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Title

Archival Enterprise Across Early Modern Europe: A Review Essay

Keywords: archives; archivists; early modern; Europe; literature

Archival history is steeped in context. It embodies experiences, transactions, and encounters held in documentary sources shaped by geographies, creators, and curators over generations. In the past several decades, historians have increasingly centered archives and archivists as actors in scholarship of Early Modern European (c. 1450-1800) historical concerns. In particular, they have explored two linked areas of inquiry the impact of archives on forming European identities, and the influence of European archivists on shaping archives. Studies of archives - including research about theories of archival collections and stewardship, and about sites housing collections - are rich sources that tease out ideological shifts in early modern times.

This essay examines literature contributing to discussions of emergent archives and archival practices across Early Modern Europe. Here the word “across” is emphasized, as European countries then (and now) lacked cultural and procedural unanimity in archives management. To be sure, archival endeavors across geographies did foster a collective archival culture that culminated in the preservation of information. Building upon Markus Friedrich’s argument that comparative methods limit study of archival history, Guy Burak, E. Natalie Rothman, and Heather Ferguson declared the “perils” of using a Eurocentric-lens: “As transnational history has underscored, much is to be gained by thematizing mobilities across categories, units, and entities, rather than by drawing comparisons between pre-given ‘Europe’ and ‘non-Western parallels.’”¹

“Archives” or archival collections encompass curated official records and personal non-records.² They are ubiquitous, and therefore an academic home for archival history defies a single discipline. This review relies upon literature drawn from cognate histories including information, knowledge, and library science. Fortunately, since 1995 when James O’Toole commented in *Provenance* on the understudied state of Early Modern European archives, historians have made strides to fill the void in scholarship.³ This article spotlights diverse and compelling ways archives have been shown to interface with history, and the essentiality of archives in understanding the past. Further, exploring the concept of “archival enterprise” within these contexts presents exciting opportunities to study its manifestations through a multitude of lenses and fields of study. “Archival enterprise,” according to the Society of American Archivists, is “the practice of managing archives and organizations”; further, it “implies

¹ Guy Burak, E. Natalie Rothman, and Heather Ferguson, “Toward Early Modern Archivality: The Perils of History in the Age of Neo-Eurocentrism.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 3 (2022): 547. doi:10.1017/S0010417522000196. The authors reference Markus Friedrich, “Epilogue: Archives and Archiving across Cultures - Towards a Matrix of Analysis,” in Alessandro Bausi et al., eds. *Manuscripts and Archives: Comparative Views on Record-Keeping* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 439.

² Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, entry for “Archives,” accessed December 5, 2022, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archives.html>.

³ James O’Toole, “The Future of Archival History,” *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 13, no. 1 (1995).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol13/iss1/2>.

complexity, interconnectedness of parts, and the need for tenacity and vision.”⁴ The writings illuminate the fortitude of archivists engaged in archival labor during the early modern era. They also recast the archivist’s persona from a neutral information facilitator to an interventionist mediator of the past, or as Friedrich suggests, “the archivist as alter ego of the personified archive.”⁵

In Early Modern Europe, rapid change forces contributed to the exponential increase in information sources, spurring a demand for record-keepers, archivists, and compilers. Donald R. Kelley has contended that the need to reclassify knowledge during this era was particularly acute, “especially during the search for a proper method of understanding and discovery.”⁶ Ann Blair spoke to this unprecedented type of information overload, but reminds us that parallel crises were experienced even earlier from ancient to medieval times.⁷ Among the social and intellectual transformations underway effecting these changes, with a few examples noted, were: discovery of new geographies (New World); cultural rebirth (rediscovery of classical antiquity); movement toward empirically-based science (Renaissance to Enlightenment); increasing congruence among state and nation; technological inventions (printing press, rifle, telescope); capitalism and trade; and religious volatility (Reformation and Counter-Reformation).⁸

These events had direct implications for archival developments. Greater accessibility of paper and the invention of the printing press created a significant volume of tangible information. In addition to manuscripts, the proliferation of print materials contributed to the deluge of information. The rise of literacy and written forms of documentation, such as chronicling and note-taking, supplanted reliance on the craft of medieval memory to retain knowledge of the past.⁹ These advances catalyzed the demand for archival labor to collect, organize, and preserve documentary sources. Friedrich observed that aspects of documentation work were performed by people across sectors from notaries to merchants.¹⁰

Archival labor across Europe grappled with documenting the interplay between competing and converging religious, political, and legal factions. Historians including Jason Lustig have described epistemologies of power and control underpinning archival shifts. He argued: “Archives’ function as ‘arsenals of state power’ in medieval and Early Modern Europe was rooted in how paper or parchment provided proof of ownership of land, relationships of

⁴ Society of American Archivists, entry for “Archival enterprise,” accessed December 5, 2022, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-enterprise.html>.

