

The Paperwork of a Mamluk *Muqṭa'*: Documentary Life Cycles, Archival Spaces, and the Importance of Documents Lying Around*

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Abstract

This article follows prevailing trends in research on the archival practices of the premodern Middle East by emphasizing the importance of documentary life cycles. Specifically, it examines the afterlives of a micro-sample of documents from an underexplored historical context: the administration of amirs who held iqṭā' land grants in areas of Egypt outside Cairo. Though iqṭā' holders (muqṭa's) were key administrative actors in the Mamluk sultanate, we know little about their activities on the ground. The material investigated here is related to the administration of justice in far-flung districts of Egypt, one of the less-known roles of these muqṭa's, and is preserved in the Papyrus Collection of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Contextualizing the documents by relating them to the activities of several named amirs, I delineate three stages in the documents' afterlives: archiving, reuse, and disposal. I rely on the materiality of the documents, an indispensable tool for identifying the more enigmatic aspects of documentary life cycles. I then turn to reflect on what these afterlives can tell us about the archival spaces of this administrative setting. By examining the muqṭa's' paperwork, I highlight shifts in meaning that documents underwent over time, calling attention to the phenomenon of casual storage, or “documents lying around.”

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Introduction

In the governing of the territories of the Mamluk sultanate, *iqṭāʿ* land grants allotted to individual amirs played a fundamental role. Each *iqṭāʿ* holder, or *muqṭaʿ*, was granted the temporary right to collect tax revenue from the land he held, in return for military service. In spite of the importance of *muqṭaʿ*s for the administration of the Mamluk realm, we know surprisingly little about how this system functioned on the ground, particularly at the lower levels of administration. Contemporary chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and administrative and chancery manuals provide substantial information on the functioning of the *iqṭāʿ* system under Mamluk rule.¹ Nonetheless, like much of the contemporary narrative literature, they maintain an elite focus and manifest a tangible “urban tunnel vision.”² The *muqṭaʿ*s named in such narratives are usually holders of high government office, often recipients of multiple *iqṭāʿ*s in far-flung Mamluk territories, and distant from the management of affairs on the ground.³ The day-to-day activity of administering these regions, as well as the documents and paperwork it inevitably generated, thus remain mysterious. Surviving documentary traces originating in these settings have so far largely not been explored.

This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the documentary activities of lower-ranking *iqṭāʿ*-holding amirs in regions of Mamluk Egypt outside the capital of Cairo. The documentary practices of *muqṭaʿ*s, and particularly their archiving activities, have attracted some prior scholarly interest. In his study of archival practices in the Mamluk administration, Konrad Hirschler highlighted the significance of these amirs’ offices (sing. *dīwān*), not only as the “main administrative partner” to the central state apparatus in Cairo but as one of its primary archival partners, too.⁴ These *dīwāns*, though rather poorly documented in the contemporary literature, appear to have been the institution through which amirs managed their *iqṭāʿ*s.⁵ Hirschler thus argued for the decentering of archival practices in the Mamluk state, highlighting the amir’s *dīwān* at the site of the *iqṭāʿ* as an important location where documents were produced, used, and preserved.

1. Tsugitaka Sato, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam: Sultans, Muqṭaʿs, and Fallahun* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Hassanein Rabie, *The Financial System of Egypt AH 564–741/AD 1169–1341* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972); Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale, Qūṣ* (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 1976), esp. 231–86. See also, though with an earlier focus, Claude Cahen, “L’évolution de l’iqṭāʿ du IXe au XII siècle: Contribution à une histoire comparée des sociétés médiévales,” *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 8, no. 1 (1953): 25–52; and, more recently, Yossef Rapoport, *Rural Economy and Tribal Society in Islamic Egypt: A Study of al-Nābulusī’s “Villages of the Fayyum”* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), esp. 143–70.

2. This apt phrase is borrowed from Konrad Hirschler, “Studying Mamluk Historiography: From Source-Criticism to the Cultural Turn,” in *Ubi Sumus? Quo Vademus? Mamluk Studies—State of the Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann, 159–86 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2013), 169.

3. See, for instance, the examples listed in Rabie, *Financial System*, 46–47. For the hierarchy of *muqṭaʿ*s, albeit in the Ayyūbid period, see Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, 149–55.

4. Konrad Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices: Rethinking the Preservation of Mamlūk Administrative Documents,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136, no. 1 (2016): 21–26.

5. Rabie, *Financial System*, 64–68; Sato, *State and Rural Society*, 87–91. See also references to the secretaries (*kuttāb*) of *muqṭaʿ*s: Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, 157.

This emphasis on the paperwork of Mamluk state actors reflects a recent renewal of scholarly interest in the archival history of the premodern Middle East. Shifting away from a fixed and institutional idea of “the archive” toward a more flexible conceptualization of practices, this trend has served to problematize the oft-presumed paucity of surviving documents from the pre-Ottoman period.⁶ Prominent in such studies is a new appreciation of the life cycles of documents. The phenomenon of document reuse, for instance, has been highlighted as a practice with profound implications for understanding archiving. Reuse practices shed light on the shifting meanings attributed to documents over time, their potentially declining archival value, and the practical and symbolic ways in which they were used.⁷ Scholarly discussions of archiving place emphasis on the “afterlives” of documents, emphasizing the shifts that documents underwent after fulfilling their immediate functional purposes.⁸ Taking these discussions further still, Marina Rustow’s recent work on Fatimid state documents preserved in the Cairo Geniza argues for the reconstruction of an entire “documentary ecology.” She contends that the archival uses of documents are only to be fully understood within the broader range of processes in which documents played a part, including the “migration” of documents to new sites and uses and the documents’ disposal.⁹ It is thus increasingly clear that by exploring this entire “ecology,” and not just moments of clear archival preservation, we can work toward a more profound understanding of the archival and wider documentary cultures prevailing in the societies we study.

In this article, I sustain this approach, applying it to a different corpus: original documents stemming from the activities of Mamluk *muqṭaʿ*s. These documents are preserved in the Papyrus Collection (Papyrussammlung) of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. They are mostly endorsed petitions or decrees, which shed light on the role *muqṭaʿ*s played in the administration of justice in the regions over which they had authority. Werner Diem published a number of these documents in his volume of so-called “official letters”

6. See, e.g., Frédéric Bauden, “Du destin des archives en Islam: Analyse des données et éléments de réponse,” in *La correspondance entre souverains, princes et cités-états: Approches croisées entre l’Orient musulman, l’Occident latin et Byzance (XIIIe-début XVIe siècle)*, ed. Denise Aigle and Stéphane Péquignot, 27–49 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Petra Sijpesteijn, “The Archival Mind in Early Islamic Egypt: Two Arabic Papyri,” in *From al-Andalus to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Muslim World*, ed. Petra Sijpesteijn et al., 163–86 (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Julien Loiseau, “Le silence des archives: Conservation documentaire et historiographie de l’État dans le sultanat mamelouk (XIIIe–XVI siècle),” in *L’autorité de l’écrit au Moyen Âge: Orient-Occident*, ed. Société des Historiens Médiévistes de l’Enseignement Supérieur Public (SHMESP), 285–98 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2009); Tamer El-Leithy, “Living Documents, Dying Archives: Towards a Historical Anthropology of Medieval Arabic Archives,” *Al-Qanṭara* 32, no. 2 (2011): 389–434; Maaïke van Berkel, “Reconstructing Archival Practices in Abbasid Baghdad,” *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 1 (2014): 7–22; Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices”; Marina Rustow, *The Lost Archive: Traces of a Caliphate in a Cairo Synagogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Daisy Livingston, “Managing Paperwork in Mamlūk Egypt (c. 1250–1517): A Documentary Approach to Archival Practices” (PhD diss., SOAS, University of London, 2019).

7. Frédéric Bauden, “The Recovery of Mamlūk Chancery Documents in an Unsuspected Place,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni, 59–76 (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Konrad Hirschler, “Document Reuse in Medieval Arabic Manuscripts,” *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (2017): 33–44.

8. E.g., El-Leithy, “Living Documents,” 426.

9. Rustow, *Lost Archive*, esp. 6.

(*amtliche Briefe*), where he flagged the connections of multiple documents to individual named amirs, extrapolating that they represent the traces of document collections that were at some point archived together.¹⁰ These published documents formed some of the key sources Hirschler used to assert the archival importance of the amir's *dīwān*.¹¹ The specific archival and documentary practices attested by the original material have not, however, earned comment. In this article, I address this by exploring the life cycles of these documents. I identify “dossiers” of documents issued by the same few amirs—groups of documents that belonged, at one stage, to the broader documentation of an amir's *dīwān*.¹² In addition, I consider further individual documents that belong to the same genres and administrative milieus. The article has two main goals: first, to contribute to the ongoing broader discussion of documentary life cycles, and second, to add further substance to our understanding of Mamluk *iqṭā'* holders' administrative activities and the roles played by their offices outside the capital in the generation and preservation of paperwork.

