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Inhalt

ARNDT BRENDECKE	
Von Postulaten zu Praktiken. Eine Einführung	13
1 Die Praxis der Theorie.	
Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog	21
MARIAN FÜSSEL	
1.1 Praxeologische Perspektiven in der Frühneuezeitforschung	21
FRANK HILLEBRANDT	
1.2 Vergangene Praktiken. Wege zu ihrer Identifikation	34
SVEN REICHARDT	
1.3 Zeithistorisches zur praxeologischen Geschichtswissenschaft	46
DAGMAR FREIST	
1.4 Historische Praxeologie als Mikro-Historie	62
2 Ärztliche Praktiken (1550–1750)	78
MICHAEL STOLBERG	
2.1 Zur Einführung	78
VOLKER HESS	
2.2 Schreiben als Praktik	82
SABINE SCHLEGELMILCH	
2.3 Ärztliche Praxistagebücher der Frühen Neuzeit in praxeologischer Perspektive ...	100
MICHAEL STOLBERG	
2.4 Kommunikative Praktiken. Ärztliche Wissensvermittlung am Krankenbett im 16. Jahrhundert	111

3 *Saperi*. Praktiken der Wissensproduktion und Räume der Wissenszirkulation
zwischen Italien und dem Deutschen Reich im 17. Jahrhundert 122

SABINA BREVAGLIERI, MATTHIAS SCHNETTGER

3.1 Zur Einführung 122

SABINA BREVAGLIERI

3.2 Die Wege eines Chamäleons und dreier Bienen.
Naturgeschichtliche Praktiken und Räume der politischen Kommunikation zwischen
Rom und dem Darmstädter Hof zu Beginn des Dreißigjährigen Krieges 131

SEBASTIAN BECKER

3.3 Wissenstransfer durch Spionage.
Ein florentinischer Agent und seine Reise durch Nordeuropa 151

KLAUS PIETSCHMANN

3.4 Musikgeschichtsschreibung im italienisch-deutschen Wissenstransfer um 1700.
Andrea Bontempis „Historia musica“ (Perugia 1695) und ihre Rezension
in den „Acta eruditorum“ (Leipzig 1696) 163

4 Praktiken frühneuzeitlicher Amtsträger und die Praxis der Verwaltung 174

STEFAN BRAKENSIEK

4.1 Zur Einführung 174

HANNA SONKAJÄRVI

4.2 Kommissäre der Inquisition an Bord.
Schiffsinspektionen in Vizcaya ca. 1560–1680 177

ULRIKE LUDWIG

4.3 Verwaltung als häusliche Praxis 188

HILLARD VON THIESSEN

4.4 Gestaltungsspielräume und Handlungspraktiken frühneuzeitlicher Diplomaten ... 199

CORINNA VON BREDOW

4.5 Gestaltungspotentiale in der Verwaltungspraxis der niederösterreichischen
Kreisämter 1753–1799 210

BIRGIT EMICH

4.6 Handlungsspielräume, Netzwerke und das implizite Wissen der Beamten.
 Kommentar zur Sektion „Praktiken frühneuzeitlicher Amtsträger und
 die Praxis der Verwaltung“ 222

5 Religiöse Praxis im Exil 227

JUDITH BECKER, BETTINA BRAUN

5.1 Zur Einführung 227

JUDITH BECKER

5.2 Praktiken der Gemeindebildung im reformierten
 Exil des 16. Jahrhunderts 232

TIMOTHY FEHLER

5.3 Armenfürsorge und die Entwicklung der Informations- und
 Unterstützungsnetzwerke in und zwischen reformierten Exilgemeinden 245

BETTINA BRAUN

5.4 Englische katholische Inseln auf dem Kontinent:
 Das religiöse Leben englischer Exilnonnen im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert 256

6 Materielle Praktiken in der Frühen Neuzeit 267

DAGMAR FREIST

6.1 Zur Einführung 267

BENJAMIN SCHMIDT

6.2 Form, Meaning, Furniture: On Exotic Things, Mediated Meanings,
 and Material Practices in Early Modern Europe 275

CONSTANTIN RIESKE

6.3 All the small things: Glauben, Dinge und Glaubenswechsel im Umfeld
 der Englischen Kollegs im 17. Jahrhundert 292

LUCAS HAASIS

6.4 Papier, das nötig und Zeit, die drängt übereilt. Zur Materialität und
 Zeitlichkeit von Briefpraxis im 18. Jahrhundert und ihrer Handhabe 305

