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How to Distinguish between Manuscripts and Archival Records: A Study in Archival Theory

Abstract: According to a narrow, classical definition, an archive consists of records of juridical, administrative or commercial activities. In the twentieth century, however, the emerging field of Archival Science increasingly focused on how archives were initially structured, i.e. how records were organised before being transferred to an archive. The archival principle of provenance requires archivists to pay attention to the order given to an archive by its creator. As a consequence, a sort of ‘structuralism’ elaborated in archival theory has changed the notion of what an archive is. Referring to archival writers from Germany, Britain and the United States and using a type of nineteenth-century German registry as an example, the article examines this concept of an archive as opposed to a manuscript collection and deals with the distinction between manuscripts and archival records, and takes this as a starting-point for comparison.

1 Introduction

Archival records often pertain to local or at least geographically restricted concerns. Archival holdings are generally related to matters concerning the place where they are kept, and as archives seldom move, the best opportunity of finding your grandparents’ marriage records is to turn to the archives of their home town. Many archivists are experts in historical issues related to the archives they administer, so they often deal with regional history.

Archival Science surmounts these limitations insofar as it addresses technical problems and examines the nature of archives and their role in society and culture. Nowadays, the need for standardisation is handled at a global level—the German Archive Portal (Archivportal-D) is based on the XML standard for Encoding Archival Description (EAD), for instance. There is also a worldwide network for the archival community: the International Council on Archives (ICA), established in 1948, promotes the preservation and use of archives all around the

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world.¹ Moreover, archivists have been attempting for some years to find a consensus on the main principles of their discipline within an international framework. A Universal Declaration on Archives initiated by the ICA was adopted by UNESCO in 2011 as a result.

However, globalisation has not reached Archival History² yet, at least not in Germany, although the impact of colonialism has become an important issue in recent scholarly debates on archives. Archival Science applies strictly to archival practice³ and is hesitant to focus on the bewildering variety of non-European historical phenomena in the archival sphere. Archival History no longer plays a major role on the whole, and up to the middle of the twentieth century, when the scenario was substantially different, archivists did not reflect on the possibility that they might be dealing with an area of interest which crosses continental boundaries.⁴ The archives of ancient Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome were the only exception; they were regarded as preceding the archival landscape of Europe that had emerged since the Middle Ages.⁵

Three years ago, the journal of the Society of German Archivists published an article on 'international archival relations'.⁶ The author, who is President of the Federal Archives, seems to be weary of diplomatic dealings in the field: a great deal of time and energy is required to regularly attend to international contacts, he says. He begins his contemplations with a rather down-to-earth question which is far from enthusiastic about looking abroad: 'Don't we all have enough to do at home?'

It would thus appear to be a privilege of the theorist to give free rein to their thoughts and let them wander back to the past or roam to another part of the world. To be interested in the history of archives in other parts of the world is a

1 The 1988 *Dictionary of Archival Terminology* is one of a wide range of publications initiated by the ICA that are worth mentioning. It is still useful today.

2 In the sense of a subdiscipline of Archival Science. On the relevance of Archival History, see Reininghaus 2008.

3 In North America and other parts of the English-speaking world, the archival discourse is currently rather more open-minded about theoretical questions. A useful overview is provided by MacNeil/Eastwood 2017.

4 An interesting case is Brenneke 1953, a major German monograph on archival theory and archival history. In spite of the title of the book announcing a European archival history, the historical account includes non-European regions of the world as well to a certain extent, albeit only those with archives under strong European influence such as those in the United States and South America. Also see Brenneke 2018 and Schenk 2018b.

5 Posner 1972.

6 Hollmann 2014.

matter of ‘intellectual’ or ‘theoretical curiosity’ (Hans Blumenberg)⁷; it is not relevant for professional archivists’ everyday work, but it is a fascinating topic nevertheless.

