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Context(s) of the Archive: Regimes of archiving and historiography since the late Middle Ages[1]

O(s) Contexto(s) do Arquivo: Sistemas de arquivamento e a historiografia desde o final da Idade Média

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ABSTRACT

Both historical and archival theorists use the concept of "context," but with significantly different referents. Historical context generally refers to circumstances surrounding events or actors of interest, and can range from the local details of events to global trends. Archival context, in contrast, was rigorously defined during the emergence of canonical Western archival theory in the 19th century, and refers to assemblages of records created by an actor – individual or institutional – while conducting its business, which must be preserved according to the canons of provenance and *respect des fonds*. This paper argues that archival context itself has a history, however,

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and that the canonical version associated with modernity and a capitalist political economy was preceded in Europe by a particularist, pertinence-based understanding of archival context that emerged from the political economy of privilege in late medieval and early modern Europe. Moreover, a post-modern understanding of archival context embodied in the model of the records continuum is emerging today, in connection with a political economy of commodified information. The essay offers both historical cases and comparative considerations to illuminate this trajectory. Close attention to context in historical and archival theories, which look at how archival thinking and historical thinking were entwined over this entire trajectory, provides a fresh perspective for understanding both past deep structures and current tendencies. The goal of scholarship is both to make meaning out of the evidence around us in disciplinary ways, but also to reflect on the conditions of that meaning-making: the limitations, the questions unasked, the patterns not perceived. Looking at archival regimes as a historian – given that historians today are profoundly dependent on archives – can add a recursive and dynamic perspective on long-standing models of transformative change.

KEYWORDS: Historical context; Archival context; Historiography; European archives.

RESUMO

Tanto os historiadores como os teóricos dos arquivos utilizam o conceito de "contexto", mas com aplicações significativamente diferentes. O contexto histórico refere-se geralmente às circunstâncias que envolvem os acontecimentos ou os atores em questão, abrangendo desde pormenores de ocorrências locais até tendências globais. O contexto arquivístico, por outro lado, foi rigorosamente definido com a emergência da teoria canónica dos arquivos ocidentais no século XIX, referindo-se a conjuntos de documentos criados por um ator (individual ou coletivo), no exercício da sua atividade, que devem ser preservados de acordo com os princípios da proveniência e da ordem original. O presente artigo defende que o contexto arquivístico tem, ele próprio, uma história e que a versão canónica, associada à modernidade e a uma economia política capitalista, foi precedida, na Europa, por uma conceção particularista, baseada na pertinência do contexto arquivístico, que emergiu da economia política do privilégio, entre o final da Idade Média e o início da Época Moderna. Além disso, está a surgir, atualmente, uma compreensão pós-moderna do contexto arquivístico, consubstanciada no modelo

de *records continuum*, que se articula com uma economia política da informação mercantilizada. Este ensaio apresenta casos históricos e reflexões comparativas para esclarecer esta trajetória. Dá especial atenção ao contexto nas teorias históricas e arquivísticas, analisando como o pensamento arquivístico e o pensamento histórico se entrelaçaram ao longo do tempo, o que oferece uma nova perspetiva para compreender tanto as estruturas profundas do passado quanto as tendências atuais. O objetivo dos estudos académicos é, por um lado, atribuir sentido às provas que nos rodeiam de acordo com as normas das disciplinas e, por outro, refletir sobre as condições desse processo de construção de sentido: as limitações, as questões não levantadas, os padrões não percebidos. O olhar do historiador sobre os regimes arquivísticos – dado que os historiadores atuais estão profundamente dependentes dos arquivos – pode adicionar uma perspetiva contínua e dinâmica aos modelos de mudança transformadora de longa duração.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Contexto histórico; Contexto arquivístico; Historiografia; Arquivos europeus.

I. Introduction: archival and historical contexts

When considering the contexts of archives and archival practice, a historian's first impulse is to address the *historical* context, such as the early modern European archives I have been studying for nearly three decades[2]. To understand archival collections, such as the remarkable material in the Torre do Tombo in Lisbon, any historian – certainly, any historian of archives – will consider the circumstances surrounding the materials' creation, preservation, and organization. For example, when looking at the beautiful volumes of the *Leitura Nova*, a unique archival product in the Torre do Tombo from the 16th century, one must consider the political history of Portugal in this era, the history of the royal chancellery and its agents, and

2 This essay took shape as a public lecture, and explores ideas around the historical and archival meaning of "context" in a broad perspective. It grows out of reflections in my book on archival organization in early modern Europe: Head (2019), which I developed further in Head (2021, pp. 104-127); and in a lecture delivered in July, 2021 on "Archived Landscapes and Archival Landscapes: Architectures of Political Record Keeping in Early Modern Western Europe, 1450-1700", at LOWE Research Cluster Conference "Architectures of Order", Goethe Universität, Frankfurt aM, Germany. I also thank the UC Riverside PhD students in HIST 240F and HIST 290 who have explored recent archival theory with me over the past years.

the political circumstances from the 1450s to 1550s, all of which shaped these volumes' production[3].

