1 Introduction
Records, Tools, and Archives in Europe to 1700

Records: Objects, Information, and Artificial Memory

Both the administration of states and the writing of history are possible only because of the human propensity for making and keeping records. As far back as we can trace, humans caught in the flow of time have made records about what they experienced, knew, or valued, using techniques that ranged from marks on bones and walls to the shared structures of mythical recitation.[1] Most significantly, our ancestors developed writing systems that could reproduce their words and ideas in persistent media. Among its many uses, writing from its earliest beginnings allowed the creation of *records* – that is, stable representations that could be activated later for the purposes of providing information and evidence.[2] Early record-making often took place during the management of property, goods, and relationships, and the resulting products were of particular interest to rulers and their agents in the pursuit of power.[3] It is records in this more limited sense, and their accumulation and organization in repositories that we now call archives, that are the focus of this book, particularly in Europe from about 1400 to about 1700. A short discussion of the epistemological, archaeological, and theoretical dimensions that such a study touches on may be useful before turning to specific historical evidence and its analysis.

As the primeval history sketched here suggests, not all records are written, and not all writings constitute records. It is rather the specific purpose of providing evidence about past circumstances for future situations that defines the record – and many different configurations of medium and information can fulfill this purpose. To quote the eighteenth-century Swiss scholar Salomon Hirzel in defining the related German term *Urkunde*:

[1] Delsalle, *Histoire*, 9–11.
[2] I owe the term "stable representations" to Yeo, "Concepts of Record (1)."
[3] Posner, *Archives*; Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory*.

All proofs of actions that have taken place are called *Urkunden.* These are of many kinds, for the things that can prove that an action took place are very diverse. A coin, an inscribed column, a gravestone, the remnants of a building—all of these are witnesses to past actions.[4]

Given the right context, all sorts of phenomena can serve as evidence of past action, and thus serve as a record. Moreover, with the notable exception of oral and performative records, most records by their very nature combine materiality with information. Keeping both the informational and the material dimensions of records in sight is therefore vital, since each aspect has presented its own challenges for the transmission of records through time.

The study of archives resonates with the broader study of memory, both individual and cultural, but is not the same thing.[5] Whereas the investigation of cultural and social memory encompasses a wide variety of media, purposes, and channels by which societies have appropriated the past for present and future use, the study of archives narrows its focus in two ways. First, focusing on archives means concentrating on the accumulation and management of large numbers of records, rather than on individual records and what they conveyed. Second, an archival focus situates such accumulations of records as part of political and legal contention in particular circumstances and according to socially established rules. The term "archive" has a broad range of meanings today, but its genealogy lies firmly within the fields of political power, social authority, and practices of domination, as will be demonstrated at length in this book. Narrowing the field of analysis from the global theme of memory to the highly structured context of archival records (namely, those kept in pre-modern Europe), and to the even more specific question of how such records were preserved and made available to future users, puts the role of archival technologies in the history of Europe and its emerging states at the center of attention in what follows.

Developments since the Middle Ages have made it seem natural to us today that political institutions create, collect, and organize a wide variety of records about their world, their work, and us as their subjects. In reality, however, the emergence of such practices was itself one part of long and contingent processes of political transformation with many names – bureaucratization, the emergence of the modern state, the

[4] [Hirzel], "Versuch eines Plans," 37. The attribution of this anonymous text to Hirzel appears in Im Hof and de Capitani, *Die Helvetische Gesellschaft*, 1: 230.

[5] On memory, see Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory*; Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, especially 327–43. On the memory in medieval European culture, see Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*.

intensification of dominion – that have drawn historians' attention at least since Leopold von Ranke, Max Weber, and others began defining and exploring them in the nineteenth century. Bureaucratization has occurred repeatedly in quite different global contexts, and record-keeping is just as much part of the history of China, India, the Islamic world, and beyond as it is part of the history of European politics. The material presented in this book addresses only the European case, primarily in the high medieval and early modern periods, which were characterized by rapid change in the volume of records produced and consequential developments in how rulers sought to preserve, organize, and use the resulting accumulations. In earlier medieval Europe, rulers had made limited (though very significant) use of writing as they administered their domains, even as writing and its associated technologies played a vital role in other spheres of medieval culture. In the later Middle Ages, however, "governance on the basis of knowledge" expanded very substantially.[6]

