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The Field of History and the Fields of Iraq

INTRODUCTION

The legend of the Wandering Jew goes back to thirteenth-century Bologna, if not earlier; in its first written form, pilgrims at the monastery of Ferrara related that

they had seen a certain Jew in Armenia who had been present at the Passion of the Lord, and, as He was going to His martyrdom, drove Him along wickedly with these words “Go, go, thou tempter and seducer, to receive what you have earned.” Jesus is said to have answered him: “I go, and you will await me until I come again.”¹

This narrative tidbit places upon the shoulders of the Jews responsibility for taunting Jesus at the crucifixion and assigns them the concomitant punishment of itinerancy persisting until the messianic return. The story of the Wandering Jew is a metonym used by Christians to mark the Jews as a people whose obstinate rejection of Jesus explained their low state in medieval Christian Europe and could further be used to deny them a place of long-term settlement, consigning and condemning them instead to wander like their ancestor the Wandering Jew. But the trope of individuals transcending an ordinary human lifespan and living out their days as eternal (or nearly eternal) wanderers is not unique to the anti-Jewish tropes of high medieval Europe. Rabbinic literature draws on the biblical figure *Seraḥ bt. Asher*, granddaughter of the patriarch Jacob, whose appearance in both the narrative of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt (cf. Genesis 46:17) and the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert hundreds of

¹ *EJ*, s.v. “Wandering Jew” (Yvonne Glikson).

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years later (cf. Numbers 26:46) sparks rabbinic creativity: the Rabbis imagine a figure who wandered for centuries throughout the Jewish world.² Medieval Jews perpetuated this legend and imagined Serah in the East as late as the seventeenth century.³ Serah's peregrinations – like those of the Wandering Jew – did not speak to migration from one destination to another; they spoke to an unsettledness in *any* land. But the dynamics of migration and resettlement of the Jewish People as a whole has captured the Jewish imagination for centuries. Indeed, even current broad-based histories of the Jewish experience have turned to migration as the very defining fact of Jewish existence: Michael Brenner's 2012 *A Short History of the Jews* literally defines each chapter in Jewish history as going from one place to another – “From Ur to Canaan,” “From Exile Back Home,” and so forth, with the sole exception being “From Hebrew into Greek” – a linguistic migration of sorts;⁴ likewise, David N. Myers writes in his *Jewish History: A Very Short Introduction* that “Jews ... throughout history ... have been a people in movement.”⁵ As the modern study of Judaism and Jewish history developed in the nineteenth century, scholars turned to the biblical account of the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE to describe the Land of Israel as an “empty land,” repopulated by those who returned to the land under Cyrus of Persia some fifty years later.⁶ The exile described by the Bible was understood to have stripped the Land of Israel of the majority of its Israelite population, who only later returned from their diaspora in Babylonia to repopulate and to revivify the empty land. As we shall see, this narrative of migration from the East establishing the heart of Jewish settlement in new territory (or, in the case of the Land of Israel, previously held territory) to the West is a trope which has captivated scholars working on a number of distinct periods of Jewish history.

Indeed, medieval Jewish historiographers had their own version of the myth of the empty land: in the narrative known as “The Story of the Four

² See, for example, Tosefta Soṭa 4:7 and Talmud Bavli Soṭa 13a.

³ *EJW*, s.v. “Serah bat Asher” (Orly R. Rahimiyan).

⁴ Michael Brenner, *A Short History of the Jews*, trans. Jeremiah Riemer (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁵ David N. Myers, *Jewish History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), xxi–xxii.

⁶ See, for example, Hans M. Barstad, “After the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’: Major Challenges in the Study of Neo-Babylonian Judah,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 3 n.1. I thank Jonathan Kaplan for bringing this material to my attention.