Although the history of archives has not been rediscovered yet as a key area of interest within the scope of Archival Science (at least not in Germany), there is one feature which may be interesting in the present context: a sort of ‘structuralism’ in archival theory elaborated during the first half of the twentieth century. In what follows, I will explain and discuss this characteristic trait of the discipline step by step. I will argue that archival records are distinct from manuscripts and that there is a difference between archives and collections of manuscripts.

What follows is divided into four sections. Firstly, I will outline what is understood by the term ‘archive’ today (section 2). Secondly, I will introduce the famous principle of provenance as it was defined at the end of the nineteenth century (section 3). Extending the dialogue between two distinct though overlapping areas, manuscript culture and archive culture, I will discuss the term ‘manuscript’ from an archivist’s point of view (section 4), and finally, the somewhat peculiar structuralist trait of archival theory will be outlined (section 5).

To approach the issue of manuscripts, it is necessary to shed some light on exactly what archives are in order to learn how to distinguish them from collections of manuscripts. A manuscript may be part of an archive, but obviously it does not necessarily have to be. We should take account of the parallels and differences between archival records and manuscripts on the one hand and between archives and collections of manuscripts on the other.

2 The term ‘archive’: past and present

Historians, philologists, archaeologists and scholars of other disciplines are not archival professionals and are not generally familiar with archival practice and its specialist terminology. It can be assumed that they take recourse in a colloquial understanding of the term ‘archive’ when dealing with archives related to their particular field of interest. They are likely to have reflected on whether the concept of the archive they have in mind is appropriate for their specific purposes, and will be forced to modify it slightly if it is not. If they are able to draw upon literary sources, they can take up what was said there. As specialists in the

⁷ Blumenberg 1973.

field of manuscript cultures, some researchers will take it for granted that archival records represent a certain type of manuscript and that archives can be defined as a type of manuscript collection. Nowadays, they tend to pick up the concepts of a ‘new’ kind of archival thinking that has emerged over the last few decades, influenced particularly by French philosophy.⁸ In his 1969 treatise on the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault speaks of the archive as the ‘general system of the formation and transformation of statement’, for example.⁹ This notion is highly metaphorical and speculative. Foucault stated that it was not his intention to refer to materials left over from a bygone era, and he did not distinguish between libraries and archives either. In my opinion, his perspectives do not help in the current context.¹⁰

Foucault’s unconventional use of the term ‘archive’ was taken up by Jacques Derrida two-and-a-half decades later. Derrida’s famous 1995 book entitled *Mal d’Archive* in French (*Archive Fever*) inspired extensive debate.¹¹ With his interest in psychoanalysis, Derrida is in danger of playing down the differentiation between memory and archive. When individuals or communities remember the past, they transform their memories in the course of time against the backdrop of a continually changing present. Psychologists or sociologists might seek to explain these phenomena. Yet it is useful to reserve the term ‘archive’ for physical objects which are remains of the past and may be discovered as traces of previous events or circumstances. Archival records are in any case authentic relics.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to return to the old, narrow definition of an ‘archive’ as a holding of juridical, administrative and commercial records. This means that archival records are defined by the sphere of life from which they originate. Not all documents which appear in the context of administrative, juridical or commercial affairs necessarily find their way into an archive—there may be documents which are less important or not even filed at all. Nowadays, archivists have to appraise the vast amount of documents and data being produced today: not all of them have a long-lasting value, so they will select some of them and destroy the rest. Nevertheless, these materials are at the core of archival holdings.

The spheres of literacy mentioned above—administration, jurisdiction and commerce—have something in common: all of the records which originate in

⁸ See Ebeling/Güntzel 2009. Lepper/Raulff 2016 provide a summary of the recent debates on archives from a German perspective.

⁹ Foucault 1969.

¹⁰ For a broader discussion on the issue, see Schenk 2014. The ideas of Foucault and Derrida have been taken up by archivists in a multi-faceted way. An inventive contribution comes, for instance, from the South African archivist Verne Harris 2007. Also see Cook 2001.

