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Why Materiality Matters in Archival History: An Introduction

It may be a truism, but it is an important one: written artefacts are three-dimensional objects – a basic fact that crucially determines what humans can do with them and how they interact with human societies. ‘Documents, too, are things’, write Sue Breakell and Wendy Russell; they continue, ‘Documents and archival records have an object life as well as a text life’.¹ Managing writings, therefore, means managing objects. This insight is particularly relevant when it comes to practices of storing, preserving, organising, and maintaining larger bodies of artefacts, a complex of activities here summarised for convenience by the term ‘archiving’. Put differently, archives are heavy, bulky, and unwieldy, and archiving is a pointedly physical activity. Working with archived artefacts implies dirt, sweat, and physical labour. The specific materiality of archived artefacts varies greatly across time and space, ranging from enormous and robust objects to tiny and fragile ones, from carefully managed individual pieces to carelessly dumped masses of writings. Yet, no matter the local variations, archiving always means working cleverly with the specific affordances offered by distinct writing materials, as well as considering the distinctive challenges and difficulties that each form of handwriting posed. This book explores how archive builders and archive users across time and space have accommodated the material features of their respective manuscript cultures in world history.

1 Materiality overlooked (no longer)

Like many other material dimensions of human life, the physical features of archiving as a social practice have been easy to overlook. Apart from practising archivists, whose profession requires long hours spent walking along miles of documents in archival storage facilities, and conservators, who earn a living through repairing and preserving archival objects, the bulkiness of archives, even the smallest ones, has all too often been considered unimportant or irrelevant.² Many of the influential innovations in archival studies since World War II have

¹ Breakell and Russell (eds) 2023, 4, 5.

² Hughes and Heckman 2012; Rekrut 2014.

primarily focused on epistemic characteristics of ‘the archive’, including the contributions of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Ann Laura Stoler.³ Archives have been linked to ‘knowledge’ or ‘episteme’ – notions which themselves have all too long been considered without sustained reference to material factors.⁴ As a consequence, archives have been unduly reduced to immaterial or idealistic bodies of information.⁵ When scholars have included considerations of materiality at all, they have frequently focused on the emotional effects of architectural and other structures, exploring the aura or atmosphere of archival spaces.⁶ Hardly, however, have actual physical conditions received attention or the material conditions of usage been investigated in detail.

This disregard for material features in archival histories may unconsciously have been furthered by new trends ushered in by digitisation and digital-born media. On the one hand, widely used interfaces of human–machine interaction continue to be organised – rather anachronistically, one is tempted to say – with reference to paper-based archives, dealing metaphorically in ‘files’ and ‘folders’, ‘desktops’ and ‘recycle bins’. On the other hand, recent large-scale campaigns to digitise archives have furthered the dematerialisation of archives, as most material features of digitised documents are either not recorded at all in the digital copies, or are available only in abstract, non-tactile form.⁷

Several trends in scholarship have recently helped to overcome this idealistic simplification, developing a fuller perspective on archival items by reinterpreting them as physical things and material objects. Archival studies have become intimately entangled with the growing historiographical focus on ‘practices’ as primary objects of study. Human life in general, including all activities related to writing and managing writings, is nowadays studied as a series of habitualised behavioural routines, often enacted unconsciously or semi-consciously; these routines are understood as being intrinsically shaped by the material environment of a human-shaped physical world. In this context, scholars now frequently ask how writing practices were used to do things. Pioneering new approaches have emerged in the study of administration and bureaucracy, focusing on the

³ See e.g. Csendes 2004.

⁴ Completely free of any considerations of archival materialities is, for instance, Richards 1993.

⁵ A similar diagnosis, though from a very different perspective, is found in Breakell and Russell (eds) 2023, e.g. 3.

⁶ Prominently, Mbembe 2002. Quoted e.g. in Schulz-Dornburg and Zimmermann 2020, 23–34. A key text exploring the material and spatial vectors of archival atmospheres is Farge 1989.

⁷ This is sometimes considered a severe loss by historians; see e.g. Elliott 2012, 15. Some of these broader points are alluded to in e.g. Story et al. 2020, even though the focus of this ‘roundtable’ is on digital-born archives.