Captives,” the twelfth-century historiographer Abraham Ibn Daud describes through the hand of God the relocation of four rabbis – one each to Alexandria and Spain and two to Ifrīqiya (Tunisia) – and the elevation of these rabbis to leadership of centers of Jewish learning in the Diaspora that led to the decline of Babylonian rabbinic hegemony.⁷ There were certainly autochthonous Jewish populations in the three cities (Fustāt, Qayrawān, and Córdoba) which eventually became the adoptive homes of these four rabbis – but those autochthonous populations lacked the wherewithal to sustain themselves *halakhically* without the counsel of these migrant notables, for (in Ibn Daud’s words) they “were not thoroughly versed in the words of our rabbis, of blessed memory.”⁸ Although the lands the four captives encountered had not been empty of people, these émigrés brought the wellsprings of knowledge that made the land flourish. They became heads of local academies and changed the course of local Jewish learning.

However, recent scholarship has challenged the “myth of the empty land,” in its early manifestation in the biblical period. Rather than presuming the exile to Babylonia to have been comprehensive and the subsequent return to have been the dominant demographic force in Judea in the Persian period, recent studies have focused on the *longue durée*, revealing a decline and subsequent recovery as opposed to a total denuding of the land of its denizens and a massive influx replenishing it.⁹ Even those who hold on to the traditional narrative of destruction in Judea concomitant with Babylonian conquest argue that the picture painted by the archaeological detail suggests a recovery over a protracted period (to the extent that a recovery took place at all).¹⁰

⁷ See Abraham ben David Ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah: A Critical Edition with a Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition*, ed. Gerson D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967), 63–66; and Gerson D. Cohen, “The Story of the Four Captives,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 29 (1960–61): 55–131.

⁸ Ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, 65.

⁹ Even those who reject the revisionist picture presented by Barstad, Lipschits and others nonetheless see recovery as gradual rather than the result of a massive influx from the East; see, for example, Avraham Faust, “Settlement Dynamics and Demographic Fluctuations in Judah from the Late Iron Age to the Hellenistic Period and the Archaeology of Persian-Period *Yehud*,” in *A Time of Change: Judah and Its Neighbors in the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods*, ed. Yigal Levin (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 23–51: “the relative prosperity of the seventh century was followed by a major decline, and then a gradual recovery” (49).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50: “A real recovery did not take place before the Hellenistic period.”

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The passage of Jewish history from the “Middle Ages” to modernity is also often dated to the moment of another major migratory shift – namely, the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492; Jonathan Ray writes that “The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 is so intricately bound up with the other momentous events of that year, and its impact on the history of the Jews was so far-reaching, that it is tempting to take it as the *terminus a quo* for the history of early modern Jewry.”¹¹ The various waves of expulsion led, in Ray’s account, to the formation of a “Sephardic diaspora” with a new corporate identity which

allowed them much greater geographic, social, and economic mobility, which in turn rendered them more acceptable to their host societies. This acceptance, based on perceived economic utility to their lords, was a major factor in the construction of Sephardic trading networks and the broader diaspora society they helped define.¹²

In traditional historiography, this move was seen as facilitating a renaissance of communities both throughout the Mediterranean littoral and in Western Europe which had atrophied under unfavorable political and legal regimes whose treatment represented a decline from the high-water mark of the high Middle Ages in Islamic Spain; the fifteenth-/sixteenth-century Jewish notable Elijah Capsali wrote that “the rise of the Ottoman dynasty and the creation of a new area of settlement for the Jews just as they were being expelled from Europe was evidence of God’s continued compassion for His chosen people.”¹³ The resulting networks of Sephardic migrants have been understood to have ushered in an “Ottoman-Jewish Golden Age,” during which the Sephardic merchants “created a trading network that stretched from the Mediterranean to India and beyond, specializing in the manufacturing and transshipment of a dizzying array of products.”¹⁴ Challenging this picture, Ray explains that Sephardic migration to Ottoman lands was actually gradual, and in fact was shaped by a small number of merchants and intellectuals who

¹¹ Jonathan Ray, *After Sepharad: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry* (New York University Press, 2013), 12.

