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Editorial: Archival transformations in early modern European history

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This special issue addresses a double transformation. The first is the historical process that saw a dramatic increase in the production of documents and a substantial improvement in their management and preservation throughout Europe between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century. The early modern period, inclusively conceived, is often described as the age of print, but it was also the great time of archives, understood as both the physical repositories and organised offices established by institutions or collectivities to store handwritten documents produced in the course of continuous functions with a view to long-term use. For many European historians, the process of centralisation, expansion, and (more or less successful) rearrangement of archives is symbolised by the establishment of the great Simancas and Vatican archives respectively in 1540 and 1612. But, as the articles collected here demonstrate, smaller states too enacted reforms in record-keeping, and the changes concerned more archives than those of central institutions. The second transformation is interpretive and methodological. Archives have long been at the centre of historians’ research, but over the last ten-fifteen years an ‘archival turn’ in disciplines ranging from history to literature, anthropology and the social sciences has turned archives from sites of research into objects of enquiry in their own right. These works study the evolving processes of selection, ordering and usage that produced archives not as neutral repositories of sources but as historically constructed tools of power relations, deeply embedded in changing social and cultural contexts.

The history of archives has been long practised by archivists, who are professionally aware that documents were neither produced nor arranged as sources for modern scholars but as records of historical transactions and activities. Some archivists have written broad general histories of archival science, often published in textbooks in countries where archival training includes a historical component, such as in schools attached to Italian State archives or in central institutions such as France’s Ecole des Chartes.¹ Other archivists have written specific histories of the repositories placed under their responsibility, often as introductions to archival inventories.² Again, this has been crucial to archival work when arrangement and description are based on the principle of provenance. Lately, however, archivists have engaged in a dialogue with historians, leading to a growing number of joint projects, conferences, and publications. Since 2001 the journal Archival Science has been a forum for exchange and a standard reference for practitioners in both professions. In short, in a move that parallels the history of libraries

² See for example the large bibliography in Guida generale degli Archivi di stato italiani, 4 vols. (Rome 1981-94).
and museums, the history of archives has been moving from the domain of specialists towards the centre of historical studies.\(^3\)

Before discussing some of these works in the context of early modern European history, it may be useful to capture some of the broader cultural and intellectual developments that have given impetus to this move. The first is the digital revolution that has been altering beyond recognition how we use, retain, and access information. The amount of records produced and stored online – how safely? for how long? – is growing at an astronomical rate to volumes that the mind finds difficult even to conceive. As we learn to organise our files and folders on hard drives or in the cloud, archives become a common presence in our lives, and now serve as an evocative metaphor for many artists, scientists and commentators.\(^4\)

Meanwhile, new projects are exploring possibilities for the digitization and study of archives.\(^5\)

The second, not unrelated but more strictly historiographical, development concerns the determination of scholars in different disciplines to historicise sources not as abstract containers of information but as themselves material means of communication shaped by changing preoccupations. Historians of the book transformed the study of culture and ideas by concentrating on the material conditions for the production and circulation of texts.\(^6\) This approach now extends to written culture more generally and to aspects such as the history of paper, writing and the physical form of documents.\(^7\) The time is ripe for the same critical scrutiny to be applied to archival collections, whose historical significance derives not just from hosting single documents but from establishing complex systems of meaningful relations among those documents. Studying the selection, arrangement and classification of archives helps us understand the uses (or non-uses) of documents at the time they were produced and in the immediate future. Just as historians of the book and new philologists have placed an emphasis on the creative, transformative effects of textual circulation, so archives can be shown to have been sites not just of knowledge preservation, but knowledge production.

Moreover, archivists and historians have both been engaged in important processes of self-reflection. Partly in response to Jacques Derrida’s *Mal d’archive* (1994), the former have been affirming the active role of their profession, not as passive

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\(^5\) For different examples, see the projects carried out by the Centre for Editing Lives and Letters at University College, London (http://www.livesandletters.ac.uk) and the Venice Time Machine project based at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne and the University of Venice Ca’ Foscari (http://vtm.epfl.ch).