¹¹ Derrida 1995.

these fields belong to ‘pragmatic literacy’, as the mediaevalist Hagen Keller termed it.¹² Documents have a good chance of surviving the rigours of time if the conduct of affairs is organised, at least to a certain extent. This is the case with state archives. However, even a family might possess their own archive (without employing an office clerk). Some archives are very small; all the old documents in someone’s possession might be contained in a box just a few inches in size.¹³ In contrast, modern archives used to be measured in linear metres of shelf space and comprise hundreds and thousands of files. They are usually ‘an archive of archives’, in the sense that holdings of different provenance come together in a larger-scale archival institution.

Furthermore, a modern archive collects documents to complete its holdings, which may be recognised as historical sources in the future. Nowadays, it is disputed that collecting is merely supplementary to archiving in the narrow sense of acquiring records from administrative contexts.

There is a further distinction which is worth mentioning here, too: a registry is different to an archive. The place where documents are kept in an office or in the office responsible for an organisation’s information pool is called a registry. Documents from the registry are passed on to the archive when they are no longer in regular use. In this case, the aim of preserving the documents becomes just as important as the opportunity to access them. However, the difference between a registry and an archive need not be particularly distinct; the two are often combined, with one person responsible for both. It is therefore quite common to speak of a registry as an archive.

In Europe, many centuries of history have resulted in highly complex archives being created. The development of archives went hand in hand with the expansion of literacy. They preserve products of pragmatic literacy, which spread widely—approximately since the twelfth century in Italy and most often later in other parts of Europe. During the Early Modern Period, archives were ‘armouries’ of judicial documents: old rights had priority in legal disputes. Historical expertise was required long before writers of history such as Leopold von Ranke understood themselves as ‘researchers’. In the nineteenth century, the archive was discovered by historiography as a main resource. Although antiquarians already used archival records in the seventeenth century, the historical use of archives increased rapidly after the epoch of the French Revolution. Today, public archives are accessible to everyone; they serve as ‘institutions of memory’ for civil

¹² Keller 1992.

¹³ I recently described a private archive of this type belonging to an unknown woman who lived in Neustettin, a small town in eastern Germany, in the nineteenth century. See Schenk 2015.

society. A characteristic feature of the archive after the transition from the *Ancien Régime* to modern times is that documents lost their primary administrative and legal function and became sources of history. As relics they seemed to directly reveal the past, so to speak.¹⁴

Archivists have been building up their own expertise for a long time. Archival theory, in the limited sense of being a type of instruction guiding the registrar, has existed ever since the sixteenth century. The development of archival studies in the nineteenth century led to the establishment of special schools focusing on teaching diplomatics, like the *École des Chartes* in Paris (founded in 1821) and the Institute of Austrian Historical Research in Vienna (founded in 1854). As it turns out, these institutions ended up training future archivists as well as diplomats.

It may widen the scope of all researchers dealing with archives to know how archivists approach archival issues. It is important to recognise that their starting point is not generally an investigation of individual records or types of records; instead of focusing on individual documents such as a manuscript, they are concerned with groups of records, some of which are referred to as ‘archives’. There is a wide range of types of records that can belong to an archival holding, such as files, books, deeds, maps, pamphlets, posters and photographs.¹⁵ Yet archivists do not like to define their areas of responsibility according to particular types of archival material for practical reasons: if documents or even artefacts are part of a group of items, they should not be split up; a forged coin may belong to a juridical file as evidence of what happened, and a children’s violin to an estate as a treasured keepsake and souvenir. They should not be separated.

3 The principle of provenance and its impact

Thus, one important feature of an archive is that all the records that belong to it are strongly interconnected. In the past, archivists liked to use organic metaphors to address this key point: an archive was not artificial, but ‘natural’. They suggested that the ‘organic unity’ of the archive expressed the life of the organisation or the organism which created it. Other metaphors used in the same context are ‘body’ and ‘organic growth’, for instance.