The origin of the material in the Vienna collection poses some difficulties, particularly for those interested in practices of archiving. This collection owes its origins to the massive upsurge of interest in Egyptian antiquities that developed during the nineteenth century alongside European colonial intervention in the country. Mounting “archaeological fervor” led to increasing efforts to gain control of archaeological sites, especially after the British occupation, and many documents obtained from these sites were shipped to European collections.¹³ The Vienna collection was supplied by documents that emerged from several large archaeological finds, notably those in the Fayyūm oasis, around 80 km southwest of Cairo, and in the district of Ashmūnayn, located in the Nile Valley around 300 km south of the capital.¹⁴ Subsequent excavations continued to produce large numbers of documents, many of them derived from these same two locales, and the collection was also fed by the flourishing antiquities market.¹⁵ The collection thus contains an enormous number

10. Werner Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe des 10. bis 16 Jahrhunderts aus der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Wien* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 3.

11. Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices,” 21–26.

12. My use of the term “dossier” is close to that recently proposed by Jean-Luc Fournet, who defined it as a “subset” of a contemporary archive: Jean-Luc Fournet, “Archives and Libraries in Greco-Roman Egypt,” in *Manuscripts and Archives: Comparative Views on Record-Keeping*, ed. Alessandro Bausi et al., 171–99 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018). This departs from earlier definitions, which see dossiers as corpora brought together by modern scholars. See Katelijjn Vandorpe, “Archives and Dossiers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall, 216–55 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 218.

13. Hélène Cuvigny, “The Finds of Papyri: The Archaeology of Papyrology,” in Bagnall, *Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, 30–58, esp. 30–38.

14. For the find and acquisition history of the collection, see Helene Loebenstein, “Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer’: Zur Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek; 100 Jahre sammeln, bewahren, edieren,” in *Die Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek: Katalog der Sonderausstellung 100 Jahre Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer*, ed. Helene Loebenstein and Hermann Harrauer, 3–39 (Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 1983), esp. 4–6, 27.

15. For a recent study of the vagaries of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antiquities market, albeit with an Egyptological focus, see Fredrik Hagen and Kim Ryholt, *The Antiquities Trade in Egypt 1880–1930: The H. O. Lange Papers* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2018), esp. 164–82.

of documents and fragments, including well over 30,000 Arabic paper documents, many of which are difficult or impossible to contextualize geographically. Complicating this unpromising situation further, large numbers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egyptian documents were found in excavations of ancient and medieval rubbish heaps, where the documents had been disposed of by their medieval or ancient owners. Such origins hardly seem indicative of careful archiving by the documents' original custodians. Despite this, these excavations tended to unearth documents in bulk, and some collections of papers were found in baskets, suggesting that they were brought to the rubbish heap en masse to be disposed of.¹⁶ The implication is that the documents were accumulated before being at some point deemed useless or irrelevant and thrown away. There is no direct evidence that the particular documents I examine in this article were unearthed from such a rubbish heap. Nonetheless, given the history of the Vienna collection, this is probably the kind of backdrop that we should envisage for their preservation to the modern day.¹⁷

The preservation context of these documents is therefore inescapably problematic. It dictates methodological necessities that can limit our ability to draw firm conclusions, and we must exercise constant caution, for instance when dating and ascribing provenance to documents. Despite this, I contend that the documents' problematic provenance also raises valuable possibilities. Their apparently accidental preservation and the deliberate method of their disposal serve to highlight the non-static nature of these documents, revealing a progression through multiple stages over the course of their lives. Unlike material that has been carefully looked after over the course of the intervening centuries, these documents demonstrate traces of use, reuse, and abandonment; care and also lack of care. They thus offer us a relatively complete picture of the treatment of documents by the various individuals and institutions that were involved in their contemporary creation, use, and archiving. Like the Geniza documents in Rustow's recent study, these documents offer a full view of a messy documentary life cycle, unobstructed by processes of archival rationalization.¹⁸

Rather than attempting to identify specific archival sites or formal archival practices that in this corpus may be unrecoverable, in what follows I use these documents to comment on the larger documentary ecology, to borrow Rustow's expression. Specifically, I explore the afterlives of these documents: the stages they went through after their initial production and use. In this enterprise, the materiality of the extant documents represents my most valuable methodological tool. In the first section I delineate the corpus under consideration, through which we can gain some grasp of the historical and administrative backdrop to the documents and their life cycles. I then identify and explore in turn three stages of the documents' afterlives: their archiving, their reuse, and their eventual disposal. Finally, I offer some reflections on what this life cycle can tell us about the nature of the spaces in which such documents were preserved. Ultimately, I argue that the afterlives of

16. Cuvigny, "Finds of Papyri," 50–53.

17. The archaeological origins of many of these documents are clearly perceptible in the soil that still adheres to their surfaces.

18. Rustow, *Lost Archive*, e.g., 8, 54.

these documents reveal a continual shifting in the value attributed to documents by their custodians, manifest above all in the material ways in which they were used and preserved. Reflecting on the potential of these afterlives to shed light on the archival spaces of the *muqta*'s administration, I highlight the phenomenon of casual storage, which I term in this article "documents lying around," the significance of which extends beyond this small corpus.

In the analysis of a corpus such as this one, one cannot avoid some speculation. I would nonetheless argue that this kind of analysis, even if speculative, is an indispensable tool. Without allowing conjecture, source material of this nature, which is not only highly understudied¹⁹ but also fragmentary and difficult to contextualize, would simply remain untapped. Instead of offering firm conclusions, I thus aim to flag the phenomena these documents reveal, and in so doing to flesh out our meager understanding of the documentary and archival contexts in which their lives played out. For the purposes of this special dossier it seems to me fitting to contribute something with many empty holes, which I have no doubt Michael Cook, and all the members of the Holberg Seminar, would have risen to the task of filling.

The *Muqta*'s' Documents and Their Afterlives

The documents used in this article are connected to processes of petition and response. Petitions were submitted to amirs to lodge requests or complaints, and amirs responded in one of two ways: by endorsing the petition with a rescript, that is, an official response drafted on the reverse side of the petition; or with a decree written on a separate support. Documents of these genres are, compared with many of the other genres held in the Vienna collection, relatively easy to contextualize. Where the full text of a petition or decree survives, place-names are often included. When the names of amirs can be found, the practice of deriving honorific *nisbas* from the names of the sultans they served sometimes makes it possible to date documents to a particular sultan's reign.²⁰ In addition, the naming of amirs allows us to identify dossiers of documents issued by the same amir.

The dossiers I am using thus consist of sets of decrees and endorsed petitions that can be firmly connected to one or several individual amirs, with most datable examples originating around the turn of the eighth/fourteenth century. The most substantial such dossier (the al-Azkā dossier) contains a group of decrees issued on the authority of a certain Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf al-Azkā along with documents issued by his two sons, Bahā' al-Dīn Aḥmad b. al-Azkā and 'Alā al-Dīn 'Alī b. al-Azkā.²¹ Many of these decrees are written on the verso of the petitions to which they respond, and the place-names that are mentioned refer to

19. The Arabic papyrology research community has largely focused on the early Islamic period in Egypt, meaning that later Arabic material represents one of the most underutilized parts of the Vienna collection.

20. Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, 7–8.

21. In the catalog for the exhibition of the Vienna collection that took place in 1894, Josef von Karabacek read this signature as the *nisba* al-Karakī: Josef von Karabacek, *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer: Führer durch die Ausstellung* (Vienna: Hölder, 1894); Diem offered the reading al-Azkā instead: Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, 240.

locations within the district of Ashmūnayn. The respective titles of these three individuals, *al-malakī al-nāṣirī* for Yūsuf and Aḥmad and *al-malakī al-muẓaffarī* for ʿAlī, allow these documents to be dated to the period of the second sultanate of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (698–708/1299–1309) and that of his successor al-Muẓaffar Baybars II (708–9/1309–10).²² Diem edited ten documents connected to these three related individuals.²³ I was able to identify several more documents belonging to this dossier among the unpublished material in the Vienna collection. These include four documents issued by Yūsuf,²⁴ three by Aḥmad,²⁵ and one by ʿAlī,²⁶ all identifiable on the basis of their distinctively written signatures and official titles. The entire dossier thus comprises eighteen documents, a substantial number considering the challenges of connecting documents within the Vienna collection. The collection also contains several other, much smaller dossiers of similar documents: three documents connected to a certain Bahāʾ al-Dīn, also based in Ashmūnayn, probably around the same time (the Bahāʾ al-Dīn dossier),²⁷ and a later dossier of an amir known as al-Būshī based in the Fayyūm region.²⁸

These dossiers are complemented by a more disparate and unwieldy set of documents that represent similar genres, also recording the administrative activities of amirs, but that cannot be so easily connected to each another and are often fragmentary. Through familiarity with better-preserved and contextualized examples of documents, one begins to recognize the documentary features, formulary, and scripts of these genres, which eventually makes it possible to incorporate these decontextualized or fragmentary examples within the corpus. Locating the surviving dossiers against the background of larger numbers of similar though less easily contextualized documents allows us to extend arguments beyond the individual samples surviving in the dossiers and to identify the wider currency of the practices they reveal.²⁹

These extant documents, though clearly constituting just a micro-sample, provide important evidence of the activities of amirs in local administration. It should be noted that the majority of these documents do not explicitly specify that the amir in question held an *iqṭāʿ*. Nonetheless, the details of the amirs' responsibilities and activities that emerge from the documents, as well as the wider picture of the various agents in the region with whom they communicated, suggest strongly that they were indeed *muqtaʿ*s, as they tally closely

22. Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, 240–42.