Even if this development was only one part of the changes that led toward modern European states, it represents a vital part whose multiple dimensions deserve close attention. When we look at how record-keeping practices evolved as European states expanded their investment in records and information management, we will see that the path from rare and precious documents hidden away in tightly locked treasuries to the ubiquitous piles of paper (not to mention accumulations of bits) that we experience today was far from simple. Understanding the history of record-keeping depends in part on understanding how states themselves emerged as a central player in political life.

Contemporaries already noted the growing salience of stored records during this period. In an oft-cited decree of 1456 that sought to improve the finances of Venice's secret chancellery, the city's Council of Ten described the chancellery and its records as *cor status nostri*, the heart of their state.[7] Similar expressions abounded by the later Middle Ages, especially in the writings of secretaries and chancellors seeking patronage and funding for their efforts among such accumulations of records. However, closer examination suggests that political leaders often attributed more value to their treasuries of charters and accumulations of administrative records than this material, and the staff responsible for it, could reliably deliver. Fantasies of complete information through

[6] The phrase from Max Weber cited in Stock, "Schriftgebrauch." On surveillance practices in early modern Europe, see Groebner, *Who Are You?*

[7] De Vivo, "Heart of the State," noting that the phrase conveyed fragility and dysfunction as well as centrality as the Council sought to bolster their staff.

effortless access to carefully indexed collections usually faced a reality in which disorderly masses of paper, parchment, and books were stuffed into bulging armoires or simply piled on the floor, leaving them vulnerable to fire, flood, and the depredations of rats (not to mention thieves). Nevertheless, the archival image of a collection of treasures persisted, and underpinned most of the efforts analyzed in this study.[8]

Historians, for their part, have been acutely aware of archives for as long as they have been drafting footnotes.[9] In the nineteenth century, Leopold von Ranke's turn away from chronicles and narrative sources and toward archival records as the most authentic source of knowledge about the political past reflected changes in historiography whose roots went back the Reformation, and launched a new discipline that thrived in parallel with the states it investigated.[10] More recently, after a century of work during which historians' faith in archives was reinforced by professional norms, the so-called historical turn and archival turn in the human sciences has increased awareness of archives' complexities among scholars in multiple disciplines – as has the digital revolution over the same decades, which has made archivists out of everyone, willy-nilly.[11] Still, though historians have been working in archives since at least the seventeenth century, and have been questioning how to use archives properly since the nineteenth century, only recently have they begun looking at archives as socially, culturally, and politically situated phenomena in themselves.[12] The chapters that follow take up this approach by looking at particular archives found across Europe from the end of the Middle Ages to the early eighteenth century, investigating and comparing their structure and practices, with particular attention being paid to the registers, inventories, and other finding aids.

Older views of the European Middle Ages sometimes posited an oral culture that only slowly gave way to literacy and written texts during the Renaissance.[13] More recently, medievalists have stressed that both medieval and early modern European cultures were fully literate – that is, written records played a vital role in the circulation of information and

[8] For more on the cultural trope of the archive in early modern Europe, see Navarro Bonilla, *La imagen*.
[9] Grafton, *The Footnote*, captures this development.
[10] Leopold von Ranke's programmatic statement to this effect from 1824 is still striking: *Zur Kritik*.
[11] The term "historical turn" gained currency with the publication of McDonald, *The Historic Turn*. On the archival turn, see Stoler, "Colonial Archives," especially 95, and Ketelaar, "Archival Turns."
[12] Recent overviews: Yale, "The History of Archives"; De Vivo, Guidi, and Silvestri, "Archival Transformations."
[13] Ong, *Orality*; Goody, *The Logic of Writing*.

the production of knowledge throughout our period.[14] What is relevant for our purposes is understanding changes in *how* writing was used at various times, by whom, and for what purposes.[15] While some scholars such as Michael Clanchy posit an overall trend "from memory to written record," which they support by exhaustive investigation of medieval documents, others such as Brian Stock have probed the uses of texts by different communities in ways that defy any simple divide between the oral and the literate.[16] Extensive studies of scholastic erudition as it consolidated after about 1100 demonstrate the central role that medieval Europeans assigned not only to writing, but also to the sophisticated analysis and manipulation of texts – developments with major ramifications for record-keeping as well.