These metaphors were widespread in the era of Romanticism. German archivists were as familiar with them as Dutch or English archival writers. They all

¹⁴ For a *histoire problème* of the societal functions of archives, see Schenk 2013.

¹⁵ The wide range of archival sources is being investigated by Beck/Henning 1994.

spoke of ‘organic growth’ in order to characterise archiving processes as a whole.¹⁶ The most fundamental concept of archival thinking—the principle of provenance—is based on this understanding of the archive. In general, it demands that an archive should be preserved in the order given to it by its creator; any exemptions or modifications must be justified. It even makes sense to reconstruct the original order in some cases.

In 1898, the Dutch archivists Samuel Muller, Johan Adriaan Feith and Robert Fruin published a manual presenting a practical method of describing and arranging archives according to this principle.¹⁷ It was translated into several languages, and a resolution adopted at a conference of European archivists in Brussels in 1910 approved the principle of provenance in a single vote. Nowadays, the emergence of a type of archival thinking based on this tenet is seen as a turning point in modern archival theory.¹⁸

An episode in German intellectual history may serve to illustrate the lasting significance of the principle of provenance. Friedrich Meinecke (1862–1954), a renowned German historian,¹⁹ started his career as an archivist at the Prussian Privy State Archives in Berlin (*Geheimes Preußisches Staatsarchiv*) and worked there for fourteen years. He took up his position just a few years after the principle of provenance was introduced in 1881.²⁰ The original order had already been destroyed in this case, however—by archivists, of all people. Some records, for example, originally belonged to a registry of the Prussian king Frederick William III, organising the affairs of his Cabinet. This small registry had existed separately from other record offices of the Prussian government and its ministries, which were larger. When records of this kind were transferred to the archive, they were not regarded as an autonomous archival holding and were filed according to the classification scheme applied to all archival material. To make matters worse, this scheme had its origins in the seventeenth century and did not match current requirements any more. The procedure of ‘filing’ according to a category is wrong, according to advocates of the principle of provenance.

16 For example, Brenneke 1953, 20.

17 Muller/Feith/Fruin 1898. (Translation of the second Dutch edition by Leavitt 1940, 21968.)

18 This is the reason why a recent survey of archival theories starts with the Dutch Manual. See Ridener 2009.

19 Meinecke was a teacher of no less than a dozen emigré historians, ranging from Hans Baron to Felix Gilbert. They all stayed in touch with their teacher long after having gained their university degrees and wrote letters to him from across the Atlantic until he died. See Ritter 2006. An overview of his life and work is given by Bock/Schönpflug 2004.

20 See his autobiographical records in Meinecke 1941, 142–143.

Young Mr Meinecke was asked to reconstruct the registry of the Cabinet. This was only achievable with the help of the reference numbers and notes from the registry on each file. He had to search for the files that were distributed among the various categories of the classification schedule, and restored the original arrangement as a separate archive.

Meinecke enthusiastically embraced the shift in archival thinking, which he got to know as an archival practitioner. He saw the new way of archiving as a consequence of the historicist paradigm²¹ and called it a 'revolution'. He had the impression that the past had come alive, and was delighted to have been part of this experience and be witness to the changing times. He wrote: 'The idea now realised by investing all available manpower brought an incredible amount of vividness and individuality into the archive. Each registry became a living thing of its own, with its own rule of life, and individual human beings with their particular traditions and impulses came to light'.²²

What did this type of registry look like? At this point, I would like to give an example to illustrate how they were constructed. It is taken from the archival holdings of which I am custodian and is a typical *Sachaktenregistratur*, that is, a registry arranged according to a set of subjects. At the end of the nineteenth century, the office of the Academy of Arts in Berlin was managed by a single official who was responsible for every aspect of the administration. The registry was stored in a cupboard. The official placed all incoming letters, copies of outgoing letters, notes and minutes on the shelves. Each shelf was reserved for a certain subject belonging to a 'plan of files'. Gradually, a small stack accumulated on each shelf, containing papers categorised by subject matter and arranged in chronological order within each category. Each file was inserted into a cover or 'lid' and bound as soon as a stack was large enough. The reference number and title were put on the side of the cover.

