



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

De Vivo, Filippo and Donato, M.P. (2015) Scholarly practices in the archives, 1500-1800. Introduction. *Storia Della Storiografia* 68 (2), pp. 15-20. ISSN 0392-8926.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/15226/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>  
contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

or alternatively

## Scholarly practices in the archives, 16th to 18th centuries. Introduction

Filippo de Vivo and Maria Pia Donato

Over the last ten years or so, a new cultural history of archives has gained momentum in a variety of fields and with a range of different approaches. Some of its themes are well established, such as the bond between archives and the rise of the state or that between archives and nations.<sup>1</sup> Others are more recent, such as the selection effects produced by the construction of archives, or the materiality of the records and the material culture of archiving.<sup>2</sup> In short, the history of the archives is moving from the niches to the centre of the discipline, so much so that many have spoken of an inclusive ‘archival turn’. This entails a transformation of our attitude to archival repositories, no longer as simple places for research, but as objects of research, or – even better – as open problems. This results from a double reflective trend: on the one hand, the critical re-consideration by historians about their own practices and about the non-neutral nature of their chosen sources; on the other, the self-reflection of archivists themselves on the significance and implications of their social role, not as merely voiceless guardians or passive ‘keepers of the records’.

This trend is visible across national boundaries. Archivists have for a long time written the history of the collections under their responsibility and, especially in Italy, of the institutions

---

<sup>1</sup> *Archives et nations dans l'Europe du XIXe siècle: actes du colloque organisé par l'École nationale des chartes, Paris, 27-28 avril 2001*, eds B. Delmas, C. Nougaret (Paris: École des chartes, 2004) ; *Archivi e storia nell'Europa del XIX secolo: alle radici dell'identità culturale europea: atti del convegno internazionale di studi nei 150 anni dall'istituzione dell'Archivio Centrale, Firenze, 4-7 dicembre 2002*, eds I. Cotta, R. Manno Tolu (Roma: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> *Fabrique des archives, fabrique de l'histoire*, eds. É. Anheim, O. Poncet, special issue of *Revue de synthèse*, 125, (2004); medievalists have been particularly prominent in studying the material culture of record-keeping, cf. P. Chastang, *La ville, le gouvernement et l'écrit à Montpellier (XIIe-XIVe siècle)*, (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2013) and Jessica Berenbeim, *Art of Documentation: Documents and Visual Culture in Medieval England* (Toronto: PIMS, 2015), but cf. also Arlette Farge, *Le gout de l'archive* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1989).  
Citare il progetto in corso *Ecritures Grises*? si citarlo però qui e aggiungere il libro di quell medievista di Paris XIII che ne fa parte? non ricordo il suo nome, Filippo credo abbia il libro FDV: non mi viene in mente di che medievista parli, ma ho aggiunto un paio di riferimenti che secondo me stanno bene qui. Invece secondo me *Ecritures grises* sta meglio insieme a *paper technologies*, più sotto nota 8, magari insieme a *Gitelman paper knowledge* (Duke, 2014).

that first produced those collections and preserved them over the course of the centuries.<sup>3</sup> While this literature is firmly situated in the traditional narrative of the rise of modernity, especially in its bureaucratic aspects, a more recent trend has arisen, amongst English-speaking archivists in particular, in response to post-modernism. While historians have interpreted Jacques Derrida's *Mal d'Archive* as a criticism of the presuppositions of historiography, archivists have read it as a manifesto of the importance of archival management as an active factor in the selection of memory. The profession as a whole has been undergoing a transformation of its own, following the rise of new stakeholders who see archives as not just embodying the memory of institutions, but as more inclusive social constructs.<sup>4</sup>

Historians, for their part, have in recent years tended to historicise their sources, that is, they have increasingly interpreted sources not as neutral containers of information, but as material objects and as tools of communication and knowledge at the time when they were first produced. This tendency is shared by historians of documentary culture in the early middle ages, by historians of written culture more generally, as well as by historians of the book. The contribution of the archival turn to this vibrant rethinking is that it invites us to reflect not just on the production and immediate reception of texts at the time when they first appeared, but also, and crucially, on their continued use or non-use, on their arrangement, classification and juxtaposition over the long time and successive phases of their preservation. Archives are by definition selective, because not everything can be preserved, and classificatory, because archival documents are ordered within separate series and 'fonds' and because they are provided with reference tools that to some extent determine the conditions of documents' access and guide their interpretation. Thus, preservation itself participates in the production of meaning.