‘keepers’ of the records, but as historically-situated contributors to memory through selection and preservation.\(^8\) Once again, this is not unrelated to wider developments in information technology, as the growth of records gives paramount importance to processes of appraisal and selection. Archivists in many countries have developed an encompassing vision of archives as non-neutral instruments of power.\(^9\) In parallel, theoretically informed cultural historians have produced critical studies of their own complex and occasionally twisted intellectual dependence from, and emotional relationship with, archives, seen at once as validating ground, rite of passage and object of fetishism.\(^10\) Many, including feminist historians and those in subaltern studies have sought to unearth the inherent bias of archives and its unintended consequences on history-writing. In this rising awareness, the dialogue with anthropologists of post-colonial society has been especially important, as historians reformulate their questions to take into account the internal logic of archival organisation – studying archives, in Ann Stoler’s words, along the grain.\(^11\)

Another great source of inspiration has been the work of some medievalists who have been conducting what has been described as the ‘archaeology’ of archival documents, at the intersection between traditional disciplines such as diplomatics and palaeography and the anthropology of writing.\(^12\) Increasingly, they have looked beyond the form of single documents to study the physical conditions of their preservation in complex combinations with other documents. The study of cartularies – a sort of book-size archives – has emphasised the active choices made in selection and compilation.\(^13\) Inspired by these researches, historians of the high middle ages have recently confronted the question of the historical uses of documents, thereby revising the notion of a dark age in which literacy was confined to a clerical minority.\(^14\) Above all, perhaps, Michael Clanchy’s pioneering From Memory to Written Record has inspired many to study the

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\(^10\) Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, eds, special issue: Archives, Records, and Power, Archival Science, 2, nos. 1-2 (2002); Blouin and Rosenberg, eds, Processing the past: contexting authority in history and the archives (Oxford 2011); Isabella Zanni Rosiello, Archivi e memoria storica (Bologna 1987) and Gli archivi tra passato e presente (Bologna 2005).


multifaceted uses of records throughout medieval Europe.\textsuperscript{15} Some have concentrated on the pragmatic aspects of written culture while others study the practices of documentary writing.\textsuperscript{16} Medievalists have been particularly prominent in studying the material culture of record-keeping, an avenue that has also been increasingly pursued by cultural historians and historians of literature for other periods.\textsuperscript{17} To turn now to early modernists, they are following in these paths but also opening new routes for research by focusing on the transformations brought about by a variety of factors in the scale of production and management of archives from the fifteenth century onwards. For the sake of discussion we can group these studies under four headings.

The first is the political history of archives, or the archival history of politics. If some medievalists placed particular emphasis on the literacy revolution around 1200, it is impossible to ignore the massive surge in administrative paperwork resulting from the concurrent centralisation and expansion of early modern states. Recent Italian historians have been particularly attentive to the possibilities of comparing the growth of chanceries in republican and princely regimes as the regional expansions of the fifteenth century pushed them all to reduce their traditional reliance on notaries, to diversify their chanceries, and to make the latter directly accountable to the ruling prince or council.\textsuperscript{18}

The rise of increasingly resident networks of diplomacy also required ever greater sophistication in archiving letters at the time.\textsuperscript{19} In larger states such as Spain, France and England, substantial hierarchies of officers emerged under the direction of new figures, variously described as principal secretaries or secretaries of state, who managed all papers produced in executing the ruler’s orders.\textsuperscript{20} As Jacob Soll has demonstrated in the paradigmatic case of Colbert, they turned archives into powerful instruments to demonstrate royal prerogatives inside the state and claims over neighbours.\textsuperscript{21} Various historians have described this process as the emergence of ‘information states’ with increasingly complex government departments charged with gathering and managing written information on their territories and population, whether to determine fiscal

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\item[21] Soll, The Information Master.
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revenues, allocate military contributions, or trace the spread of disease. Under rulers such as Philip II (the rey papelero) or Louis XIV (roi bureaucrate) archives evolved from repositories of old documentary proofs of rights into information-management institutions. Regime change or expansion also meant that new states captured the offices of old ones, made them obsolete as administrative instruments, and turned their working papers into archives for their own uses. Similarly, the expansion of overseas empires — colonial or commercial — brought about streams of correspondence which also required the institutional transformation of archives. In the age of confessionalisation the Churches also underwent a process of information gathering and management, whether through diocesan questionnaires and other paperwork aimed at confessionalisation or through the correspondence of religious orders aimed at global expansion.