¹² Jonathan Ray, “Creating Sepharad: Expulsion, Migration, and the Limits of Diaspora,” *Journal of Levantine Studies* 3/2 (2013): 9–35 (at 21).

¹³ Jonathan Ray, “Iberian Jewry between West and East: Jewish Settlement in the Sixteenth-Century Mediterranean,” *Mediterranean Studies* 18 (2009): 44–65 (at 48).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

had a formative influence on the character of their adoptive communities.¹⁵

Historiographic approaches to demographic movements have been challenged for their connection to contemporary politics. Was there, indeed, an uninterrupted Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel from antiquity? How did immigration movements (the various waves of “*aliyot*”) to the Land of Israel from the late nineteenth century affect the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious characteristics of the region?¹⁶ Here, the connections between the agendas of historians and collective, communal memory are, perhaps, more easily apparent. But the tension between the competing narratives of a persistent (if small) presence of one population over the *longue durée* on the one hand and a significant migration from the outside transforming the character of the local population on the other is a persistent feature of Jewish history, especially that of the Jews of the Middle East.

In his seminal article “Some Fundamentals of Jewish Demographic History,” Sergio Della Pergola presents a schematic representation of migratory flows sowing “the main migration streams and some of the main areas of settlement and resettlement” from Israelite origins up to the Middle Ages (Figure 1.1).¹⁷ The earliest of these movements includes the aforementioned loss of Israelite sovereignty and the concomitant expulsion to Babylonia, along with the subsequent return to the Land of Israel (both understood to have taken place in the sixth century BCE),¹⁸ and Della Pergola explains that Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE led to a second diaspora which fed “the southern part of the Italian peninsula, as well as other areas along the Mediterranean coasts of North Africa and southern Europe.”¹⁹ Della Pergola next identifies the move to Italy to have led to a later migration from Italy into the

¹⁵ Thus, Ray writes, “The arrival in the eastern Mediterranean of a relatively small number of prominent scholars who had lived through the expulsion has masked the fact that most of the exiles did not live long enough to make this transition from West to East” (*ibid.*, 65).

¹⁶ For a discussion of some of these historiographic trends, see Ilan Pappé, “Critique and Agenda: The Post-Zionist Scholars in Israel,” *History and Memory* 7/1 (1995): 66–90.

¹⁷ Sergio Della Pergola, “Some Fundamentals of Jewish Demographic History,” in *Papers in Jewish Demography*, 1997, ed. Sergio Della Pergola and Judith Even (Jerusalem: Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 2001), 11–33 (at 15–17).

¹⁸ Della Pergola’s ascription of the former movement to the eighth century BCE (*ibid.*, 16) certainly referred to the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE by the Assyrians.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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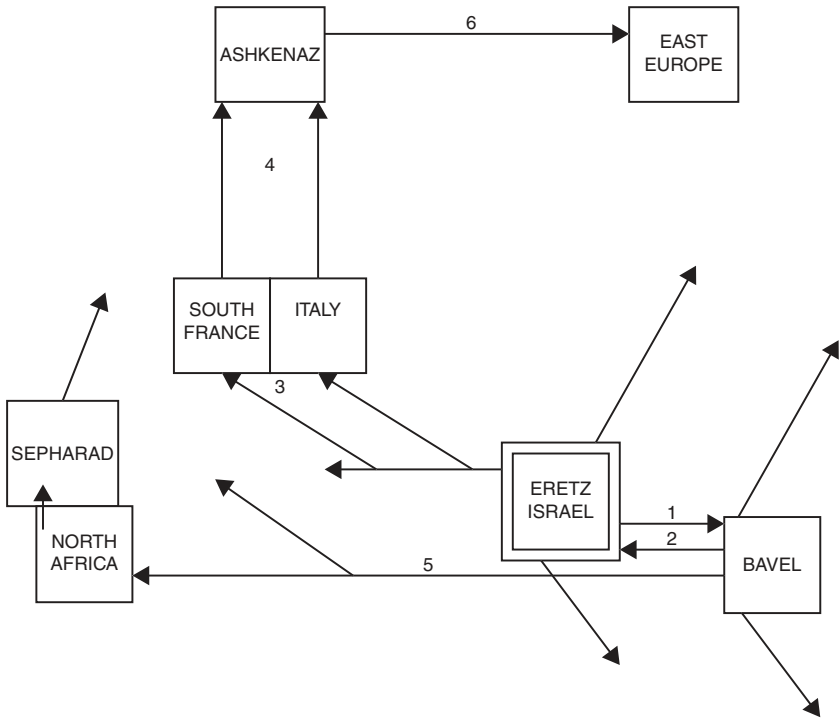