Several other trends have contributed to the archival turn. First the history of record-keeping as a tool of government has gained renewed strength, particularly thanks to the work of Michael Clanchy on the expansion of writing in England following the Norman conquest; despite some reservations by historians of earlier periods, this has been very influential

---

<sup>3</sup> A rich bibliography is contained in the individual entries in the *Guida generale degli Archivi di Stato italiani* (Roma: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, 1981-1994).

<sup>4</sup> Cook, Terry. "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape." *The Canadian Historical Review* 90 (2009): 497-534; L. Giuva, M. Guercio eds., *Archivistica. Teoria, metodi, pratiche* (Rome: Carocci, 2014).

amongst late medievalists and early modernists.<sup>5</sup> In Italy, the trend has been developed especially in relation to the long fifteenth century by a new ‘documentary history of institutions’, and a similar trend can be detected in other countries for later periods.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the classificatory systems of archives have been studied as revealing the worldview of governments, a notion that for example Randolph Head has investigated in line with both Michel Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ and of J.C. Scott’s work *Seeing Like a State*.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, there has been a growing interest on the part of historians of information and knowledge for what Peter Becker and William Clark described, in the framework of Enlightenment Germany, as ‘little tools of knowledge’, that is the techniques and material tools for the management, retrieval and storage of information: indexes, inventories, calendars and so on.<sup>8</sup> The same line has been pursued also in the history of the book, where Ann Blair has studied the practices of compiling anthologies (or *florilegia*) and of note-taking among late medieval and early modern scholars.<sup>9</sup>

The attention for the practices of, and the spaces for, the production of knowledge has been central too, of course, to the history of science and the new social history of knowledge. Since the 1990s, ‘locating knowledge’ and ‘embodying knowledge’ are the watchwords of a tendency – by now relatively mainstream, at least in principle – to materialise the production and circulation of ideas in precise social settings, an approach and a methodology which are only

---

<sup>5</sup> Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979); successive editions (the latest in 2014) have taken into account the criticisms of Anglo-Saxon specialists.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. eg. Lazzarini, Isabella, ed. *Scritture e potere. Pratiche documentarie e forme di governo nell’Italia tardomedievale (secoli XIV-XV)*, special issue of *Reti Medievali - Rivista*, v. 9 (2008); D. Navarro Bonilla, *Escritura, poder y archivo: la organización documental de la Diputación del Reino de Aragón (siglos XV-XVIII)* (Zaragoza: Prensas universitarias de Zaragoza, 2002); O. Guyotjeannin, “Les méthodes de travail des archivistes des rois de France 5XIIIe-début XVIe siècle”, *Archiv für Diplomatik* 42 (1996), 295-373; O. Poncet ed., *Une histoire de la mémoire judiciaire de l’antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: Ecole nationale des Chartes, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Randolph Head, ‘Knowing Like a State: The Transformation of Political Knowledge in Swiss Archives, 1450–1770’, *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), pp. 745-82 – a study that explicitly evokes the work of J. C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> *Little Tools of Knowledge: historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices*, eds P. Becker, W. Clark (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); see also D. Gardey, *Écrire, calculer, classer: comment une révolution de papier a transformé les sociétés contemporaines, 1800-1940* (Paris: la Découverte, 2008) and, from the standpoint of historians, see C. Lebeau, G. Salinero eds, *Pour faire une histoire des listes à l’époque moderne*, special issue of *Mélanges de la Casa de Velazquez*, 44.2, (2014).

<sup>9</sup> A. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

partly coterminous with those of the social history of culture. The cross-pollination between the history of the natural and social sciences has been extremely fruitful, in both directions. Historians of science have been studying archives, intended above all as specific collections of documents put together in the course of their researches by the protagonists of scientific enquiry, whether private individuals or institutions.<sup>10</sup> Like the historians of the book mentioned above, they too have explored the development or refinement of ‘paper technologies’.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the archival turn can be described as a genuinely interdisciplinary movement.

Paradoxically, the field of the history of historiography has on the whole failed to participate in these developments, with few exceptions. Of course, thanks to those historians who have explored the production of historical knowledge in the early modern age, we have learned a great deal about the methods of historians, the practical techniques for the interpretation of historical evidence, and the textual arrangements that shape the production and transmission of historical knowledge. The seminal work of Anthony Grafton has been magisterial in this sense.<sup>12</sup> And yet, the material assemblage of documentary collections, the nature of the historians’ access to archives, and the uses of archival sources in published (and unpublished) history remain largely unexplored. Part of the problem here is that the early use of archival sources was not necessarily associated with particularly innovative historiographical trends. As Felix Gilbert argued a long time ago, experimentation in historical writing in the Renaissance had to do less (if at all) with the substantial use of manuscript collections, let alone archives, than with styles of narrative and with textual criticism.<sup>13</sup> Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century historians who made use of state archives were by definition working in a logic of clientelism – which granted them access to archives in the first place.<sup>14</sup> Yet the degree of that access, and the

---

<sup>10</sup> Starting from the groundbreaking *Archives of the scientific Revolution: the Formation and Exchange of Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. M. Hunter (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998). The University of Geneva recently promoted an international research project on *Archives des savoirs. Enjeux scientifiques, universitaires, patrimoniaux*, the final conference of which was held in Geneva 19-21 June 2014 and is now in press.