These files only make up half of the registry, however. In addition, all the papers were recorded in a handwritten book: an annual register known as a 'diary of letters' or *journal* in French. Each entry starts with the name and address of the sender of an incoming letter, and its subject matter is mentioned thereafter. This is followed by a summary of how the administration reacted, with a summary of the answer provided in the corresponding outgoing letter. Finally, the reference number was noted down so that the official was able to find the original letter on

²¹ For a modern perception of German historicism, see Beiser 2011. It was Meinecke who discussed the emergence of historicism in a 1936 monograph.

²² Meinecke 1941, 141 (translation by the author). For further details, see Schenk 2013, 117–120.

file. In addition, the registration number was written on each sheet of paper in the file, and a draft of the answer could be found, usually on the reverse.

What I wish to emphasise by explaining this precise method of registration is just how closely the individual papers or documents are bound together, not just physically, but logically. This old-fashioned and complicated registry is in some ways similar to a modern database. The material files or books which belong to an archived registry are 'archival units', as archivists refer to them, but as logical units they are less independent than what archivists would call a manuscript. A file of this type can be compared with one volume of a multi-volume dictionary comprising only the letter 'C' or 'D'. This is clearly insufficient if you also need the letter 'E' or 'F'. In other words, it is impossible to remove one piece without destroying the whole thing.

4 Manuscripts and archival records

Having sketched some of the main characteristics of an archive, I will now turn to the subject of manuscripts. Archival Science has adopted this term, but it is still a little unfamiliar to traditionalists as it is understood to allude to the manuscript department of libraries. The word covers a specific category of documents: they are handwritten, unlike a typescript,²³ and contain drafts or autographs of a work or part of a work. It need not be a masterpiece, but it must at least be possible to identify an individual creator. Manuscripts often belong to the personal papers of writers, scholars or artists. In contrast, files are generated by a process involving several people.

The rules of cataloguing literary estates and autographs as defined by librarians distinguish between four types of document: manuscripts, correspondence, records of personal life and collected materials.²⁴ It would be wrong to dogmatise this typology, however. From the archivist's viewpoint, these terms can be useful in order to characterise certain documents, but it is not advisable to arrange an archive or the estate of a writer or scholar according to this type of pattern since

²³ However, it is sometimes used as a generic term for types of documents, handwritten texts and typescripts.

²⁴ *Regeln für die Katalogisierung von Nachlässen und Autographen (RNA) (Rules for Cataloguing Personal Papers and Autographs)* 2010 (http://kalliope-verbund.info/_Resources/Persistent/5bf5cd96ea4448bfec20caf2e3d3063344d76b58/rna-berlin-wien-mastercopy-0802-2010.pdf).

the arrangement should preserve the structure discovered within the materials; in fact, classically trained archivists try to avoid any kind of schema at all.

While the term ‘manuscript’ has never played a role in German archival theory, in the United States a curator of historical collections at a university is called an archivist and the documents kept are called manuscripts.²⁵ A pioneering American archival theorist, Lester J. Cappon (1900–1981), who had the job of administering this type of archive,²⁶ came to terms with ‘manuscripts’ as a type of archival record. He refers to Hilary Jenkinson (1882–1961), a major English archival writer, who was a historian and archivist at the Public Record Office in London for nearly half a century and taught palaeography and archival practice at various institutions in London. In 1922, Jenkinson published *A Manual of Archive Administration*.²⁷ In search of viable definitions, Cappon reverted to Hilary Jenkinson and accepted his definition of archives as ‘Documents drawn up for the purposes of, or used during, the conduct of Affairs of any kind, of which they themselves formed a part, and subsequently preserved by the persons responsible for the transactions in question, or their successors, in their own custody for their own reference’.²⁸