23. A Ch 12502; 25677; 10809; 15499; 11584; 25676; 25674; 23075; 16220; 2007. Published in *ibid.*, nos. 50–59.

24. A Ch 12503; 15915; 25672; 25675. Diem briefly notes the details of these four documents in his introduction to Yūsuf al-Azkā's documents but does not deem them worthy of full critical edition, no doubt because of their fragmentary nature. *Ibid.*, 240.

25. A Ch 6249; 12531; 25966.

26. A Ch 6239.

27. A Ch 366; 5864; 25673c. The latter document is published in Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, no. 6. For a more detailed exposé of these dossiers see Livingston, "Managing Paperwork," 169–73, 256–60.

28. A Ch 17306; 24993. Published in Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, nos. 7–8.

29. A full list of the documents that I have consulted in the writing of this article can be found at the beginning of the bibliography.

with accounts in the contemporary narrative literature.³⁰ The amirs who appear in these documents are almost certainly rather junior, unlike the high-ranking *muqta*'s who surface in other contemporary sources.³¹ The surviving documents are particularly expansive on the role of these amirs in the administration of justice, an aspect of the *muqta*'s activities about which we know little from the contemporary literature. Many of the petitions, for instance, show locals complaining of crimes against them—cases of murder³² and theft³³—and requesting that the amir begin the process of securing justice. The documents in the al-Azkā and Bahā' al-Dīn dossiers show the amirs responding to petitioners in villages scattered around the administrative district of Ashmūnayn, presumably the locales where they held *iqṭā'* units.³⁴ The dossiers and individual documents are thus fertile ground for explorations of the involvement of *muqta*'s in the day-to-day concerns of local communities, particularly among the lower ranks about which less is known from the narrative and administrative literature.

The documentary lives that I seek to examine through this corpus strongly reflect the geographical realities of *iqṭā'* holding. They seem to have been documents whose *raison d'être* was mobility.³⁵ Petitions were ordinarily drawn up outside the sphere of the amirs and their *dīwāns* on behalf of petitioners, while the responding decrees would be written by the amirs' secretaries or scribes. This much is clear from the different scripts used for the petitions and their responding decrees: whereas petitions are mostly written in legible and practiced handwriting, they are not the chancery-trained hands used for the responding decrees, some of which seem to have been written by the same unnamed individuals (compare recto and verso on Fig. 1).³⁶ After their initial submission, then, the lives of these documents converged in the amirs' administrative circles. Responding decrees were not addressed to the petitioners themselves. Instead, the amirs usually addressed local shaykhs or representatives, who were charged with acting on the amirs' commands, summoning those accused of crimes to meet justice or compelling recalcitrant peasants to pay taxes of various kinds. As Hirschler has argued, the address of these decrees implies that the documents, though centered on the amir's *dīwān*, "circulated" within broader administrative networks in which the amirs were active.³⁷ Traces of their intrinsic mobility survive in peculiar remarks written in their margins, which usually specify an individual charged with their delivery. At times the note refers to "a soldier as messenger" (*jundī rasūl*

30. Livingston, "Managing Paperwork," 169–79; Hirschler, "From Archive to Archival Practices," 25–26. See also Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, 144.

31. For the hierarchy of *muqta*'s, albeit in an Ayyubid context, see Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, esp. 149–55.

32. A Ch 16220.

33. A Ch 366; 12502; 25676.

34. For the distribution of *iqṭā'* units, see Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, 144–49.

35. Processes of petition and response are, of course, always to some extent characterized by mobility. For decrees, for instance, see Rustow, *Lost Archive*, e.g., 267–68.

36. See similar comments on the scripts of Fatimid petitions: Marina Rustow, "The Fatimid Petition," *Jewish History* 32 (2019): 351–72.

37. Hirschler, "From Archive to Archival Practices," 26.

or *jundī sāʿī*);³⁸ others mention simply “a soldier” (*jundī*),³⁹ “a young soldier” (*jundī ṣabīy*),⁴⁰ or just “a messenger” (*sāʿī*).⁴¹ This feature is present in both the dossiers identified above and in several individual documents and fragments from both Ashmūnayn and Fayyūm, and it thus seems to represent part of a consistent documentary procedure used in the *dīwāns* of amirs in different parts of Egypt. Whether the surviving original documents were themselves sent out to the amirs’ various contacts is not clear. These documents might instead be the “archival” copies, with the marginal delivery notes representing official verification that copies had in fact been sent out to the relevant personnel.⁴² Either way, these documentary practices highlight the dispersed geographical realities of the *muqṭaʿ*’s administration.

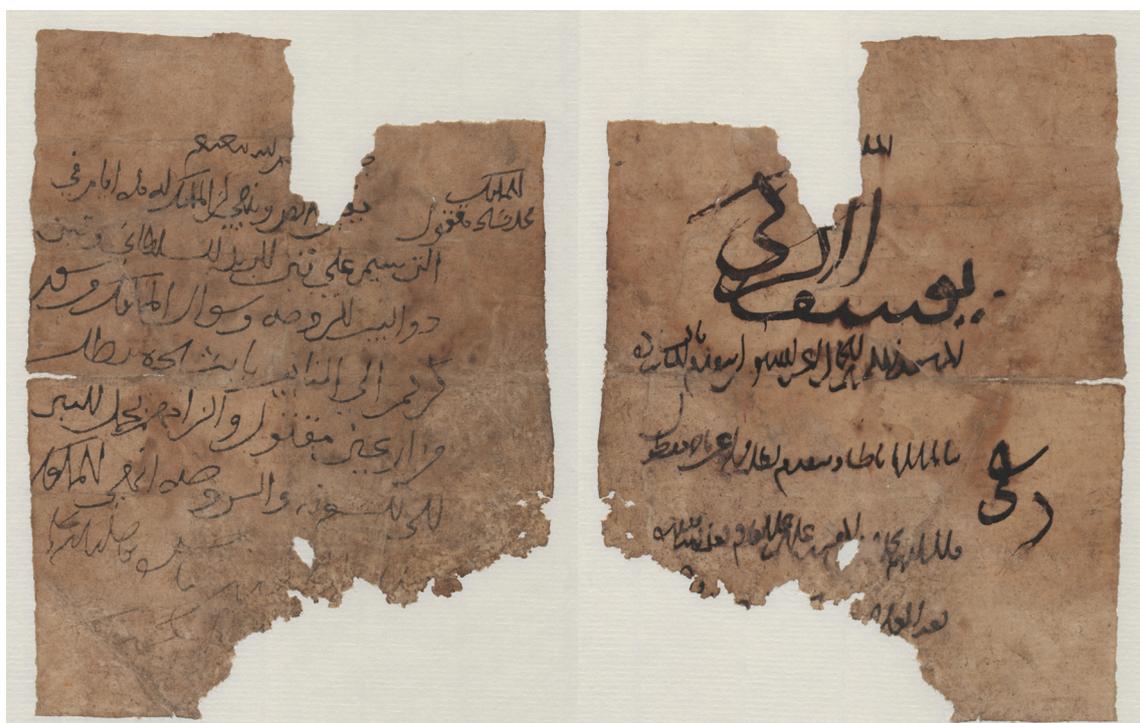


Figure 1: Endorsed petition from the al-Azkā dossier containing Yūsuf al-Azkā’s distinctive signature (A Ch 25677); petition on recto (left) and rescript on verso (right). (Photograph: Papyrussammlung, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek)

38. *Jundī rasūl* in two of the three documents in the Bahāʿ al-Dīn dossier; also in A Ch 16196. I suspect that this latter document also belongs to the Bahāʿ al-Dīn dossier, though it is too fragmentary to allow confirmation. *Jundī sāʿī* in one document in the al-Azkā dossier: A Ch 16220. Diem’s translation reads “Ein Soldat als Bote/Eilbote”: e.g., Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, 271.

