

Chapter 1: The Astonishing Career of the Archive

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Introduction: The Human Urge for Preservation?

Weimar, Germany, 2 September 2004. It must have been a grim scene for the eyewitnesses that evening. A simple technical problem had led to one of the biggest, if not the greatest, library burnings of the German post-war era. The famous *Herzogin Anna Amalia Library* was on fire. It took hours to get the fire under control and save the library from complete destruction. Even after the flames had died down, the ashes of burnt books were still raining from the sky.

The library, which reopened after extensive restoration in October 2007, was founded in 1691. In 1998, it was listed as a UNESCO world heritage site as a part of *Classical Weimar* and contains some of the most important books and manuscripts in German history dating from the ninth century, such as those of Luther and Goethe. A total of around 50,000 manuscripts, handwritten works and printed books were lost that memorable night. A further 118,000 books were severely damaged by fire, smoke and water. Quite remarkable were the people who desperately tried to save some of the books and documents from the flames while the fire still raged inside the library. Citizens and firemen formed a human chain to pass the books from inside the destroyed building to people out on the street.

There must be something about these materials from the past that evokes strong feelings and triggers the urge to preserve and save them for the future. Losing them is tragic, a loss that cannot be compensated – that means that an irreplaceable part of our history is gone forever.

Throughout human history there have always been conflicts and destruction. Consequently, there has also been a strong tendency to collect and preserve evidence – material and documentary traces of human life and human action. Apparently, it is an integral part of human nature to hold on to heritage and history. Humans have always produced documents in a wide range of formats, records that allow us to remember, a window through which to explore the past. Perhaps having to face an unknown future motivates human beings to maintain a link with the past, one that promises to explain how we became what we are now. What is it that humans want to preserve throughout history and continue to store?

It is a common assumption and a genuine hope that we can learn from our past and avoid repeating the same mistakes. This presupposes we have information about the past. In archival contexts, this takes the form of records we have access to and can work with in order to make sense of them. Archives, along with libraries and museums, offer a wealth of knowledge and shed light on human experience and the public mind.

Taking these thoughts into consideration leads us to some basic questions: How can we define

the term *archive*? What constitutes an archive? Archives seem to be more than just storerooms for documents and records. How did archives and their concepts develop over time and shape the image that comes to mind when we think of archives today?

Books that endeavour to answer these questions would fill vast halls. Clearly a few pages could never do justice to the history of archives in its entirety. This chapter will nonetheless attempt to provide a brief overview and basic understanding of this complex and diverse subject matter. Although archives are a global phenomenon, the chapter will highlight general tendencies with a few (mainly) European examples. Furthermore, the examination concentrates on written records and out of necessity neglects the oral and visual traditions that are both so vital to history and memory. This chapter will outline how archives developed from assemblages of seminal documents to tools of political rule for those in power, who not only formed them into symbols of power and knowledge but also into factors of oppression and freedom. This evolution is linked to a range of ideas that accompanied the archives over time in an effort to optimize their suitability for a particular purpose, such as criteria for the selection and preservation of records. Today probably more than ever we have to deal with these questions and introduce new concepts for record preservation, given the increase in record production in times of globalization, digitalization, mass and social media.⁸ Taking these aspects into consideration, the following chapter intends to raise awareness about archives, which – far from guaranteeing completeness – may have gaps for several reasons.

I. Ancient Roots

Archives in the Near East and the Bronze Age Aegaeis – the impact of literacy

*To explain what an archive is,
it is important to say what an archive was and how it became.⁹*

Is there an actual starting point to the history of archives? According to the concept of four media revolutions postulated by Michael Giesecke, without either writing or written documents, there would be nothing to archive. The first media revolution, the invention of language, can be seen as a precondition for the development of literacy, as it made complex communication possible and distinguished humans from animals.¹⁰

The tendency to preserve the knowledge we produce and/or evidence of our activities can be traced back to prehistoric times. Objects such as pictographs, stone steles and totem poles

⁸ Throughout this text, a distinction is drawn between “digitization” and “digitalization.” The former refers to converting something into a digital format, such as by scanning a physical document and creating a digital file, and the latter to the conversion of analogue processes into digital equivalents, such as replacing letter-writing with email exchange.

⁹ Translated from German: “Um zu erklären, was ein Archiv ist, muss gesagt werden, was ein Archiv war und wie es geworden ist”. Dietmar Schenk, „Aufheben, was nicht vergessen werden darf“: *Archive vom alten Europa bis zur digitalen Welt* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2013), 38.

