

*Markus Friedrich, The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*, trans. John Noëll Dillon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018). xii + 284 pp. Notes. Hardback. \$75.00.

Markus Friedrich's volume illustrates the diversity of archival practices in late medieval and early modern Europe. Large institutions associated with royal courts served as models, but archives "had a variety of local . . . causes and manifestations" affecting an increasingly large proportion of the population "on multiple political and social levels" (p. 48). Merchants and municipalities, churches and monasteries, and corporations and rulers all maintained records. *The Birth of the Archive* is a praxis-oriented study of the history of European archives circa 1200 to 1800, concentrating on developments in Italy, France, and various German-speaking principalities. It looks at how archives in those regions adapted to different contexts and how they functioned over time. Markus Friedrich, a professor of early modern history at Hamburg University, indicates that although a comparative, worldwide study of archival history would be highly desirable, his current investigations do not extend beyond Europe.

The introduction touches briefly on the "archival turn in cultural studies" and particularly on the innovative use of the word "archive" in the metaphorical sense employed by philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault.<sup>1</sup> Friedrich notes that actual archives in the traditional sense generally play no part in the theoretical conversations promoted by philosophers: "The interest of cultural studies in archives . . . serves to reflect critically on . . . contemporary culture and its media [and] psychological, hegemonic, and historical structures" (p. 10). Friedrich's expressed intention is to examine the "archive qua institution" of archivists and historians, leaving the "archive qua concept" to philosophical discourse (p. 11).

A short survey tracing historical developments in written communication shows that "pragmatic literacy" was a prerequisite for the burgeoning of archives. Documents proliferated (related in part to an increase in trained scribes and the growth of papermaking capabilities in Europe) during the transition from the high to the late Middle Ages. As written culture expanded, some documents were deemed ephemeral, while others, considered to have long-term value, were retained in storage. Of special significance were cartularies (holding copies of important incoming documents) and registers (preserving materials needed to authenticate agreements or replace lost contracts). Registers guaranteed continuity and consistency by facilitating a search for precedents, affording a "self-referential view of one's own history" (p. 27). Archival research was typically triggered by challenges to the social *status quo*. Written materials could adjudicate disputes over rights and duties; for example, archives preserved records that proved "what powers the lord possessed and what freedoms his subjects enjoyed" (p. 144).

Holding archives connoted power, and competing armies considered the capture of an adversary's records a significant coup. Philip Augustus of France carried his royal archives (considered part of his treasure) into battle against England's Richard Coeur de Lion in 1194. Philip's records (and the state secrets they contained, including proof of John Lackland's machinations) fell into Richard's possession when his soldiers captured the French army's baggage train. Archives were not only reservoirs of knowledge—they

also had a symbolic cachet.<sup>2</sup> The individual or social class that controls archives has the ability not only to write history, but also to shape it.

One salient thread shows what informed individuals in the early modern period thought about archives, representing a “new phase” in archival history (p. 13). In 1571, Jakob von Ramingen, who had overseen collections in several German principalities, published manuals that “elevated the discourse of archives to a higher, more sophisticated level” (p. 59). Contributions from other authorities followed, signaling the emerging cultural and social importance of archives. Relevant publications addressed such topics as who should be in charge and what their responsibilities should be (such as custodian, scholar, or political or legal advisor); what furnishings were best; and how physical space should be planned. Jean Mabillon’s *De re diplomatica* (1681, supplemented in 1704) had a major influence on subsequent archival methodology. Practitioners scrutinized the “external” (including seals, parchment, ink, and handwriting) and “internal” (for example, wording) characteristics of charters and other records more carefully than before to assess their authenticity (p. 65). In 1777, Philipp Ernst Spiess, who was critical of thematic rearrangement of collections, embraced the principle of provenance, but the importance of original order was not widely accepted until the nineteenth century (p. 64).