FIGURE 1.1. The main migration streams of Jewish settlement from antiquity to the Middle Ages. From Sergio Della Pergola, “Some Fundamentals of Jewish Demographic History,” Fig. 3, p.17

Rhine Valley (Arrow #3 in Figure 1.1). But it is the next migration mentioned by Della Pergola, Arrow #5, in which I am interested in this book: “The westbound migration from *Bavel*, reaching the north shores of Africa and the south shores of Europe – especially the Iberian Peninsula, or *Sepharad* – reaching its peak in correspondence with the westward expansion of Islam (7th–8th centuries and after).”²⁰ Yet despite the prominence of this migration, Della Pergola explains that “In each instance of a significant Jewish migration movement, it can be assumed that a minority moved away from the local established Jewish community while the majority remained.”²¹ Indeed, relying primarily on the population estimates of the important medieval travel writer Benjamin b. Jonah of Tudela, whose late twelfth-century account is understood to be the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 17.

most important description and reckoning of the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean and the Middle East,²² Della Pergola concludes that the proportion of world Jewry living in Iraq and Iran was roughly five times that of the southern Mediterranean littoral in the medieval period,²³ even *after* that migratory move had taken place!²⁴

Historians of Jewish life in the lands of Islam provide more detail to the schematic drawn by Della Pergola, and generally break down the aforementioned migratory wave from Babylonia to North Africa into two component shifts: the first is characterized by a shift in the civilizational pattern of the Jewish communities in the East “from the agrarian way of life depicted in the Talmud to a more cosmopolitan one,”²⁵ beginning with the rise of Islam; and the second explains that as “a bustling international commerce centered in Baghdād and Baṣra, people traveled to and fro, east and west. Some of the Iraqī Jewish merchants who came to the western provinces of the empire began to settle there temporarily or permanently.”²⁶ As the ‘Abbāsīd Iraqī heartlands fell under civil wars in the second half of the ninth century and the first half of the tenth century, a “genuine population movement westward occurred.”²⁷ The rise of a Jewish “bourgeoisie” involved in long-distance trade contributed to a “steady flow of people to the west” which Norman Stillman dubbed “a minor ‘brain drain’”: as the ‘Abbāsīds’ hold on their center became increasingly tenuous, “Not only intellectuals, but artisans and other talented individuals moved westward into the more stable lands bordering the Mediterranean.”²⁸ In supporting his analysis, Stillman relied on the earlier work of S.D. Goitein, whose magnum opus *A Mediterranean Society* described the rise of the

²² Cf. *EJIW*, s.v. “Benjamin ben Jonah of Tudela” (Abraham David).

²³ Della Pergola, “Some Fundamentals of Jewish Demographic History,” 18.

²⁴ Note that Della Pergola’s ratio of 5:1 in Iraq and Iran versus Northeast Africa and the Maghrib does not change however one might treat Benjamin of Tudela’s figure of some 455,000 Jews living in the Arabian Peninsula. Della Pergola has “adjusted” the figures in Benjamin’s itinerary to realign with his understanding, commonly held among historical Jewish demographers, that the detail provided by Benjamin for certain parts of the world is unreliable. Benjamin’s population figures for Iraq and Iran outweigh his corresponding figures for Africa even more starkly prior to Della Pergola’s adjustment.