¹⁰ Michael Giesecke, *Sinnenwandel, Sprachwandel, Kulturwandel: Studien zur Vorgeschichte der Informationsgesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 36–42.

carried meaning through visual or symbolic content for those able to interpret their message. Taking this into account “we have had archives [...] since before we have had records as we define them today.”¹¹ The beginning of the archive almost inevitably coincides with the second media revolution, the invention of writing, which made complex data processing possible. Human memory as the only, albeit highly transient, data storage medium was supplemented by the more durable stone, clay, papyrus, and later paper. Records that had previously been stored in the psyche via *oral traditions* were now physically accessible – a basic condition for archiving them. Fixing something onto a specific material for future reference was a key step in record production and closely connected to the upturn of an early archival practice. The invention of writing brought the prehistoric era to an end.¹²

Records for economic purposes

The oldest documentary evidence originated in the ancient Near East, around the period from the third millennium BC. Approximately 400,000 clay tablets with writings were found at archaeological sites in Babylonia, Mesopotamia and Assyria. The principal achievements of early Near Eastern cultures were soon adapted by Mediterranean cultures, first and foremost by ancient Crete. Crete was the first region in the Aegaeis to form a stricter hierarchical society and, relatedly, to erect monumental palace buildings. The most famous of these palaces were located at Knossos. In the Minoan palace culture, named after the mythical king Minos of Knossos, a unique style of writing based on the Near Eastern cultures evolved. The so-called Linear A style probably had administrative functions, but scholars are still dealing with interpretation approaches to it and have not yet properly understood it. Later, researchers discovered the decipherable Linear B style from the ancient city-state of Mycenae located on the Greek mainland.

The findings from the different sites north of the Persian Gulf, along and around the Euphrates and the Tigris, are predominantly economic texts that functioned as orders and receipts or copies of receipts. They document the processing, storage and transfer of goods, livestock, tax payments or payments for labourers.¹³ These early Near Eastern archives – if we can already call them that – seem to have been a storage place specifically for selected economic records. On the other hand, there may well be other types of records that have not yet been found. That some of these tablets have survived is a result of their highly resistant material rather than the human urge to preserve them.¹⁴ There is evidence that at least some of these tablets were made for a limited period of time and updated regularly.¹⁵ In other words, when it comes to archival theory there was no demand for the preservation of a record in its original form or indeed of every single record regardless of whether it was considered useful enough for

¹¹ Laura Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practices* (London: Facet, 2017), 37.

¹² Giesecke, *Sinnenwandel, Sprachwandel, Kulturwandel*, 37.

¹³ Maria Brosius, ed., *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

¹⁴ Eckhart G. Franz, *Einführung in die Archivkunde* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), 7.

¹⁵ Brosius, *Ancient Archives*, 5.

permanent conservation. Moreover, given their economic purpose, clay tablets were probably quite mobile. That is, they were moved elsewhere when needed and were not stored permanently in one place.

‘Working’ archives or an ‘accumulation of documents’?

While literacy and archiving are interrelated, they should not be understood as identical or as an automatic co-development. It takes human effort to create archives. Different needs and aims, which change over time, determine the content of the archive. It would therefore be difficult to define these early record collections as archives from a current perspective, since they have little in common with the institutions we have in mind when we talk about archives today. Some scholars use more descriptive terms instead, such as ‘accumulation of documents’ or ‘assemblage’. Terms such as ‘active’ or ‘working’ archives are more suited to their constantly changing states and their use of Maria Brosius.¹⁶

In any case, we do find sites similar to those in the Near East when looking at the Minoan and Mycenaean palace culture of ancient Crete around 2000 to 1200 BC, which was written in Linear B style. This is not surprising, since trading connections had emerged around the Mediterranean and the tablets found in Mesopotamia basically served economic purposes. Rooms in the massive palace complexes found on Crete are referred to as storage space for documents. There is a gap in surviving written forms from the collapse of these palace cultures around 1200 BC up to 800 BC – a period referred to as the Dark Ages, characterized by few cultural contacts and loss of the ability to write. Migration led to re-urbanization, a new alphabet and the comeback of written documents, although not much has been preserved from the seventh and sixth century BC. Unlike stone, organic materials such as papyrus, wood or parchment are far less resilient and can only be preserved under specific conditions. They are prone to climatic factors, natural soil characteristics and erosion processes. Hence whatever documents we find depends not only on what was meant to be kept, but also on material, time and environmental conditions. Moreover, archaeological findings are often a question of chance due to their topographical siting. Mountain regions or woodlands, for example, are less easy to access than agricultural areas. We have to remember that the material we are dealing with today might just be a small part of a much larger whole, and that clarifying whether the survival of a record was intentional or not is nigh to impossible.

Graeco-Roman periods – institutional origins

The Archaic period from around 800 BC onwards came up with some important achievements, such as the Homeric epics and the first historiographic sources, for example from Herodot and Thukydides. Given the same cultural background, language and writing, urbanization processes arose all over ancient Greece and the first *poleis* emerged. Social life

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

within the *poleis* no longer revolved in a strictly hierarchical manner around a *basileus* as was the case in the palace culture of Crete. Society was still hierarchically organized but more developed and complex due to the emergence of law and taxes, and the rising importance and meaning of terms like public life and citizenship. These achievements developed further from 500-350 BC, which is referred to as the Classical period in Ancient Greece. Economic texts from this period, which were frequently written on less durable materials such as papyrus, are rare. Record producers may well have selected materials according to how long they wished the record to exist. In contrast to legal texts, which were frequently inscribed in stone, economic texts were perceived as fulfilling short-term purposes.¹⁷ Therefore Greek public archives contained collections of official legal documents and decrees, private contracts, records of loans, gifts, the liberation of slaves, and finance and taxation, rather than economic texts. This could indicate a shift in document preservation. The preserved records dealt with the granting of privileges and contained documentary evidence of legislation as well as trial and literary documents. Similar to public buildings and emerging political structures, they were controlled by political units such as the state, the council or the *demos* and their institutions.¹⁸

The institutional origins of the archive can be traced to this period at the latest, as the term itself stems from ancient Greek. The Greek *archaion/ἀρχαίον* is related to the term *archē/ἀρχή*, which means authority or office. The Latin word *archivum*, on the other hand, derives from *archeion*, but the modern term is based on the Latin form. It describes the institution itself or the official documents of authorities and offices rather than a general collection of old documents. Official documents were first of all produced for a specific purpose, illustrating that today's image of the archive does not correspond to what was originally associated with the term archive.¹⁹ Furthermore, these documents clarify a key archival aspect: they were and still are instruments of power and empowerment, of political rule and of an active assertion of interests. The documents produced and kept by the political authorities were those assessed as vital to this unit. In other words, archives could simultaneously legitimize those in power and marginalize those without.