⁵ Markus Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*. Translated by John Noël Dillon (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 84. The quote is Friedrich’s interpretation of this line taken from a poem about archivist Johan Sebastian Müller of Weimar: “He is and remains my true alter ego.” Friedrich’s source: Johann Sebastian Müller, *Des Chur - und Fürstlichen Hauses Sachsen Ernestin - und Albertinischer Linien Annales von Anno 1400 bis 1700* (Weimar, 1701).

⁶ Donald R. Kelley, ed., *History and the Disciplines: The Reclassification of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997), 3.

⁷ Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁸ Eugene F. Rice, Jr. and Anthony Grafton, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460-1559*, 2nd. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

⁹ M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 3rd ed. (Chichester West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive*, 19.

fealty, and the power of the bureaucratic centralized state.”¹¹ To actualize records management, archivists established local physical and intellectual controls for administrative archives. They were given directives about how to order from royalty and chancellors, but they also developed techniques for appraisal, arrangement, classification, and description to create access points for diverse *fonds* of archives.

Scholars have studied the presence of bureaucracy and power asymmetries in the customized ordering methods implemented in specific geographic contexts. Further, a lack of interoperability among finding tools could be construed as a tactic to protect sensitive information. Filippo de Vivo illustrated in a study of archival processing in early modern Venice that concepts of information access were variable and localized. According to de Vivo: “The elites who had access to political information also created and ran archives to store it, and devised systems for those archives’ organization and indexing.”¹² For insights about archival enterprise in Early Modern Spain, Antonio Castillo Gómez’s research traced the trajectory of archival organization from securing the legacy of the Hispanic monarchy to safeguarding municipal records utilized by the public.¹³ Swiss archives have been attended to by Randolph Head, who established the influence of political forces on practices akin to provenance and archival integrity in Swiss archives from 1450 to 1770. He described the context whereby archives took a subjective turn in this way: “The most striking shift took place from the traditional hierarchy incorporated in the ideal-topographic inventories of the earlier periods to the state-centered perspective that began to spread in the eighteenth century.”¹⁴

Archives were established as needs dictated, and the unpredictable nature of accretions contributed to a disordered state of information management. This predicament underscored the need for standards and guidance to inform proper stewardship. In the first published print manual of instruction for ordering registries and archives, the German *Registrar* Jacob von Rammingen wrote in 1571:

And so the registry (as defined according to our subject and our intention) is an art, or a science, and a vocation: the well-arranged collection and preservation from decay of old public certificates and other written memoranda belonging to a lord or an office; to preserve them, to carefully present their content or content Description, and in a few short words - faithfully, in the relevant records and books - write down and update the entire content of these certificates and memoranda. The purpose of this is that they should thus be entrusted to these two everlasting memories and be available as permanent information.¹⁵

¹¹ Jason Lustig, “Epistemologies of the Archive: Toward a Critique of Archival Reason,” *Archival Science* 20 (2020): 65-89, at 70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09313-z>.

¹² Filippo de Vivo, “Ordering the Archive in Early Modern Venice (1400-1650),” *Archival Science* 10 (2010), 232. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-010-9122-1>.

¹³ Antonio Castillo Gómez, “The New Culture of Archives in Early Modern Spain,” *European History Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2016): 545-567.

¹⁴ Randolph Head, “Knowing Like a State: The Transformation of Political Knowledge in Swiss Archives, 1450-1770,” *The Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 4 (2003): 745-82. <https://doi.org/10.1086/383353>.

¹⁵ Source of English translation: *The Earliest Predecessors of Archival Science: Jacob von Rammingen’s Two Manuals of Registry and Archival Management, Printed in 1571*, translated by JBLD Strömberg (Lund: Wallin & Dalholm, 2010).

