Introduction

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<td>Published Version</td>
<td>doi:10.1007/s10502-008-9069-7</td>
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<td>December 30, 2017 5:22:36 PM EST</td>
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Introduction

Archives -- collections of paper, books, and other substrates of information (some might say “memory”) and the institutions that house and manage these objects -- are subjects of a renewed and vital current critical historical interest. Archives, broadly conceived, have been used for the writing of history since historical writing began, and archival materials and institutions are an integral part of the making not just of history but of the modern historical profession as well. The historian’s relationship with the archive has been long and varied and described in a broad range of terms, as being as unproblematic as “bread and butter” (Giles 1996) or as driven by erotic, fetishistic desire (Smith 1998). It is fitting that historians should turn their scholarly attentions to these depositories that have been the object, if not the subject, of so much historical work.

Historians cannot hope to study the history of archives without learning from the professionals who create and maintain them. Historians and archivists work together today primarily to improve funding and conditions for the collection, cataloging, and preservation of documents for consultation now and by future generations. Historians and archivists have too rarely, it seems to us, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, worked together on an area of mutual intellectual interest, viz. the history of archives, archivists and archival practices (see Moss 2006 and 2007). Since the 1980s the development of the history of the book as an interdisciplinary field of research has helped
to open channels of communication between historians and book professionals, including librarians, book dealers and conservation specialists, which have proven beneficial to all. More recently archives have begun to receive similar interdisciplinary scholarly attention, with archivists, anthropologists and literary scholars leading the charge, and historians joining the conversation lately. (Ketelaar 2002; Schwartz and Clark 2002; Steedman 2002; Blouin and Rosenberg 2006; Burton 2005) We hope that this special issue will continue a fruitful dialogue across a different set of professional boundaries by focusing on the historical study of archives.

Archivists have long been aware of the significance of past decisions about archiving, but historians have typically only cared about past archival practices in so far as these affected specific research projects they had underway. In recent years, however, cultural historians have pointed to archives, alongside museums and libraries, as sites in which to examine conceptions about knowledge, its order and management and control by the state (Burke 2000; Starn 2002). At the same time, more theoretical approaches in anthropology, philosophy and critical theory have pointed to the “archive” as a crucial but often overlooked site of political and epistemological power (Dirks 1993; Richards 1993; Ketelaar 2002; Stoler 2002). The term “archive” has acquired even broader dimensions, as recent work in science studies has emphasized that sciences like geology rely on an interpretation of nature as an archive, constituted by the accumulation of traces of earlier natural phenomena (volcanic activity, erosion etc) (Bowker 2005). Similarly, the material traces left by human activity can also be considered an archive, most often the purview of archeology. Attention has most recently turned to the power of “the archive” as institution and metaphor in the historical sciences, as scholars examine the
ways in which archival policies and historians practices have shaped historical
knowledge and experience (Rosenberg 2001 and 2004; Steedman 2002; Burton 2003;
Burns 2005). Certainly the “archive” is a rich concept, which will continue to elicit
attention from many different quarters.

The papers in this special issue all take a historical approach, to examine the roles
which archives played in the formation of states, in the creation of international networks
of individuals and nations, in changing modes of understanding history and managing
and conceiving information. The analyses focus on archives not only as repositories of
historical information, but also as institutions with significant, complex histories of their
own. This work adds to the growing historiographies on state-building, information
management, and institutional histories, but also implicitly engages the challenges that
Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook addressed in these pages to archivists and historians alike,
when they called on users and practitioners of archives to examine critically the power
(epistemological, professional, and political) in historically specific configurations
(Schwartz and Cook 2002). For archivists and users of collections today, this kind of
critical work makes it possible to interrogate, rather than replicate, modalities of power at
work in making and conserving these sources.

This special issue brings together work that emerged from an Exploratory
Seminar held at the Radcliffe Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2006. We are
grateful to the Radcliffe Institute and all the original participants for the opportunity to
begin a conversation that we hope we and others will be interested in continuing. We are
grateful to Archival Science editors Elizabeth Yakel and Eric Ketelaar for their crucial
guidance throughout the process of editing this special issue. Six articles focus on
selected cases in the development of archives in early modern Europe and in modern national contexts in Europe and China, although the seminar also included presentations on archives in colonial Peru, Mexico, and India. In all cases our work focused on the relationship between governments and their archives, particularly emerging or established nation-states and empire. As Peter Burke notes in his closing comment, these essays are as much about traditional concerns of the historian – the formation and practice of states, the conditions of modernity, the management of knowledge – as they are about archives. Studies from many other times and places, and from different disciplines, would have offered equally good opportunities to reflect on the multiple topics we seek to address—on the circumstances of the development and use of archives in specific contexts, on the virtues of a comparative study of archives across different cultures, and on the critical and methodological insights afforded by the historical study of archives. We are sorely aware of the limited geographical and chronological scope of the studies gathered here—they offer only a few forays into a vast area which we hope will be explored by much more study both within and beyond the historical discipline (see for example Fleischer 1994; Wareham 2002; Thomson 2006; Kagan 2008; Sherman forthcoming).