Places of knowledge

The Roman author Plutarch describes in minute detail the great fire that shook the ancient city of Alexandria and its inhabitants in 48 BC during the civil war.²⁰ One of the buildings affected by the fire was the Library of Alexandria, a place that attracted savants from far and wide. At least this is what Plutarch and several other authors tell us.²¹ Today it is difficult to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Franz, *Archivkunde*, 1–2.

²⁰ Plutarchus, *Vitae Parallelae: Große Griechen und Römer. Caesar*, trans. Konrat Ziegler (Mannheim: Artemis & Winkler, 2010), 49.

²¹ Plutarchus, *Vitae Parallelae. Caesar*, 49; Seneca, *De tranquillitate animi: Über die Ausgeglichenheit der Seele*, trans. Heinz Gunermann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006), 5, 9; Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae. Attische Nächte*, trans. Hartmut Froesch (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2018), 7, 17.

determine what really happened and, for instance, whether there was a fire at all. Even after the *annus horribilis* of 48 BC, Alexandria remained a magnet for the educated and a destination for scholars. Neither do we know the real extent of the library, although Plutarch gives us a rough idea by stating that years later Marcus Antonius donated Cleopatra the Library of Pergamum, which consisted of approximately 200,000 scrolls, maybe to compensate for the loss of the old library.²² As research has shown, this figure is most likely exaggerated²³, but it gives us an idea of the importance of writing and remembering. Creating libraries and other places of knowledge was a key aspect of imperial power when it came to demonstrating prestige to the polity's own public, as well as to competing empires. Loss of the library and its treasury of ancient knowledge was not only a tragedy in itself. Ancient states, in this case Pergamon and Egypt, seem to have competed for the most extensive library, since it meant owning *the* place of knowledge.²⁴ In other words, knowledge was power.

Powerful manuscripts

The archive of ancient Rome was located in the temple of Saturn, which also contained the state treasury until a fire in 78 BC made a change of location necessary. It contained only records of high legal status. Records of basic administrative operations were stored at the relevant institution or agency. As administration of the Roman Empire complexified, the production of records and official documents increased and gained in significance. We know that several emperors systematically used censuses to enumerate Roman citizens. Acquiring and recording such information was elementary to raising taxes, awarding citizenship and conscripting the Empire's inhabitants to the army.

Archives were repositories of manuscripts, but also agents to legitimize those in power and marginalize those without. Emperor Justinian decided that it was the duty of each city of the Roman Imperium to create their own archives. This continued in the course of the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, notwithstanding changes that emerged in the process.²⁵

II. The Medieval Chancery Archives: Record-Keeping at Royal and Ecclesiastical Courts

A mobile kingship with a monarch travelling from place to place within his kingdom meant that reference to information in written form was of growing importance and a tool to intensify power. From the tenth century onwards, the production and use of written material multiplied,

²² Plutarchus, *Vitae Parallelae. Antonius*, 58.

²³ Roger Bagnall, "Alexandria: Library of Dreams," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146, no. 4 (2002): 353–356; Rudolf Blum, *Kallimachos: The Alexandrian Library and the Origins of Bibliography*, trans. Hans H. Wellisch (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

²⁴ Plinius Secundus, *Historia Naturalis: Naturkunde, Sammlung Tusculum*, trans. Roderich König (München: Artemis & Winkler, 1973–2004), 13, 70.

²⁵ Franz, *Archivkunde*, 8–9.

although there had already been phases of intense writing at the turn of the ninth century.²⁶ North of the Alps, in the early and high Middle Ages, monasteries became crucial pillars of the monarchy by taking over administrative work. They had the monopoly on writing, through their rare abilities to read and write. Furthermore, the technology to create documents was concentrated in the royal and ecclesiastical courts in the hands of scribes and clerics. Ancient and early Christian knowledge was preserved in monasteries and cathedral schools in written form and through practical use. Monks and clerics in these institutions also selected the texts to be stored long-term and those to be reproduced by hand. The great majority of medieval records and their creation must therefore be seen in an ecclesiastical or imperial context. They served sacral and symbolic purposes and were produced as evidence of legal and business transactions. The years after 1100 show evidence of a rapid growth in these legal documents, causing Italian city states to quickly reorganize their archives. Medieval certificates, donations to private individuals or a particular monastery or abbey, and any other sort of documents all contain figures and events considered worthy of preservation in the context of their time. Since these records fulfilled a particular purpose, information about the “common man” was negligible. The latter was neither a member of the social elites, nor of importance according to either a political or administrative perspective.²⁷ In other words, those responsible for preserving records selected them on the basis of their own interests and perspectives, which were frequently at odds with the rest of their societies.