The key purpose of this study is to explore from a comparative perspective the practices of record-keeping and record-finding that characterized chancelleries, registries, and similar institutions across Europe from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century. Broad statements about the growing power of written records will remain tenuous until we grasp how record-keepers actually worked, which depended significantly on the framing assumptions that grounded their approaches. "Knowledge is power" remains a vapid abstraction until we understand how actionable information could be produced from specific documents, and indeed which documents could even be found among overfilled chests and boxes. After all, secretaries' complaints about drowning in a sea of records were just as ubiquitous throughout the early modern period as were scholars' laments about too much knowledge.[17] If theories of political change imply that archives were a new source of political power and social capital, then we need to understand how archives evolved, and how they worked in a wide variety of situations, as undertaken in the case studies that follow.

Some Tools and Terminology

Certain terms will be ubiquitous in what follows, and therefore need at least a preliminary definition that takes account of the layers of meaning these terms possess in various disciplines. Along with historiography and

[14] Following Teuscher, *Lords' Rights*. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 194, argues: "it will become clear during my discussion that the terms 'oral' and 'written' are inadequate categories for describing what actually went on in traditional composition."
[15] Peter Burke provides oversight on this debate from an early modern perspective: *Popular Culture* and *A Social History*.
[16] Canonical works include Clanchy, *From Memory*, and Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*.
[17] Blair, *Too Much to Know*.

historical ethnography, recent contributions from archival theory are particularly important in establishing such definitions. Although I have greatly benefited from many thinkers' contributions, the main purpose here is to lay out my own usage in what follows.[18] As I have already discussed memory, the first set of definitions concentrates on framing assumptions about the role of media and their configurations in European archival history, and on a pair of centrally important terms for formal record-keeping in Europe – namely, "information" and "proof." The second set of definitions turns to specific terms whose technical definitions derive primarily from archival science, although they also resonate with historians' language and with our broader culture. These latter terms include "document," "text," "record," "repository," and (as a first attempt) "archive" itself.

Information and Media

I treat political information (the genre of information most relevant to this study) as inherently relational and medial.[19] Recorded information is relational because it moves *within* systems of knowledge as one vital element that can emerge from texts in the context of human relationships. What counts as information depends on who is recording, circulating, or retrieving it, and on whose knowledge is, in consequence, informed by it.[20] Information in this sense therefore cannot be reified as something autonomously present or absent in a particular record. In a study that focuses on chancelleries and their practices, this requires that we attend to the techniques available to scribes for recording and organizing various kinds of information, their ability to read older records containing potential information, and the specific tasks that their masters gave them. As users and their needs changed, so did the information they found in chancellery records.[21] In regard to records and their use in the Middle Ages and early modern period, I will argue that one particular category of information from documents – namely, proofs – took a central and defining role.

[18] Recent archival theory will be discussed at more length in Chapter 2.
[19] Geoffrey Yeo's illuminating discussion of *Records, Information and Data* appeared after this book was complete, and offers a deeper analysis that I find very persuasive. On broad definitions of "information," see Zins, "Conceptual Approaches," and Brown and Duguid, *The Social Life*.
[20] In Peter Burke's terms, "The classic trinity of problems – gathering, storing and employing information – needs to be subdivided and above all personalized. Historians need to investigate who stores what, loses what, stores where, classifies how, makes accessible to whom, hides what from whom, uses for what purpose and so on" (Burke, "Commentary," 391).
[21] Demonstrated over the *longue durée* in Hildbrand, *Herrschaft*.

