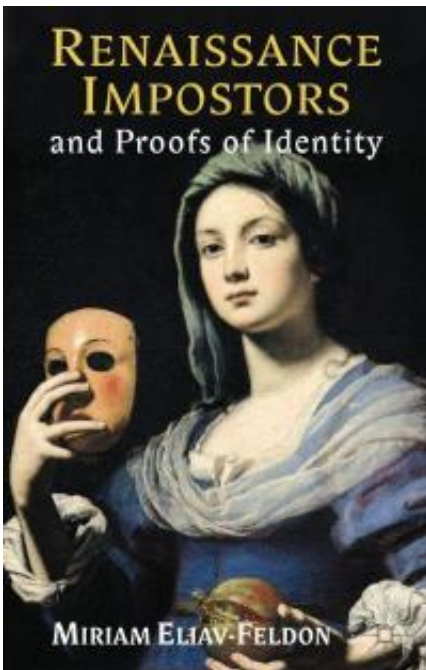


# History's impostors inspire modern bureaucracy

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This is the book cover of "Renaissance Impostors and Proofs of Identity." Credit: American Friends of Tel Aviv University (AFTAU)

"Identity theft" seems a uniquely 21st-century crime, and is very common in the contemporary world. But in a new book, Prof. Miriam Eliav-Feldon of Tel Aviv University's Department of History observes that identity theft and associated fraud have deep historical roots. From royal pretenders to women masquerading as men and those who resort to fraud to conceal their religious faith, history is brimming with stories of

impostors. The battle between frauds and those who try to thwart them has been constant from the beginning of humanity, she says – and the battle is still going strong.

Prof. Eliav-Feldon's book, *Renaissance Impostors and Proofs of Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan) argues that this situation bred the formal identification systems we have today. Documentation such as diplomas, travel papers, and occupational licenses became prevalent, and that necessitated the creation of systems to distribute and authenticate these new forms of identification.

Modern bureaucracy was born. This makes the early modern centuries a crucial period in the development of ID, a hallmark of life today.

## **Fear of the unknown**

Coupled with a greater capacity for travel, the rapid growth of cities in early modern Europe eroded the traditional "face-to-face" society, where people were born, lived, and died in the same villages. Suddenly, not every face was a familiar one—a change that led to mass suspicion and fear. And while this fear was often directed at outsiders, such as a new Gypsy population, it also encouraged people to suspect the integrity of their neighbors and friends.

The situation came to a [boiling point](#) in the 16th and 17th centuries. Authorities began to fear that many people were not who they said they were, which sparked a desperate attempt to identify and categorize individuals in larger populations.

That prompted reactions such as the witch craze, which justified the execution of approximately 50,000 people suspected of being in league with Satan, and the Spanish Inquisition, which encouraged people to betray their neighbors as heretics, secret Jews, or crypto-Muslims,

explains Prof. Eliav-Feldon.

Uncertainty and the need for truth prompted new methods of identification. Some were rudimentary and brutal in nature—thieves were branded to indicate their criminal status wherever they might go, for example. Others were early models of identification we are familiar with today, including travel permits, the ancestors of our own passports.

Ironically, as government bureaucracy grew, so did the prevalence of fraud, Prof. Eliav-Feldon discovered. Early hand-written documents were not difficult to forge, and as quickly as identification appeared, forgeries followed. The battle continues today—as the means of identification become more sophisticated, so do attempts to circumvent them, a cycle common in the fields of cyber and border security.

## **Suspending disbelief**

With so many frauds and impostors throughout the early modern period, the question of how and why they succeeded in their deception remains a mystery, notes Prof. Eliav-Feldon, who identifies it as one of the key issues of the phenomenon. The answer, she says, relies on a different notion of truth.

One example is the tale of David Reuveni, who in 1524 came to Venice and declared himself a prince of the lost tribes of Israel. Appearing before the Pope and various kings of Europe, he vowed to forge an alliance with European leaders to liberate the holy land from the Muslims. Despite the absence of proof, Jews and non-Jews alike rallied to his cause. It was years before his deception was uncovered.

Prof. Eliav-Feldon believes that Reuveni succeeded so well because kings and church prelates alike desperately wanted his tale to be true. "They wanted to believe that they had a potential ally—and were willing

to suspend judgment because it fit their interests," she explains. "Many impostors succeeded for a long time not because everybody believed them, but because they had no way of confirming they were impostors."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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