39. A Ch 17306.

40. A Ch 12495.

41. A Ch 25677. See Fig. 1, above. The pen stroke below *sāʿī* may be a *rāʿ* (ر), perhaps an abbreviation of *rasūl*.

42. The addition of these delivery remarks seems to serve a kind of verification purpose, being added to the support in the same thick pen used for the amir’s signature. See Livingston, “Managing Paperwork,” 193–94.

The textual content of this corpus of endorsed petitions and decrees thus reveals an extended documentary life cycle. Nevertheless, none of the stages I have discussed—the submission of the petition, the response in the decree, the “circulation” among the amir’s administrative partners in the region—can be considered part of the documents’ afterlives, the focus of this article. Afterlife can be an ambiguous term. The responses drafted on the verso of the petitions might, after all, be considered to belong to the afterlife of the original documents.⁴³ I contend, however, that the rescript represented an intrinsic function of the initial text, despite constituting a separate phase in the document’s material life.⁴⁴ It was not, therefore, part of its afterlife. In this article, I use the term afterlife to refer to all stages that took place after the completion of the initial functions for which the textual content of the document was produced. In the case of the decrees issued by amirs, this function was essentially a communicative one, ordering others to implement the decisions they had made.⁴⁵ Once this was done, the main purpose of the document was fulfilled, and it is from this point onward that we can speak of its afterlife. To glimpse these stages, we must leave the textual content behind, looking instead to the documents’ materiality.

If we combine all the stages that are visible within the corpus used here, I see the typical life cycle of a single document to be made up of the following phases:

- 1) The drawing up of the petition. This took place outside the amir’s *dīwān*. The petition was then presented to the amir.
- 2) The drawing up of the responding decree on the verso of the petition. This was carried out by the scribes in the amir’s *dīwān*, visible to us from the trained, if highly cursive, chancery-style hands used.
- 3) The circulation of the decree, or a copy thereof, among the amir’s relevant contacts in the region.
- 4) The document’s archiving.
- 5) The reuse of the document’s material support.
- 6) The document’s deliberate destruction and disposal.
- 7) Preservation until the modern day.

43. Christian Sassmannshausen, for instance, defines the use of late Ottoman *sijills* in a court setting as an afterlife, even though this could be considered one of the main purposes for which such documents were produced. Christian Sassmannshausen, “Mapping *Sijill* Landscapes: Family Monitoring and Legal Procedure in Late Ottoman Tripoli,” in *Lire et écrire l’histoire ottomane*, ed. Vanessa Guéno and Stefan Knost, 173–206 (Beirut: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2015), 180–81.

44. That is, through the addition of a new text on its verso.

45. See also Christian Müller, *Der Kadi und seine Zeugen: Studie der mamlukischen Ḥaram-Dokumente aus Jerusalem* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 137–40.

This outline is clearly schematic and does not address the transitions between the different phases, discussed below. Not all documents found within the corpus underwent every one of these stages. Not all decrees were drafted on the verso of a petition; in such cases stage 2 represents the beginning of a document's life. Many of the documents do not display clear signs of reuse (stage 5), and some do not show signs of deliberate disposal (stage 6). Nonetheless, each of these stages emerges with some clarity within the corpus, and several extant documents exhibit evidence of them all.

According to the definition I have adopted, stages 4–7 constitute the document's afterlife. Stage 7, its preservation until the modern day, represents the broad backdrop against which we must situate each document's survival. Though it offers our firmest evidence that dossiers were at some point preserved together, it provides only limited insights into the documents' contemporary lives. It is therefore the three penultimate stages (4–6) that constitute the focus of the next part of this article. I address these stages in turn, exploring the material features the documents provide as evidence for each: the deliberate archiving of documents, their reuse, and their eventual disposal.

Archiving: The “Bundle Archive”

The deliberate archiving of the petitions and decrees that make up this corpus is undoubtedly the most intangible phase in the documents' lives. The documents do not show signs of archiving comparable to those that mark other extant documentary corpora. They do not contain the traces of formal recordkeeping in separate register archives that can be found on decrees issued by the chanceries of the Mamluk sultans and their predecessors.⁴⁶ Nor do they display any other notable traces of techniques designed to assist in their systematic storage and later retrieval, such as the archival filing notes present on legal documents from the Ḥaram al-Sharīf corpus of seventh-/fourteenth-century Jerusalem⁴⁷ or on deeds related to *waqf* endowments from Mamluk Cairo.⁴⁸ It may be tempting, then, to suggest that these documents were simply not archived at all.

Such an argument *ex silentio* is, however, problematic. The fact that we know little about the *muqṭaʿ*'s administration as an archival context does not mean that it was not one.

46. For a concise discussion of registration in Fatimid chancery decrees, see Samuel M. Stern, *Fāṭimid Decrees: Original Documents from the Fāṭimid Chancery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 166–75; Geoffrey Khan, “A Copy of a Decree from the Archives of the Fāṭimid Chancery in Egypt,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 49, no. 3 (1986): 439–453, esp. 451; Rustow, *Lost Archive*, esp. 349–52, 368–77. For Mamluk documents, see Samuel M. Stern, “Petitions from the Mamlūk Period (Notes on the Mamlūk Documents from Sinai),” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 29, no. 2 (1966): 247–49; Malika Dekkiche, “Le Caire: carrefour des ambassades; Étude historique et diplomatique de la correspondance échangée entre les sultans mamlouks circassiens et les souverains timourides et turcomans (Qara Qoyunlu–Qaramanides) au XVe s. d’après le ms. ar. 4440 (BnF, Paris)” (PhD diss., University of Liège, 2011), 389–90. For register archives in Mamluk Cairo, see Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices,” 12–17.

47. See Müller, *Der Kadi*, e.g., 197–98; Livingston, “Managing Paperwork,” esp. 141–46.

48. Livingston, “Managing Paperwork,” esp. 71–72; Daisy Livingston, “Documentary Constellations in Late-Mamlūk Cairo: Property- and *Waqf*-related Archiving on the Eve of the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt,” *Itinerario*, forthcoming.

In my view, these documents are, in fact, better viewed against the background of other, simpler methods of archiving that are well attested across the papyrological corpus: what I designate “bundle archives.” As the name suggests, these are collections of documents in which each piece was tightly folded and which were held together by various means. Bundle archiving seems to have been particularly common for collections of documents that might be termed family or business archives.⁴⁹ One particularly well-contextualized example is the recently published archive of the Banū Bifām, an eleventh-century Christian landowning family living in the Fayyūm region. This archive, containing Arabic legal documents, tax receipts, and business letters, was unearthed in the excavation of the Naqlūn monastery in eastern Fayyūm, situated in domestic buildings adjoining the church.⁵⁰ The legal deeds that were written on parchment were rolled and stored within a leather pouch, while the tax receipts, business letters, and remaining legal documents that were written on paper were found in four small bundles of tightly folded documents, each wrapped in a strip of linen. The packages of documents were themselves preserved in a large earthenware jar.⁵¹

Few papyrological documents have been unearthed in such well-defined archival circumstances. These archival techniques nonetheless provide a possible indicator of the way less easily contextualized documents may have been kept. This is because bundle archiving left material traces on the documents, many of which are still visible today. The large corpus of seventh-/thirteenth-century business letters, notes, and accounts found in the excavation of a house in Quṣayr al-Qadīm on the Red Sea coast offers a revealing example. These documents relate closely to the activities of a family of businessmen and thus appear to have been part of a household business archive. Though discovered in a state that strongly suggests their deliberate disposal, several of the individual documents show signs of tight folding and some were even discovered tied with a cord.⁵² Though the folding of documents was also related to their delivery, with addresses of letters often written on the outside of the folded document, the survival of bundles demonstrates that documents were also preserved in this state. The archival evidence from the Banū Bifām and that gleaned from the Quṣayr documents show that archival practices of this somewhat informal variety prevailed in family, household, and business settings.

The material traces that bundle archiving left behind are shared by documents in all the amirs’ dossiers examined here as well as by many of the other individual documents and fragments emerging from this administrative context. Almost all of these documents show signs of having been tightly horizontally folded, and given the patterns of accidental damage such as wormholes on the documents, it is certain that many were preserved folded (traces of horizontal folding are visible in Fig. 1 above). The implication, then, is that the amirs also kept bundle archives.