ANNIKA RAAPKE	
6.5 Dort, wo man Rechtsanwälte isst. Karibische Früchte, Sinneserfahrung und die Materialität des Abwesenden	320
7 Praktiken der römischen Bücherzensur im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert	332
ANDREEA BADEA	
7.1 Zur Einführung	332
MARGHERITA PALUMBO	
7.2 „Deve dire il Segretario che li sono stati accusati...“. Die vielfältigen Wege der Anzeige an die Indexkongregation	338
ANDREEA BADEA	
7.3 Über Bücher richten? Die Indexkongregation und ihre Praktiken der Wissenskontrolle und Wissenssicherung am Rande gelehrter Diskurse	348
BERNWARD SCHMIDT	
7.4 Was ist Häresie? Theologische Grundlagen der römischen Zensurpraxis in der Frühen Neuzeit . . .	361
MARCO CAVARZERE	
7.5 The Workings of a Papal Institution. Roman Censorship and Italian Authors in the Seventeenth Century	371
8 Can you hear the light? Sinnes- und Wahrnehmungspraktiken in der Frühen Neuzeit	386
DANIELA HACKE, ULRIKE KRAMPL, JAN-FRIEDRICH MISSFELDER	
8.1 Zur Einführung	386
CLAUDIA JARZEBOWSKI	
8.2 <i>Tangendo</i> . Überlegungen zur frühneuzeitlichen Sinnes- und Emotionengeschichte	391
HERMAN ROODENBURG	
8.3 <i>Pathopoeia</i> von Bouts bis Rembrandt, oder: Wie man die Gefühle der Gläubigen durch ihre Sinne beeinflussen kann	405

DANIELA HACKE

8.4 *Contact Zones*. Überlegungen zum sinneshistorischen Potential
frühneuzeitlicher Reiseberichte 421

ULRIKE KRAMPL

8.5 Akzent. Sprechen und seine Wahrnehmung als sensorielle Praktiken des Sozialen.
Situationen aus Frankreich im 18. Jahrhundert 435

JAN-FRIEDRICH MISSFELDER

8.6 Der Krach von nebenan.
Klangräume und akustische Praktiken in Zürich um 1800 447

PHILIP HAHN

8.7 Sinnespraktiken: ein neues Werkzeug für die Sinnesgeschichte?
Wahrnehmungen eines Arztes, eines Schuhmachers, eines Geistlichen und
eines Architekten aus Ulm 458

9 Archival Practices.
Producing Knowledge in early modern repositories of writing 468

MARKUS FRIEDRICH

9.1 Introduction: New perspectives for the history of archives 468

ELIZABETH WILLIAMSON

9.2 Archival practice and the production of political knowledge
in the office of Sir Francis Walsingham 473

RANDOLPH C. HEAD

9.3 Structure and practice in the emergence of *Registratur*:
the genealogy and implications of Innsbruck registries, 1523–1565 485

MEGAN WILLIAMS

9.4 Unfolding Diplomatic Paper and Paper Practices in Early Modern Chancery
Archives 496

10 Praktiken des Verhandeln 509

CHRISTIAN WINDLER

10.1 Zur Einführung 509

RALF-PETER FUCHS

10.2 Normaljahrsverhandlung als dissimulatorische Interessenvertretung 514

MATTHIAS KÖHLER

10.3 Argumentieren und Verhandeln auf dem Kongress von Nimwegen (1676–79) ... 523

TILMAN HAUG

10.4 Zweierlei Verhandlung? Zur Dynamik „externer“ und „interner“
Kommunikationspraktiken in den Beziehungen der französischen Krone
zum Alten Reich nach 1648 536

CHRISTINA BRAUNER

10.5 Ehrenmänner und Staatsaffären. Rollenvielfalt in der Verhandlungspraxis
europäischer Handelskompanien in Westafrika 548

NADIR WEBER

10.6 Praktiken des Verhandeln – Praktiken des Aushandelns.
Zur Differenz und Komplementarität zweier politischer Interaktionsmodi
am Beispiel der preußischen Monarchie im 18. Jahrhundert 560

JEAN-CLAUDE WAQUET

10.7 Kommentar zur Sektion „Praktiken des Verhandeln“ 571

11 Praktiken der Heuchelei?

Funktionen und Folgen der Inkonsistenz sozialer Praxis 578

TIM NEU, MATTHIAS POHLIG

11.1 Zur Einführung 578

THOMAS WELLER

11.2 Heuchelei und Häresie. Religiöse Minderheiten und katholische
Mehrheitsgesellschaft im frühneuzeitlichen Spanien 585