Notably, Rammingen's manual¹⁶ articulated a rationale and codified framework for archive management.¹⁷ But endeavors to develop ordered and indexed collections were still shaped by place and time. In terms of curation, archival collections were products of many creators. This variability was reflected in the types of information being generated, and also in the filing systems used by the recorders. Chroniclers,¹⁸ note-takers,¹⁹ and autobiographical works²⁰ evoked new ideas about what constituted an archive, and who were the modern subjects of them.

Archives can originate from a single source, or in the case of synthetic collections, be assembled to capture evidence that may not otherwise be saved. As pointed out by Michel Duchein, a former Inspector General of the Archives de France, in Early Modern Europe many records were lost, and archives had to be re-established by collecting anew. European countries were recovering from years of chaos induced by wars and invasions.²¹ The recalibration of social and political life was an impetus for regenerating modes of documentation. Duchein's seminal article tracing archives and the archival profession in European contexts was published in the winter 1992 issue of *American Archivist*. Beyond library and information science professionals, the article resonates for historians of the period, social history, and political science.

Within a social and political framework, Duchein tracked archival history from ancient Greece to the time of the article's publication. Duchein maintained that despite the close physical proximity of European countries, their corresponding archival programs persistently lacked harmony due to legacies of political, social, and religious unrest. For Duchein, geography was the only shared element creating some semblance of archival community, and stressed: "All the new monarchies (German, French, English, and later Spanish), the great feudal powers, the Church, and the towns organized their own records-keeping independently so that little by little local or national traditions and methods were created, giving birth in modern times to the various archival systems which now exist."²² In Duchein's estimation, the most significant transformation in Europe's archival management aims unfolded post-Revolution, "when it became clear that archives could no longer be considered only 'historical' repositories."²³

As the scope of archival collections expanded toward the eighteenth century, the information they held was metamorphosed to enforce political rule and entrench governance structures.²⁴ Along the archival continuum, a key finding of Stefan Berger's research is that in

¹⁶ Jacob von Rammingen, *Von der Registratur und ihren Gebäwen und Regimenten Deszgleichen von ihren Bawmeistern und Verwaltern: Ein ... Auszug Deren Bücher Welche ... Jacob Von Rammingen ... Von der Kunst der Registratur Geschrieben* (Heidelberg: M. Harnisch, 1571).

¹⁷ German History Intersections, "Jacob von Rammingen on the Ordering of Registries and Archives (1571)," accessed November 30, 2022, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-12>.

¹⁸ Harriet Lyon, "'A Pitiful Thing'? The Afterlife of the Dissolution of the English Monasteries in Early Modern Chronicles, c. 1540-c. 1640," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 49, no. 4 (2018), 1037-1056. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.11343>.

¹⁹ Ann Blair, "The Rise of Note-Taking in Early Modern Europe," *Intellectual History Review* 20, no. 3 (2010), 303-316. DOI: [10.1080/17496977.2010.492611](https://doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2010.492611).

²⁰ James S. Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus: Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

²¹ Michel Duchein, "The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe," *American Archivist* 55, no. 1 (1992): 14-25. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.55.1.k17n44g856577888>.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ Randolph C. Head, *Making Archives in Early Modern Europe: Proof, Information, and Political Record-Keeping, 1400–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

Europe, archives did not wholly influence the formation of national master narratives.²⁵ In the case of Germany, he explains: “In the nineteenth century, the idea of a centralized archive bringing together all documents from the Holy Roman Empire, gained ground in the German lands and was closely associated with the promotion of the German national idea.”²⁶ The thinking evinced through collection access bolstered nascent perceptions of European dominance, globality, and intellect. For secular and religious societies, archival labor transformed evidence, albeit in many cases biased and constructed, into a memory data bank. Duchein’s work shows how external forces reoriented the emphasis of archives; they transmuted archival ideals in social, cultural and societal values.

Social history relies on evidentiary and historical sources to interpret the past. Paradoxically, archives and archival collections are documentary sources that record their own histories. In 2016, the social history of archives and record-keeping practices in Early Modern Europe was the theme of a special supplement of *Past & Present*, a scholarly journal aimed chiefly at academics with interest in historical changes in cultural and social contexts. Historian and journal editorial board member Alexandra Walsham authored the introduction for the issue.²⁷ This piece of scholarly writing is much more than a gateway to the articles that follow it. Walsham’s introduction is essential reading for research centered on archives in Early Modern Europe. It impressively brings thematic coherence to nearly 150 sources, ranging in subject from government to natural science in archival contexts. Further, it historicizes constructs of archives and archivists, and distinguishes the lenses through which they were studied.