It is characteristic of Jenkinson’s concept of the archive that he links the principle of provenance with unbroken custody. If an office builds up an archive but subsequently loses control of it, some of the documents might get lost and those that survive might get scattered. In Jenkinson’s opinion, these ‘leftovers’ are no longer archival. In a further explanation, Jenkinson refers to the difference between ‘archives’ and ‘collections’ and tries to point out why this distinction is so important. He stresses: ‘Archives are not Documents collected artificially like objects in the Museum [...], but accumulating naturally in Offices for the purposes of Administration’.²⁹

²⁵ See Berner 1983 on the historical manuscript tradition in the United States. It would be interesting to compare this tradition to the archives of literature in Germany, most of which are curated by librarians and scholars, not by archivists. See Schenk 2018a.

²⁶ Cappon started his career as an archivist at the University of Virginia where he was appointed in that specific role. Later on, he became heavily involved in field collecting and historical research; he spent his whole career editing historical documents and is the author of several leading reference works. He was also President of the Society of American Archivists. See Cox 2004.

²⁷ Jenkinson 1922, rev. ed. 1937. Also see Jenkinson 1980.

²⁸ *Public Record Office* 1949, 2. Also see Cappon 1956, 102, and Cox 2004, 36.

²⁹ *Public Record Office* 1949, 2. Also see Cappon 1956, 103, and Cox 2004, 36. The Canadian archivist Luciana Duranti refers to the cited text passage in her reading of Jenkinson as well. See Duranti 1997, 335.

Cappon chose the daring title ‘Historical Manuscripts as Archives’ for one of his articles.³⁰ But how does his suggestion that a collection of historical manuscripts might be called an archive fit in with Jenkinson’s definition of an archive with which Cappon, on the whole, agrees? Cappon analyses the historical collections he is so familiar with and discovers that they are partly archival. Beyond that, the collector’s policy aspires to get closer to what constitutes an archive: a vast number of documents which belong together and ideally allow a precise historical account of a matter to be reconstructed.

Concerning the definition of the term ‘archive’, Cappon rejects just one element: the insistence on unbroken custody. He observes that, in most instances, the custody of bodies of historical papers is broken when they are transferred to manuscript repositories; he refers to this type of repository as an archive nevertheless.

Therefore, Cappon defines historical manuscripts as ‘records of historical value, written by hand or typewriter or its equivalent (as distinguished from printed records), in single or multiple form’. With reference to the concept of the archive, he states that ‘[h]istorical manuscripts can be classified in three categories: (1) bodies or groups of papers with organic unity, in the nature of archives, personal or institutional; (2) artificial collections of manuscripts acquired by a private collector from various sources, usually gathered according to plan but without *respect des fonds*;³¹ (3) individual manuscripts acquired by the repository for their special importance to research and comprising a collection of what, for want of a better term, are sometimes called *miscellaneous manuscripts*.³² Cappon indicates that the arrangement of a registry of non-current records is not always lost when the chain of custody is interrupted; transferring the registry to another archive or to a historical collection might be a means of safeguarding it.

Furthermore, the curator of a historical collection or research library might have developed a plan of collecting with a sound historical basis. He knows that his richest material consists of bodies of related papers belonging to individuals, families, organisations or institutions, in their original order of arrangement, ‘as the hypothetical archivist of any one of them would have preserved them’.³³ Thus, he is eager to access holdings of an archival nature in this broader sense from a network of owners. Acquiring material in this way, the collection comes closer to

³⁰ Cappon 1956. Reprinted in Cox 2004, 35–42.

³¹ *Respect des fonds* is the French term for a specific interpretation of the principle of provenance.

³² Cappon 1956, 104–105, and Cox 2004, 36.