The concept of "archives in context" has a quite different meaning for archivists than for historians, however. Modern archival theory maintains that each archives (to use the British term) or each *fonds* has a context within the larger system of document preservation, and that such context is essential for correctly understanding what a *fonds* contains and what its contents mean[4]. This premise is central to the archival theory that emerged during the 19th century in Europe, which emphasized *respect des fonds* and the preservation of provenance. The powerful idea here is that we can best understand the documents created by an institution when they remain in the arrangement that they had while being used in the chambers of power. If documents are detached from this context, in contrast, we will not understand why they were important at that moment, and may thus misunderstand the actions that produced them in the first place. The *Leitura Nova* constitutes a *fonds*, but so do the "primitive charters" registered for daily use that were its original source, and so do other groups of royal records. All must be considered in their contexts.

At first, the two senses of 'context' here – let us call them historical context and archival context – may seem quite distinct, each the product of separate disciplinary developments and focused on the respective concerns of historiography and archival theory. Yet they are connected as well, since the very idea of *interpretation in context* became salient for both historiography and archival science between the mid-18th and the mid-19th century[5]. Invocations of "context" today, moreover, convey a deeper epistemological claim, namely that the interpretation of texts is enriched – or, in the strong form of contextualism, is only possible[6] – in the *context* of other texts. That both historians and archivists began making similar claims at about the same time suggests that there are deeper connections between the two senses of 'archives in context' I am discussing. At stake are not simply historical methods or practices in state archives, but more generally the way that European intellectual culture has derived meaning about the human past from texts.

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3 See Head (2019) for additional literature and context on the *Leitura Nova*; and Deswarte (1977).

4 This form of "archival context" is central to modern archival theory, canonized in the *Dutch Manual.* For recent reflections, see Horsman et al. (2003, pp. 249-270); and Cook (1997, pp. 17-63).

5 Discussed in the introduction and essays in Müller (2015).

6 See the discussion in Rysiew (2023).

To understand these developments, we must start before the double emergence of 'context' as a crucial term for archivistics and historiography. Looking at pre-1800 archives and their organization, I will argue that archival contexts in pre-modern archives emerged primarily in relation to political configurations *external* to the institution keeping a particular archive. This pre-modern pattern in archive formation – which diverged sharply from the 19th-century ideal of provenance – was not simply a matter of happenstance, but rather reveals a characteristic political epistemology that was hegemonic across the European system, one closely connected to the political economy of privilege that predominated from before 1400 to about 1800. We can speak, I think, of a coherent archival regime over this period. Examining that regime thus provides a way to diagnose the deep structures of early modern European political culture, with all its inequalities, oppression and instability, as well as its growth, innovations, and changes.

Moreover, if there was a shift in regimes that stretched across historiography, archival practice, and many other disciplines somewhere around 1800, this invites us to inquire into the deep structure of the successor regime – the one that comprises modern historiography with its central focus on archival research as well as national archives organized on the basis of *respect des fonds*. Additionally, since it appears to me that we are in the middle of another, comparable shift in the early 21st century, visible in changing canons of history-writing and new archival theories of the records continuum, what are the corresponding epistemological assumptions and social and political underpinnings for the emergent regimes in these two disciplines? These are very large questions about which I can make only preliminary suggestions, by which I hope to add a *longue durée* historical perspective to Eric Ketelaar's reflections on similar topics in this volume (Ketelaar, 2025).

The narrative I am proposing reproduces the familiar periodization of *pre-modern, modern, and post-modern* in European cultures and society. Close attention to context in historical and archival theories does not necessarily change that macro-perspective. However, looking at how archival thinking and historical thinking were entwined over this entire trajectory provides a fresh perspective for understanding both past deep structures and current tendencies. The goal of scholarship is both to make meaning out of the evidence around us in disciplinary ways, but also to reflect on the conditions of our meaning-making – the limitations, the questions unasked, the patterns not perceived. Looking at archival regimes as a historian – given that historians today are profoundly dependent on archives – can add a recursive and dynamic perspective on long-standing models of transformative change.

II. Context and the making of meaning

An important first step is to consider what we mean by 'context'. The incomparable Peter Burke has taken up this issue from a historical perspective in an illuminating article entitled "Context in Context" (Burke, 2022, pp. 152-177). As Burke notes, the term 'context' has roots in theological hermeneutics, and was used by St. Augustine in such expressions as *contextio scripturae* before it was abandoned for nearly a millenium in favor of the related term *circumstantiae.* For theologians, context – meaning passages connected with the passages they sought to interpret – enabled a better understanding of a given phrase in Scripture. "Context" reappeared as a concept in early modern literature and philology after 1500, and its use expanded explosively in the mid-20th century. Modern and especially post-modern hermeneutics assert that interpretation is enriched or even determined not by the word or text being interpreted, but by the relevant context. This may feel self-evident to us today. Words never exist in a vacuum, but are connected with other phenomena, starting with other words that precede or follow them, and extending to "the time, place, public, and so forth," that is, to the circumstances (Burke, 2022, p. 153). Nevertheless, some schools of theology and philosophy have denied that context is relevant to interpretation in favor of essentialism or formalism. The importance of context for interpretation was amplified when Roman Jakobsen and other linguists showed that the very sounds that make up words are not objective phonic phenomena, but rather consist in relationships with other phonemes: the same physical vibrations are interpreted differently depending on the sonic context. Modern historians have long assumed that context – by which we mean anything from other documents to global trends – is central to the interpretation of all historical evidence.