49. See, for instance, Fournet, “Archives and Libraries,” 178.

50. Christian Gaubert and Jean-Michel Mouton, *Hommes et villages du Fayyūm dans la documentation papyrologique arabe (Xe–XIe siècles)* (Geneva: Droz, 2014), 3–11.

51. *Ibid.*, 5–6; see also images of the bundles, 305–6.

52. Li Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic Documents from Quseir* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), esp. 108, 113, 115 (plates 2–3).

This method of archiving, though apparently rather informal, was presumably well suited to the purposes of *muqṭaʿ*s, whose careers in regions such as Ashmūnayn and Fayyūm were by their very nature peripatetic and time-limited. *Iqṭāʿ*s were, at least theoretically, not inheritable,⁵³ and amirs were usually granted multiple small portions in different locales.⁵⁴ Bundle archives would have been easy to transport from place to place or to preserve in an office, however rudimentary. This method of archiving also corresponded to the function of these particular documents, which was an immediate, communicative one. The need to refer to the documents after the commands they contained had been carried out was probably limited.⁵⁵ Ease of access was not, therefore, a priority in a bundle archive of this kind of material. Endorsements of petitions were certainly not the only kind of documentation used in the amir's *dīwān*, which would also have had to deal with records related to the amirs' other responsibilities, such as tax collection and the distribution of seed.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, the immediacy and overwhelmingly practical value of the petition and decree genres goes some way toward explaining the archival practices that we witness in such documents, determined above all by short-term needs.

The Reuse of Paper: Blazons and Snowflakes

Evidence for the next stage in the documents' lives comes in the form of traces of reuse. By the term "reuse" I refer, above all, to the secondary use of the paper supports on which documents were originally written. Like the concept of a document's afterlife, the concept of reuse has potential to be a rather ambiguous one. If defined broadly, it could cover an enormous variety of practices occurring at various stages in a document's life. This could include predictable reuses that were part of the normative practices of producing these genres of documents, such as the writing of a decree on the verso of an already-written petition. It also, however, includes less predictable reuses, which appear to have no clear connection to the documents' initial uses. This second kind of reuse can be roughly equated with the "recycling" of documents, also discussed in the scholarly literature, which implies

53. They were, however, sometimes handed down from father to son. For a concise discussion of this issue, see Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21–22; Rabie, *Financial System*, 59–60; Jo van Steenberghe, *Order out of Chaos: Patronage, Conflict and Mamluk Socio-Political Culture, 1341–1382* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 78–82. Research on this question has largely focused on individuals who were probably higher up the social ladder than were the amirs discussed in this article. See, e.g., Ulrich Haarmann, "The Sons of Mamluks as Fief-Holders in Late Medieval Egypt," in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. Tarif Khalidi, 141–68 (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1984); Ulrich Haarmann, "Joseph's Law: The Careers and Activities of Mamluk Descendants before the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann, 55–84 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

54. See, e.g., Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, esp. 149–50.

55. Rustow has likewise noted the "short contractual time" of Fatimid decrees: Rustow, *Lost Archive*, e.g., 317.

56. Sato, *State and Rural Society*, 84–91; Rapoport, *Rural Economy*, 155–64.

the complete repurposing of a document and its support.⁵⁷ It is these kinds of reuse that are the most valuable for conceptualizing the life cycles of documents, as they reveal what happened to a document after it had performed the function for which it was initially produced. This form of reuse is the focus of the following section.

The documents emerging from the amirs' administration attest to a diverse and creative set of reuse practices. Though the corpus thus seems an ideal place to explore the question of reuse, its diversity poses some challenges, not least because it is rarely clear what function the reuses served. Perhaps the most fascinating, if puzzling, example is a single fragmentary document from the al-Azkā dossier.⁵⁸ The recto of this document contains two lines of a petition regarding the dispatch of four camel-couriers from the village of Itlīdim, 13 km north of Ashmūnayn, while the verso contains the responding decree, issued by Aḥmad b. al-Azkā. At a later date, the text of the petition was largely obscured by the addition of an illustrated blazon, containing an image of a sword on an upside-down-teardrop-shaped field whose central section was colored with red paint. On the verso, the text of the decree was covered by a circular decoration. Though the exact form of the decoration is difficult to discern as much of the paint has flaked away, it contains a circular border in red with a black design in the middle against a background of gold or ochre paint (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Endorsed petition from the al-Azkā dossier containing an illustrated blazon (A Ch 23075), recto (left) and verso (right). (Photograph: Papyrussammlung, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek)

The artistic reuse of this endorsed petition is curious. Although doodles of various sorts appear with some regularity in the documents and fragments of the Vienna collection, this example is evidently not a casual scribble. The use of colored paint and the quality of the

57. El-Leithy, “Living Documents”; Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices”; Rustow, *Lost Archive*. The concept of “recycling” can be somewhat dismissive, packaging together the full range of reuse practices in a way that might obscure differences in practice and motivation. It is for this reason that I avoid it in the following section. See, for instance, criticism of the concept in Hirschler, “Document Reuse,” 38.

58. A Ch 23075.

execution indicate that it followed a thought-out design and was produced with a specific purpose in mind. The presence of the military blazon is especially noteworthy.⁵⁹ For one, it highlights the intrinsically military nature of the amir's administration; the *iqṭāʿ* was, after all, first and foremost a method of paying for the armies that the sultan relied on to fight his military campaigns. Bethany Walker has highlighted the importance of blazons as visible emblems of legitimacy within the Mamluk social hierarchy, especially from the early eighth/fourteenth century onward—contemporary, in fact, with the career of Aḥmad b. al-Azkā.⁶⁰ The blazon here brands the paperwork with a military identity, confirming the connection between the authority invested in the documentation and the person of the amir. This strongly suggests that the reuse of this document took place within the same documentary setting that initially issued the decree it contains, that is, the amir's own *dīwān*.

The blazon itself also provides indications of the time frame that we should envision for this particular example of reuse. The upside-down-teardrop-shaped field of the blazon is characteristic of those used by amirs who paid allegiance to the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.⁶¹ Aḥmad b. al-Azkā, to whom the initial petition was addressed, was himself in the service of this same sultan, as we know from his *nisba*. Diem dated the document to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's second reign: 698–708/1299–1309. Although we cannot determine whether the blazon belonged to Aḥmad, we can nonetheless be sure that both the production of the document and the addition of the blazon occurred within al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's reign.⁶² We should probably not, therefore, envisage the period of this document's archival preservation between its initial use and its reuse as a very extended one. The appearance of the blazon allows us, to some degree, to locate the reuse of this document temporally as well as spatially.

These reflections do not, however, explain the reasons behind this creative reuse. What was the function of this attractively decorated piece of paper? It was evidently not a use for which the presence of legible traces of a rather mundane petition and its responding decree represented a hindrance. Despite this, some lengths were gone to in order to invest this small fragment with the visual trappings of military prestige. Perhaps the document should be interpreted as a practice illumination exercise, preparing images that were to adorn a

59. For a general discussion of Mamluk-era heraldic blazons, see L. A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry: A Survey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933). See also Nasser Rabbat, "Rank," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.; Bethany Walker, "The Ceramic Correlates of Decline in the Mamluk Sultanate: An Analysis of Late Medieval Sgraffito Wares" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1998), 223–25; Bethany Walker, "Ceramic Evidence for Political Transitions in Early Mamluk Egypt," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 54–68; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and Its Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 38–39.

60. Walker, "Ceramic Correlates of Decline," 254–55; Walker, "Ceramic Evidence," 68.

61. Rachel Ward pointed this out in her conference presentation "Allegiance by Design: Mamluk Blazons" at the International Conference "Material Culture Methods in the Middle Islamic Period," Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg, University of Bonn, December 9, 2017.

62. However, we cannot be certain which reign. His final reign stretched over more than thirty years: 709–41/1310–41. Aḥmad b. al-Azkā's father, Yūsuf, was also in the service of the same sultan, but it is not clear from the extant documents whether his son took over his position, or whether they were active during the same period. We cannot, therefore, limit the period any further.

more illustrious object. Alternatively, the folding visible on the document suggests that it may have been intended for a more material use: to be wrapped around another object. The folding illustrated in the mock-up in Fig. 3 is vertical rather than the more usual horizontal.⁶³ It centers on the two roughly circular designs on the recto and the verso, meaning that when the document was folded one of these images would have been visible on the outside. The design on the verso was added to the document when its left side was folded, so the left-hand segment of the circular pattern appears on the recto of the unfolded document, to the right of the blazon (see Fig. 3a, b, and c).⁶⁴ The placement of the image across both sides of the paper is improbable, were this a simple example of painting practice. It is tempting to suggest, then, that it might have been used to wrap another folded document or a bundle thereof—serving as a label by which a small bundle archive was marked with the blazon of the amir. Any object wrapped up with this document would have to have been roughly the size and shape of a folded document. This one instance of creative document reuse offers an exceptional and surprising insight into the potential range of repurposing that documents underwent.