Our focus here on “great powers” is itself a historical artifact, for it is in the field of archival history that the call to de-center imperial powers is perhaps best demonstrated. Work on “the archive” began on colonial archives and has only recently reached the metropole. Anthropologists and historians of colonialism and imperialism have long been aware of the power of archives to create states, to shape nations, to regulate and construct populations, and to speak for history. It is thus not surprising that scholars of the colonial and postcolonial world have been among the first to break critical ground in the history of
archives. As Kathryn Burns and Hermann Bennett demonstrated in our workshop and in their writing, colonial archives perhaps most dramatically reveal the myriad ways archival practice and archival knowledge shape subjects in history and subjects of history (Bennett 2003; Burns 2005).

The study of archives should also extend far back into pre-modern period. The history of archiving can be studied as early as the written record itself. Many of the earliest forms of writing, from notched stones to clay tablets, recorded commercial or administrative transactions which were often saved consciously as part of a collection. In ancient Mesopotamia for example urban sites included special rooms for the storage of clay tablets, stored in jars with labels indicating the year and type of document. Archival techniques made possible the development and administration of the far-flung empires of the ancient Near East (Brosius 2003). The notion that owning records was crucial to good government can be traced throughout the great empires of the ancient world (Posner 1972), even though very few records kept on papyrus survive. Governmental archiving suffered from the disruptions of the early Middle Ages, though the Church successfully maintained some record-keeping throughout this period. Documents were valued as a source of authoritative claims, as evidenced by the creation of forgeries like the Donation of Constantine in the late 8th or early 9th century. In high medieval Europe documents played a progressively more important role in legal and administrative processes, starting in the 11th century in England for example (Clanchy 1993). Historical documents were increasingly valued over oral testimony to support arguments over land and rights. They were also stolen when possible, e.g. from the French king Philip Augustus in his defeat at Bouvines in 1194; this loss triggered the formation of the Trésor des Chartes to house
important documents so that they need not travel with the person of the king (Pomian 1992, p. 222). Archiving was important in many other contexts in pre-modern times, from Byzantium and the Ottoman empire to India and China, to name only a few areas which would reward further research.

The focus of these papers is on governmental archives. We hope that the comparisons may also be extended to different kinds of collections, notably by moving beyond institutional and governmental archives to include notarial, commercial and personal archives. Recordkeeping often poses similar problem, both intellectual and material, of how to organize and store active and inactive materials. It is likely that techniques and organizational tools migrated from some contexts to others, transmitted mostly by persons moving from one context to another, but possibly also by written accounts. The process of comparing case studies is probably not yet developed enough to identify the movements of archival practices from one context to another with confidence. But similarities between kinds of recordkeeping are suggestive of the genealogies that might be found. For example the practice of storing business records on metal wires or “files” in 16th-century England may have inspired the note closet first described in manuscript by Thomas Harrison, circa 1640, in which scholars could store their reading notes on slips of paper poked onto metal hooks each associated with different topical headings (OED "file" n2 section 3a; Wolfe 2005; Malcolm 2004). The material forms of archiving in the past are generally particularly hard to reconstruct, given that evidence was typically lost as the collections moved through different physical spaces and forms of storage in the intervening centuries.
Despite inevitable limitations in space and time these case studies raise conceptual historical questions that apply to all historical studies of archives. Under what conditions is a collection of works considered an archive? What kind of authority does the designation “archive” give to such a collection, in the past as well as in the present? How did the authority of archives affect decisions about how to organize, store and make documents available to users? These papers emphasize that the definition of archives, and the authority that such a designation confers, has a history. While the archive as a collection has a history, the archive as institution has a similarly (but not equivalent!) complex past. The archival institutions studied here are largely tied to the state, whether a city-state, a small canton, a kingdom or a large empire. These histories examine not just the content of these state collections, but reveal the workings of the producers, managers and users of these information storehouse. This focus on the production of archives rather than on mining the content of archives, is a crucial tool in understanding histories of power and the production of subjects and objects of knowledge. Indeed these institutional histories do much to suggest that the “archive” is as interesting to the historians for its infrastructure as for its content.