<sup>11</sup> V. Hess, J. A. Mendelsohn, "Case and Series. Medical Knowledge and Paper Technology, 1600–1900", *History of Science*, 48.3-4 (2010): 287-314; R. Yeo, *Notebooks, English Virtuosi, and Early Modern Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote. A Curious History* (London, 1997) and *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 221.

<sup>14</sup> See the works of Gary Ianziti, *Humanistic Historiography under the Sforzas: Politics and Propaganda in Fifteenth-Century Milan* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) and *Writing History in Renaissance Italy: Leonardo Bruni And the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

uses that these historians made of the sources they read, should be analysed further to understand the latitude of their writing, the intended uses of their accounts, as well as the precise nature of their archival research.<sup>15</sup>

A similar assessment can be made for later periods too, including the rise of antiquarianism and erudite history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the age most commonly associated with the rise of diplomatics and the new culture of source criticism. And yet here the dominant approach remains that of intellectual history, despite significant national differences. In the country of Mabillon, for example, these studies remain confined to political history, so that the debate between ‘Romanists’ and ‘Germanists’ on the origins of the French nation still fills the pages of history books.<sup>16</sup> In Germany, on the other hand, the history of erudition has elicited studies in early modern textual practices which consider the historiographical text not as an end but as part of the process of knowledge construction, for example emphasising how the various techniques of compilation – through extracts, commentaries, citations or simply plagiarism – was the basis of erudition.<sup>17</sup> Other works have followed, focusing on the history of erudition specifically or the history of historiography more generally,<sup>18</sup> and some historians have also begun to trace the history of archives themselves and of archival science as a branch of erudition. Markus Friedrich has especially addressed archives as a privileged standpoint to investigate early modern knowledge production.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this new research, the specific uses that historians made of archives are still too often either ignored or treated in passing with only few remarks. To put it simply, we still

---

<sup>15</sup> C. Callard, ‘L’histoire comme art de gouverner. Remarques sur la charge d’historiographe à Gênes, Venise, en Savoie et en Toscane, au XVIIe siècle’, in ‘L’histoire Comme Art de Gouverner. Remarques sur la charge d’historiographe à Gênes, Venise, en Savoie et en Toscane, au XVIIe siècle’, *Historiographes et historiographie dans l’Europe moderne* (Paris, 2006) pp. 37–59.

<sup>16</sup> *Historiographie de la France et mémoire du royaume au XVIIIe siècle. Actes des journées d’étude des 4 et 11 février, 4 et 11 mars 2002*, eds. M. Fumaroli, C. Grell (Paris: Champion, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, *Die Praktiken der Gelehrsamkeit in der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. H. Zedelmaier, M. Mulsow (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Parmi d’autres, J. M. Sawilla, *Antiquarianismus, Hagiographie und Historie im 17. Jahrhundert: zum Werk der Bollandisten; ein wissenschaftshistorischer Versuch* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2009); M. Gierl, *Geschichte als präzisierte Wissenschaft: Johann Christoph Gatterer und die Historiographie des 18. Jahrhunderts im ganzen Umfang* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012); *Europäische Geschichtskulturen um 1700 zwischen Gelehrsamkeit, Politik und Konfession*, eds. Thomas Wallnig ... [et al.] (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012). See also N. Gädeke ed., *Leibniz als Sammler und Herausgeber historischer Quellen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> M. Friedrich, *Die Geburt des Archives. Eine Wissensgeschichte* (München: Oldenbourg, 2013).

overwhelmingly tend to consider ‘archival history’ as a sign of modernity in the grand narrative of the history of history writing, a turning point marking the birth of so-called ‘scientific’ historiography in the nineteenth century. This is a vision that is now attracting significant criticisms and revisions, as demonstrated in this very special issue of *Storia della Storiografia* by the articles edited by Philipp Müller.