The claim that meaning-making depends not only on text but also on context is slippery, however. The problem lies in determining what the *relevant* words, texts, or circumstances are that should guide a reader in interpretation. As Burke concludes at the end of his whirlwind tour:

> […] the concept of context is one that has been defined precisely or vaguely, narrowly or broadly, and employed in both a flexible and a rigid manner… Context is often regarded as local, but the idea of a 'global context' is also in circulation. It might well be asked, What is *not* context? (Burke, 2022, p. 171)

While this philosophical problem admits to no simple solution, looking more closely at the history of archival practices may help understand the shifts in relevant context that affected archival collections from the early modern period and the historians who rely on them.

III. Three archival regimes

A good starting point is to focus on the way different actors chose different ways to organize and access archival material over the past six centuries. Archival history suggests that a specific and narrow understanding of context lay at the center of 19th century archival theory, which produced the ideas of provenance and *respect des fonds*[7]. My argument here will be that this new understanding grew out of earlier shifts in archival practice that had changed the *way* (though not the *fact*) that archival order responded to larger historical contexts. Today, the way archival theory understands context is changing again, suggesting that another fundamental shift in epistemologies is underway.

The two epochal shifts that archival historians perceive in Europe since the Middle Ages – one somewhere around 1800, the other now under way – prompt me to propose three regimes of archival organization, each of which both participated in and also documents for us how archival contexts changed over time, specifically for political archives and the documents they preserve. In each regime, "archival context" (in the sense of what other records each record was put together with), and "historical context" (in the sense of the dominant regime of power and knowledge at the time), followed interlocking pathways of change. Each of these proposed regimes, to be clear, is also a broad ideal type, many of whose features can be found at all times. What else changed during these shifts – the political foundations, the economic system, the information ecology, the global network, or many other possibilities – has been debated endlessly since the Enlightenment. The focus here, however, is on political archives in their historical contexts.

The first archival regime I perceive is broadly captured by the terms *treasury* and *pertinence*. In this system, each document's perceived *value* and *content* provided the primary context for organizing, using, and understanding it. The archival logic of pertinence was epistemologically particularistic: it focused on specific external actors or places, and it tended to treat docu-

7 For succinct surveys: Ridener (2009); Delsalle (1998).

ments in isolation, rather than encouraging their aggregation through statistics. Systems of pertinence in archival context corresponded, at least in Europe, to a political economy of privilege that treated dominion as partible and fragmented, documented in charters that described and allocated specific privileges. Empirical examples for this regime will come from the ideal-topographical architectures identified by Peter Rück, such as those found in 15th century Savoy, 17th century Zurich, and many other early modern archives (Rück, 1975; further examples in Head, 2019, esp. chs. 9-10).

The second archival regime, which began to take shape in the 16th century, is associated with the terms *registry* and *provenance*. When implemented, this system foregrounded documents' role in the flow of political decision-making as the critical context for their organization and preservation, which oriented them primarily to the emerging modern state (further discussion in Head, 2019, chs. 13-14; Head, 2021). Archiving under registry and provenance rests on what we might call an epistemology of informed administration, whose ideal types were articulated, among others, by Max Weber, and which co-evolved with the political economies of national capitalism. This system became canonized in archival theory during the triumph of the national state in the 19th century, with which it was intimately connected. In archival practice, this system is seen especially clearly in German and Dutch *Registratur,* whose sophisticated, internally-oriented organization of files created coherent provenances for archiving. It came to predominate in modern state information systems and record management environments during the 20th century[8].

The third, still emerging, archival regime that I perceive has developed recently in the work of archival thinkers whose commitments to subaltern, community, and indigenous records has pushed them away from the administrative state. In this regime's perspective, multiple contexts for records derive from a broad definition of 'records creators', and archivists emphasize their obligation to provide transparency and accountability to multiple publics – which often brings them into tension with state-operated recordkeeping. The records continuum model, which seeks to formalize this regime, rests on an epistemology of pluralization and virtuality, enabled by growing entanglement with digital media. More speculatively, I perceive post-canonical archival thinking as corresponding to (but also critiqueing) a political

8 The publication of the Dutch Manual (Muller et al., 1898) marks the moment when canonical modern archival theory emerged, in most accounts. See Ketelaar (1996) for a transnational introduction.

economy characterized by the commodification and virtualization of property and power, which became strikingly visible, for example, during the global financial crisis in 2008-2009[9].