Literacy facilitated imperial expansion and led to the granting of rights, privileges and possessions. This in turn led to notarial practices in the twelfth century, underlining the importance of written documents for personal interests. There was a growing tendency to see these documents, so vital to different groups in political and social life, as objects in need of special guardianship. A claim without document proof could expire, as in the case of King Jaume I of Aragon in the thirteenth century, who lacked specific documents and was obliged to withdraw his territorial claims. Carrying important documents around was risky and the growth in document production called for geographically stable institutions.²⁸

III. Pre-Modern History – Facing the Paper Avalanche

New material, impulses and ideas

Periodization problems are commonplace for historians. Epochal boundaries can vary or disappear altogether as a result of shifting parameters, such as a region or a thematic field. In the context of archival history, the concept of a feudal-centralist(-absolutist) pre-modern era seems practical in the sense of Dietrich Gerhard’s concept of “Alteuropa” (or “traditional” or

²⁶ Markus Friedrich, *Die Geburt des Archivs: Eine Wissensgeschichte* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013), 31–32.

²⁷ Millar, *Archives*, 38.

²⁸ Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*, 34, 40.

“pre-industrial Europe”). This would extend from around 1200 to 1800, instead of the habitual division into the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period with the epochal boundary at around 1500 (which originates from the Renaissance) – given that the term “Alteuropa”, which is neither entirely defined nor drawback free, has led a marginal life in recent years.²⁹

The unity of the High Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period offers a sharper perspective on the continuities in archival development and the break in these processes that occurred at the beginning of the modern era. The focus in archival development is not on historical events, but on the continuities or discontinuities in political and structural history, as well as in social history. The pre-modern archive as a control mechanism with the beginnings of bureaucracy and an administrative system differs from the modern archive, which despite its strong link to the administrative system represents a repository of the past. This allowed for examining new concepts of meaning – also in terms of modernity.

The rediscovery in the early Middle Ages of the archival concept and the usefulness of writing in administration made it possible to build on this body of knowledge from the thirteenth century onwards. The beginning of the thirteenth century saw a surge in writing all over Europe. While up to this point merely a scattering of individual documents had been found, countless written documents have been preserved since then. An Aragonese document from 1198 states that anything not put down in writing would simply be forgotten.³⁰

The precondition for this explosion of written material was the “paper revolution”. Since its invention in the third century and wider distribution in the tenth century in China, Egypt and Ethiopia³¹, paper-making knowledge gradually reached Europe at the end of the eleventh century via Islamic Spain.³² Paper was cheaper to produce than parchment and gave an extra boost to the trend in writing and record production. The invention of the book press in Europe in the fifteenth century – the third media revolution according to Giesecke, as it marks the beginning of a technical and industrial shift in European societies – and the ability to duplicate writings mechanically accelerated record production, although handwritten manuscripts continued to account for the majority of written material in the archives. While libraries became places for printed books, the role of manuscript repository fell to the archives, which were visited with a view to writing new books based on the records³³

Even more significant was the emergence of state-building processes – as described by

²⁹ Cf. e.g., Thomas Bauer, *Warum es kein islamisches Mittelalter gab: das Erbe der Antike und der Orient* (München: C. H. Beck, 2018). The term “Long Middle Ages”, which was defined by Jaques Le Goff and extends this period from the third to the nineteenth century, seems inappropriate.

³⁰ Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*, 32–33.

³¹ Robert I. Burns, *Diplomatarium of the Crusader Kingdom of Valencia: The Registered Charters of Its Conqueror Jaume I, 1257–1276* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 9; Millar, *Archives*, 38.

³² Burns, *Diplomatarium*, 9.

³³ Giesecke, *Sinnenwandel, Sprachwandel, Kulturwandel*, 38. The basic technique of printing was well-known in East Asia as early as the eighth century – about 600 years before Gutenberg. This invention, however, had no influence on European book production and European archives, making it irrelevant for us at this point. Cf. Helen Cooper, “The Origins of the Early Modern,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2013), 134.

Michel Foucault – with new institutions and the accompanying organizational structures in the sense of “staff discipline”, which spread from top, the military as a disciplinary institution par excellence, to bottom, all segments of society.³⁴ (We still see the impact of nation and state units today, as almost every country has a national archive.) According to Foucault, all of these processes demand constant control, idealized in the physical conditions of the panopticon. One basis for controllability is the preservation of written records – in archives (as a memory of the panopticon). The new controllability of all areas of life made it possible to form the centralized state of modernity.³⁵

The affordability of paper encouraged the proliferation of administrative structures, which became more distinctive. In this context, the growth in the number of institutions also led to an increase in the number, spread and complexity of archives. New positions were no longer filled by clerics, but by professional scribes and officials who had been trained for this purpose at universities since the twelfth century – pre-modern officials and archivists were usually lawyers by qualification. This long process began at the large courts and gradually extended to smaller courts and the bourgeoisie. It took until the end of the pre-modern era to spread pragmatic writing to all European regions. Hence archival history is closely linked to administrative history.