'little tools of knowledge' required by all governing agencies.⁸ Delphine Gardey, Lisa Gitelman, and others have focused on the 'paper technologies' used by everyone intending to employ writing for any purpose.⁹ Architectural historians have recently brought new vigour to the study of the architectural frameworks necessary to facilitate paper-based social exchange.¹⁰ Several contributions have explicitly included archives as part of this practice-oriented re-evaluation of human life, preferring now to speak of 'archiving' or 'archival practices' rather than of 'archives'.¹¹ Recently, design theorists and cultural critics have also started to explore the archive's materiality, often with a strong focus on artists and art production.¹² *Pace* Foucault or Derrida, 'the archive' is no longer reduced to an abstract, dematerialised idea; written artefacts come in various material and physical forms, and these very forms guide and determine human interaction with them, not least in the context of archival practices.

This insight has been deepened by approaches and concepts from material culture studies.¹³ One crucial development here is that the correlation between human agency and the role of the material objects that surround humans has become conceptualised in newly complex and ambivalent ways. No longer are things, be they natural or artificial, simply seen as passive and subject to human agency; scholars now investigate how the object world surrounding us also greatly influences our possibilities for expressing ourselves. A 'history of things', understood as a study of the varying ways in which humans bring things forth and in turn adapt to the things that surround them, has become possible.¹⁴ This has also affected the ways in which scholars understand the interaction of humans and written artefacts. Book history – and ultimately also its first cousin, manuscript studies – has benefitted enormously from these approaches. Material culture studies have alerted scholars to the fact that the interaction of humans and written objects is conditioned by the objects' material features and their social valuation. This has created attention for many previously overlooked or marginalised types of interacting. When seen as part of a broader material world, written artefacts acquire a much richer texture of social possibilities. Scholars have become aware of the fact that material choices significantly affect what can, and

⁸ Becker and Clark (eds) 2001.

⁹ Gardey 2008; Gitelman 2014.

¹⁰ Bernasconi and Nellen (eds) 2019; van der Maele 2016.

¹¹ For instance, El-Leithy 2011; Friedrich 2015; Hirschler 2016.

¹² Breakell and Russell (eds) 2023 provide a range of interesting perspectives along these lines.

¹³ Thorstad 2020.

¹⁴ Trentmann 2016.

cannot, be done with writings, including storage and retrieval. The ways in which writing is conducted materially affords certain ways of keeping and managing documents, while precluding others. The question of ‘how to do things with books’, which might have sounded meaningless only two decades ago, has now become a leading concern.¹⁵ In the field of archival history, for instance a ‘material history of lordship’ has become possible, adding a material dimension of lordship – including but not limited to archives – to more established perspectives.¹⁶ Taking such considerations into account, research has recently begun to open up new perspectives on the history of archival practices, significantly enriching our understanding of what archiving has meant and how it was done in various times and places.

2 Why materiality matters for archival history

Rooted in a broad conceptual reorientation of the humanities in general and cultural history in particular, this new appreciation of the materiality of written artefacts has opened up exciting new perspectives for the study of archives and archiving. On a basic level, such an approach can highlight how the technology of writing and its product, countless writings, have an impact on society not only for the information they contain, but also through their existence as objects. In the sense that recent sociology has called for an awareness of objects’ agency in general, written artefacts, as objects, should likewise be studied for their agency regardless of content.¹⁷ In the context of archival history, this highlights the fact that storing and potentially also retrieving written artefacts implies reckoning with important material features. Writing materials and writing technologies, of which there are many, all result in the production of objects with specific affordances and challenges as to how they can be stored and potentially retrieved. Put simply, storing papers means something different from storing palm leaves, and storing a few personal documents is different from storing routinely mass-produced bureaucratic paperwork.

In general, a stronger focus on materiality restores two considerations to the study of written artefacts. On the one hand, it highlights the (varying degrees of) fragility of writing. Non-destruction changes from being unremarkable or ‘nor-

¹⁵ Price 2012.

¹⁶ Friedrich 2013; Thorstad 2020.