The second approach derives from historians of knowledge, who have been particularly keen to identify spaces and sites of research. Historians of science have studied the archives of scientists and scientific institutions, as well as exploring the development of ‘paper technologies’. At the juncture between information management and administrative life, archives are not just institutions for the preservation of knowledge, but — like laboratories — sites for its elaboration. The archival turn represents a natural evolution of the study of the transmission of knowledge, because the management of documents is instrumental to their transmission over generations. Archivists and their masters selected, arranged and classified written information in order to turn it into useful knowledge. Partly because of the sheer growth in records, partly because of the accidents of conquest, the early modern period saw deliberate reforms in the organisation of records. Intellectual historians have shown how the expansion of information required the development of tools for its selection and retrieval. Ann Blair has studied the notes and anthologies of those Renaissance scholars who first expressed concerns about information excess. More work could show the bureaucratic

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30 Ann Blair, Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age (New Haven; London
The production of retrieval tools coincided with broader re-organisations of archives. In the sixteenth century a new organisational logic for filing current records by affair or theme gained traction in German-speaking areas under the label Registratur.33 By the eighteenth century, administrators subsequently began to apply the principle of pertinence to historical collections reaching back to the fourteenth century – sometimes with disastrous effects as in the case of Austrian-ruled Milan.34 These developments were of course never simply technical. To continue the parallel with the history of science, just as laboratory practices encapsulate notions of social relations, so new archival practices embodied new ideas about the archiving institution and its place in the world. For example, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century, the archives of various Swiss cantons underwent a process of rearrangement that moved from hierarchies of charters granted by superior authorities to a new sense of territorial unity.35 Between the mid-sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, France’s Trésor des chartes was reorganised under the guidance of jurists and antiquarians.36 In this sense archives can be seen less as tools of government than as embodiments of the worldview of governors – what Michel Foucault called ‘governmentality’ – and as part of the broader history of classification.37

Thirdly, moving from documents to people, we may speak of a social history of archives that complements and to some extent contrasts with the preceding approaches.38 Thus, for example, while political historians of archives underline the

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33 See Randolph Head, ‘Configuring European Archives’, below, pp. 0000-0000.


38 Eric Ketelaar, ‘Prolegomena to a Social History of Dutch Archives’, in Aad Blok, Jan Lucassen, and Huub Sanders, eds, *A Usable Collection: essays in honour of Jaap Kloosterman on collecting social history* (Amsterdam
exploitation of repositories by the state, social historians have recently focused on the clerical intermediares who often remained anonymous in the very records that they were in charge of preparing and storing. Individual chancellors and secretaries of Renaissance Italy, from Leonardo Bruni to Niccolò Machiavelli, have for example long attracted attention, but recently this has given way to the analysis of the social and professional strategies of groups of professionals, at a time when training and eligibility were being streamlined, partly to facilitate the constitution of closed social groups. A recent collection published by the same editors of this special issue has analysed the various figures who, under different names, worked as archivists for political institutions in Italy. The agency of late medieval and early modern record-keepers has attracted particular attention in studies that range from Flanders to colonial Peru, although a comparative history of the notary, a figure that prevailed in large parts of Europe and European empires, still needs to be written.

This more socially inclusive approach to the history of archives has underlined the apparently contradictory ways in which archives were not just tools of government but also sites of social and political conflict, more permeable to outside influences than the notion of an information state suggests. Archives were the objects of conflicting claims, as even Colbert saw archives as not just tools of state power but also as weapons against competing factional leaders. State archives in early modern Italy were often described as secret at the time (for example in Rome, Venice, Ferrara, Bologna), but the emphasis on secrecy may be seen as a response to the anxieties caused by the frequent illicit dispersal of documents. Archives were built as a result of competition between different forms of record-keeping, as many early modern governments made determined attempts, albeit far from successful, at seizing papers from the hands of ministers, whose own aristocratic mentality saw archives as part of family heritage. In Italy, the state’s attempt to centralise the preservation of notarial archives was fought and successfully limited by notaries keen to retain the profit they secured from handing out copies of their papers to clients. As a result, central archives competed with others. Families, local communities, professional associations gathered collections of records as guarantees of claims against other groups and against the state; archives could turn less into the means of legitimating than of contesting power.

2014), 40-55.