IV. Historical contexts for early European archiving

Two characteristics of political dominion in late medieval Europe provided the historical context for the way rulers accumulated and managed written records to sustain their power during the earliest archival regime we are considering. The first, with deep roots in the past, was that control over land and people was managed through a complex discourse of privileges. Privileges, imagined as grants of authority licensed from above, were a way to formalize the profound fragmentation of political control that characterized Western Europe after the 9th century. Originally attached primarily to people, privileges documented the flow of parcelized authority among political actors that included not only emperors and kings, but lords, monasteries, and eventually corporate entities like towns and even villages. The flow of privileges, large and small, encouraged the use of writing, and centers of authority created *treasuries* of privileges that established their legitimacy and the scope of their control[10]. The second tendency, which accelerated in the later Middle Ages, was the territorialization of dominion: political actors increasingly accumulated bundles of privileges over particular places, including control over serfs and free people, influence over local churches, rights to economic resources such as mills and ponds, and more[11]. Such territorialized bundles of privileges became a key context for asserting dominion and defending against rival power centers. At the same time, power remained deeply entangled with interpersonal networks, mediated by noble houses and corporate institutions, leading to a complex tapestry with overlapping jurisdictions and endless litigation, which further drove the increase in written records.

The clerks responsible for preserving and organizing the tide of charters by which the political economy of privilege operated generally chose to

9 Post-canonical archival theory is a rapidly developing body of work that is not yet complete. Key authors include Terry Cook, Sue McKemmish, Anne Gilliland, Frank Upward, Michelle Caswell, and many others. Cook (1997), and Ridener (2009) cover the earlier phases. For a recent manifesto, see Caswell et al. (2017).

10 This terminology and periodization introduced in Bautier (1968). Yann Potin (2020) has developed the theme of 'treasury' much further.

11 For a canonical view of this transition in the German lands: Moraw (1985).

organize their hoards in relation to the landscape of privilege. Archival spaces could reflect those giving and receiving privileges – higher lords and neighboring authorities – or the divisions of territory created by the bundles of privileges a lordship possessed. The chests, armoires, rooms and register books that filled late medieval archives were subdivided into such spaces, and new information specialists (*Registrators* or archivists) gathered documents that they saw as connected into separate boxes, or copied them into differentiated sections of registers according to the content of the privileges that charters documented – that is, according to their pertinence. Through archivists' work, therefore, document repositories came to mirror the structure of jurisdictions, alliances, and hierarchies in a ruler's political sphere, along with the domains where the ruler claimed control. To put it more broadly: rulers and their servants understood the charters they possessed as being about the external world of domains and jurisdictions, about specific lords and subjects.

V. Peter Rück's contribution

Peter Rück's career united historical and archival disciplines to an unusual degree, making him a seminal figure for historical studies of European archives. The massive reorganization of the Savoyard archives in Chambery undertaken in the 1440s, known as the Clairvaux Register, provided a perfect case for Rück's analysis[12]. The scale of the reorganization, in which documents were re-housed in 45 new armoires while 13 new register volumes were created to describe the resulting collection, meant that Rück could analyze a *designed* solution to making a large archival collection useful. As Rück noted, "consciousness of the way structures of dominion and archival structures are intertwined is old and also widely recognized today" (Rück, 1975). What set Rück's analysis apart was his recognition that this intertwining could be read deep into the internal structure of archival collections.

Rück named the remarkably lucid architecture found in the Clairvaux system of the 1440s *ideal-topographical*. As Rück put it, the goal was "the physically visible, ideal-oriented, placement of holdings in the archive's space. Mental and material orders were to coincide" (Rück, 2019). The Savoy archive after this reorganization was characterized by precisely articulated spaces that mirrored dominion in late medieval Europe. In a critical second step,

12 See Rück (2019) for the empirical material discussed below.

this order was also reproduced in book-form finding aids. The first armoire contained boxes with charters and documents pertaining to Savoy's interactions with the papacy, and was described in the first section of the manuscript register. The next box pertained to archbishops, the next two to bishops, and so on down the ecclesiastical hierarchy, each with its corresponding section in the registers. Starting in Armoire 7, the Holy Roman and Greek emperors started a new sequence, followed by kings, dauphins, dukes, and cities, in that order. The result was a double mirroring: the actors in Europe's spiritual and political hierarchies defined specific archival contexts, namely boxes in the archive, that also corresponded to pages in the register.

A second part of the archive, in Armoires 14-45, accommodated documents about the House of Savoy's own dominion over others. Here, the logic was more muddled, in keeping with the tangled reality of the Savoyard domains. The sequence of cabinets did not correspond to any bird's-eye mapping of Savoyard territory. Rather, it was the relationship of the ruling family to complexes of privileges and authority that provided the critical context. The dynasty's internal records came first, including testaments, marriage contracts and appanages; then records about directly ruled domains, the *baillivats*; then the domains of subordinate lords and areas where Savoy possessed specific privileges but not primary dominion. We should not overlook that the correspondence between archival spaces and external contexts ran in both directions. The order of the archive not only mirrored the imagined order of the world, it also supported and re-circulated this order through the archive's role in administration and litigation. Archival context was defined by dominion over spaces, and the resulting archive also supported the reproduction of spatial divisions, often down to the present.