¹⁷ See Kohs and Kienitz 2022, 5–6.

mal' to being a surprise.¹⁸ As a material-studies approach to archiving highlights the fact that most written artefacts are not very durable per se, culturally specific approaches to the long-term preservation and safekeeping of written artefacts come into sharper relief than ever before. The long-term survival of written artefacts is turned into an explanandum, requiring the careful historical reconstruction of culturally specific life-prolonging practices: 'The storage of material culture is an essential part of the biography of an object and one that we should not overlook because the purposeful guardianship of objects is a statement in itself.'¹⁹ On the other hand, a focus on materiality draws our attention to the cumbersomeness of engaging with documents, records, and literary writings. Writings were often not easy to handle: touching, carrying, opening, and placing them required manual skill and, often enough, a certain amount of physical exertion. Many basic archival activities, all too long reduced only to epistemic processes, were inherently physical, often exhausting not just minds, but also bodies.²⁰ Dust and dirt are rightly considered key material elements in all archival histories.²¹

The twin points of 'fragility' and 'cumbersomeness' may be developed further into a series of more specific topics that have been moved to centre stage in many of the newer histories of archiving. First, the recent attention to materiality in archival studies highlights the practical difficulties and limits of managing archived documents. If recent scholarship has highlighted the unintended and counterproductive epistemic consequences of increased archiving,²² the frequently self-defeating nature of archiving is further highlighted through a focus on materiality. Archival history is not only about 'too much to know', but also about too much to carry and too much to store.²³ In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Western countries have destroyed upwards of 90 per cent of public documents purely due to their material bulk. The impossibility of continuing to store all documents produced by public administrations has triggered one of the most complex international debates in archival studies: the discussion about how to prune archives and how to destroy 'unnecessary' documents.²⁴

A focus on materiality furthermore illuminates the key category of document mobility. In everyday life, written artefacts remain much more mobile than the

¹⁸ Apellániz Ruiz de Galarreta 2020.

¹⁹ Thorstad 2020, 194.

²⁰ Friedrich 2018b.

²¹ Steedman 2002.

²² Blair 2003.

²³ This references Blair 2010.

²⁴ For instance, Wettmann (ed.) 1994.

static notion of institutionally stable ‘archives’ seems to indicate. Stored written artefacts, despite being ‘archival’, continue to be on the move. Documents and records can be mobilised in culture, politics, or religion only by actually moving, transitioning at least from storage to reading facilities, but often also from one location to another. Scholars working on administrations of various kinds point to the frequently decentralised character of record-keeping, speaking of networks of repositories, even in cases where supposedly strongly centralised institutions exist.²⁵ Retrieving knowledge, in an archival context, means moving objects, hence the analytical focus on archival materialities makes it more urgent to ask what is stored where, and why. Highlighting materiality thus means mapping landscapes of archival locales.²⁶ Scholars of the Ottoman Empire, for instance, are now discovering the ‘mobility of early modern archival practices’.²⁷

Lastly, studying the material environment of specific archival practices facilitates new insights into culturally specific attitudes towards archiving. The willingness to invest in a document’s or a collection’s longevity – for instance, by paying for more durable writing materials or protective covers, including boxes or roofs – depends on assumptions about a document’s ideal lifespan. If written artefacts are produced for quick consumption, there will be no great investment either in the initial writing materials or any protective measures. Thus, material and physical arrangements are implicit indications, and often also explicit articulations, of cultural attitudes towards writings. Even the happenstance and seemingly random positioning of written items ‘here and there’ may be presumed to follow internalised cultural preferences. Such preferences may be rendered more fully and systematically in cases where archival contraptions and spaces for managing documents were created in more explicit fashion. In all cases, however, the materialities of archiving may be considered palatable reflections of prevailing ‘graphic ideologies’.²⁸ Certainly, the forms that the material guardianship of records takes, and the resources employed to preserve written artefacts over longer periods of time, are powerful symbols and ‘physical manifestations’ of power.²⁹

The indicatory potential of physical and material aspects of archiving for scholars is made especially evident *ex negativo*. From many places and times

²⁵ For the Middle East, see e.g. Michel 2012. For a European case study, see Friedrich 2010.

²⁶ ‘Paesaggio delle fonti’, quoted from Cammarosano 1995, 9. I have tried to elaborate this further for archives in Friedrich 2018a, 48–51.

²⁷ Burak, Rothman and Ferguson 2022, 548.

²⁸ The term – without reference either to archiving or to the materialities of archives – is taken from Hull 2012, 14.