40 De Vivo, Guidi and Silvestri, eds., Archivi e archivisti in Italia tra medioevo e età moderna (Roma 2015).


45 Andrea Giorgi and Stefano Moscadelli, ‘Cum acta sua sint. Aspetti della conservazione delle carte dei notai in età tardo-medievale e moderna (XV-XVIII sec.)’, in de Vivo, Guidi and Silvestri, eds, Archivi e archivisti, 259-81.

46 Vittorio Tigrino, Castelli di carte. Giurisdizione e storia locale nel Settecento in una disputa fra Sanremo e Genova (1729-35), in Quaderni storici, 101 (1999), 475-506; Marie Lezowski, Confitti di precedenza, uso degli archivi e storiografia locale alla fine del Cinquecento (Pavia 1592), in Quaderni storici, 133 (2010), 7-39; Andy Wood, The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in Early Modern England (Cambridge 2013); Kuipers,
competition between central *archivos* and smaller private or semi-private *archivillos*. 

Precisely because they were so precious, archives were at the centre of conflicts extending beyond the institutions that produced them, and were occasionally targeted during civil strife.

The final angle we wish to underline is that of the history of historiography. Well before Ranke, archives began to be used with increasing regularity as sources for historical narratives. Scholars such as Arnaldo Momigliano, Donald Kelley and Anthony Grafton have long emphasised the importance of evidence in the response of antiquarians, jurists and philologists to historical scepticism. Diplomatics, the technique of source criticism based on the form of documents, evolved in the seventeenth century. As Randolph Head and others have suggested, in the meantime, an alternative form of criticism focused on archival location. This was no dispassionate enterprise. Rival official historians were given access to archives to score points drawn from past authority in the *bella diplomatica* or ‘wars of documents’ that arose out of religious and political conflict from the sixteenth century onwards, whether to prove the date of conversion of a particular ruler and so the confessional allegiance of his heir’s territories, to demonstrate the ceremonial precedence of one petty ruler over another, or to prove a ruler’s right over a particular territory. Recent contributions to this field have underlined the conditions of archival research and the practices of archival scholarship, including the collaboration between historians and archivists. The latter themselves prefigured historiographical activities, preparing compendia, annals, and lists of ‘curious and memorable deeds’ (as in Venice or at Simancas since the second half of the sixteenth century), whether or not they were then used by historians.

This special issue arises from the activities of the research project ‘ARCHIves, A Comparative History of Archives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy’, funded by the European Research Council and based at Birkbeck, University of London in 2012-16. Because of its fragmented political history, Italy has an exceptional variety of archives that invite comparison. The project has studied in depth seven case studies (Rome, Venice, Florence, Modena, Milan, Naples, Palermo) emanating from different


52 Richard L. Kagan, *Clio & the crown: the politics of history in medieval and early modern Spain* (Baltimore; London 2009), 96-104 and 133. In this vein, see Filippo de Vivo and Maria Pia Donato, eds, Special issue *Scholarly practices in the archive, 1500-1800*, *Storia della storiografia*, 68 (2015), especially the article by Fabien Montcher (on Spain) and Fabio Antonini (on Venice).

53 See [http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/archives/](http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/archives/) and [https://birkbeck.academia.edu/ARCHIvesProject](https://birkbeck.academia.edu/ARCHIvesProject).
regimes. We focused on six aspects of archival history: the political and administrative uses of archives; their organization, arrangement and finding devices; material aspects such as textual supports, furniture and buildings; the staff in charge of archives; their broader social uses and their contested place in society at the time; and, finally, their use by historians. One of our driving principles from the beginning has been to compare the Italian cases with others and to combine our own methodological approach with insights developed by specialists of other countries – not least because the history of Italy’s archives is strongly marked by the importance of relations with other countries, whether in the form of domination (as underlined here by Silvestri) or diplomatic relations (de Vivo). For this reason, we are particularly happy to publish this special issue, covering developments that took place not just in Italy but in several European regions in the early modern period broadly conceived, including regions such as the Mediterranean and England, which are rarely studied together. All authors have reflected on different moments of transformation and acceleration in archival practices, due to a variety of reasons.