Large quantities of paper were required as a result of the rediscovery of Roman law, which spread from Italy across the whole of Latin Europe. This led to new practices in the collecting and careful analysis of evidence (*fides instrumentorum*), which consequently had to be preserved for later judgement. Every step was documented, since ordinary trial records legitimized official judgements and the archival documents in question could be used later in the case of political conflicts. Notaries produced written documents that were simpler and cheaper than the previous costly deeds. As a result, notarial writings were produced more often, even in less important cases. Here, the beginnings of banking and preserving of evidence of money transactions played a decisive role in the increase of these documents.

The growing attraction of the archive – a tool to control and organize

Over time, more and more documents were preserved. While up to the late Middle Ages only deeds were considered worthy of preservation, a growing number of records, such as notes on everyday life, were preserved *ad perpetuam rei memoriam*. The one-time use of tax lists common in the past gave way to new thinking about the future, so that documents were now being kept as a form of proof. This made administrative processes traceable and controllable for the future.

³⁴ For the transfer process cf. e.g., Michel Foucault, *Überwachen und Strafen: Die Geburt des Gefängnisses* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 227–229. The process character is more pronounced in Gerhard Oestreich, “Strukturprobleme des europäischen Absolutismus: Otto Brunner zum 70. Geburtstag,” *Vierteljahrszeitschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 55, no. 3 (1968), 329–47.

³⁵ Foucault, *Überwachen*, 184.

It is not surprising that the early and high medieval practice of storing all manner of documents in the state treasury soon reached its limits. Storage shifted to central locations, as in the case of France, where documents were kept close to the (former) treasury.³⁶ The many everyday documents of the chancelleries and agents, and the rapidly growing amount of correspondence called for new techniques. Handling the growing mass of records across Europe demanded the professionalizing of archives and archivists. The process got under way in France in 1307, when King Philip IV handed letters and documents of donations and privileges over to Pierre d'Etampes for storage and conservation – the beginning of the so-called *Trésor des Chartes*. Up to the fifteenth century, this was the central institution for documents produced by the French monarchy.³⁷

Responsibility for archival records was transferred to professionals like Pierre d'Etampes or to chancelleries. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, various finding aids such as indexes or registers, which were ordered by different parameters, were created throughout Europe. These inventories mark a central step towards modern archives, the orderly structuring of heterogeneous documents. This continuous professionalization of archives made it possible in a second step to separate the archive from the chancery. Thus, numerous archives have been created since the sixteenth century, separating older holdings from their producing institutions and storing them at a central location. These institutions formed a complex system and while differences between them were blurred at first, they soon began to differentiate and became more precise with reference to their collected documents.

The orderly preservation of documents in archives not only facilitated their retrieval, but also increased their authenticity and probative value in legal disputes, where the principle in *dubio pro authentica* applied. In the case of conflicts, this *authentica* was crucial. The disputes following the Peace of Westphalia, for example, were not conducted with weapons but as *bella diplomatica* with deeds. Both sides tried to expose the opposing documents as forgeries.

Throughout the pre-modern era, the archive remained a place of (state) administration. *Zedlers Konversationslexikon* from 1732 defines an archive as “a certain place where the *instrumenta publica* and other important and secret things concerning the state and law of the prince and his country are kept”. Documents kept in a pre-modern archive pertained to the ruler. This basically remained the status quo from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. The collections consisted of legal titles, deeds, court records and correspondence – in other words, everything created by or concerning the sovereign. Only a sovereign, Zedler continues, had the privilege of setting up an archive. In addition to such genuine archives, there were also special depositories and *scrinia* (shrines), where legal titles and court records were stored. The primary task of the archives was to enhance the value of the records deposited there through order and to guarantee legal certainty for the owner. Although historians and scholars were permitted to

³⁶ The *Chambre des Comptes* was located on the *Ile de la Cité* in the centre of Paris close to the *Saint Chapelle*, where the state treasury was stored in the Middle Ages.

³⁷ Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*, 54.

search for sources in the archives, they were unfree in their research. It was not until the modern era that the archive as we know it today became the workplace of historians.³⁸

IV. The Long Nineteenth Century – The Impact of the French Revolution

Centralization and inter-state approaches

In the early modern period, a fractured system of small, even contradictory, archives emerged. The first archival centralization processes were set in motion in the eighteenth century, notably in centralized states, albeit these attempts were somewhat inadequate. A catalyst for this development was the French Revolution. Initially, archives faced enormous challenges – during uprisings, for example. Some were stormed and disagreeable documents found their way into the fire. Within a short time, however, a shift took place and the documents of the *Ancien Regime* were centralized in the *Archives Nationales*. The bond between these records and the respective sovereigns was largely lost in this process. The right of use was strengthened and the arcane character of the archives overcome. Historians were able to write a new history with free access to the files. This created the nucleus for the *archival human rights* proclaimed later by Wilhelm Wiegand, although this freedom was to be severely restricted again with the Restoration. A distinction was made between archival records relevant to contemporary politics and those that were irrelevant, whereby only the latter were freely accessible. In Prussia, for example, the year 1700 was considered the limit for political relevance in 1898. 1910 saw this limit raised to the reference year 1800. That said, a liberal approach prevailed when it came to the inspection of the irrelevant files: archives in Prussia were open to students if they could produce a recommendation from their professor. The opening up of the archives was a long slow process and is not over yet.