Equally, all record-keeping depends on, and is therefore shaped by, the communications media available in a particular context.[22] In any given medium, moreover, human users inscribe and recover information only by relying on shared, culturally specific forms. I define such medial forms as stable technical ensembles that actors in a particular period and region employed when creating records. Different medial forms allowed information to be inscribed differently, and the characteristics of a particular medium – voice, parchment, or paper; icon, text, or image – constrained how (or if) information might be recalled or reconveyed in the future. The practices involved in inscribing political information, and in seeking information from the resulting products, evolved continually in tandem with changes in the larger political world as a changing *gestalt*. In late medieval and early modern Europe, key medial forms included parchment, paper, ink, boxes, sacks, codices, rolls, seals, and so forth. For contrast, one can look at the clay tablet, stylus, and syllabic–ideographic writing of the Ancient Mesopotamian world as another medial *gestalt*, or the bamboo strips inscribed with ideographs of the Ancient Chinese tradition. But while medial forms enable and constrain record-making and record-keeping for any particular society and era, they do not provide differentiating features when looking at archives *within* that society and era, since they tend to be widely shared, and innovations in their use tend to diffuse rapidly. For example, a tradition that employs the medial form of hanging seals will not tightly bundle documents – you cannot bundle the seals – but this constraint will operate throughout the historical environment in which hanging seals are prevalent, rather than distinguishing cases within that space. In northern Europe, the hanging seal was most relevant in the High and Late Middle Ages, leading to the emergence everywhere of archival spaces organized by chests or drawers in which documents could be laid loose. When nonsealed records took on greater salience, however, the fact that these materials could be bundled tightly with string led to a shift to bound or bundled documents, leaving behind the awkward sealed originals as a differentiated subgroup rather than as the core form of stored record.

As this example suggests, basic medial forms created shared practices that founded and supported various specific and fluid medial configurations. In contrast to medial forms, which represent a common resource in any historical moment, medial configurations at various levels of abstraction are critical to understanding *differences* in how records are stored and organized over time. Medial configurations crucial in Europe

[22] See Head, "Configuring European Archives."

Table 1.1 *Medial forms underlying medieval and early modern European archives*

Fundamental medial forms occur in various functional realms, including inscription, authentication, methods of gathering multiple records, and technologies for stable storage. The lists in this table are suggestive rather than comprehensive.

Production: paper, parchment, ink, alphabetic writing
Authentication: signatures by issuers and witnesses, seals, signets, notarial signs, chirographs
Multiple-record collocations: rolls, codices, quires, strung groups (*filae*, files), piles
Spatial units of storage: boxes, sacks, strings, armoires, rooms

included, for example, specific practices of *mise-en-page* and *mise-en-livre*, which shaped how a codex could be deployed in an archive; the specific practices and the resulting formation of bundles, *Konvolute*, *liasses*, *legajos*, and other forms of noncodical gathering; and so forth. These configurations and others are discussed in detail in the case studies later. In contrast to the stability of the underlying medial forms, such configurations, I have found, display great heterogeneity across early modern Europe, such that they provide useful comparative tools for differentiating cases and for understanding the practices in play within a given case.[23]

The European discipline of diplomatics founded by Jean Mabillon works with a characteristic set of medial forms and configurations that will be familiar to any student of European history. Table 1.1 includes key medial forms relevant across late medieval and early modern European record-keeping, grouped according to various aspects such as record-making, authentication, storage, and forms of gathering.

These medial forms all appeared ubiquitously across Europe after about 1200, with variations that reflected specific micro-practices in use at particular moments. Often, such micro-practices then remained fossilized within collections – as in the stitching of documents into a roll or in the sewing of particular material into quires – even as new practices emerged to shape the production of subsequent archival material.

Moving from forms to medial configurations, Table 1.2 suggests some specific configurations that form a basis for comparative analysis across European cases. None, to be sure, was exclusive to Europe, and all, with

[23] Obviously, no a priori line can distinguish medial forms from medial configurations: Depending on the context, one can place phenomena in either category. Thus, these terms are heuristics for distinguishing which medial features matter for a particular agenda.