²⁹ Thorstad 2020, 199.

survive texts that use descriptions of archival neglect in polemical ways. Whenever someone wished to call attention to what they perceived as administrative shortcomings, they usually included horrified descriptions of the documents' allegedly dismal physical storage arrangements. Descriptions of archival *chaos*, in which materiality always plays a crucial role, are often narrative proxies for diagnoses of broader societal problems. 'Lying on the floor', having 'rotted', and being stored in a location that is 'dark and damp' – such are the typical tropes used to describe scandalous current archival practices.³⁰ Similar expressions of outrage over material archival conditions are on record from various places, including Abbasid Baghdad and nineteenth-century Cairo; in each case, they have an accusatory ring to them and legitimise the authors' alternative agenda.³¹ Not least in colonial contexts, accusations of physical neglect – made plausible by stark descriptions of material depravation – authorised the seemingly benevolent taking of antiquities. Physical and material disarray, as perceived subjectively by the observer, indicated neglect or disregard, and often sanctioned intervention. This volume is an attempt to establish similarly close connections between materiality and archiving also in a positive fashion, highlighting how a closer look at material technologies allows scholars to investigate the purposes, forms of usage, and man-made affordances of any given archival collection.

3 Analysing materiality

Three general categories are helpful in analysing the material features of archival cultures in greater depth: functions, social status, and local specifics.³²

Functions: The material features of archiving are often designed with certain functions in mind, including most prominently physical protection against ecological dangers as well as questions of security, access, and epistemic order.

Among the most basic factors impinging on the design of material archival structures were ecological ones. Written artefacts exist in a complex ecology, as

³⁰ The quotes come from a report from 1790 about important Sicilian fiscal state archives; see Silvestri 2021, 190.

³¹ See various quotes in van Berkel 2014. For manuscript hunters in late-nineteenth-century Cairo, and their taking of uncounted Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and other manuscripts, see now – with ample quotations – Jefferson 2022.

³² These are freely adopted from a textbook on the history of furniture; see Lucie-Smith 1979, 8–12.

they consume nature – and are, in turn, consumed by nature.³³ Breaking this cycle, namely by protecting written artefacts against at least some forces of nature, is often a basic consideration in choosing or designing archival locales. Primarily, this implies protection against the elements, but also against animals, plants, and fungi. The material fragility (albeit to various degrees) of most written artefacts was well known to their users, and on many occasions available technologies were used, and improved, in order to combat the environmental dangers specific to preferred writing materials. A focus on the materiality of archiving, therefore, will highlight the importance of protective layers or second skins for the safekeeping of written artefacts. As we will see, this includes everything from book covers to architectural structures.

The security concerns are at least twofold: protecting stored written artefacts from human vandalism or destruction, and from the illicit manipulation of content. Wilful physical destruction of archived artefacts, often with a high degree of intentionality and as a result of careful planning, is a timeless threat to the survival of written artefacts.³⁴ Numerous material strategies exist to prevent or limit the possibility of destruction, some of them with highly counterproductive implications – documents buried in the ground or walled in, for instance, are withdrawn from inspection by definition, even by legitimate users. In addition to outright destruction or vandalism, material structures are also put in place to prevent and minimise unauthorised access, safeguarding the documents' content from manipulation or undue disclosure. Locks and doors prevent entry into archival rooms or the opening of boxes, while the choice of solid and first-rate materials often makes breaking the protective barriers at least more difficult and easier to detect.³⁵

Moreover, the material structures surrounding the written artefacts are often designed to help users navigate a collection's epistemic substructure. Same is filed with same; related documents are put in related places. Distinctions between document types are materialised by distributing distinct documents in distinct locations. Perhaps the underlying criteria for what is put where are even made explicit, for instance by having key words written on furniture or walls. Alternatively, catalogues or inventories are crucial for unpacking the physical manifesta-

³³ The power of an 'ecological' approach to the history of writing is explored in the book by Calhoun 2020.

³⁴ Filippov and Sabaté (eds) 2017; and Kühne-Wespi, Oschema and Quack (eds) 2019.

³⁵ There is ample evidence for highly sophisticated locking mechanisms, often relying on multiple keys, involved in archival security; see e.g. Huynh 2019, 14 and Friedrich 2018a, 118–119.

tions of epistemic orders, indicating, for instance, that certain documents are stored in one (and only one) armoire or room.