Napoleon Bonaparte accelerated the centralizing process of the archives by consolidating the smaller German states. As in the case of France, however, this led to a crisis. Many documents lost their significance under radically changed social and political conditions. Mediatization and secularization meant that archives lost their holders and consequently collections lost their protection. Important archival collections were transported from the conquered territories to France, where a vast central archive was to be created. As a result, a key challenge in the nineteenth century was to find the holdings after the war and arrange them in new archives.³⁹

Between politics and history

New interest in archives was stoked by historians, whose scepticism of previous narratives in the archives motivated them to look for new and reliable answers by applying empirical

³⁸ *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, ed. Johan Heinrich Zedler, vol. 2. (Halle: 1732), <https://www.zedlerlexikon.de/index.html?c=blaettern&seitenzahl=644&bandnummer=02&view=100&l=de>.

³⁹ Schenk, *Aufheben, was nicht vergessen werden darf*, 87.

techniques “d’écrire une histoire enfin ‘vraie’”.⁴⁰ After the first approaches in sixteenth-century France, *historical Pyrrhonism* took hold of Europe in the eighteenth century. Archival records were perceived as the only reliable sources. Archivists were given the new role of checking archival documents for authenticity and reliability, thus leading to the emergence of the *diplomatica* discipline. Historians were able to use archives in the early modern period but were dependent on their patron’s favour. The open archives of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, offered almost unlimited opportunities, heightened by the growing mobility that made extensive archive journeys possible.

Changing use patterns also reshaped the demands on archivists and how operations worked in the archives. Archivists were no longer actors in a legal and administrative system, but primarily those who facilitated the work of historians. Their historical competencies gained currency. While archivists had previously been lawyers and administrative specialists, the profession was now increasingly filled with historians, who continued to act as such in their positions. This development ultimately led to the emergence of an independent archivist education. An early example is the *École des Chartes* in Paris, founded in 1821 out of *diplomatica*, which became a prototype for the rest of Europe.⁴¹

Equipped with historical competence, archives began to investigate themselves. In other words, they explored the provenance of their own holdings. The Dutch manual developed in the Netherlands in 1898 was decisive for the provenance principle, which instructed the archive staff to arrange files according to their origin.

The term “saddle period” used by Reinhart Koselleck would perhaps be appropriate here, as it describes the period as a transitional phase between pre-modernity and modernity. New developments in the archival system occurred during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars but were reneged during the Restoration. But in the sense of Goethe’s “from the spirits that I called” the seed had already been sown and archivists were asserting themselves successfully, so that we can assume a negotiation phase between the pre-modern and the modern archive up to the middle of the nineteenth century.

V. The (Post-)colonial Archive

Colonizing the globe

From the sixteenth century onwards, a number of European powers attempted to conquer and assert sovereignty over other parts of the world for economic, political and/or missionary reasons. The first bases and landmarks along foreign coastlines soon developed into colonies under the control of a so-called mother country. As a means of gaining and maintaining control over a distant land, archives were crucial to long-distance ruling. Shortly after arrival in the said

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 144.

⁴¹ Schenk, *Aufheben, was nicht vergessen werden darf*, 109.

colonies, the colonial powers created archival structures. The French Crown had maintained a naval and colonial archive since 1699, as did the Spanish Crown upon arrival in the Americas, in the Caribbean and in Central America. In 1674, for instance, the Netherlands set up archives on the island of what was then Ceylon and in New York. The conquest of the East by the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century was also accompanied by archival construction. Europe's early modern archival system had meanwhile spread across the entire globe.⁴²

Archives – in most places – became central to colonial administration. The colonial powers collected all kinds of documents in their archives. These ranged from administrative and legislative records, to civil and personal records of colonial staff and colonized civilians, and highly intimate intelligence records (including financial and military records). In the case of the Spanish colonies of New Spain, records even included reports of sexual *misbehaviors*, or *sins*.⁴³ Archives were instruments of the so-called mother country and collected records that were seen as useful to the colonial power. It is important to note that archives also contained records that incriminated the colonial administration in question. These include, for example, records documenting war crimes committed by colonial governments.

The aftermath

During processes of decolonization, many of the former colonial powers sought to destroy or displace certain sections of their colonial archives. This left former colonized countries with incomplete records from the colonial era. Since archives are not merely sites to accommodate sources of historical and cultural value, but contain civic sources as well, removing parts of an archive can have immense consequences. Many archival theorists have argued that an archive – in contrast to a library – should be understood as a whole. It simply cannot (and should not) be torn apart into separate pieces. It functions as a comprehensive body of sources.⁴⁴ Another crucial development during decolonization, apart from the removal of records, was the removal of those who had worked with the records.

On leaving their colonies, German administrators had clear instructions about archival records regarding which ones to destroy, hide or ship to Archives in Germany. Optimistic that the colony would be regained in the near future, they simply buried many of them in the ground and left them there. For the most part, these records included financial, budget and inventory files, lists of native chiefs (*Häuptlingsverzeichnisse*) and property files. Other records deemed of greater immediate value to the Empire were shipped to Hamburg. This applied notably to intelligence records linked to the ongoing war. From Hamburg they made their way to the *Reichsarchiv* in Potsdam, where they were largely destroyed by bombs and the subsequent

⁴² Friedrich, *Geburt des Archivs*, 59.