²⁵ Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book*, 1st edn (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

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North African Jewish population as part of general changes in the medieval Islamic world:

Muslim North Africa owed the ascendancy it achieved during the Fatimid period not only to its natural resources and certain favorable trends in world trade, discussed presently, but also to the influx of vigorous elements of ambition, and sometimes also equipped with capital and technical know-how. All the various principalities that sprang upon the soil of Muslim North Africa down to this period, including the Fatimid, were founded and ruled by foreigners coming from the East: Arabs, Persians, and Turks. We read about the exploits of these adventurers in the accounts of the historians. The Geniza records teach us that the new bourgeoisie of the North African countries, too, had its roots in the ancient centers of commerce and industry in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. This great population movement from East to West was in the main completed by the end of the tenth century, the time when the Geniza records begin to appear in larger numbers. Thus we notice in them the results rather than the course of this great historical process. Our material consists in family names, the names of grandparents or other ancestors, but sometimes also in direct references to westward migration.²⁹

Goitein understood the prevalence of family names suggesting an “eastern” origin to point to a great population movement to North Africa, a conclusion confirmed a few years after the publication of the first volume of *A Mediterranean Society* by the social and economic historian Eliyahu Ashtor in an article entitled “Un mouvement migratoire au haut Moyen Âge: migration de l’Irak vers les pays méditerranéens” in the journal *Annales*.³⁰ Ashtor turned both to Arabic chronicles and to Geniza documents to refine Goitein’s inferences and to describe both the composition and the historical arc of that migratory movement. It is worthwhile noting that while Goitein saw the roots of the westward movement in the rise of long-distance trade and the emergence of what he would come to call “the Middle-Eastern bourgeoisie,”³¹ Ashtor added to this migratory group by identifying a prominent strand of legal scholars among the migrants from East to West. Further, despite Goitein’s statement that the migratory shift from East to West had been completed by the end of the tenth century, Ashtor’s comparative study of

²⁹ S.D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–93), vol. I, 30–31.

³⁰ Eliyahu Ashtor, “Un mouvement migratoire au haut Moyen Âge: migration de l’Irak vers les pays méditerranéens,” *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 27/1 (1972): 185–214.

³¹ S.D. Goitein, “The Rise of the Middle-Eastern Bourgeoisie in Early Islamic Times,” in *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 217–41, repr. from “The Rise of the Near Eastern Bourgeoisie in Early Islamic Times,” *Cahiers d’histoire mondiale / Journal of World History / Cuadernos de historia mundial* 3/3 (1957): 583–604.

Geniza documents and Arabic chronicles shifted the apex of westward migration to the eleventh.³² Stillman's characterization of an eastern "brain drain" was perceptive in noting that not only merchants, but scholars and artisans as well were part of a more broad-based move to the West;³³ that is, his characterization was broader than that of Goitein and Ashtor. Adding artisans to the mix was bold given that Ashtor's study saw artisans as only a small portion of a move overwhelmingly dominated by merchants, religious functionaries, and teachers, though artisans are certainly suggested by Goitein's allusion to "technical know-how."³⁴

Other scholars broadened still further Goitein's and Ashtor's discussion of this westward movement: writing about the eleventh and early twelfth centuries in Egypt, Mark Cohen explains that "The immigrant status of the majority of the most important Jewish public servants in the Egyptian capital ... tallies perfectly with the finding that most of the spiritual and communal leaders in the Geniza were foreign-born."³⁵ Here, Cohen relies on Goitein's explanation from the second volume of *A Mediterranean Society* that

Most of the judges and other muqaddams whose origin is referred to in our sources were foreigners or at least not natives of the town or district where they served. Palestine and Iraq, northwest Africa and Spain, Byzantium, and later also France provided most of the spiritual and communal leaders. This fact was perhaps due to the preference of the Egyptian Jews for more practical ways of life ...³⁶

While Goitein's concern in the first volume of *A Mediterranean Society* and Ashtor's concern in his article was the migratory wave from East to West, Goitein's concern in the second volume was much broader and also later in time, alluding to migratory moves that extended all the way up to the early thirteenth century.³⁷ Cohen yokes these demographic shifts together, explaining that

³² Compare Ashtor's Table 5 with his Table 1 (Ashtor, "Mouvement migratoire," 195, 203).