A strong focus on the materiality of record-keeping will, above all, help scholars to nuance a standard assumption in the field, namely that document retrieval was the primary purpose of document storage. A closer look at the materialities of record collections demonstrates that physical archival arrangements were by no means always made primarily with frequent and everyday usability in mind. Quite to the contrary, modernist assumptions about many readers perusing numerous writings on a casual and everyday basis, and archival structures being designed to facilitate such usage, must be abandoned in many cases. The Jewish genizot (and related) phenomena drive this point home, if in a uniquely extreme way: documents were intentionally sheltered (thus preserved, not destroyed), yet in ways at odds with any idea of using them. The widespread presence of such phenomena in the Jewish world, including the numerous genizot in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, should alert us to the importance of arrangements for physical preservation with no intention of use.³⁶ In fact, numerous caches of written artefacts have survived in non-Jewish Europe in what were *de facto* similar, genizah-like forms. If genizot were habitually in synagogues' attics, the attics of office buildings were also a stereotypical place where numerous early modern archivists claimed (with much terror) to have found long-missing caches of administrative documents. A closer look at material features will help scholars to ask – and not simply take for granted – whether, and in which ways, the everyday use of archived artefacts was a concern at all in different times and places.

Social status: The material arrangements made for preserving and storing written artefacts help express their owner's or archiver's social status. As the following chapters will illustrate, every aspect of document preservation bore the potential to be transformed into displays of splendour, luxury, and wealth. More than a few archival structures were artistically embellished, sometimes in lavish ways; individual book covers or file containers featured artistic covers or luxurious materials, thereby reflecting their owners' prestige or their contents' social importance.³⁷ Moreover, archival materialities are also indicative of cultural preferences about what to do with available resources. Archiving costs money (if only, most basically, because it requires space), and the necessary resources could always also be spent on alternative projects, from warfare to welfare. Choosing to invest in archival infrastructure thus reflects not only the availability of necessary

³⁶ There is a debate about Islamic parallels, one key contribution being Sadan 1986. For Jewish genizot beyond the Cairo Genizah, see Denz et al. (eds) 2015–2023 and Lehnardt 2016.

³⁷ For a few counterintuitive cases, see Huynh 2019, 13.

funds, but also preferences on how to spend them. At least in some of the archival contexts discussed in this volume, owning (and showcasing) sophisticated (and expensive) archival arrangements became a marker of social status and self-fashioning in itself.

Local specifics: While certain material arrangements in the name of document preservation may have been prevalent or typical in certain regions and times, it must be pointed out that most arrangements were also highly individual in nature, reflecting local preferences and possibilities. Archiving written artefacts was – and is – an inherently local affair, situated in specific spaces and done by individuals with specific agendas, experiences, and visions. Hence, despite similarities and parallels, the history of archival materialities remains tied to the study of specific instances. The following chapters will present numerous examples of highly unique archival arrangements that defy easy attempts to impose generic typologies. In addition to idiosyncratic preferences in technical, artistic, or spatial arrangements, the local nature of individual depots of written artefacts and their material structures is also reflected in the complex and unique aura that surrounded some of them. Often, local sacred spaces were used to deposit written artefacts. Such locales were often imbued with additional layers of protection; stories about snakes, dragons, or spirits protecting certain documents are prominent, having been encountered and recorded, for instance, by European intruders into Middle Eastern Jewish genizot.³⁸

By way of a final note concerning the material features of archives, it is important to understand that it is often next to impossible to implement ideal solutions on all levels at the same time. Protecting written artefacts, for instance, frequently impinges upon everyday functionality. Limits of space prevent ideal spatial arrangements, requiring compromise, for instance, in implementing epistemic orders. Put differently, archival practices and their materialities are deeply shaped by local negotiations, which in turn reflect specific local hierarchies of the above-mentioned dimensions. If modern archive buildings, for instance, are located in certain outlying neighbourhoods for symbolic purposes, this may diminish their functionality or at least their accessibility. Inversely, using highly auratic ‘old buildings’ to store ‘old documents’, which may be considered symbolically appropriate for institutions dedicated to musealising the past, results in relatively uncomfortable working conditions and less-than-ideal technical arrangements. In other words: relying on, as well as consciously designing, archival infrastructures always carries relatively high opportunity costs. Thus, the material processes of archiving were arenas for competing interests, allowing for a wide variety of