Walsham called out the need for more scholarly attention to archivists as historical actors. The classic text *A Manual of Archive Administration* (1922) by archival practitioner and theorist Hilary Jenkinson²⁸ is noted as a source that projects personas on to archivists. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, archivists were instructed to uphold neutrality when conducting their work. However in the early modern period, Walsham contends that archivists were active agents in the archival enterprise. She argues that stereotypical conjecture persists, and has worked against historical thinking, writing: “These assumptions have exerted ongoing influence and contrived to obscure the extent to which the ‘keepers’ of records themselves have played a critical part in establishing the parameters and boundaries of historical understanding.”²⁹

A rich body of literature has examined archival content creators and curators in historical transformations of scientific thought, methods, and discoveries.³⁰ The Scientific Revolution was a reaction to, and inspired in part, by innovation stemming from Renaissance rediscoveries of ancient philosophies. An important thought-shift was propelled by Francis Bacon’s insistence on inductive generalization, an argument characterized by reliance on experimentation and observations to inform theories about nature. The movement toward evidence-based science was a touchstone for progress toward modernity. Situated among histories of the book, archives, and

²⁵ Stefan Berger, “The Role of National Archives in Constructing National Master Narratives in Europe,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 1 (2013): 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-012-9188-z>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ Alexandra Walsham, “The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe,” *Past & Present* 30, Issue supplement 11 (2016), 9-48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtw033>.

²⁸ Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922).

²⁹ Walsham, 10.

³⁰ Two examples are Nicolas Popper, “Archives and the Boundaries of Early Modern Science,” *Isis* 107 no. 1 (2016): 86-94; and Richard Serjeanston, “The Division of a Paper Kingdom: The Tragic Afterlives of Francis Bacon’s Manuscripts” in *Archival Afterlives: Life, Death, and Knowledge-Making in Early Modern British Scientific and Medical Archives*, eds. Vera Keller, Anna Marie Eleanor Roos, and Elizabeth Yale (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 28-71.

science, Elizabeth Yale's investigation brings to the fore cases of naturalists and antiquaries, such as John Aubrey, to shed light upon perspectives on how scientific discovery and notions of personal scientific legacy impacted archival memory. This social and cultural history notes the influence of Bacon; it is an exploration of common ground between naturalists and archives in the seventeenth century.³¹

According to Yale, naturalists and antiquaries' sensitivities were heightened to information loss resulting from closure of monasteries and political volatility. She relates how papers lacking protective enclosures and bindings were highly susceptible to loss. Yale points out that for naturalists, interpretations of what constituted a "manuscript" was narrowly defined as a bound book, while "papers" included loose sheets, drafts, and commonplace books. She argued that English naturalists were more interested in the transmission of their research, and less so in their physical manifestations. However, manuscript and printed formats were understood to be more preservation-worthy formats. According to Yale, there were two ways to preserve records, notes, and correspondence: through dissemination, and storage. Both strategies worked toward creating perpetual access to a corpus of data. Further, these activities established personal legacy by saving data in tangible forms. Yale cites the establishment of the Ashmolean Museum and the Royal Society as evidence of naturalists' quest to safeguard their scientific groundwork, positing: "...their efforts signaled a growing faith in the power of public institutions to preserve cultural patrimony and memory through changes of time, war, government, and religion."³²

A theme woven throughout Yale's scholarship is the "material culture of scientific communication."³³ Heather Wolfe and Peter Stallybrass' book chapter places special emphasis on the material culture of record-keeping, and the physical characteristics of collected papers in Early Modern England.³⁴ In comparison to Yale's work, which described the variety in paper formats, the co-authors elevate the materiality of the paper itself to the locus of discussion. The central arguments of their social and cultural history - aimed chiefly at scholars of the early modern period, information, and archives - are twofold: papers located outside of official domains, such as family archives in households, are a form of archives; and modifications made to paper are evidence of the archival lifecycle.