VI. An epistemology of the particular in early modern archiving

Rück's analysis helps us understand how the archival context of documents in Savoy, as in most of late medieval Europe, derived from external political contexts through the principle of pertinence. Such connections enabled not only the preservation but also the finding of documents for use in contention over specific places, people, and privileges. Late medieval and early modern secretaries needed to be able to find evidence of particular privileges, and late medieval sources about archives are replete with references to finding, often using terms such as *facilitas inveniendi* that echoed the world of Scholastic reference books (discussion in Head, 2019, esp. chs.

3, 5). The methods used for finding specific documents in Savoy and elsewhere therefore give us deeper insight into the political epistemology of the rulers and secretaries who created and operated these archives. What do changes in organization and finding tools tell us, not just about archives themselves, but also about larger structures associated with the shift from early modern to modern states and their underlying cultural foundations? Important evidence comes from the quite specific nature of archival finding in ideal topographic systems.

I argued above that for these rulers and archivists, archival records consisted primarily of signs about particulars out in the world, in the form of authentic records of past actions that could inform action in the present. This focus on particulars, implicit in both ideal-topographical architectures and in early modern indexing practices, led to archives organized by means of division, and also explains the surprising lack of records aggregation in Europe during this period. In the words of the 17th century Italian scholar Baldessare Bonifacio:

> That order is certainly to be kept in archives is demonstrated to everyone by Nature herself: first it is proper to *divide up* locations, then affairs, and finally times. If we aid this *division* by means of indexes arranged alphabetically, nothing will be difficult for us find. (Baldessare, 1632, as quoted in Born, 1941, p. 236 [emphasis mine])

As Bonifacio also suggests, indexes became an important tool for finding records within the pertinence archives of early modernity. However, the Clairvaux Registers discussed by Rück had no indexes, since in ideal-topographical archives, archival context itself was a primary finding tool. Users of the Clairvaux Register knew both the political hierarchy and the character of the various domains of the House of Savoy, which supported their searching: they knew that kings came before dukes, and that family wills were more important than the baillivats.

After 1500, the flood of diverse documents to be preserved and rulers' growing interest in deriving more information from archives meant that this approach was insufficient. Search based on context alone in ideal-topographical archives also faced the problem of defining what documents were "about", when most were about more than one thing. Archivists' lamentations about this problem are a useful clue, since this seems to us a trivial problem. The common solution was to create indexes (often linked to rubricated words in the margins of documents) that allowed searching for a

particular name or place independently of a document's location. This was the strategy suggested by Bonifacio, and used in the *Leitura Nova* volumes created here in the Torre do Tombo in 16th century (notably, without alphabetization of the indexes).

A seventeenth-century archive that combined an unusually explicit ideal-topographic plan with supplemental indexes emerged in Zurich in 1646, documented in a volume entitled *Index archivorum generalis* (Staatsarchiv Zürich […], n.d.). The complete reorganization of the chancellery office with its 485 boxes of documents carried out by Johann Heinrich Waser created 13 sections, which traced both external political and ecclesiastical hierarchies, as in Savoy, and the different domains under the city's control. Additional sections comprised categories such as judicial administration or negotiations with Zurich's Swiss allies. In describing this system in the *Index generalis*, Waser explained the need for a second finding tool, the *Index archivorum specialis,* as follows:

> Thus, in the *index specialori,* documents that pertain to a single matter are found together, even if they are located in different boxes; since often a single document contains points pertaining to different matters, but one can not divide the document, but needs to put it under a single title. (Waser cited in Head, 2019, p. 211, from Staatsarchiv Zürich […], n.d., fol. [vii])

Arrangement by pertinence, supported by indexical supplements, was a common strategy across Europe at this time, though in a wild variety of configurations. The related indexes linked specific referents out in the world of politics to the relevant documents in the archive. In doing so, moreover, systematic indexing had the potential to bring together separated documents that shared a common point of reference. In this way, the rapid proliferation of indexes in archives after 1600 also helped to develop a technology that would enable a momentous shift in archival context that began in European archives during the 17th and 18th centuries.

VII. Beyond pertinence: states, information, and modern archival practices

Under regimes that conceptualized politics in the language of privilege, a parcelizing approach to political knowledge long prevailed. But over time,

