

Case Study 3.1: An Archival Backpack from Gotha

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This archival ‘backpack’ may seem like an incidental leftover of the past. Unadorned, simply functional and with no mention in the sources. Yet, it does serve as an excellent example of what archival daily work might have looked like. While this type of back carrier was a common tool in many aspects of everyday life throughout the Early Modern Period up until the early twentieth century, its accommodation to bureaucratic and archival practices is not widely attested. The piece is made of wooden boards installed at right angles to each other. Two boards with round edges on each side prevent documents from sliding off when in motion. The dimensions are W 40 cm × H 68 cm × D 31 cm. Two textile straps allow the device to be carried on the back. A pouch allowed for some sort of padding to support the back. Empty, it weighs 4.3 kg.

To appreciate the necessity for such a carrying device in an archival context, it is important to understand the workflow that took place between the archive, the administration, its records offices and external institutions. Before a document ended up registered in the archive vault, it was produced, revised, sent, consulted and copied – all of which happened in different locations. Even after its active use, it might still be important evidence for a case and, therefore, taken out of the archive again.

The castle of Friedenstein in Gotha, where the archive and the administration of the principality could be found under one roof from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, was compact and well organised – and yet, files still needed to move between rooms and parts of the building. The main archive and its office were located in the north-western corner of the castle. Next to it, a stairwell led to the first floor where the different government offices could be found. From the corridor connecting them, a staircase led to the stables underneath. Each letter that arrived by horse or carriage had to pass through this network of pathways, each document that left the castle as well. Furthermore, several sources illustrate that archival material was often transported to the private quarters of the prince or the households of administrative staff. In all these processes, the archival backpack was a useful tool to facilitate the daily work routine of transporting (archival) documents.



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Figs 1a–b: ‘Rucksack’ from Stiftung Friedenstein; photo: Ann-Sophie Hellmich-Schwan.