Archives can also be studied for their cataloging practices, although the cataloging of archives has often been considered of little interest, since the material is often too varied and unique to encourage systematic classification (Taylor, 1999). The modern standard is to sort by provenance and series, which offer stable and practical criteria. But some early modern archives attempted to map a hierarchy of government activities onto the organization of the documents they generated. Randolph Head’s paper in this collection shows that in some circumstances (e.g. in a relatively small collection,
as in Luzern) archives could be thoroughly reorganized multiple times. In larger
collections older archives were rarely rearranged, because of the labor involved, but
newly accessioned documents would be organized according to new principles. In this
way a long-lived collection can include layers of different organizational principles.
Along with the library and the museum archives thus offer insight into the intellectual
ambitions of organization and the material constraints of management of "stuff."

One standard definition of “archive” emphasizes that it results from the
unselfconscious production of documents in the course of the activities of individuals or
institutions for whom destroying the documents posed more problems than saving them
(Pomian 1992, p. 171). In this way, the archive is considered to differ crucially from the
museum or the library, both of which institutions rest on the active search for and
selection of items deemed worthy of inclusion. To emphasize the serial records produced
by administrative, legal or business transactions in defining archives matches the
historical interests of the Annales school and corresponds to a large percentage of
documents available for study by historians. Nonetheless, it is misleading to assume that
collections, even of these kinds, were formed then transmitted for centuries simply
because it was more work to cull and destroy them than to keep them.

By the early modern period, and in some cases before, archives were formed and
transmitted with conscious attention to their potential utility. Of course many, perhaps
most archival documents have rarely if ever been consulted, just as one scholar has
observed of printed books that most have rarely been read (Amory 1996, p. 51). But in
the early modern period the explosion in recordkeeping studied here by Paul Dover,
Randolph Head and Jacob Soll, warrants explanation from many angles. The explosion
can be attributed in part to the increased availability and cheapness of paper, stimulated by the concurrent demand for paper by printers (Weiss 1983, pp. 62-69). A cheaper medium than parchment made temporary writing on wax tablets and other erasable surfaces less attractive and encouraged making potentially permanent written records in the first place and then keeping them. But the early modern explosion in record-keeping is also due to a number of cultural factors, including renewed attempts to develop and centralize government and ecclesiastical bureaucracies, and more generally a heightened awareness of the potential utility of saving written matter (Blair, forthcoming; Burns 2005). During the Renaissance many lavished time and money on expanding collections of all kinds–from books, to reading notes to natural curiosities and objets d’art. To own one or more collections was a matter of pride, which could be made public through printing–in a catalog of one’s collection, or by being mentioned in the books about admirable collections, which were also published starting in the 17th century (Pomian 1990). Although archives were rarely published about and were not viewable like libraries and early museums, they too promised utility, notably to governing institutions.

We also see at work in these early modern collections of documents forebears of the professional archivist, but at the same time we can recognize distinct differences in the kinds of archival “science” practiced by Colbert, the Venetian ambassadors, Swiss power brokers, and their modern counterparts in Europe and China. Questions of archival preservation and archival access – opening up the archives – remained state-centered and state-controlled in these early modern cases. The notion of public access, in the modern understanding of the term, was not at issue. The role of the archivist in these contexts, charged with supplying documents to support state needs and initiatives and denying access as appropriate, was
centrally important to the power and functioning of the state. Loyal service to the prince, city, minister or king was the principal quality by which an early modern archivist was assessed, without concern for objectivity, neutrality or professional responsibility. History and power were intimately allied in the early modern state and its archival holdings, and this relationship is symbolized in both the place of these holdings (in the domicile of the powerful) and in the person of the royal historiographer who self-consciously used the archive as what Keith Baker has called an “ideological arsenal” (Baker 1990; Kelley 1970).