NIELS GRÜNE

11.3 Heuchelei als Argument. Bestechungspraktiken und Simoniedebatten im
Umfeld von Bischofswahlen der Frühen Neuzeit 596

BIRGIT NÄTHER

11.4 Systemadäquate Artikulation von Eigeninteressen: Zur Funktion von
Heuchelei in der frühneuzeitlichen bayerischen Verwaltung 607

TIM NEU	
11.5 „nicht in Meinung das [...] etwas neues eingeführt werde“.	
Heuchelei und Verfassungswandel im frühen 17. Jahrhundert	619
12 Praktiken des Entscheidens	630
BARBARA STOLLBERG-RILINGER	
12.1 Zur Einführung	630
BIRGIT EMICH	
12.2 <i>Roma locuta – causa finita?</i>	
Zur Entscheidungskultur des frühneuzeitlichen Papsttums	635
ANDRÉ KRISCHER	
12.3 Das Gericht als Entscheidungsgenerator.	
Ein englischer Hochverratsprozess von 1722	646
GABRIELE HAUG-MORITZ	
12.4 Entscheidung zu physischer Gewaltanwendung.	
Der Beginn der französischen Religionskriege (1562) als Beispiel	658
MATTHIAS POHLIG	
12.5 Informationsgewinnung und Entscheidung.	
Entscheidungspraktiken und Entscheidungskultur der englischen	
Regierung um 1700	667
PHILIP HOFFMANN-REHNITZ	
12.6 Kommentar zur Sektion „Praktiken des Entscheidens“	678
13 Die Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen	684
DANIEL SCHLÄPPI	
13.1 Die Ökonomie sozialer Beziehungen. Forschungsperspektiven hinsichtlich	
von Praktiken menschlichen Wirtschaftens im Umgang mit Ressourcen	684
14 Fachgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit	696
JUSTUS NIPPERDEY	
14.1 Die Institutionalisierung des Faches Geschichte der Frühen Neuzeit	696

9 Archival Practices. Producing Knowledge in early modern repositories of writing

MARKUS FRIEDRICH

9.1 Introduction: New perspectives for the history of archives

Archives have a very special place in the heart of historians. Archival work is still considered the bedrock of historical research. As John Elliott recently wrote: “The sight, the touch and even the smell of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century documents, the dried brown ink, the paper itself sometimes crumbling in one’s hand – all these sensory qualities enhanced, at least in my own experience, that imaginative and intuitive sense which is so important for the historical reconstruction of past societies.”¹ A wide variety of critical theories notwithstanding, historians still define themselves to a great deal through archival work.

Their fascination with archives, though, has usually not led historians to study the *history* of archives – we *use* archives, but rarely *study* them, a point well made in Randolph Head’s paper. Work in the field usually tends to be occasional, isolated, often positivist, and frequently focused on questions that seem to be most relevant from a contemporary perspective. Thus it is no wonder that the history of archives is still a fairly marginal field. As Wilfried Reininghaus has famously said, it is (at best) a “submerged subdiscipline (untergründige Subdisziplin)”² Only in the last few years historians have begun to take a fresh look at archives and acknowledged them as interesting objects for historiographical investigation.³

1 Elliott, John H.: *History in the making*. New Haven (CT) 2012, p. 15.

2 Reininghaus, Wilfried: Archivgeschichte: Umriss einer untergründigen Subdisziplin, in: *Der Archivar* 61 (2008), pp. 352–360.

3 A brief survey of new work can be found in Wellmann, Annika: Theorie der Archive – Archive der Macht. Aktuelle Tendenzen der Archivgeschichte, in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 57 (2012), pp. 385–401. See now also Schenk, Dietmar: “Aufheben, was nicht vergessen werden darf”. *Archive vom alten Europa bis zur digitalen Welt*. Stuttgart 2013.

9.1.1 Archives and archival mentality

Archives, together with libraries and museums, are among the most important infrastructures created to enhance the ‘survival chance’ of select documents.⁴ As physical structures, archives are built to protect fragile materials such as paper or parchment; as epistemic structures, they help to order knowledge so that documents can be retrieved. Neither long-term survival nor accessibility of written documents is self-evident. Archives thus add something significant to writing, and they have been very successful in doing so – in fact, the long-term availability of many types of documents has become a key aspect of European civilization. Archives have been crucial for this process: They make it plausible and reliable for people to assume that many documents, once produced, will be there in the future, ready for inspection if needed. This had important cultural implications.⁵ As people became accustomed to assume that older documents could in principle be retrieved at will, they increasingly had to reckon, too, with the fact that the knowledge contained in those documents would be available whenever required. The past could now be documented and ‘looked up’, whether for legal, religious, or political purposes – a fact people learned to appreciate and fear at the same time, depending on what they expected from the archived past.

