

# Historical approaches to the archive for early modern historians.

In scholarship over the past few decades, the terrain of archival history has changed, equipping historians of the early modern period to produce much richer studies. The boundaries between the historiographical study of ‘archives’ as spaces where historians conduct research and the more traditional political histories of archives and filing systems have broken down. This is a positive development that allows historians to appraise archives as objects with epistemological effects in their own time and in the present. By opening up conceptual distance between archival research and the process of historical enquiry, early modern historians can develop their understanding of the people or institutions that carried out archiving. This is a challenge to the Ranken tradition of historical endeavour, which holds that the object of history is to make truth-claims through the interrogation and comparative analysis of ‘authentic’ historical sources in their own right. By admitting that they have been influenced by the archive, historians must concede that their sources are not wholly ‘authentic’.

By transforming archives into the subjects, rather than sites, of research, historians can introduce the archive into their work as a character in the creation of historical

narratives.<sup>1</sup> Much of the foundational literature on this subject has focused on one particular quality of the archive, its finitude. The limited scope of an archive, Derrida points out, is the quality that gives it its historicity, and also renders it a historically partial object. In Derrida's archive, alternate possibilities for telling one story are suppressed through a process of exclusion. No archivist can avoid taking part in this process, because decisions must be made about the archive's limits for it to exist. These decisions include questions of which sources to preserve and which sources to leave behind (this does not just extend to paper records). These limits have a deconstructable history, and can extend outside of the formal research archive.<sup>2</sup> In the context of daily record-keeping, for example, the decision to preserve something that has lost its immediate utility imposes a historicity upon it. By engaging with the question of why a particular source was preserved, historians can understand how its meaning has been transformed within the wider archive.<sup>3</sup>

Within the formal research archive, the historian's access to the historical substrate is mediated by the cataloguing and classifying techniques employed by institutional archivists, as well as by the archive's technology. This is what Derrida calls the 'privileged topology' of the archive.<sup>4</sup> By creating research aids such as calendars or catalogues, necessities in any functional archive, the archivist gains another tool with which to either suppress or stress certain sources. An overly abbreviated or insufficiently descriptive calendar entry can steer historians away from certain sources. Such a situation could arise from an archivist's judgement of a hierarchy between sources, or simply because of

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. Head, 'Early modern European archivality: organised records, information, and state power, c.1500', in *Archives and information in the early modern world*, eds. K. Peters, A. Walsham and L. Corens (London: British Academy, 2018), p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>J. Derrida and E. Prenowitz, 'Archive fever: a Freudian impression', *Diacritics* 25 (1994), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup>A. Blair, 'Introduction', *Archival Science* 10 (2010), p. 199.

<sup>4</sup>Derrida and Prenowitz, 'Archive fever', p. 10.

the constraints of the form. However, by appreciating and making allowances for these limitations, the historian can make their studies more thorough.

In a digitised archive, these constructions become even less visible to the historian, who may only be able to view records that have been photographed (and thus subject to even greater selection). Because the way in which digital archives are navigated differs so significantly from the way in which physical archives are used, particularly when one considers the difference between the practices of ‘browsing’ and ‘searching’, historians can use entirely different sources depending on the format in which they encounter an archive. Francis Blouin has argued that the reliance of historians on word searches while using the digital archive leaves them hostage to “particular linguistic structures” in the correct sources.<sup>5</sup> Searches for ‘women’, for example, might not yield useful sources related to ‘gender’. Significant technological advances since that time, particularly the use of large language models to produce more contextually aware archival search tools, have gone some way to resolve this particular issue.<sup>6</sup> This does not negate, and in fact reinforces the suggestion that historians should be mindful of the manner in which they engage with the archive, and take into account exactly how this influences their writing.

This is not to say that the incompleteness or abridgement that defines the archive can be fully corrected. Abbreviation is an essential feature of all habits of knowledge collection and of history-writing itself. One cannot write a ‘total’ history. In his short story *On Exactitude in Science*, Jorge Luis Borges tells of an empire so obsessed with cartographic accuracy that it created a one-to-one map of the entire kingdom. It is only upon completing this enormous map that they realise the error of their ways.<sup>7</sup> Archivists

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<sup>5</sup>F. X. Blouin Jr and W. G. Rosenberg (eds.), *Processing the past: contesting authority in history and the archives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 57.

<sup>6</sup>L. Jaillant, K. Aske and A. Caputo, ‘The National Archives (UK)’, in *Navigating artificial intelligence for cultural heritage organisations*, ed. L. Jaillant (London: UCL Press, 2025), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup>J. L. Borges, *A universal history of infamy*, trans. N. T. de Giovanni (London: Penguin, 1975).

cannot collect all the evidence about a period into one place, and it would be equally impossible for the historian to view all of it. By acknowledging the limitations of their use of archives and by using them as an entry point into the archivist's mental world, the historian becomes more aware of their limits when attempting to create an image of the past.

Although problems of reception and use have come to dominate recent historiographical discussion around the archive, the study of the composition and creation of archives in the early modern world also has historical value. The formation of archives was closely tied to the appearance of the state as an active figure in early modern political life, and growing recognition developed that the archive was the means with which a state projected an image of itself into the future. The state's increasing exploitation of information about its subjects in this period opens up a particular use of the archive for the early modern historian. Kate Peters has suggested that by surveying these archives, and remaining mindful of their limits, historians can engage in the intellectual process of 'seeing like a state'.<sup>8</sup> The study of collections of 'official' records offers historians the opportunity to recreate how the state saw its subjects, and how it wanted to be seen by posterity. Pierre Nora's famous concept of the collective artificial social memory is highly relevant to the work of a historian interested in considering the archive as a political actor in its own right.