When describing the historic and evidentiary value of textual sources, Wolfe and Stallybrass equally privilege the paper and its enclosures. They emphasize the importance of inspecting materiality as follows: "The surviving evidence of early modern archival systems - filing holes, folds, endorsements, as well as pouches, chests, and drawers - enables us to reconstruct the record-keeping practices of both contemporary and subsequent custodians, and of both household and bureaucratic record-keepers."³⁵ In systematic progression, the authors detail the mechanics of producing enclosures, portability considerations, and modes of access. The section headings evoke the concepts under study: "Filing as the First Stage of Records Management," "Bundles of Paper," "Bags and Pouches," "Boxes, Chests, and Trunks," and

³¹ Elizabeth Yale, "With Slips and Scraps: How Early Modern Naturalists Invented the Archive," *Book History* 12, no. 1 (2009): 1-36. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.0.0013>.

³² Yale, "With Slips and Scraps," 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ Heather Wolfe and Peter Stallybrass, "The Material Culture of Record-Keeping in Early Modern England," in *Archives and Information in the Early Modern World*, eds. Kate Peters, Alexandra Walsham, and Liesbeth Corens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 179-208.

³⁵ Wolfe and Stallybrass, 179.

“Writing Desks, Drawers, and Cabinets.” To illustrate the main arguments, this research thoughtfully integrates period artwork and reference images. Examples of the curated primary sources include the painting *Portrait of a Merchant* (c. 1350) by Jan Gossaert, a photograph of a “Visible filing hole in a brewer’s bill from Henry Webling to Lady Jane (Stanhope) Townshend, 27 February 1590,”³⁶ and an image of “Bundle of acquittances from 1614 to 1615. Townshend Archives, Raynham Hall.”³⁷ The authors demonstrate how investigating family papers and their handling can open new spaces for scholarship about daily life in the early modern period.

The histories of family papers, genealogy, and archives are uniquely intertwined. In contrast to records of current legal or administration needs, the documentation of births, deaths, marriages, and censuses fulfill a different function: to preserve generational heritage. Like today, more than five centuries ago, genealogy was a deliberate research practice exercised to trace ancestry. Relatedly, family histories and narratives animate the people they describe and provide glimpses into the social conditions and geographies in which they lived. In the context of Early Modern Europe, genealogical and family archives were summoned to assert claims to land ownership, project wealth, and exert political control. Historians have examined the fervor to document royal and dynastic relationships through concepts of “genealogical gaze”³⁸ and “genealogical craze.”³⁹

Markus Friedrich’s scholarship has advanced ideas of the genealogical study by situating it in a data-driven context.⁴⁰ He credits genealogical research with instigating an “archival consciousness” in Early Modern Europe. His article, “Genealogy as Archive-Driven Research Enterprise in Early Modern Europe,” appeared in *Osiris*, an annual journal that publishes thematic research on the history of science. This specific issue focused on data histories. Friedrich’s work could have been included in a publication aimed for library and archival science, or early modern historians, but the choice of *Osiris* affirms his argument that genealogical information is data. While Wolfe and Stallybrass considered the materiality of family-generated primary sources, Friedrich meditates on the intensive work required to track lineage using these sources. Placing his argument within a social and cultural framework, he dismantles presumptions of archives as static repositories or sites that simply warehouse collections. In particular, he gives credence to the skill sets and endurance of archival workers performing the studies, and characterizes the efforts as enterprising and collective acts of data production. According to Friedrich, “In early modern Europe, genealogy became an archive-based research activity. This process had several important consequences for the history of archives, the history of genealogy, and the history of historical studies in general.”⁴¹

For Friedrich, genealogical research is relational data production. He importantly notes the diversity within ancestral histories, providing the examples of “legal or juridical genealogy,

³⁶ Ibid., 185.

³⁷ Ibid., 194.

³⁸ Eric Ketelaar, “The Genealogical Gaze: Family Identities and Family Archives in the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 44, no. 1 (2009): 9-28.

³⁹ Ben Guy, “Writing Genealogy in Wales, c. 1475-c. 1640: Sources and Practitioners,” in *Genealogical Knowledge in the Making: Tools, Practices, and Evidence in Early Modern Europe, Cultures and Practices of Knowledge in History*, Book 1, eds. Jost Eickmeyer, Markus Friedrich and Volker Bauer (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 99-105.

⁴⁰ Markus Friedrich, “Genealogy as Archive-Driven Research Enterprise in Early Modern Europe,” *Osiris* 32, no. 1 (2017): 65-84.