During the Enlightenment, the health of workers emerged as a significant topic of concern. Air quality and improved lighting in repositories “became an outright obsession in eighteenth-century archival literature” (p. 98). Dim rooms impaired eyesight, and lungs were endangered by breathing in musty vaults. A 1765 treatise by Pierre Camille Le Moine argued persuasively for better conditions. Published works also addressed the danger to documents from mold, fire, mice, and insects. Durable file cabinets, positioned away from damp walls; windows to facilitate the circulation of fresh air; and cats to discourage pests were all suggested at one time or another.

In the wake of the French Revolution, aristocratic and monastic archives were typically centralized and rehoused in newly established state-run repositories. These institutions were at the forefront of a “new historical culture . . . linked to the rising nationalism of the nineteenth century,” in large part “to make holdings available for the historical master narrative of the nation” (pp. 201–2). After 1789, the social and political structures of the *ancien régime* in France did crumble, and charters and legal documents confirming dependent relationships lost their “everyday function” (p. 201). But Friedrich argues that, at that juncture, archives in Europe “became historically, not legally, relevant . . .” (p. 201). The erosion of the legal importance of archival collections is surprisingly overstated.

The original title of the book in German is *Die Geburt des Archivs: Eine Wissensgeschichte*. The word “*Geburt*” (birth) is misleading. Since the origins of writing, people have made decisions about what records are worth keeping and have taken measures to safeguard them.<sup>3</sup> For example, the Ebla tablets (cuneiform documents unearthed in the Near East by archaeologists) were carefully maintained in a Sumerian palace’s archives room circa 2500 to 2250 BCE. The wooden shelves on which they had originally been stored burned in antiquity, but the clay tablets, when excavated, were still arranged in an orderly scheme with rectos facing outward for easy identification and ready access. A more

accurate (albeit more cumbersome) title for the book might have been “The Expansion and Burgeoning Importance of Archives from the Late Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe.” The subtitle is also inadvertently deceptive—knowledge exists now and has existed in the past in many forms other than written records and in many places other than archives.<sup>4</sup>

The book is an engaging compendium of interesting facts and pictures. Colorful stories abound, some less apposite than others. Friedrich, for example, insists that thieves and forgers, as well as archivists and legitimate users, should be considered “people of the archives” (pp. 1–4, 107–10). His emphasis on this unsavory notion is highlighted by a long passage detailing the theft and sale of records from the *Chambre des Comptes* in Paris in 1682. Recycled parchment, purloined or otherwise, was a valued commodity, much in demand as casing for musket cartridges. Well-chosen illustrations are an informative supplement to the text: archival spaces, cabinets, and indexing systems are depicted. Figure 4, for example, shows how cut-and-paste “snippets” served as a finding aid to a seventeenth-century collection. Figures 12–14 show how an assortment of eighteenth-century storage cabinets was labeled.

As Francis X. Blouin (an archivist) and William S. Rosenberg (a historian) remind us, awareness of how archival practices developed “is fundamental to ascribing historical meaning to archival holdings.”<sup>5</sup> The policies, attitudes, resources, and facilities associated with archives have always been critical factors in determining what records were preserved and how they were arranged, described, and used. These processes, in turn, shape how history is researched and how the past is viewed. Archives function as aids to or substitutes for human memory, serving individual users and organizations, as well as society in a larger sense. Perceptions of historical people, events, and practices can be skewed by cultural distance, by the experience of finding the past to be strange. But penetrating the strangeness (or attempting to) is among the joys (and challenges) of our efforts in archives, and the wisdom attained by a deeper understanding of the history of our profession can only result in making us better at what we do.

Jeffrey Mifflin  
Archivist Emeritus  
Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston

## NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
2. Archivists who neglect the “symbolic context” of their collections have left much of their responsibility unfulfilled. See James O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56, no. 2 (1993): 234–55, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.56.2.e481x55xg3x04201>.
3. For an extended treatment of very early archival collections, see Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

4. Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993) is an invaluable resource for understanding the emerging significance of documents in the High Middle Ages, but it does not specifically focus on archives.
5. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William S. Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authorities in History and Archives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 210.