³⁸ Jefferson 2022.

different combinations of protective, functional, and symbolic considerations. No wonder, then, that the actual archival materialities that came into existence in different contexts often varied significantly, even in close spatial and chronological proximity. This makes the study of archival materialities a revelatory indicator of local expectations projected onto writing and written artefacts. It would therefore be difficult to transfer one local archival arrangement unaltered to other locations, and it is even more naïve to suppose there existed only one ‘true’ form of archival trajectory.³⁹

4 Materiality and globality

Material arrangements of archiving are culturally specific, and yet they may help in comparing archival practices across time and space.⁴⁰ ‘Materiality is a connective tissue’ between seemingly distinct and distant practices.⁴¹ As the individual chapters of the volume will illustrate, archivists across time and space sometimes relied on comparatively similar solutions to the challenges of storing, transporting, and accessing bulky writing materials. Analytical descriptions of these material arrangements provide a starting point for comparing archival practices.⁴² If

³⁹ It is for good reason, then, that Randolph C. Head included the materialities of writing and a society’s material culture at large prominently in his concept of culturally specific ‘archivalities’, see Head 2017.

⁴⁰ In a way, this volume, thus, expands preliminary ideas first voiced in Friedrich 2018c.

⁴¹ Breakell and Russell (eds) 2023, 6. The authors use this formula not to argue for a global perspective, but for integrating various art forms and their performance of materiality. The phrase, nevertheless, merits broader application.

⁴² Burak, Rothman and Ferguson 2022 have recently spoken out against any comparative approach to archival history. They point out, and very rightly so, that there is a potential danger in comparing archival cultures, as this may lead not only to essentialising practices, but also to prioritising one culture’s archival arrangement and turning this into the yardstick of others. They lament specifically, and very correctly, that far too long modernist Western assumptions of what an archive is have been used to evaluate or, rather, denigrate other archival cultures. This danger is real, and needs to be confronted. Yet, they offer few alternatives for bringing experts of Middle Eastern and European archival practices into meaningful conversations. Their fascinating case study of archival entanglement in the Ottoman–Habsburg borderlands can be considered as a template only for tiny fractions of both the Habsburgs’ and the Ottomans’ archival activities, as only minuscule parts of these vast archives reflect such entanglements. How could the large parts of both archives not pertaining to borderlands become part of an integrated history, other than by comparison? For a recent, and highly productive, comparative study of various Middle Eastern archival cultures, see Apellániz Ruiz de Galarreta 2020.

the boxes or pouches used for the storage and transport of written objects share certain basic features – which is where a comparison may start – these material similarities may be a point of departure from which to develop insights into what storing and moving documents may have meant in different contexts. Similar conflicts about where to store administrative documents – in public archives or private homes? – may, for example, connect early modern Ottoman and French secretaries more closely than one might assume.⁴³ And parallel descriptions of how lowly peasants stored their documents from nineteenth-century Tyrol and twentieth-century Tibet may provide a point of departure for exploring similarities and differences in archival practices related to landholding regimes.⁴⁴ In short, the study of archival materialities provides the opportunity to relate instances of record-keeping across time and space without immediately taking recourse to highly abstract and over-conceptualised notions of ‘archive’, ‘power’, and ‘state’, among others. Rather, as the current research stands, it allows for, and often encourages, the opening up of a basic empirical bottom-up description – hitherto underdeveloped – of what was stored where, for how long, in which ways, and by whom. A focus on the material cultures of archiving will help us shine a spotlight on individual acts and instances of the careful handling of written artefacts, all of these in necessarily fine-grained empirical analysis. These can form the basis for comparative studies of how, and why, bodies of written artefacts were made to survive – and for how long – in different manuscript cultures across the globe. The relative comparability of some of the physical tools used to manage vastly different forms of handwritings provides a potential starting point for exploring commonalities and distinctions between different cultures of record-keeping.

5 Studying and presenting archival materialities: About this book

Investigating the material culture of archival practices can be a complex and often somewhat frustrating affair. Frequently, the original archival structures have vanished, even if the documents they once preserved have survived. While hundreds of thousands of cuneiform tablets have come down to us largely intact, their erstwhile shelters have not fared so well. Much evidence has simply disappeared,

⁴³ Ferguson 2020.