³³ Interestingly, Stillman does not mention Ashtor's 1972 article in *Annales* in the bibliography to his *Jews of Arab Lands*, though he does cite much from the rest of Ashtor's oeuvre.

³⁴ Cf. Table 6, Ashtor, "Mouvement migratoire," 205.

³⁵ Mark R. Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca.1065–1126*, Princeton Studies on the Near East (Princeton University Press, 1980), 87, citing Ashtor and Goitein.

³⁶ Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, vol. II, 70.

³⁷ This is the migratory move from France, discussed in the sixteenth-century historical narrative *Shevet Yehuda* of Solomon Ibn Verga; this migration and its impact on the Egyptian Jewish community in particular is discussed by Alexandra Cuffel in "Call and

This phenomenon was in part a consequence of the general population movement from eastern Islamic lands toward the Mediterranean in the high Middle Ages. More immediately, it had its roots in the political and economic deterioration that touched the regions bordering Egypt during the eleventh century. After a long period of economic and cultural florescence, Tunisia entered a precipitous decline in the middle of the eleventh century . . . As a result of these depredations, Egypt absorbed many displaced Tunisians . . . The other eleventh-century upheaval that had a demographic impact upon the Jews was the constant state of war with Bedouins in Fatimid Palestine, followed by the Seljuk invasion of 1071 and the crusader conquest of 1099. These crises sent large numbers of refugees pouring into relatively secure Egypt.³⁸

Yet Cohen also suggested that the rise of Babylonian prominence in Egypt was really due to the *earlier* migratory wave, as it was

largely a consequence of the migration of Babylonian Jews to the Mediterranean provinces of the Muslim empire in the early Islamic centuries. Egypt, for instance, possessed a considerable population of Babylonian Jews by the tenth century. These *ʿIrāqīyyūn*, as they were called in Arabic, established separate synagogues following the Babylonian liturgical rite and maintained strong ties with the *yeshivahs* and *gaons* of their ancestral homeland. As the eleventh century wore on, large numbers of Tunisian Jews settled permanently in Egypt.³⁹

Although Cohen may simply have been arguing that the migratory move that reached its peak in the “high Middle Ages” was well underway by the tenth century, resulting in a “considerable” population of “Babylonian” Jews in Egypt, he yokes together three separate migratory moves: the first, an early move from East to West, resulting in the establishment of so-called “Iraqi” communities in Egypt, well underway by the tenth century; the second, a century and a half later, from West to East, presumably the result of the invasions of Ifrīqiya by the Banū Hilāl and the Banū Sulaym at the behest of the vizier of the Fāṭimid caliph al-Mustaṣir in 1057 CE;⁴⁰ and the third, just slightly later than the second, the arrival in Egypt of refugees from Seljūq and Crusader conquest of Palestine. But by calling to

Response: European Jewish Emigration to Egypt and Palestine in the Middle Ages,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 90/1–2 (1999): 61–102.

³⁸ Cohen, *Jewish Self-Government*, 87–89.

³⁹ Mark R. Cohen, “Administrative Relations between Palestinian and Egyptian Jewry during the Fatimid Period,” in *Egypt and Palestine: A Millennium of Association (868–1948)*, ed. Amnon Cohen and Gabriel Baer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 113–35 (at 120).

⁴⁰ Paul Ernest Walker mentions the internal problems experienced by Qayrawān and eventually the devastation wrought by the Hilāl, in *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and Its Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 52–53.