⁴³ Zeb Totorici has published a noteworthy book on his work with these records. Most of which have survived to this day. See Zeb Totorici, *Sins against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

⁴⁴ James Lowry, "Introduction: Displaced Archives," in *Displaced Archives*, ed. James Lowry (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1.

burning of the building in 1945. Other records of little value to Germany were quite simply left behind (seldom destroyed) in the chaos of decolonization, and have largely remained in the former colonies to this day. The 1970s saw the launch of a vast intercultural project between Cameroon and the Federal Republic of Germany. The aim was to reassess archival records from the colonial past. Antoinette Burton declared the archive a “contact zone” between the past and the present. So, one could argue that efforts in the 1970s to recollect, reassess and reorganize these archival records were the trigger for both countries to explore their enmeshed colonial history in more depth. The project was developed as a long-term partnership, with Germany training Cameroonian archivists in its archival schools for years.⁴⁵ Similar bilateral projects were set up in other former German colonies in the 1960s and 1970s – foremost in Togo and Tanzania. These projects had certain aspects in common: after a two-week assessment phase, a German archivist was sent to the former colony to work with African colleagues for a two-year period. The African archives also received material and technical support. In the case of Togo, the Federal Republic financed the construction of an archive building in 1984, exactly 100 years after its colonization. Although this can be seen as one of the more positive developments in terms of colonial archives, it should be remarked that the absence of certain records (and of course colonization itself) continues to have a substantial impact on the people of former colonized countries. Today, for example, the *Bundesarchiv* still receives enquiries about colonial records from African government officials wishing to retrace the development of African state lines, the vast majority of which were drawn in the colonial era. Another example is Namibia, where the absence of person-related records in archives has had and continues to have a discriminatory impact on its non-white population.⁴⁶ Therefore, it should be kept in mind when working with colonial archives that these records were initially created from a distinct perspective – that of the colonial power, the suppressor.

Although there is still much work ahead – especially in scientific research – the German example can be seen as one of the more inclusive handlings of colonial archives. Some former colonial powers are still unwilling – or less willing – to cooperate with their former colonies on the matter of archival records. A bleak example is the United Kingdom. In the course of a lawsuit in 2009, it came to light that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was still holding Kenyan archival records under lock and key.⁴⁷ In the context of Commonwealth countries, the term “migrated archives” is commonly used to describe records that made the journey to the United Kingdom from former colonies in the course of decolonization – hence *migrated*. These records were deemed *embarrassing* to the then colonial governments and often contained information that would incriminate the UK government or government officials. In

⁴⁵ Sabine Herrmann, “Koloniale Amnesie? 100 Jahre Archive zur Geschichte der deutschen Kolonien,” *Bundesarchiv Koblenz*, 2019, https://www.bundesarchiv.de/DE/Content/Publikationen/Aufsaeetze/aufsatz-s-herrmann-koloniale-amnesie.pdf?__blob=publicationFile.

⁴⁶ Ellen Ndeshi Namhila has published an impressive article on this subject. See Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, “Content and use of colonial archives: An under-researched issue,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 2 (2014), 111–23.

⁴⁷ Riley Linebaugh, *Curating the Colonial Past. Britain's 'Migrated Archives' and the Struggle for Kenya's History* (forthcoming).

recent decades, many of these migrated records were destroyed. Some are still *missing*.⁴⁸

VI. The Twentieth Century

Archives for eternity

It would be nothing short of impossible to give a *brief* history of archival developments in the twentieth century. Too much changed in the life of the archives in the course of that century. Countless archival theories were produced, numerous storage opportunities emerged, and the very function of the archive itself has been amplified. A gradual shift in the meaning of the archive – from the purpose to support governance to the will to construct history, as stated above – came about between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This newly found value of the archive was demonstrated in the construction of new archival buildings in Europe in the first third of the twentieth century. Archives were now housed in impressive structures that reflected the political and socio-cultural importance of the institution. Since worldly destruction such as wars, particularly World War II, did not spare these buildings, countless archival records were lost. In order to protect *valuable* records, some countries came to a pragmatic conclusion: meta-archives. In the second half of the twentieth century, several nations launched projects that aimed to permanently safeguard archival records from destruction. They host records that are considered particularly valuable to national culture and history. One of these so-called meta-archives can be found in the German Black Forest region close to Freiburg. In 1975, the *Barbara-Stollen*, a former supply tunnel, began to accommodate a plethora of film and photo material, manuscripts and literature by accomplished German writers and poets, paintings, legal certificates and other historical documents. In the hope of protecting the archive in the case of armed conflict, the *Barbara-Stollen* is under the special protection of the UNO and UNESCO. Air traffic in the area of the tunnel is strictly prohibited. The *Barbara-Stollen* is the most extensive project of its kind in Europe, but there is a similar example in Sweden. Since the end of the 1960s, Sweden has housed its most valuable archival sources beneath a thick layer of granite under the sea.⁴⁹ Projects like these revive the question of what is seen as valuable enough for safekeeping. Given that the principal aim of meta-archives is to preserve the profile of a nation's culture and history, we have to ask what and above all who determines the sources to be kept in the archives. Maybe the more important question is what is not considered valuable enough to be preserved in such highly secure places. Who and what is remembered, and who and what has been forgotten or silenced?