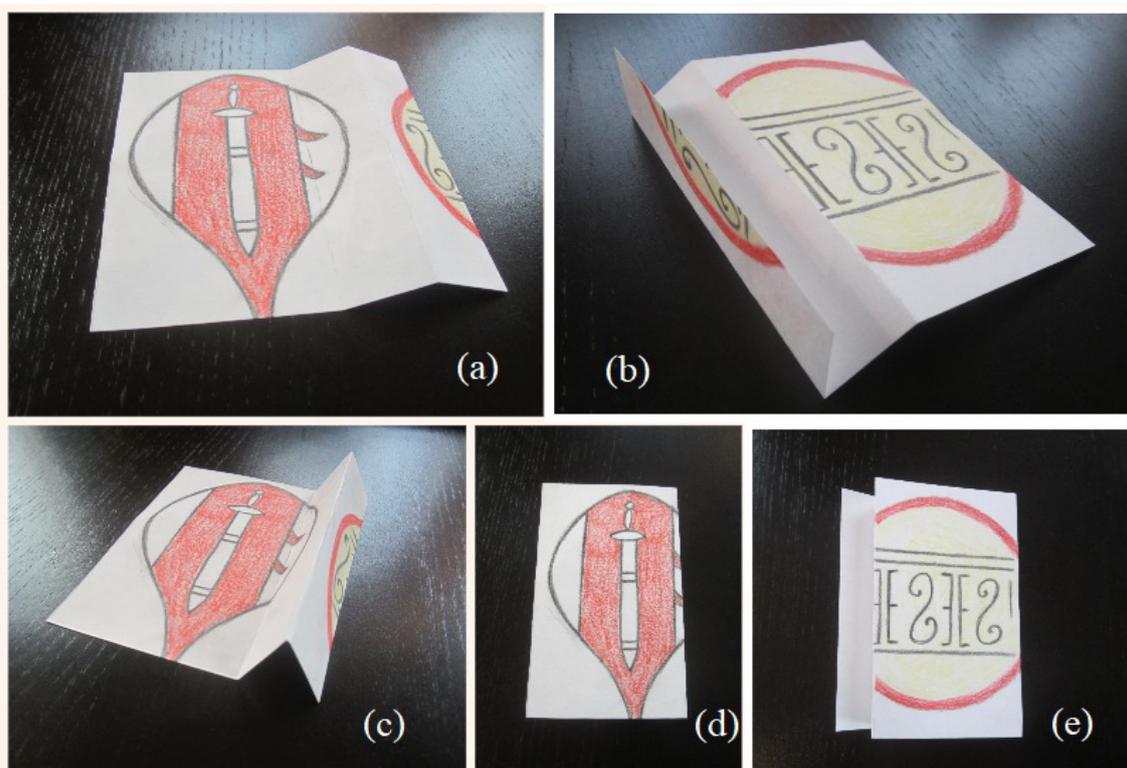


Figure 3: Mock-up of vertical folding pattern on A Ch 23075; (a) recto, (b) verso, (c) folding of recto, (d) recto folded, (e) verso folded. (Images by author)

63. Original horizontal folding is also visible.

64. Diem also described this physical layout, though he offered no comment on how these images should be interpreted. Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, 266.

It is also among the documents issued by Aḥmad b. al-Azkā that we find another kind of documentary reuse: the cutting of documents into shapes. This is, in fact, a reuse practice that appears with some prominence in the Vienna collection at large. The document in question is another of Aḥmad’s endorsed petitions, this time dealing with the murder of a woman by her husband.⁶⁵ At some point, this document was cut into a triangular wedge shape, with a fold down the middle, and a large hole was pierced through the upper part of it (see Fig. 4). As with the blazon document, it is not clear what function the cutting of the document into this shape might have served. With the cutting of documents, we must be particularly careful in drawing conclusions, as it is impossible to establish when such reuse might have occurred. It could, in fact, represent the work of modern antiquities dealers. One Mamluk-era summons to the Ashmūnayn *qāḍī* court, for instance, has a peculiar diagonal cut across the bottom of the sheet of paper, which Diem suggested could have been made by a modern dealer to even out the damaged edges common to documents in the papyrological corpus.⁶⁶ Such “tidying up” of damaged documents does not seem to me to represent the same phenomenon as the practice of reshaping old documents into new forms, which is extremely widespread in the Vienna collection and thus seems to preclude an explanation based on modern interference.



Figure 4: Endorsed petition from the al-Azkā dossier cut into a wedge shape (A Ch 16220), recto (left) and verso (right). (Photograph: Papyrussammlung, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek)

One of the major problems with cut-up documents is that thanks to their diminutive size, they furnish us with a smaller amount of text from which to glean context—to identify scripts or document types for dating purposes or to establish provenance. This is not always, however, an insurmountable obstacle. For instance, there are several other wedge-shaped documents or fragments thereof containing Mamluk-era chancery-style scripts that

65. A Ch 16220.

66. Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, no. 78.

are similar to those found in the amirs' dossiers.⁶⁷ The careful cutting of these documents suggests that they were intended for quite a precise purpose, though the specificities elude us. Beyond the wedge-shaped documents, more complex shaping is also visible. One document, probably originally an endorsed petition, was cut into an elaborate mirror-image fleur-de-lis shape (see Fig. 5).⁶⁸ Another was cut into a heart shape.⁶⁹ Yet others were fashioned into forms similar to paper "snowflakes," small pieces being cut out of a folded piece of paper multiple layers at a time.⁷⁰ It is difficult to get a meaningful grasp of this particular kind of document reuse. The wedge shapes bear superficial similarities to fragments of documents that were found reused as arrow flights during the excavation of the citadel of Damascus. These documents too were cut into triangular wedge shapes, in this case designed to improve the aerodynamic qualities of an airborne arrow or crossbow bolt.⁷¹ There is no evidence to suggest that the Vienna documents were used in such a way.⁷² Nonetheless, this usage alerts us to the possibly eclectic range of reuses to which old documents were put and at which the cut-up documents in the Vienna collection may hint. These documents may, for instance, have been cut up to provide structural or decorative



Figure 5: Endorsed petition (?) cut into a fleur-de-lis shape (A Ch 25002a), recto (probably upper) and verso (probably lower). (Photograph: Papyrussammlung, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek)

67. A Ch 2434; 2143; 3196.

68. A Ch 25002a.

69. A Ch 25610. The function of the original document is unclear.

70. A Ch 25611; 25655. The context of the first of these is entirely uncertain; the second is almost certainly from the Mamluk era.

71. David Nicolle, *Late Mamlūk Military Equipment* (Damascus: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2011), esp. 151–65, 315.

72. David Nicolle, who first flagged this particular reuse phenomenon in the Damascus material, considered it unlikely that the wedge-shaped documents I found within the Vienna collection were used for this purpose; personal communication.

elements of book bindings or other objects.⁷³ Alternatively, they may represent the random fiddling of bored or procrastinating scribes in the amir's *dīwān*. Whatever the reality, the evidence of reuse that such documents offer provides yet another tantalizing glimpse into their complex and multifaceted life cycles.

The methods of reuse discussed here differ in two significant ways from those that have earned prominence in previous scholarly literature. First, most scholarship on the subject has emphasized textual reuses of documents; that is, cases in which an old document was used as a support for later written texts. This category includes the reuse of complete documents in the manufacture of manuscripts, such as in al-Maqrīzī's autograph manuscript identified by Frédéric Bauden and in the Damascene *majmūʿ* manuscripts investigated by Hirschler.⁷⁴ In these cases, old documents, some of which contained a considerable amount of blank paper, were used to build manuscript quires. Aside from these examples, probably the most famous example of the textual reuse of old documents is the Cairo Geniza. The main explanatory logic behind the preservation of many Arabic documents in the Geniza is their reuse by Jewish scribes for the writing of Hebrew-script liturgical and scriptural texts.⁷⁵ The older documents thus became a new writing support for texts that did not require a clean, new surface.⁷⁶ Examples of this kind of textual reuse can almost certainly be found within the Vienna collection, though few appear in the corpus examined here. Some documents containing texts of these administrative genres might be classified as scrap paper, containing drafts of documents or brief notes, though this represents a rather different phenomenon from the textual reuse of older documents.⁷⁷ In such cases, the document may have begun its life as scrap paper. The nontextual reuses identified above are challenging to interpret, but they serve to highlight a broader range of document reuses than has previously earned comment.