⁴¹ Ibid., 69.

erudite or historical genealogy, and encyclopedic or reference genealogy.”⁴² In the early modern era, the most important virtues of genealogical data were authenticity and trustworthiness. Increasingly, and to alleviate tedious fact-checking, legal titles would accompany genealogical sources. Friedrich spotlights the practical and logistical challenges of locating, organizing, and interpreting large volumes of genealogical data. This complex work encompassed acquiring information, note-taking, reading, and authentication. In addition to paper documents, non-textual artifacts with archival characteristics such as coins, coats of arms, and epitaphs were mined. In developing his thesis, Friedrich cited diverse archival sources including personal letters. One piece of correspondence was sent in 1710. It was a letter to royal genealogist Pierre Clairambault from French author and clergyman François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon, who described challenges in investigating his own incomplete family history,

Friedrich notes the lack of scholarship on the intellectual work of archivists, such as processes for confirming pedigrees and locating evidence of kinships. He also calls attention to the problem of fragmentation within genealogical practices. According to Friedrich, genealogists prioritized compiling vital information and recording relationships among their study subjects. However, the tangential information amassed in the course of this work was deemed to be of lesser significance. Friedrich’s research presses consideration of appraisal in the early modern archive, reframing it as a subjective cause of data loss. The contextualizing of archives as data, such as Friedrich’s comparison of genealogical data to Big Data, situates archival science in histories of data (raw, disordered) and information (processed, ordered). This emplacement expands concepts of archives, reimagining them from collected materials to intelligence. These future-facing ideas have great potential to invigorate pedagogical approaches to teaching about the early modern archive.

Information as an agent of control is a theme that permeates the history of archives. This concept is one among many explored in *Information: A Historical Companion*, a history about the genesis of information and its human interventions edited by Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton. A path-breaking book, the essays coalesce strands of information history from pre-modern regimes to social media.⁴³ According to Blair et al., “One of the most influential developments explored across this volume is the rise of the ‘information state’ and its informational apparatus - chanceries, secretaries, surveillance, archives, and the like - designed to help assert political control over populations.”⁴⁴ In chapters four to ten, the contributions with specific relevance to Early Modern Europe, the writings attend to information networks, the European information state (c. 1400-1700), and periodicals and the commercialization of information. This book inspires thinking about the trajectory of society’s engagement with historical records, manuscripts, and early book formats. It also dually elicits consideration of how society has transformed information sources, and how society has been transformed by them.

A theme knitting the writings together is the ubiquitous presence of subjectivity in archive-building practices. This truism of archival history reminds us that records do not reflect a complete past. Further, provenance, processing methods, and preservation techniques embody institutional beliefs at a certain place and time. Along this line of thinking, collections animate the deliberate choices exacted by archivists in appraisal and selection - notably, what to include

⁴² Ibid., 68.

⁴³ Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton, eds., *Information: A Historical Companion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

⁴⁴ Blair et al., ix.

and to exclude. Citing Elizabeth Yale, archives are therefore not metaphorical “windows or mirrors.”⁴⁵ Rather, the documents and other primary sources that are arranged, described, and filed in repositories are curated imaginaries of the past.

From ancient history to the present, nowhere do epistemologies of knowledge, information, and historical memory converge more than in archival enterprise. Archives were a conduit for information transfer in Early Modern Europe. While archival strategies were localized, collective strategies built a research corpus of European history. Archival work was, and continues to be, an invaluable form of preservation. It increases the probability that evidence of discoveries, ideas, and interactions will be retrievable, safeguarded, and transmitted to future generations. The research literature affirms the essentiality of archives and archivists in shaping understandings of European identities. Each work cited in this review uniquely offers fresh insights that can be expanded upon in the study and teaching of early modern history and archival history.

To add to these thought-provoking perspectives, practicing archivists could be more active in this discourse. One possible approach to bridging the academic gap: create collaborative research opportunities between historians and archivists with deep knowledge of archival methods and practices. Synergistic partnerships could produce valuable scholarship about the nuanced interpersonal dynamics experienced within archives, and bring another dimension to the profound contributions of archivists in preserving European history. Traditions of archival enterprise have made it possible to explore these inquiries.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Yale, “The History of Archives: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 18 (2015): 340. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bh.2015.0007>. Yale was synthesizing an idea developed by Katherine Burns in her book *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).