the growing "info-lust" (to use Ann Blair's phrase (Blair, 2010)) of rulers and functionaries made the limitations of existing archival epistemology increasingly apparent, especially in larger administrations. Although it is impossible to point to a single sharp break, a fundamental shift in practice began in the 17th century. Some state archivists, seeking coherence for their "oceans of documents" in the face of demands from the rulers of Europe's information states, began to organize documents primarily in relation to their place in a state's decision-making processes[13]. This shift produced assemblages of records that were different in their form, their content, and their organization from previous practices. From being evidence about particulars in the world, records became evidence about the process by which a state dealt with the world – which also helped make the new state institutions visible and legible to its agents and subjects. To be understood properly, records in such a system had to remain connected to the offices, agents, and pathways that received, produced, and annotated them, since their context of creation was now essential for understanding what they meant, in contrast to the traditional charter, which was imagined to be self-explanatory and self-sufficient. Such dependence on documentary context became a fundamental component of provenance in archival theory as it took shape in the 19th century.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, chancelleries increased their ability to manage documents consistently, and thus to track matters of interest out in the world. A general term for this development is registry, and it has been studied most systematically in the German lands and Netherlands, although it was at work among larger archival systems across Europe (see Head, 2019, chs. 11-12, for more on the emergence of registries). Three key features characterized the new archival contexts that administrators began creating in registries. First, new administrative structures were dedicated to managing documents and the information in them, separately from the chancelleries where documents were used. Second, documents were organized around the internal processes of the state involved. Third, these documents were intentionally held accessible to provide useful information to rulers and their agents, rather than being kept in treasuries for use in litigation. Registry thus focused record-keepers' attention on making and executing decisions within a political apparatus, rather than on contexts

13 The phrase "an ocean of letters and of registers, confused as by a storm," comes from the French 14th century archivist Gérard de Montaigu, cited in Delaborde (1909, cxi). The term "information state" in this context was developed by Higgs (2003).

outside the apparatus. In a registry, the outside world became raw material for state action, rather than providing the framework that shaped the internal architecture of the archives.

The book-form protocols that European cities began creating in the High Middle Ages were proto-registries, as Eric Ketelaar and others have shown (Ketelaar, 1980). Items in protocols were entered chronologically, which emphasized the document's connection to the city in a specific functional context, rather than oriented to external circumstances. Registers and protocol books in various political units grew in volume and became more specialized over the sixteenth century, adding more and more metadata that placed records in contexts defined by offices, councils, or other state institutions. Such registers reveal that their creators were beginning to understand the state – an abstract entity, in principle – as the actor that provided the most important context for records over time.

Registry systems have received relatively little scholarly attention, and the way that the sophisticated transaction-file registries of nineteenth-century Prussia and its neighbors developed still needs considerable study. A clear example of this new orientation in a moderately-sized archive appeared during a complete archival reorganization in the city of Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1698. In place of a system of boxes based on pertinence, the city secretary, Johann Karl Balthasar, removed many old documents into an 'old archive' that would no longer grow, then rearranged his storage system for new records not according to actors or places, but according to functions of his city-state, such as 'commerce' or 'military affairs'. The system was also designed to allow extensive and detailed indexing of names and places (which were still important, after all), so that a single document or a single entry in a protocol could have multiple index entries (Head, 2007). In Brandenburg-Prussia, the key step took place in the early-17th century when a dedicated office, the *Registratur,* began managing not only the old records in the chancellery, but the ongoing paperwork of the electorate's new Secret Council, thus tying recordkeeping tightly to the business of the realm. After 1639, archivist Christoph Schönbeck created a new set of comprehensive categories for keeping all kinds of records. Although modeled on the existing ideal-topographical shelves and bundles, Schönbeck detached his categories from physical spaces and turned them into a conceptual grid oriented to the Electorate's operations and priorities, rather to the imagined political world. Another key step was to enforce the shared set of categories on the Secret Council's own secretaries. As a result, records and files could be smoothly transferred out of the Council's offices when closed, yet easily accessed later,

linking Council and archive in the execution of the state's business (Head, 2019, ch. 11, with additional literature).

When fully developed in the nineteenth century, the Prussian *Registratur* stood between the archive (now meaning the corpus of closed cases) and the state apparatus, on the one hand, and between the world and the state apparatus, supporting the deliberation of the ruler and his councils, on the other. Each ministry's incoming correspondence was directed to its *Registratur,* where each item triggered the creation of a new file within the pre-existing system of categories[14]. Whether a petition from a subject, a query from a lower court about how to handle a case, or a bill for river dredging, each incoming document went into the same system. The *Registratur* sought out relevant past documents from the archive to the file, and then routed the file to the appropriate officers and councils for deliberation. The authority's decision and the final communication of the outcome entered the same file in the registry according to a complex tracking system.

In this system, evidence from the external world became raw material that entered the state's purview through the registry. The registry file enabled a decision by the ruler, which could then be sent back out into the world. The subject's petition was denied, the court was instructed how to sentence the defendant, and the dredger's bill was either paid or returned for further proof of work completed. People and places in the world were still vital to an administration that operated in this mode. But for an office's management of records, the world was approached through bundles of information that could be moved, divided, categorized, and otherwise processed to reach a decision[15]. The state became the context for the registry's operations, while the registry and its archive provided contexts for the questions the state faced.

The archival principles that correspond to, and indeed grew out of, such registry systems in all of their variations are provenance and *respect-des-fonds*. Provenance argues that if state records are meaningful primarily in the context of the state's actions, then only preservation in the order created by that state will preserve their intelligibility. If removed from their transactional context, their meaning will be corrupted or lost. The principle of *respect des fonds* follows: the way that an office assembled and annotated records – that is, their archival context – is fundamental for their informational value.