The first two articles invite us to date the beginning of archival transformations to the fifteenth century and to tie it with political processes of expansion, administration and war. Alessandro Silvestri shows how the fifteenth-century expansion of the Crown of Aragon developed a variety of record-keeping practices to keep track of government over a vast and scattered empire in the Western Mediterranean. He compares archives instituted in different provincial capitals, to find that in some (Sardinia, Balearic Islands) the Aragonese imported their own model, while in others (Sicily, Naples) they innovated in dialogue with local archival traditions. Andrea Guidi, by contrast, focuses on the case study of the Florentine republic to demonstrate how archives served succeeding regimes. He underlines that documentary practices had a significant acceleration during the so called Italian Wars (from 1494 onwards) and, interestingly, notes the role played in the production and storage of a large quantity of state papers by Niccolò Machiavelli. The emphasis on the political framework for archival transformations is also shared by the following article, by Vanessa Harding, on sixteenth-century England. She discusses the fate and rearrangement of ecclesiastical archives after the dissolution of the monasteries and, echoing Geoffrey Elton’s famous notion of a Tudor revolution in government, she asks whether a parallel transformation took place in the management of archives.

The following two articles explore technical transformations as they consider the emergence of new record-keeping techniques between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Randolph Head describes the separation in German-speaking lands of pre-existing repositories for storing charters and the new practices of Registratur, with a primarily informational rather than juridical value. He argues in favour of a nuanced understanding of archives, encompassing more than one model, as culturally and geographically inclusive. Filippo de Vivo compares the different ways in which Italian states increasingly recorded the oral contents of negotiations between ambassadors and hosting governments. As he argues, the nature and detail of the records depended on their uses at the time, as they served to inform further aspects of diplomatic activity. Both articles emphasise the importance of the material dimension of archiving, including the difference between parchment and paper, the specificities of bundles and registers or codices, and the crucial role played by paratextual tools such as indexes and tables of contents.

The last two articles seek to situate archival transformation in a broader social and cultural context, away from strictly political developments. Antonio Castillo considers changes in archival culture as part of a wider shift towards the proliferation and systematisation of written records, one which encompassed both the Castilian monarchy and municipal administrations, but which was also shared by wider social groups. As he
describes it, Habsburg Spain saw repeated, and repeatedly frustrated, attempts to bring order to growing quantities of paper. Finally, Markus Friedrich uses the case of Pierre Camille Le Moine (1723-1800), professional *archiviste* and the author of the first printed French treatise on archival management and description, to argue for a social history of archives. He focuses on private, seigneurial and ecclesiastical archives, and on the growing labour market emerging for archival experts in eighteenth-century France. He also discusses Le Moine’s arguments in favour of arranging documents on the basis of pertinence rather than provenance, an arrangement which may owe its rationale to the principles of the Enlightenment.

In line with the double objective discussed at the beginning of this introduction, the articles of this special issue demonstrate, in different ways and on the basis of different cases, the uses of archives at the time they were put together and over successive generations, as well as the uses of the history of archives for early modern historians today. Collectively, the authors contribute to the archival turn by emphasising the reasons for the accelerating transformation of archives in the early modern age, in relation to the governmental management of information, the conduct of war and diplomacy, and the professionalisation of archival expertise. As the authors show, the centralisation and expansion of archives revealed new modes of government, while their shifting organization reflected changes in the priorities of the institutions that put them together. Such an approach will continue to illuminate our understanding of contemporary archival practices as new avenues open up for exploration. For example, how far did outsiders access and use state archives, as suggested in a recent study of early modern India? What was the symbolic meaning of archives, independently of their practical functions? If we know that documents were monumentalised, could archives as a whole be monuments to a particular idea of the states or communities that generated them? And what about developments beyond Europe? If some early modern European governments were associated with information mastery, the same can be said of other regimes such as the early modern Mughal Empire, described as ‘government by paper’ (*kaghazi raj*) at the time of Akbar (1542-1605). Across the early modern world, empires developed bureaucracies and archives whose parallels deserve further study.

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58 Peter Crooks and Timothy H. Parsons, eds, *Empires and Bureaucracy in World History* (Cambridge 2016). In May 2016 the ARCHIves project has co-organised a conference in Paris on ‘Connaître le monde, administrer la diversité: les archives impériales/Imperial Archives in Global Perspective’ with Labext Transfer and the Institut Universitaire de France.