The distance between early modern and modern state archivists (and between the histories based upon their holdings) is often characterized by an unraveling, or displacement, of the intimacy of powerful persons and archival knowledge. In the modern conception of archives, the newly founded national depositories were meant to be a record of the workings of the state for the nation. The ideal of objectivity, or at least disinterestedness, emerged in many fields in the 19th century (Daston and Galison 2007), including in statecraft, with the professionalization of archival science and the rise of scientific historical scholarship. Much scholarly attention has been devoted to the role of objectivity in the creation of the modern historical profession (Iggers 2006). Positivists famously treated the archive and its holdings as epistemologically superior to other kinds of sources (Smith 1998; Daston and Galison 2007). The considerable interest of historians in official archival holdings throughout the 19th century suggests that Ranke’s insistence on documentary history was a symptom of a larger cultural turn rather than a singular example. At the same time the liberal states of Europe developed professional training and civil service positions for archivists, effectively transforming them into state functionaries. The liberal state and its archival institutions played a crucial role in cultivating the notion that archivists like the historians using the
archives were disinterested professionals; this impulse was also centrally important to the
creation of official depositories. Objectivity and neutrality were valued in both historical and
archival sciences as archivists and historians began to be trained as and to identify
themselves as professionals (Smith 1998, pp. 130-56; Milligan 2002; Moore 2008). At the
same time this professionalization created distinctions between archivists and historians that
led to tensions between archivists and historians concerning their respective roles, but which
also paved the way for their separate, modern professional identities (Blouin 2004).

While historians still held fast to political interpretation and were keenly interested
in politics, access to and use of the archives was no longer tied to the position of royal
historiographer (Chadwick 1998; Smith 1998). Access was thus a crucial marker of the self-
conscious “modernity” of nation states and their official archival holdings. The modern case
studies identify new kinds of concerns as governments attempted to portray themselves as
transparent and open and yet to keep many archives secret. In post-revolutionary France for
example the building, maintenance and regulation of archives and archival access were
closely tied to the ambitions of a new form of government. As Jacob Soll indicates in his
essay on Colbert, the official archives of Old Regime France mirrored the configuration of
administration – separate depositories formed around sites of power, such as the Parlement,
the throne, and the Church. These depositories, as Soll shows in the case of Colbert,
contained not just official documents produced in day-to-day affairs, but also served as
collections of books, manuscripts, and maps. Indeed, these repositories were often called
libraries rather than archives – such as the “bibliothèque du Roi.” After the Revolution, the
National Archives were formed first as a repository of the newly founded National
Assembly – to serve both as the memory of the new body and as an accessible check on its
power. However, all items deemed to be in the interest of “history -- rather than government -- were sent to the Bibliothèque nationale. Thus the holdings of Colbert’s Library found their way both to the new Archives nationales and to the Bibliothèque nationale. The distinction between Archives and Bibliothèque, for the architects of revolutionary information policy, stemmed from a desire to change present politics through a reordering of past knowledge (and knowledge about the past) but also to render accessible both the arcana of state business and realms of humanistic scholarly and cultural production.

The French state maintained a real distinction between the archive of state government as the business of the present and future and the library – as the home of “useful” scientific and cultural knowledge, notably historical knowledge. Starting in the 1850s a further institution, the museum of the history of France offered the general public a carefully monitored image of the archives as a record of past and present government. However, as the contested public reception of the Museum demonstrated, the Archives could claim no monopoly on defining categories of knowledge and or fixing interpretations of history. The museum did, however, help fix the Archives in the public imagination as the proper home of authentic historical knowledge, and as a cultural site beyond the realm of politics. This, of course, belied the active cultural politics and the real administrative role of the Archives, but was itself a crucial step in the creation of the modern, professional Archives.

Eric Ketelaar’s work on the Netherlands demonstrates that this shift in focus of archival energy -- from administrative or political use to the production of cultural memory -- is a larger historical movement that reached beyond the borders of France. The new value of archive as interesting for a cultural historical memory, rather than for administrative or
political use, was not only a product of the modern nation-state, but also the private sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Cultural patrimony, according to Ketelaar, emerged as much from private as from public concerns. Beatrice Bartlett similarly cautions us against any easy formulation of modernity and the separation of cultural and political concerns. Her work on China’s archives, however, also examines the connections between the power of states and the power of archives to make distinctions between categories of information, and the impact of those categories on the study of history. Bartlett is overtly and purposefully self-reflexive, and her narrative of the history of archival formation in China has much to say about the history and politics of historical writing and research in that field.

Peter Burke concludes this volume with a note of excitement about the possibility of these histories, but also with a word caution for would-be historians of archives. Since historians are latecomers to the kind of “archive fever” that has produced reflections on archives (and libraries and museums) from other disciplines, we must be clear about our aims and methods, and articulate with care what historians can contribute to this ongoing conversation. We offer these essays as a modest example of the kinds of work historians are doing on the archives as well as in the archives. We hope this collection will be of use to historians, archivists and other users and makers of archives, as a bridge of communication across professional distinctions, as recognition of the importance of archives and archivists to history and historians, and as a call for further research.