The second major difference between the reuse practices examined in this article and the other, better-known examples is that most of the latter have been found reused "in an unsuspected place," to borrow Bauden's expression.⁷⁸ That is, the context of their reuse is separate from that of their production and initial use. They were reused outside the

73. Such as examples found in bindings for quire supports, sewing guards, and binding filler: Hirschler, "Document Reuse," 36; Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 86. More obscurely, Mamluk-period documents have been found sewn into the lining of headgear, probably to stiffen the fabric. See, for instance, documents held in the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (inv. no. I. 6374) and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (accession no. 46.156.11b). Thanks to Miriam Kühn, Irina Seekamp, and Shireen El Kassem for drawing my attention to this material.

74. Bauden, "Mamlūk Chancery Documents"; Hirschler, "Document Reuse."

75. Rustow, *Lost Archive*, e.g., 7–8, 383.

76. Reuse was also sometimes dictated by motivations beyond material practicality. See, e.g., Hirschler, "Document Reuse," 38–39.

77. One example is a decree issued by the amir and *dawādār* Sayf al-Dīn Tūghān whose verso contains a drafted receipt as well as a series of intriguing notes relating, if my reading is correct, to various mosques and other pious institution in Cairo: A Ch 8984. Diem edited the recto of this document and also offered a reading of the text of the receipt on the verso: Diem, *Arabische amtliche Briefe*, no. 4.

78. Bauden, "Mamlūk Chancery Documents."

setting of their original archiving. For the corpus examined here, on the other hand, the reuses I have identified seem likely to have occurred within the same setting that received and subsequently archived the original documents: the amir's *dīwān*. This conclusion is most strikingly illustrated by the blazon document but can, I believe, be extended to other documents whose long-term preservation together, and with the blazon document, implies shared origins in a common site. The difference in the locale of reuse between this and previously discussed corpora is not indicative of the existence of an entirely unique range of reuse practices occurring in the *muqṭaʿ*'s' administration. Rather, the documents examined here simply represent a corpus of reused material the like of which has not survived within other collections.⁷⁹ Documents from an amir's *dīwān* may have been extracted for reuse outside this immediate setting, perhaps also for textual reuses like the better-known examples, but such documents were not then preserved alongside this corpus. It is worth pointing out that the documents that survived in this setting were potentially of limited use for textual reuse, being too small to offer substantial writing surfaces. Though any assertions about the site of these documents' reuse must remain tentative, the corpus seems to me to represent the flotsam and jetsam of a functioning office.

The material examined here thus highlights the fact that documents could progress through multiple life stages even within a single space or administrative domain. The discovery of documents in surprising locations seemingly distant from the initial sites of their production and archiving is tantalizing, compelling historians to solve real mysteries in the documents' life cycles. Nonetheless, the recognition of extended archival life cycles should not be confined to the investigation of such dramatic shifts. The reuse practices identified here allow us to trace the documents' evolution, even within a single setting, from records important for their textual content to objects of primarily material significance. Although the text of the original documents may have continued to hold some meaning, it was the physicality of these documents, that is, their material support, that offered the most promise and value to those intent on their reuse. The eccentric reuses that we see within this corpus, then, bear witness to the gradually shifting value that the documents assumed at different stages in their extended life cycles.

Destruction and Disposal

In the final stage of the documents' lives, it seems neither their textual nor their material value was significant enough to justify their continued preservation. At this point, the documents were deliberately destroyed and disposed of. We do not have direct evidence that the specific documents discussed here came to light through excavations of medieval rubbish heaps, but their materiality shows clear traces of deliberate destruction. Almost all the decrees and endorsed petitions were ripped, cut, or shredded. For many of the documents in the corpus, only the top half has been located within the collection. It is possible that many of the bottom halves are also contained in the collection, but in the absence of the amirs' distinctive signatures that adorn the top parts they are more

79. Except, for instance, in geniza-like collections. See more below.

challenging to identify.⁸⁰ It seems that the documents were destroyed in a relatively systematic way by being either torn in half or shredded into strips.⁸¹

Disposal indicates that a document's custodian made a conscious decision that there was no further need to preserve it. Nonetheless, the deliberate way in which the disposal was carried out also reveals something about the perceived value of the document's content. The picture that has emerged so far of these documents' life cycles suggests that the matters they dealt with were trivial from the point of view of the Mamluk administration. The deliberate destruction of documents, however, implies that their content still maintained some importance.⁸² The need to rip the documents at the time of their disposal points to a fear that they retained some value: perhaps their content was deemed confidential, or there was a risk of forgery or other reuse not considered suitable for such documentation. This anxiety is clearer in the case of legal documents, since spurious claims made on the basis of out-of-date or counterfeit documentation might have led to real problems in the courts. Such concerns would also have been relevant in an administrative context, where documents containing details pertaining to taxation and criminal justice would have required similarly tactful handling.⁸³

Alternatively, the shredding of documents might not reflect perceptions of the documents' content so much as represent a symbolic act of disposal. Instances of such symbolic practices can be found elsewhere, for instance in the Damascus papers, which include several marriage contracts that were ripped up at the time of divorce, with divorce documents composed on the verso of the remaining half.⁸⁴ In such cases, the tearing of the document in half seems to represent not the termination of the validity of the document's text but the breaking of the legal ties binding the husband and wife—a symbolic destruction that extended beyond the document itself to reflect the social reality of the legal situation recorded in it.⁸⁵ It is not clear whether we witness such direct symbolism within the corpus examined here. The documents in an amir's *dīwān* might have taken on a certain emblematic role, echoing the social capital that holding an *iqṭāʿ* endowed upon a lower-ranking amir. Perhaps the ripping up of these documents represented the end of an amir's tenure as *muqṭaʿ* and the corresponding decommissioning of his archive, or the accession

80. There are some fragments within the corpus examined here that do not contain the signature; e.g., A Ch 5156; 5847; 6467; 16196. Only two of the documents in the al-Azkā dossier, A Ch 12502 and 25677, and two in the Bahāʾ al-Dīn dossier, A Ch 366 and 25673c, preserve the full length of the document.

81. In this way, this corpus shows similarities with the Quṣayr corpus, many of whose documents were ripped up “by human hand” or “kneaded into a paper ball of sorts and then tossed away”; Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, 104.

82. See, e.g., Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 412–13.

83. See, for instance, the destruction of dates in decrees from the Fatimid chancery: *ibid.*, 296–97.

84. Jean-Michel Mouton, Dominique Sourdel, and Janine Sourdel-Thomine, *Mariage et séparation à Damas au moyen âge: Un corpus de 62 documents juridiques inédits entre 337/948 et 698/1299* (Paris: Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, 2013), nos. 6, 38, 35.

85. The significance of marriage contracts as bearers of social and economic, as well as legal, status is discussed in Rapoport, *Marriage, Money, and Divorce*, 54–55.

of a different amir to the role.⁸⁶ Alternatively, we might interpret the deliberate shredding of documents as simply symbolic of the moment of disposal, rather as one might shred revision notes after sitting an exam. Whether done to prevent the reconstruction of the text or for more symbolic purposes, shredding can be seen as a conscious marker of the document's shift to another life stage, in which its archival value was ultimately lost.

Archival Spaces: Documents Lying Around?

Although the three life stages examined above emerge quite clearly in the corpus examined here, significant questions remain about some of the more concrete aspects of the documents' progression through these phases. The identification of extended documentary afterlives and the material ways in which the stages of these lives remain visible on the documents highlight the need to identify the physical spaces in which these lives played out. The preservation of documents, insofar as they constitute physical objects, necessarily requires physical spaces. Though the specific physical sites of these documents' medieval preservation are now lost to us, in the remainder of this article I explore the implications of their life cycles for understanding contemporary archival spaces.

The first point to note is that the documents provide insights into the nature of the amir's *dīwān* itself. The spaces in which they were drawn up constituted reasonably elaborate offices, suited to dealing with the paperwork that the amir's administrative roles entailed and boasting a well-trained and skillful staff. This is evident, first of all, in the pervasive presence of consistent cursive chancery-style scripts and in the amirs' attractively written calligraphic signatures. Beyond this, the blazon document reveals that resources and skills for illumination were also cultivated within these spaces—expertise that is unexpected within such a low-level administrative milieu. The amirs' administrative apparatus was clearly not merely practical and rudimentary. Document production and reuse took place in spaces that were fit for purpose, characterized by the presence of skilled scribal, even artistic, personnel.

The life cycles of the documents and especially the patterns of their reuse also shed some light on their longer-term preservation status. It appears that much of this material went through a phase of simply "lying around" before its deliberate disposal, a period of casual storage that was not necessarily deliberately calculated by the documents' custodians. In this state, the documents gradually lost their archival value as the perceived necessity of preserving their textual content progressively declined. By the time of their reuse, the material value of these old documents overshadowed their textual value to such an extent that reuse invested them only with new material meanings, not with textual ones.

