

Case Study 4.5: Working the Archive: An Archival Desk and Many Drawers

Ann-Sophie Hellmich-Schwan

When the new archive building for the princely archive in Donaueschingen (southern Germany) was built in the 1760s, a separate bureau for the archivist and his personnel was included in the plans from the very beginning. This is not necessarily unique, but the large desk that was constructed fittingly for this room certainly is. Constructed around the central pillar of the room, it offers six workplaces and sixty drawers for storage.

The source material directly relating to the desk is scarce. We can only find one short note from 17 April 1765 stating that the desk with sixty drawers for the registry has to be brought there when the weather allows for it.¹ Information about who constructed it or how much it cost are not transmitted. Yet, we can be sure that a day with fitting weather was found, and the desk made of oak wood was brought to the new archival building and installed in the working room. The drawers for each workplace are arranged on each side of the chair and underneath the desk. Two each are equipped with locks for secure storage.

With this set-up, it is not hard to imagine archival staff sitting at the desk with a number of documents spread out in front of them on the surface. One or perhaps two drawers stand open so a user could quickly reach the writing materials stored in them. Daily work in the archive required a number of different stationeries, including string, quills, ink, grit, pencils, paper, sealing wax and seals. When the sun set and the workday at the archive was over, the diligent writer put down his quill and locked away unfinished work in one of the drawers.

Desks were common in European archives in the eighteenth century, and before and after. Yet, most of them were not as elaborately built as the example given here – in fact, only very few other cases of desks with drawers are documented. In most cases, desks that were used in the archive were not constructed in a specific way and have, therefore, been lost over time. The only mentions in the sources tell us about their usage. Besides being used as writing tables, desks served as a short-term repository when taking documents out of their long-term storage space (e.g. armoire, shelf or drawer). Desks, therefore, served as an important transition area in the usage of archived documents or documents that are meant to be archived. This makes them as equally important in the archive as the storage furniture.

1 Fürstlich Fürstenbergisches Archiv, Hauptkasse, Bausachen, vol. 13/1, Notanda 17.04.1765, not foliated.



Fig. 1: Donaueschingen, Fürstlich Fürstenbergisches Archiv; photo: Ann-Sophie Hellmich-Schwan.