14 The canonical analysis in archival terms of the German registry in Meissner (1935); a lucid overview in Miller (2003).

15 The impact of parcellization on knowledge practices is provocatively analyzed by Alberto Cevolini, e.g. Cevolini (2022).

Moreover, such offices often expended great effort in indexing their case files, yet such effort would go lost – indeed, all too often it *did* go lost during ill-designed reorganizations – unless the body of files and indexes were kept together as a *fonds*.

Archival practice and the emergence of modern archival theory were only one dimension of a systemic transition in European information practices, which included historiography. The appearance of Rankean historical writing, centered on the actions of nations and their states, dovetails well with archives that privileged state action in their organization (Eskildsen, 2008; Müller, 2015). Another trend that emerged during the 17th century was growing interest in *aggregated* information from bodies of records, leading to the creation of genres such as population registers and land cadasters. Aggregation proved to be extremely difficult in pre-modern archives, however, with their deep-seated emphasis on the particular, but was made easier by the reorganization of archives on the basis of provenance. By the end of the 19th century, both archival theory and historical theory had reached new canonical formulations that shaped practices in archives and in history-writing for the next century. The appearance of both the *Dutch Manual* and the influential *Introduction aux études historiques* of Langlois and Seignobos in 1898 manifested the maturity of the new paradigms (Muller et al., 1898; Langlois & Seignobos, 1992). The enormous expansion of administrative paperwork during the 20th century prompted new discussions about how to manage archives that further articulated the implications of provenance and *respect de fonds* as canonical principles for vast new state archives in the larger framework of records management.

VIII. Another transition? From provenance to the records continuum

A new revolution in archival theory has begun during our lifetimes, responding to shifting media technologies, evolving political economies, and changing historiographical practice. The changes are large enough to suggest that another transformation of record-keeping regimes has begun to encroach on the state-oriented paradigm characteristic of modern archival science, and this transformation resonates with developments in the humanities and especially historiography. These developments are integral parts of post-modern thinking in that they question not only the details, but the underlying epistemologies that shaped both archival science and historical theory from the early nineteenth century until World War II.

Modern archival theory began to come under criticism from several directions in the 1970s. Australian and Canadian archivists began seeking alternatives to the iron cage of provenance and the supposed distinction between active records (which were not deemed archival) and closed records in custodial archives (Cook, 1997). They argued that in modern information states, records management would be more effective if it preceded archival custody, rather than beginning when records were transferred to the archive. Meanwhile, scholars of indigenous peoples in Australia and Canada, as well as community- and identity-focused archivists in England and the United States, began critiquing the canonical protocols of acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, and description that were taught in archival management schools. Eric Ketelaar has been a leading figure in these turns, both though his own research and by co-creating a journal, *Archival Science,* that has been at the forefront of developments in archival theory. Post-canonical archival thinking found philosophical resonance in post-structuralism and is exerting growing influence in Europe and around the world as modern states deal with the colonial material found in their archives or in the archives of their former colonizers[16].

Other theorists, like Verne Harris and Jeanette Bastian, have critiqued how canonical theory limits 'record creators' to institutional actors embedded in power systems, only reluctantly considering private archives and rejecting responsibility for preserving memory from the perspective of those outside of – or oppressed by – official institutions (Bastian, 2003; Harris, 2002). Those seeking to archive marginalized communities have called for archival theory that supports community archives as well as state archives[17]. Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemmish have emphasized that archivists' duties include promoting transparency and social accountability in state organs, not just documenting their operations for internal use[18]. All these developments have been inflected by the rapid spread of digital recordkeeping and storage, which throws up new challenges for authentication, appraisal, and the long-term preservation of records. New forms such as databases seem to put the whole idea of provenance into question, since records are dynamic and may be created *ad hoc* by queries to an underlying file that is constantly changing.

16 South Africa played a pivotal role in some aspects of the global appropriation of post-colonial archival theory (Hamilton et al., 2002).

17 A foundational opening of the question in Flinn (2007); various scholars have expanded and refined the remit of community archiving; a conspectus in Caswell et al. (2016).

18 Both are proflic authors. See e.g. Gilliland (2011); and McKemmish & Gilliland (2014).

In this emerging archival regime, how do new archival contexts connect with political, social, and cultural contexts, both in content and in organization? If not oriented to the operations of a state, what should be the guiding principle of post-modern archival organization? The *records continuum model* proposes a new framework for archival context althogether, drawing on systems theory to view the relevant contexts for records in archives not as fixed, but rather as dynamic and constantly evolving. In the words of Frank Upward, archivists need to:

> […] move from the object, the thing in a general metaphysical view, and create a more dynamic relational view of the processes that form the object, including the archivist[']s own ongoing involvement in the formation of archives as a sociocultural resource". (Upward, 2005)

This is a complex theory, but its central point is that *multiple* contexts shape the trajectory of archival records and assemblages, shaped by issues of usership, time, and space. In contrast to the iron law of provenance – that the business of an office is the only relevant context for each *fonds* – records continuum theory argues that context is not fixed, but must be analyzed dynamically over time in terms of identity, transactionality, evidentiality, and recordkeeping systems. Records creators are no longer limited to official producers in state offices, but actively encompass the subjects as well as the makers of records, especially in situations of power difference and oppression. Records can be used not only to track the operations of a state, but to challenge it and subject it to accountability.