³³ Cappon 1956, 103, and Cox 2004, 37.

being an archive. At this point, the principle of provenance intermingles with what I would call the *principle of context*.³⁴

Finally, the barrier between an ‘official’ and a ‘private’ document is not as rigid as it initially seems in Cappon’s view, and it should not be a decisive criterion. The withdrawal of records that a retiring official presumes to be his personal property has occurred most often in high administrative positions of government. Cappon concludes that ‘the reputable curator of manuscripts must be an archivist at heart to do his job well’.³⁵

5 A kind of structuralist approach

A small introductory book on archival studies written by Eckhart G. Franz (1931–2015), a former director of the State Archive of Hessen in Darmstadt near Frankfurt,³⁶ refers to the changes in the concept of an archive that have taken place over the last two centuries: ‘The previous limitation of the archive to *scripturae publicae*, to juridical and administrative materials, was dropped long ago. Archivists preserve and take care of all written, visual and sound records which manifest the activities of offices of the state or non-governmental institutions, of associations, companies or individual persons as far as they are worthy of being permanently preserved on the basis of their juridical, administrative, historical, technical, scientific or artistic relevance as sources’.³⁷

It is obvious that Franz extends the field of archival records in a similar way to Cappon and he reflects on the history of archiving. For further clarification, he presents numerous examples underlining the broader notion of the archive and demonstrating that various types of records may belong to an archive. If the term ‘archival record’ tends to be ubiquitous, the question arises of how to limit its proliferation. Franz’s proposal is convincing. In order to distinguish between an archive and a library or museum, he points out: ‘It is not the difference between handwriting, prints and objects that distinguishes an archive from a library or museum. More important than this crude distinction is the particular structure of naturally accumulated archival materials’.³⁸ Franz sticks to organic metaphors

³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this article to touch upon the notion of provenance as it was discussed recently in North America. See Douglas 2017 for coverage.

³⁵ Cappon 1956, 110, and Cox 2004, 42.

³⁶ Franz 1990.

³⁷ Franz 1990, 1–2 (translation by the author).

³⁸ Franz 1990, 2 (translation by the author).

and, to a certain extent, radicalises the archivist's eschewal of collecting by redefining the archive as a structure.

It is typical of structural features that they are not limited to a particular cultural environment. Archives from one period might be similar to archives from a totally different era, while archives from one region of the world might resemble those from a completely different area. One archivist who was fully aware of this comparative perspective was Ernst Posner (1892–1980). He became acquainted with archives on both sides of the Atlantic during his career.

Posner was employed as a Prussian state archivist in the era of the Weimar Republic, but after the Nazis seized power, he fled to the United States where he made an important contribution to the professional training of American archivists.³⁹ In later years, Posner was able to travel widely in Europe and other parts of the world where he studied the history of archives intensively. The only volume of a planned history of the archives of the Western world he completed dealt with the archives of the Ancient World, comprising archives of clay tablets.⁴⁰ During the post-war period in Germany, Posner was invited to teach at the *Archivschule* in Marburg as a visiting lecturer. A farewell ceremony was held at the end of his time there and his students surprised him by building a brick wall. This may seem like a strange idea at first, but it was supposed to allude to one of his favourite pedagogical examples: the clay tablets of five thousand years ago, which he used as a model to explain the structure of archives.⁴¹

We do not know exactly how Posner referred to the archival significance of clay tablets during his lessons, which were aimed at preparing students to understand and critically engage with archives in present-day Europe. But in any case, he drew parallels across extremely wide stretches of time. I have attempted to explain the mode of archival thinking that allows us to identify these kinds of similarities as it has proved to be a powerful tool: it serves to appraise, describe, arrange, locate and interpret archival records and even to define the nature of an archive. Many archivists share this way of thinking, and it might also be developed as a tool for comparative studies.

³⁹ See Posner 1967. For an account of Posner's individual fate as one of the few Jews who worked as archivists in Prussia and an appreciation of his merits, see Menne-Haritz 2015.

⁴⁰ Posner 1972.

⁴¹ See Posner 1967, 23.

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