From the late Middle Ages onward, this habit of ‘thinking with archives’ began to influence an ever-growing set of social practices. Archives came to permeate economic and legal life; archives started to influence religious life – not only did the administration of the churches become bureaucratic, but also individual believers now had to keep and preserve (that is: to archive) at least a few relevant documents, for instance the so-called *Beichtzettel*, certificates that an individual had confessed at a given time;⁶ archives also contributed to establish and control

4 Esch, Arnold: Überlieferungs-Chance und Überlieferungs-Zufall als methodisches Problem des Historikers, in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 240 (1985), pp. 529–570. The history of archives and the history of writing are very closely connected but they are not the same. There is, for instance, a history of writing that is not connected to archives – many types of written documents have been and are produced for immediate consumption and destruction, shopping lists, cinema tickets, and scrap paper in general.

5 For a recent illuminating philosophical discussion of the importance of documents see Ferraris, Maurizio: *Documentality. Why it is necessary to leave traces*. New York 2013. Ferraris, who never discusses archives in any depth, however, seems to simply assume that documents (which include, according to him, mental states like memories) inherently have staying-power. He does not investigate how the endurance of documents so important for his theory is made possible.

6 In the middle ages, priests had been required to keep registers of penitents. The *Beichtzettel* shifted the burden of proof/control from the priest to the penitent, cf. Kittl, Reinhard: *Der Beichtzettel im Wandel der Zeit*. Reith im Alpbachtal 1999. Lederer, David: *Madness, Religion and the State in Early Modern Europe. A Bavarian Beacon*. Cambridge 2006, pp. 82–92.

social order – archival documents were increasingly relevant as proofs of nobility in France, Germany, and elsewhere.⁷ Archives, long before the French Revolution, became closely tied to political ideas about accountability and, after 1789, to democracy, although only slowly and often in twisted ways.⁸

In many areas, the conservation of written documents thus has, though not without much debate about limits and feasibility, almost become the default cultural option for European societies; it is now often the destroying, forgetting and vanishing of information that needs explanation.⁹ Archiving and the constant availability of documentation, in many areas, are taken for granted and have acquired an aura of self-evidence in our ‘information age’. How this happened and how ‘thinking with archives’ became culturally formative, is one of the major new questions in the emerging history of archives. Future scholars in this field should look beyond the technologies and institutions of enhanced record-keeping and also start an investigation into the history and origins of Europe’s ‘archival mentality’.

9.1.2 Practices and the place of archives in everyday life

If archives have at all been discussed with broader historical questions in mind, this happened mostly in the field of administrative history. Archives have occasionally received in-depth treatment as key elements of the history of administrative bureaucratization.¹⁰ A future history of archives should not neglect this context, but might also want to move beyond it. To do so, the concept of ‘practices’ is helpful because it forces us, in very specific and concrete ways, to situate ‘the’ archive in the daily routines of human activity. The concept invites historians to establish in detail what people did (and did not) with archives on a

7 Harding, Elizabeth/Hecht, Michael (ed.): *Die Ahnenprobe in der Vormoderne. Selektion – Initiation – Repräsentation*. Münster 2011.

8 On paper-based accountability as a new formative aspect of European political culture after 1100 see Bisson, Thomas N.: *The crisis of the twelfth century. Power, lordship, and the origins of European government*. Princeton (N.J.) 2009.

9 See the brief remark by Blair, Ann: *Too much to know. Managing scholarly information before the modern age*. New Haven (CT) 2010, pp. 11–14. Of course, there are significant limits in our acceptance of archiving. Personal data is one such field where archiving and data-mining, whether by the state or by corporations, is generally and for excellent reasons viewed very critical. But then, on the other hand, projects and services allowing individuals to “archive everything” continue to fascinate, see Wilkinson, Alec: Remember This? A project to record everything we do in life, in: *The New Yorker*, May 28 (2007) pp. 38–44.