Shifting perspectives on record-makers and record users have begun shaping new digital platforms for managing archival and cultural resource material. The platform called Mukurtu, for example, rejects the idea of panoptical access confined to official gatekeepers, and instead is built around the idea of differential access to materials depending on the identity of the seeker. Mukurtu was designed originally for Indigenous communities seeking to catalog their documents and material culture in ways that respected their own boundaries of legitimate access. For example, documents and objects can be restricted to tribal members or members of a particular clan or age-class, or specified as intended for women only. Mukurtu's goal of ensuring that "you can tell your stories and your history, your way" leaves behind the positivist claims associated with modern archival theory (Mukurtu CMS, n.d.)[19].

19 Thanks to Robin Katz of UCR libraries for introducting me to this resource.

Like its predecessors, post-canonical archival practice also resonates with a specific political economy. If early modern archiving reflected a political economy of privilege, and modern archiving a political economy of capitalist states, then the new archival science appears to correspond to our emerging political economy resting on on the commodification of information. This became visible, for example, in the MERS electronic mortgage registry in the United States, which broke down spectacularly in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. MERS was created to allow financial claims resting on mortgages of property – traditionally documented in local registers of title – to be commodified and infinitely subdivided into instruments such as collateralized debt obligations (CDO) and residential mortgage-backed securities (RMBS). Digital registry allowed the value of property to be completely abstracted for trading in financial markets – at least until those markets collapsed. After 2008, however, the absence of diplomatically valid chains of transfer led to a crisis of forged signatures and litigation in the United States, since the law did not recognize the record-keeping practices of MERS[20].

The new archival theory also resonates with changes in history writing over the last generation. If Renaissance historiography looked for "exemplary" virtuous or vicious individuals, and if modern historiography was structured by narratives about the growth and character of nation states, then post-modern historiography, which is still taking shape, allows multiple perspectives that reflect not only incommensurate perspectives on the world, but also the positionality of historians and the communities they belong to.

IX. Closing thoughts

Every regime of archival context makes choices about what counts as context, and therefore generates constraints on and affordances for making meaning from documents. The regime of particularity and privilege that predominated until 1700 not only gave literate elites backed by feudal power a near monopoly over the ability to deploy documents; it also made aggregate knowledge about European societies nearly impossible to compile, built as it was on a tapestry of accessible particulars. The regime of registry in

20 The role of MERS in the "robo-signing controversy" (2024) in 2010 was much discussed in legal and financial blogs at the time. See also Esquivel (2012).

the service of national states allowed information to be deployed at an enormous scale by nation states, even as it continued many of the exclusions of the prior regime. It also enabled new forms of surveillance and extraction from those outside state power, in part through the imposition of colonial information regimes on many parts of the world[21].

A key claim of records continuum theory is that "while a record's content and structure can be seen as fixed, in terms of its contextualization, a record is 'always in the process of becoming'" (*apud* McKemmish, 2001, p. 335). Such an archival regime of differentiated access and plural contexts faces a risk of losing coherence, however, in parallel with critiques of post-modernism in other spheres. If contexts are not fixed, but depend on who is accessing a record by means of metadata that is different today than it will be tomorrow, how can any stability of meaning be possible? Are we headed to the world of George Orwell's *1984,* in which:

> The mutability of the past is the central tenet of IngSoc. Past events… have no objective existence, but survive only in the written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it[22].

Yet archival context in post-modern archiving is different from Orwell's totalitarianism. Unlike the IngSoc party, post-modern archivists are enjoined from erasing and replacing documents to change the past. The implication of pluralized contexts, instead, is that the same words on the same piece of paper or parchment can generate *different* meanings for differently situated readers in differently structured archives – but without silencing other contexts and meanings. Managing archival records under such conditions raises new challenges for archivists, as it does for historians debating records' meaning. The purpose of new archival theories is make these conditions visible, while protecting the fixed 'content and structure' of records for the future. In the end, no regime by which we preserve and interrogate the

21 Colonial information regimes have been a vital site for rethinking archivally-based historical writing. In addition to the foundational work by Stoler (2009) and Trouillot (1995), see more recently the essays in Donato (2019).

22 Much quoted, including in talks and articles by archivists since at least the 1980s, e.g. Samuels, 1986. Orwell is cited from Orwell, 1977, p. 54 (Original work published 1949).

human past will ever be free of contexts – contexts in the past, in the archive, and in our present. The goal in treating contexts as a matter of choice and consciousness – reframing but not replacing archival records – is to free us for richer debate rather than to blind us for increased control.

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