Archives and control

These questions are crucial, since the twentieth century has proved numerous times that

⁴⁸ Ian Cobain, Owen Bowcott and Richard Norton-Taylor, "Britain destroyed records of colonial crimes," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2012.

⁴⁹ Nicolas Berg, "Geschichte des Archivs im 20. Jahrhundert," in *Handbuch Archiv: Geschichte, Aufgaben, Perspektiven*, ed. Marcel Lepper and Ulrich Raulff (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2016), 72–73.

archives can be (mis)used in a highly dangerous manner. In the case of genocide, for instance, archival content can decide between life and death. Moreover, autocratic regimes were often meticulously bureaucratic. They cultivated vast archival systems by collecting civilian intelligence and recording their victims with high precision. The archive itself became a central part of the panopticon of those in power by storing intelligence data pertaining to the population.⁵⁰ Furthermore, in cases of extreme violence, citizens sometimes had to rely on the content of archives for their lives. One example is people under Nazi rule having to prove their heritage. Although autocratic regimes frequently sought to destroy their archives on the brink of their demise, in most cases they left subsequent governments with a stunning number of records pertaining to their crimes. The Stasi intelligence archives of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) are a more recent example of this. Archivists are still trying to puzzle their way through halls filled with shredded documents left behind by the GDR regime. Today, the Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv is in the process of digitalising these records in order to provide digital access to interested parties. This particular archive intends to simplify the use of the records and above all to guarantee long-term conservation through digitalization.⁵¹

Archives and the new media

The fourth media revolution – the invention of film, audio records and the Internet – brought about a sea change in the archive. With the introduction of new media, the very meaning of archive shifted from a physical place where written sources were stored to a place – in the broadest sense – where all manner of sources are kept. This shift away from exclusively written material began in the first half of the twentieth century. In many western countries the first national film archives emerged in the 1930s, of which the *Cinémathèque Française* and the *British Film Institute* were the most prominent. In Soviet Russia the *Gosfilmofond* was founded as early as 1926. Yet these archival beginnings were not without pitfalls. Archivists found it difficult to store films adequately due to the sheer nature of the material. Many were lost to fires caused by inadequate storage of the sensitive and flammable film rolls. There were, however, also theoretical questions to be answered: What should the purpose of a film archive be? Should it simply collect and conserve film-related sources? Or should it also promote and encourage contemporary productions? It seems that each institute found its own way of dealing with these hitherto unknown archival challenges. Since many of these archives also house film museums and host public cinematic events, they are no longer just sites of academic reflection, but have become major landmarks in our cultural landscapes.

With the development of the Internet, today's archives are faced with new opportunities and challenges. Due to immense digitization efforts on the part of numerous archives, the Internet has, on the one hand, enabled a greater number of people to access the archives. On the other hand, the Internet itself produces a vast number of records every second of every day. How can

⁵⁰ Foucault, *Überwachen*, 259–65.

⁵¹ For further information on this project see “Startseite,” Stasi-Unterlagen-Archiv, accessed March 21, 2021, <https://www.bstu.de/archiv/>.

archives and archivists preserve such a gargantuan quantity of records? Considering the sheer mass of possible archival records produced by the Internet, is it even humanly possible to live up to archival standards that evolved in the course of the last 5000 years?⁵²

Conclusion – The Astonishing Career of the Archive

Collecting information has always been an integral part of human history, as we seem to prefer to keep rather than destroy evidence. It took a long time for archives to become the institutions we refer to and have in mind today. That said, as we pointed out, defining archives and their non-linear and disorderly trajectory is not an easy task. Rapid evolutions were often volatile and regressed, only to evolve again at a later point. Hence archives have a rich history that is laced with constant change.

They developed alongside us, occasionally without our even knowing or recognizing the reciprocal relationship between us and our creation. Archival research means dealing with gaps, since archives have never been neutral spaces. Indeed, all records are living systems with an inner logic based on the knowledge of the individuals and groups that made sense of them at the time. The question of what there is and what can be found is therefore always the question of what might be missing. In other words, there is always an uncontrollable element to archives that forbids reducing them to mere by-products of human history.⁵³ Oriented not only to human needs and demands but actively developed and shaped by social elites and seats of power, they have always been mirrors of society and are more than just the sum of their parts. Their long and diverse history has revealed their many facets. They were – and still are – collections of specific records, administrative and bureaucratic tools, instruments and symbols of power and control, and also places and topics of research.

All in all, archives have had an astonishing career because our requests to them directly or indirectly changed over time for multiple reasons. These shifts in society impact heavily on archives, which in turn shape society's relationship to the past. Archives develop through humans because a source is not a source until we make it one. Making sense of these sources is an active and ever-changing process, as is the creation of archives – work that will probably never cease. In today's fast-moving society with increasing demagoguery and fake news, archives and archivists have a major role to play. The archive has the onus of performing on a tightrope: on the one hand, it must keep an eye on the past and, at the same time, worry about the present and the future.

⁵² See the outlook in the final chapter.

⁵³ The archive as a by-product is something that Hilary Jenkinson, Theodore R. Schellenberg and further archival thinkers of the mid-20th century assumed concerning the appraisal of records. Based on works – e.g., Foucault, *Les mots* and ---*L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008) or Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'Archive: Une Impression Freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) – postmodern archival thinkers began to question this idea in the late 20th century.