10 For a recent contribution to this genre see Grebe, Marc-André: *Akten, Archive, Absolutismus? Das Kronarchiv von Simancas im Herrschaftsgefüge der spanischen Habsburger (1540–1598)*. Frankfurt a. M. 2012.

daily basis; it helps to shift our focus from archives as institutions to archives as arenas for and elements of human behavior. Jake Soll has shown how the social, erudite, and political practices of early modern “information masters” such as Jean-Baptiste Colbert were shaped by their intimate closeness to archives.¹¹ But the lives and social practices of many other Europeans were affected by archives as well. Marc-André Grebe notes, for instance, that the Spanish crown archive in the town of Simancas became a key factor in the local economy, at least for some time.¹² Carpenters and bookbinders built lives around archives as did the producers of paper, parchment, ink, and other materials (see also Megan Williams’ paper). Parents shaped their children’s education with an eye on archival careers and families built dynastic strategies around the social opportunities available in archives. Archives thus became sites of social placement and (moderate) social mobility. Criminals also learned how to use archives. Reselling stolen parchment, paper, and wax was a risky, but potentially profitable business.

These examples lead to a more general observation: Archives have been (and are) made useful by people in more than one way, and archival history should explore as many of them as possible. Put even more generally: There is no ‘natural’ or ‘inherent’ function of archives. Their function is determined by the ways in which they are ‘activated’ by their users, as Eric Ketelaar has written.¹³ Their impact depends upon the ways in which people incorporate them into their daily activities. The history of archives should take this point seriously and follow the myriad ways in which people lived with archives. The concept of ‘archival practices’ can be helpful for doing this.

9.1.3 Critical functions of archival history

Looking at the ways in which archives were used and usable in daily life has an important critical function because it helps to deconstruct the well-established myth of archives as tokens of (bureaucratic) rationality. If ‘information masters’ such as Colbert, Walsingham, or the Austrian Habsburgs collected huge amounts of data through impressive bureaucratic procedures, a history of archival practices will also point to the limits of these achievements. The case of Walsham studied in Elisabeth Williamson’s paper demonstrates how hard and difficult it was to keep archives effective. Collecting information and putting it into an archive was one thing. Uncovering it from the archive in order to use it in meaningful

11 Soll, Jacob: *The Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colberts Secret State Intelligence System*. Ann Arbor 2010.

12 Grebe, Akten, p. 170.

13 Ketelaar, Eric: Records out and archives in: early modern cities as creators of records and as communities of archives, in: *Archival Science* 10 (2010), pp. 201–210.

ways was something quite different. A closer look at the daily life of archives illustrates that the “sinews of power”¹⁴, at least to the degree they consisted of papers stored in archives, were often stretched, torn, and not functioning so well. A close look at archival realities highlights information overload, entropy, chaos (see also Randolph Head’s paper). It indicates that archival history is not only the story of keeping, preserving, and storing but also of destroying and neglecting documents, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The history of archives is also the story of loss; it is the story of papers and parchment eaten by rats, mice, and other animals. Archives frequently were dysfunctional and ambivalent spaces of fear, uneasiness, and ambiguity because no one knew in totality what might be found in the documents. Archives were often inaccessible and, from the vantage point of many early modern users, contained largely incomprehensible knowledge – quite literally, since many early modern users were lacking the most basic palaeographic skills and could not read older handwriting. It was *not* self-evident for archives to be efficient as spaces of knowledge. Archives were (and are), at the same time, much more and much less than simply storage houses of knowledge.

The history of archives is thus at least in part also a history of (temporary) forgetting. Archives themselves do not remember, in fact they allow to postpone the actual act of remembering. Archives are sites of *potential* remembrance, as all historians know – unless ‘activated’, most of the archive’s content is not part of memory and, thus, history. Archives can therefore be seen as an invitation to partially disentangle the past from the present. The invention of a complex social infrastructure – the archive – that in principle allowed individuals and society at large to unburden itself at least for a time from constant, ‘hot’ remembering might in fact be a key aspect of European history with significant consequences, as cultural theorist Borys Groys has suggested.¹⁵ Because ‘the past’ is understood to be safely deposited in archives it does not need to be constantly remembered actively, thus freeing enormous amounts of cultural energy for other tasks. According to Groys, Europe’s increasing reliance on archives to safeguard the past helped turn its eyes on the future. Europe’s culture of archives and its culture of innovations, he thinks, are something like two sides of the same coin. If this is the case, then un-activated and in-active archives are of significant cultural importance. This, in turn, should challenge archival historians to move beyond the well-established focus on *active archives* – the (temporarily) forgotten, closed, or *dormant archives* might be just as revealing and interesting.

14 Brewer, John: *The Sinews of Power. War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783*. Cambridge (MA) 1990.

15 Groys, Boris: *Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*. Munich et al. 1992.