The articles which we present here originate in a two-day conference on ‘Pratiques savantes des archives’ or ‘Scholarly practices of archives’, which we organised in Paris in March 2015.<sup>20</sup> The conference intended to draw the different tendencies which we have been discussing so far out of their specialist fields, in order to establish a real inter-disciplinary dialogue. Hence our focus on two intertwined themes: on the one hand, the material conditions of the research practices of historians in the early modern period and, on the other, the epistemological implications of archival research at that time. We wished to propose a change in perspective in order to emphasize continuities across periods and convergences across national boundaries, as well as the intimate connections between different domains of knowledge beyond historiography, which have attracted little study so far. We therefore invited specialists of a variety of disciplines (history, archival science, history of art, history of the book) to concentrate on the uses of archives in the writing of history and, viceversa, on the often implicit uses of history in the creation and organisation of archives in the early modern period.

The articles we now propose represent some of the approaches and questions raised during the conference. They span from the mid sixteenth to the late eighteenth century, and cover a vast geographical area, from France to the Republic of Venice, from the Iberian to the Holy Roman Empire. Each article approaches archival scholarly practices from a different angle, which however is also touched upon by the others: the relationship between historians and the officers in charge of archives, the physical access to material documentary repositories, the historical uses of political and administrative archives, the status of historical evidence and the changing nature of documentary collections as well as its relationship with the evolution of the institutions responsible for documentary preservation.

---

<sup>20</sup> The conference received financial support from TransferS (laboratoire d’excellence, program “Investissements d’avenir” ANR-10-IDEX-0001-02 PSL\* and ANR-10-LABX-0099) and from the European Research Council (7th Framework Programme of the European Union, Grant agreement n° 284338, ‘ARCHIVES, For a comparative history of archives in late medieval and early modern Italy’). We would like to thank all participants to the conference for making it a moment of lively scholarly debate.

Fabio Antonini discusses the ways in which sixteenth-century Venetian historians used the archives of the government chancery and went about rearranging even earlier collections of documents until then stored without order in the vaults of the city's main church. By the end of the century, housed in better locations and equipped with new referencing tools, archives became better equipped for historical research, not least thanks to the efforts of secretaries and historians brought in to manage and consult the collections. Fabien Montcher considers the practices of royal historiographers in the seventeenth-century Iberian Empire, highlighting the combined uses of central and local archives, and describing these archives as themselves constitutive of what he terms a 'historical *dispositif*', that is, the strategies that the Spanish monarchy put in place in order to control historical discourses within the Empire and, eventually, to strengthen royal power. As Emmanuelle Chapron argues about the Bibliothèque Royale of Paris in the eighteenth century, even though libraries remained the prevalent workplace for historians, they were increasingly used as archives both by conservators and by readers. They hosted, and made increasing efforts at classifying, collections of documents originating from individuals, families and institutions, and they welcomed the enquiries and visits of scholars, genealogists as well as royal officers. Kasper Eskildsen describes the emergence in Germany in the 1770s of archival documents, especially legal and official records, as a new genre of historical authority, superior both to eyewitness accounts and also to the material evidence that had until then been privileged by antiquarians. Well before Ranke, the use of these sources in historical research helped shape the modern ideal of the historian as an archival researcher.

Between them, the articles highlight the ambiguous nature of notions such as documentary proof, evidence and even archives. They unearth a whole range of practices associated with the study in the archive, practices which the conventions of Renaissance historiography tended to leave implicit or actively hide. Moreover, they demonstrate the ability of early modern historians to call upon vast networks of connections in order to access a range of archival sources; they also suggest that occasionally historians actually needed to invoke such special favours, and so that their ability to use archives should not be taken for granted. In fact, as the authors remind us, the uses of archives often provoked contradictions between the research priorities of historians and the practical political priorities of the officers in charge of archives. The uses of archives show less the contiguity between history and power, which should not be taken for granted, than a creative tension between record-keeping and the writing of history.

Indeed, as especially Montcher and Antonini argue, however close to the court and government historians were, access to archives eventually generated tension either between

historians and their noble patrons, or among those historians who had access to records – especially to central state archives – and those who did not. These tensions enhanced a double process: on the one hand, source hunting, and on the other, legitimising different ways of writing history, provided it rested on archival sources. Founding or re-ordering central state repositories like Simancas or the Venetian State archives would seem to be crucial in affirming new forms of archival authority, although this, as Chapron and Eskildsen show too, does not mean that historians necessarily and invariably resorted to such archives, quite the opposite.

In short, the four articles in this special issue intend as much to raise questions as to offer answers and, above all, they hope to open paths of research for contextualising the study of history writing in the early modern era.