Though the notion may appear rather vague, documents lying around are, in fact, profoundly important for understanding the nature of archival spaces in this milieu. These documents remained in a space, either deliberately deposited and kept or simply left there, long enough for their perceived value and meaning to transform. Casual bundle archives containing documents whose texts were of relatively immediate value and whose long-term preservation may have been of limited functional use might have been particularly prone

86. Thanks to Yossef Rapoport for this suggestion.

to this treatment. One can imagine such bundles kept on the shelves or the floor of a functioning office until such time as a clear-out took place or office staff requiring scrap paper saw fit to mine them for resources. The lying-around stage should, then, be envisaged as an important part of the spatial and temporal backdrop to the progressing life cycles of the documents.

The most fitting point of reference for documents lying around within this historical milieu is, of course, the Cairo Geniza and the wider canvas of geniza-like practices prevalent within the medieval (as well as ancient and modern) Middle East.⁸⁷ In genizas, documents lie around, sometimes for centuries. Indeed, that is theoretically the whole point of a geniza: preserving texts simply because it was not considered acceptable to destroy them, rather than because of a perceived functional value.⁸⁸ It is this element of geniza-like practices that has led to their characterization as “counter-archival,” which highlights the fact that preservation in such depositories has no implications for the perceived archival value or future accessibility of their contents.⁸⁹ The comparison of archaeologically unearthed material with geniza collections is not new.⁹⁰ Mark Cohen, for instance, has suggested that the Quṣayr documents might be interpreted as an “Islamic Geniza” owing to the physical state in which the documents were found, which indicated that they had been deliberately shredded.⁹¹ As we have already seen, the condition in which the Quṣayr documents were unearthed is not so different from that of the corpus examined here. Should we, then, see this corpus as constituting part of a geniza-like collection? What does this perspective imply for our understanding of the space in which the documents’ lives were played out?

Certainly, the documents lay around somewhere: in a functioning office, a cupboard or storehouse, or perhaps even a dedicated geniza-like space designed more for the documents’ entombment than for their accessibility. It is even possible that the documents were ultimately disposed of in a geniza-like depository, rather than being thrown onto a communal rubbish heap. In view of the ambiguities of the documents’ modern discovery, it is possible that they remained in such a depository until they were unearthed from its ruins. Nineteenth-century archaeological excavations occurred alongside extensive digging for fertilizer (*sibākh*) by Egyptian farmers, an activity that also furnished documents for the antiquities market and often entailed the destruction of medieval buildings, whose organic

87. Joseph Sadan, “Genizah and Genizah-Like Practices in Islamic and Jewish Traditions: Customs Concerning the Disposal of Worn-Out Sacred Books in the Middle Ages, According to an Ottoman Source,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 43, no. 1–2 (1986): 36–58; Mark R. Cohen, “Geniza for Islamicists, Islamic Geniza, and the ‘New Cairo Geniza,’” *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 7 (2006): 129–45.

88. Sadan, “Genizah-Like Practices,” 36–58. For a welcome reappraisal of the motivations, both religious and social, behind geniza-like depositories, see Rustow, *Lost Archive*, 29–31.

89. Hirschler, “From Archive to Archival Practices,” esp. 3–7; Jürgen Paul, “Archival Practices in the Muslim World Prior to 1500,” in Bausi et al., *Manuscripts and Archives*, 339–60.

90. And, indeed, the other way round: Marina Rustow, *Heresy and the Politics of Community: The Jews of the Fatimid Caliphate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), xx–xxi.

91. Cohen, “Geniza for Islamicists,” 138.

construction materials served as excellent compost.⁹² Given the nature of the Vienna collection, hypotheses regarding its documents' contemporary preservation and disposal must remain conjecture. Nonetheless, the ambiguous status of documents preserved in geniza-like depositories offers a fitting backdrop against which to frame and historically contextualize the phenomenon of documents lying around.

This kind of casual storage shows that it is the point in time when the documents lose their archival value that can reveal the most profound insights into the physical spaces they inhabited. This is because such moments left material traces on the documents, such as evidence of reuse or destruction, which by their very nature encourage us to situate them within a physical world. In addition, the recognition that periods of lying around may have punctuated the progression of these documents' life cycles highlights the human factors influencing archival preservation. Not all of these can be understood as well-planned, calculated, or deliberate.⁹³ From the little we know about it, the amir's *dīwān* seems just the kind of setting in which one might expect piles or bundles of documents to lie around and be ignored, gradually forgotten about, and later rediscovered. We should, then, seek to understand the archival spaces of the *muqta*'s' administration as such multifunctional sites of administrative and documentary activity in which the lives of documents sometimes haphazardly progressed.

Conclusion

In this article, I have relied primarily on the tool of materiality to examine the afterlives of documents pertaining to the administration of low-ranking Mamluk *muqta*'s in parts of Egypt distant from the political capital. In examining this small corpus of decrees and endorsed petitions my aim has not been to provide a definitive interpretation but instead to explore the documentary ecologies prevailing in this underexplored administrative milieu. The preservation context of the material in the Vienna collection makes it challenging, even impossible, to test many of the assertions I have made, and it is important to acknowledge that there are aspects of these documents' lives of which we can never be certain. Even so, I have shown that it is possible to outline the gradual progression of the documents through various life stages in spite of the fragmentary nature of this corpus, or indeed because of it.

The documents' afterlives reveal the shifting values attributed to documents at different stages of their lives. Documents initially preserved in bundle archives for the text they contained gradually took on a greater material significance, their supports offering raw material for a range of enigmatic reuses. Later, the deliberate shredding of much of the material indicates the symbolic end of one period of preservation or use, to be followed

92. Cuvigny, "Finds of Papyri," esp. 32–35. Compare also with the Quṣayr documents, which were unearthed in the excavation of a house. Guo, *Commerce, Culture, and Community*, xi–xii, 1–28.

93. It is instructive here to cite the archivist Terry Cook, who has flagged the way in which "archivists have ... traditionally masked much of the messiness of records ... from researchers, presenting instead a well-organized, rationalized, monolithic view of record collection ... that very often never existed that way in operational reality ..."; Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape," *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (2009): 527–28.

by their disposal or discarding. The material way in which such shifts manifest on the documents foregrounds the physical aspects of documentary life cycles. This allows us to characterize the archival spaces utilized by the actors involved in administration. The Mamluk amir's *dīwān* emerges as a multifunctional administrative space. Well equipped and served by highly trained personnel, the *dīwān* was both an active office and a site of document storage, representing the spatial backdrop against which we witness the unfolding of these documents' lives. Identifying the life cycles of the documents is therefore valuable not only for its own sake but also for shedding further light on the still-mysterious documentary activities of Mamluk *muqtaʿ*s.

The ordinarily overlooked moments in which documents were “lying around” have emerged as key to understanding these archival spaces. Comparable to discussions surrounding geniza-like practices, this phenomenon of casual storage encourages us to envisage various possible modes of preservation for these documents. Documents lying around can perhaps even offer a different way of thinking about genizas, moving beyond the characterization of such practices as simply “counter-archival.” “Counter-archival” speaks above all to a scholarly endeavor to discern whether a document or collection is or is not an “archive” or, at the very least, “archival.” As this article has tried to show, a more rewarding task is to investigate the full documentary ecology, the broader culture of documentation that prevailed in a particular historical and administrative context.⁹⁴ I argue that documents lying around are an important part of this ecology. They reveal the transitions in the meaning granted to documents over the course of their complex lives within the context of physical spaces whose characteristics were determined by specific human needs and activities. Above all, documents lying around bring to the fore the potential ambiguity of a document's value, even to its custodians. The producers, keepers, and reusers of documents may have been uncertain as to whether preservation was, or was going to become, necessary or profitable. Rustow's characterization of geniza-preserved documents as “in limbo” is thus a useful one, and it can be applied well beyond the corpus for which she intended it.⁹⁵ This limbo might be seen to refer not only to an intermediate stage between calculated archival preservation and definitive disposal or destruction but also to a state of uncertainty about the potential textual or material value of a document among the people in whose functional space it lay around. We witness what might be designated incidental archiving, whereby documents were kept long-term as a by-product of the preservation and daily use of other documents within the same spaces. Documents lying around may, ultimately, be key to avoiding an overly motive-driven and rationalistic view of archival practices, emphasizing instead the contingencies of circumstance and the potentially significant impact of human uncertainty.

94. For the question of “archives” versus “cultures of documentation,” see James Pickett and Paolo Sartori, “From the Archetypical Archive to Cultures of Documentation,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62 (2019): 773–98.

95. Rustow, *Lost Archive*, e.g., 1–2, 402.

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