For historians interested in recreating the mentalities of those political leaders who maintained archives, the importance of the state archive to contemporary political actors throughout early modern Europe is further evident in the interest early modern states showed, while at war, in infiltrating their enemies' archives and protecting their own.

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<sup>8</sup>K. Peters, "'Friction in the archives': access and the politics of record-keeping in revolutionary England", in *Archives and information in the early modern world*, eds. K. Peters, A. Walsham and L. Corens (London: British Academy, 2018), p. 154.

Markus Friedrich has pointed to the role of archives in relation to a number of European conflicts, ranging from the Swedish infiltration of German archives in the Thirty Years' War to the 18th-century diplomatic attempts by various states to introduce wartime legal protections for archives as national assets.<sup>9</sup>

Although of political importance, the notion that these archives contained anything like the totality of information about the state, or even that they were truly reflective of reality, is doubtful. With archival sources often subject to highly partial interventions by their compilers, the composition of these archives was often also eminently political. To Derrida, who saw significance in 'arkheion' meaning the residence of a magistrate, the 'official' archive represents a 'domestication' of truth to paternalistic authority. Derrida was correct in two senses. Firstly, civil and parochial records were often squirrelled away in people's homes. Secondly, the collection of information relied on the cooperation of the holders of parish offices, their recorders and scribes. These citizens of Mark Goldie's 'unacknowledged republic' played a role in mediating, and at times manipulating, the way in which information was transferred from real life into the archive.<sup>10</sup>

By analysing the 'official' archive, historians can most clearly understand how the contours of political power shape historical narratives. Arnold Hunt has noted the interpretive and authorial influence of the early modern secretary or notary.<sup>11</sup> In her book *Fiction in the Archives*, Natalie Zemon Davis considers the effect of bureaucratic formulas used by scribes, clerks and notaries on the "crafting of a narrative" when recording the testimony of French prisoners petitioning the king for clemency. The demands of the

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<sup>9</sup>M. Friedrich and J. N. Dillon, *The birth of the archive: a history of knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 161-164.

<sup>10</sup>M. Goldie, 'The unacknowledged republic: office-holding in early modern England', in *The politics of the excluded, c.1500-1850*, ed. T. Harris (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>A. Hunt, 'The early modern secretary and the early modern archive', in *Archives and information in the early modern world*, eds. K. Peters, A. Walsham and L. Corens (London: British Academy, 2018).

early modern legal archive, for clean language, moral clarity and supplication to the king's authority, coloured the sources within it. The influence of archival norms over recorders, as Davis claims, layered an element of "fictionality" over records.<sup>12</sup> Historical sources are often created, Derrida contends, "with the hope" their "message will become archival. . . indestructible monument of the interrupted en-voie."<sup>13</sup> By recognising how these records were prepared for a future readership by functionaries and bureaucrats, the historian gains a greater understanding of how their creators intended them to be used.

Historians of the earlier part of this period should keep the archive's innovative quality in mind. The Michael Clanchy famously documented a shift among the political elite towards written record-keeping in medieval England. This, he suggested, was the product of an explosion of bureaucratic paper under the Norman yoke.<sup>14</sup> The early modern period witnessed another phase of this shift. Likely as a consequence of the arrival of industrial papermaking, the creation of a huge number of new administrative records in the period, conveyances, wills, deeds and many more, required that new repository stores of written knowledge were formed. However, written records were only one part of early modern memory practices. Although there was a complex interplay between written records and other memory practices, the hegemony achieved by written records and the archive in the period was a new and elite development that attracted interest for its novelty and position at the technological forefront.

Early modern historians should also consider the enormous technical development in the archival profession over the course of their period. It is a testament to the political

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<sup>12</sup>N. Z. Davis, *Fiction in the archives: pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup>J. Derrida, *The post card: from Socrates to Freud and beyond*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 342.

<sup>14</sup>M. T. Clanchy, *From memory to written record: England 1066-1307* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979).

importance of the archive that most of these archival innovations involved arranging records in ways more sympathetic to decision-making flows in state institutions.<sup>15</sup> Registries and codex inventories, freshly outfitted with topical or alphabetical indexes, enabled the archive to be more easily integrated into the state's administrative apparatus. The widespread deployment of files in this period, diminutive and subaltern 'archives' themselves, was the most important development of all. Files, essential in Weber's view to the modern management of the office, were a marker of administrative capacity.<sup>16</sup> Studying the expansion of archive technology offers historians insight into the development of the working methods of growing states.

The limits of the archive are not always circumventable. While constructing an apparently stable edifice, archivists repress certain narratives, even if only because they are unavailable or unrecorded. By recognising that they are being presented with an abbreviated collection of facts, and actively 'reading with the archival grain', historians can counteract this. Archives also affected early modern record-keeping practices and, in turn, the sources historians engage with. By considering how archival forms or traditions shaped the kinds of records created, historians can develop a more circumspect view of the past. Finally, by treating archives as historical actors in their own right, historians can conduct studies of their political and social effects. As stores of artificial memory, state archives held political significance that transcended their everyday utility. Head makes this point, identifying contemporary concern that archives should transmit the acts of rulers in these adolescent administrative states into collective, and eventually perpetual, memory.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>R. C. Head, *Making archives in early modern Europe: proof, information, and political record-keeping, 1400-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 249.

<sup>16</sup>C. Vismann, *Files: law and media technology*, trans. G. Winthrop-Young (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup>Head, *Making archives*, p. 16.

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