⁴⁴ Compare Oberhofer 2017, with Schuh 2016.

not least in moments of alleged archival modernisation. The implementation of new material arrangements has led to the destruction of previous ones, often without documentation. While periods of refurbishing archival materialities have occurred in all eras, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are surely eras of special importance in this regard. As the so-called modernisation and professionalisation of record-keeping occurred throughout the world – often as a brutal export of colonial-era European practices that went hand in hand with the eradication of well-established archival practices on the ground – much traditional archival knowledge and evidence of traditional material cultures of archiving have been destroyed. In addition to the destruction of physical evidence, the relative neglect of materiality in archival history so far has often led to imprecise descriptions or loose translations of key terms. No standard vocabulary exists to describe historical archival technologies, and certainly not in a comparative way.

Yet despite these challenges, and by drawing on a plethora of evidence ranging from extant objects to various kinds of textual and visual representations, this book attempts to highlight the bewildering complexity and astonishing sophistication – as well as the occasional beauty – of material arrangements made in the name of record-keeping. In order to overcome the severe shortage of evidence, analogies from parallel phenomena are occasionally drawn. In particular, descriptions of what, in strictly modernist language, would be called ‘libraries’ have helped us overcome the relative dearth of information on (again, in strictly modernist terms) ‘archives’. We consider such analogies, when drawn with care and with limited purview, legitimate for the following reason: while multiple differences between the storing of literature and that of everyday administrative documents can be observed in various times and places, conceptual divisions between ‘libraries’ and ‘archives’ were much weaker in the pre-modern world, even in places where they existed at all. In a world where most people owned much fewer written artefacts of whatever kind than they do today, there was much less need for clear-cut distinctions between ‘library’ and ‘archive’. While not all written artefacts were created and stored equally, we should not impose modernist degrees of conceptual distinction among various types of writings on pre-modern times.

The following chapters present their evidence on the material culture of archiving in a series of steps that move from small to big, from the question of how individual artefacts were prepared with the intention of keeping them for longer periods of time to whether and how entire architectural structures or even specialised buildings were erected to house such documents. Chapter 1, by Peera Panarut, starts by looking at individual items and their proto-archival characteristics, including questions of standardisation in terms of material features and the

application of writing to the writing surface. This is followed by an essay from Benedikt Reier, who discusses what is perhaps the smallest form of archive and certainly a very distinctive archival practice: the usage of larger book objects, especially codices, as containers for external information and pieces of writing. The larger written artefact here serves as a protective structure for smaller, singular ones. Moving from individual pieces of writing to secondary external containers, in Chapter 3, Cécile Michel presents a fascinating survey of different storage receptacles, including (but not limited to) cases, boxes, pouches, and other vessels. From containers, Chapter 4 by Markus Friedrich moves on to bigger pieces of furniture, often (though by no means always) of a room-filling nature. Finally, Chapter 5 moves from archival rooms to archival buildings. Archival rooms and archival buildings are in evidence from surprisingly early times; Philippe Depreux's essay presents numerous examples of these.

While we strove to avoid too much overlap between individual chapters, they are not meant to be entirely discrete units. Rather, grey zones of convergence exist between most chapters, and individual pieces of evidence might have fit more than one chapter. We opted not to divide the evidence or our discussion according to pre-defined categorical distinctions; rather, these overlaps give readers a sense of how we conceive of the material culture of archiving: namely as a seamless whole, where large and small technologies – those focusing on the preparation of individual written artefacts and those dedicated to preparing and perfecting storage spaces – are not to be kept apart, but rather seen as mutually influencing each other. The design of shelves influences the design of future archival documents, while the shape of furniture is determined by the shape of the documents to be stored. In addition to overlaps between chapters, frequent cross-references also make evident how each chapter builds on previous evidence or leads to questions discussed only later.

While each chapter is written by an individual author, the volume as a whole reflects the cooperation and joint expertise of a large group of scholars dedicated to the study of archival practices and technologies across the globe and through time. Collecting the evidence presented below, and orienting ourselves in such a wide range of archivalities, was a joint enterprise conducted by several dozen participants over five years of exchange and discussion at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at Universität Hamburg. Despite the fact that each chapter's lead author started from their individual area of expertise and crafted their essay's structure and focus as s/he saw fit, all sections nevertheless share the centre's crucial global perspective.

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