Table 1.2 *Common medial configurations in European archives*

Medial configurations can be distinguished within every functional area of the medial and communications technologies in use in a record-keeping system. Relevant functional areas include the core realms distinguished in Table 1.1, but also extend to all other aspects of record-making, record-keeping, and record-using that follow regular structures or forms. As in Table 1.1, the possibilities listed here are suggestive, not exhaustive.

Document genres: privilege, letter, missive, report, and so on
Codex genres: registers, cartularies, bound documents, copybooks, inventories
Mise-en-livre tools: page, opening, folio numbers, sections, tabs, hard or soft bindings, and so on
Mise-en-page tools: running heads, blocks, columns, marginal rubrics, bold text, pointers, initials, illumination, and so on
Grouping and labeling tools: icons, alphanumeric signs, spatial algorithms; cases, storerooms, vaults, towers, and so on
Spatial organizing tools: numbered space, lettered space, named space, ideal-topographic spaces, and so on
Organizational practices: alphabetization; chronological ordering; mirroring between material and finding aids, and so on

equal certainty, need to be contextualized in relation to the larger circuits of communication and power that produced them (and which we today deduce *from* them). A number of them have long been the subject of formal disciplines such as diplomatics, archivistics, sigillography, and the like, and have therefore been explored and cataloged in loving detail by previous generations of scholars. Viewing them as culturally specific configurations rather than as universal archival forms does not devalue this earlier work, although it may require us to adapt the conclusions we draw. Such configurations exist at multiple levels of abstraction and are usually highly contingent, flexible, and dynamic, as the cases in this book demonstrate. They could be combined and recombined in many ways, leading to very specific local practices, which in turn led to equally diverse practices of placing and finding documents.

The employment of stable medial forms and flexible configurations remains deeply connected to how each society understands the relationships among writing, memory, and power. The way officials collect records has always rested on their understandings of human communication, human obligation, and the reproduction of a culture through time. Clay tablets or inscriptions on stone generated different approaches than did parchment, paper, or thumbnail drives. Moreover, record-keeping in societies using paper and ink can still vary profoundly, as even a brief look at Chinese, Islamic, and European modes of keeping (or not

keeping) various records demonstrates. Treating specific repositories as growing out of the interplay of fluid medial configurations therefore helps us understand each repository's characteristics in comparison to others, near and far, and accordingly highlights the implications of organized records for governance in the past and for historical research today.

Attention to mediality also reminds us how *little* actually reached the archives in pre-modern Europe. All sorts of information circulated in medieval and early modern courts – and often also through courtyards, print shops, coffeehouses, and boudoirs. Communication often took place in oral, performative, or textual forms without ever leaving a record in a political chancellery. Consequently, what we find in archives is neither a complete nor an unbiased representation of the information that actors at the time encountered. Entirely aside from the issue of selective preservation of documents over time, political archives were radically limited in their information content even during their formation.[24] As Arndt Brendecke argues,

> The knowledge that shaped pre-modern political and social praxis must doubtless be sought primarily outside of libraries and archives. Such knowledge was carried by persons, was guarded and transmitted by families, workers, and guilds, was constituted through conversations at table or in court, and remained embedded in practices that scarcely required written form … the relationship between knowledge within and without an archive must be determined, not simply in quantitative terms but rather in respect to their status and their operative significance within everyday politics.[25]

We must therefore attend with particular care to the capacities and intentions of those who produced or preserved information in written form – and equally to the abilities and intentions of those who sought information from archival records.

Proof and Forensic Thinking in Europe

A particularly salient dimension of records in the minds of medieval and early modern practitioners of record-keeping lay in their culturally conditioned capacity to provide proof (in the forensic sense of testimony or evidence, including as part of formal adjudication) about circumstances in the past. As Chapter 3 will argue, Europeans' conceptualization of public record-keeping revolved around such proofs, and specifically around text-bearing objects intended to provide perpetual memory of the authentic and consequential acts of rulers and other authorities

[24] On selective preservation, see Esch, "Überlieferungs-Chance," especially 51–3.
[25] Brendecke, "*Arca, Archivillo, Archivo*," 268.