

Historical Sedimentation of Archival Materials: Reinterpreting a Foundational Concept in the Italian Archival Tradition



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RÉSUMÉ Le concept de la sédimentation est une partie intégrale de la tradition italienne des études en archivistique. La sédimentation s'est toujours produite, souvent de façon inconsciente, dans la pratique archivistique et a eu des effets profonds sur la préservation de documents et sur leur transmission au fil du temps. Cet article vise à explorer comment s'effectue la sédimentation dans les archives. Après avoir décrit les significations et l'utilisation du concept de la sédimentation dans l'histoire de la théorie archivistique, cet article se concentre sur l'histoire de la sédimentation, c'est-à-dire les façons dont la sédimentation s'est manifestée à différentes époques en Italie et ailleurs en Europe.

Une des idées offertes par cette étude est que la sédimentation ne s'est jamais produite de façon involontaire ou par hasard; elle a toujours été le reflet, quoique indirectement, des besoins politiques et administratifs de l'époque à laquelle elle a été effectuée et elle a anticipé toute utilisation future des matériaux sédimentés. La sédimentation archivistique est « historique » précisément parce qu'elle a lieu à l'intérieur de l'histoire d'une société dans laquelle chaque dépôt d'archives est produit et maintenu. D'une part, la sédimentation fait partie de la micro-histoire de cette société parce qu'elle dépend des actions de quelques individus, et d'autre part, elle fait partie de la macro-histoire culturelle et juridique de son époque.

Cet article se termine en suggérant que l'histoire de la sédimentation archivistique devrait être perçue comme une partie constituante du savoir à toute période de temps donnée. La sédimentation est une partie intégrale de notre mémoire historique collective.

ABSTRACT The concept of sedimentation is an integral part of the Italian tradition of archival studies. Sedimentation has always happened, oftentimes unconsciously, in archival practice, and has had profound effects on the preservation of documents and their transmission over time. This essay aims to explore how sedimentation takes place in the archives. After describing the meanings and uses of the notion of sedimentation in the history of archival theory, the essay focuses on the history of sedimentation, that is, the ways in which sedimentation took place in different time periods in Italy and elsewhere in Europe.

One of the insights offered by this study is that sedimentation has never occurred involuntarily or by chance; rather, it has always reflected, albeit indirectly, the political and administrative needs of the age in which it was executed and has anticipated any

future uses of the sedimented materials. Archival sedimentation is “historical” exactly because it takes place within the history of the society in which each archives is produced and maintained. On the one hand, sedimentation is part of the micro-history of that society because it depends on the actions of few individuals, and on the other hand, it is involved in the cultural and juridical macro-history of its time.

The essay concludes with the suggestion that the history of archival sedimentation should be seen as a constitutive part of the knowledge of any given time period. Sedimentation is an integral part of our historical collective memory.

Introduction

Marco Bologna’s essay “La sedimentazione storica della documentazione archivistica” originally appeared in the collected volume *Archivistica. Teorie, metodi, pratiche*, edited by Linda Giuva and Maria Guercio (Rome: Carocci editore, 2014), 211–35. The text offered to *Archivaria* readers in the following pages is an English translation by Gabriella Sonnewald of an abridged version of that essay, provided by the author himself.

Why this translation? The term *sedimentation*, so commonly employed by Italian archivists, may not sound familiar outside of Italy, although an article by María Mata Caravaca titled “The Concept of Archival ‘Sedimentation’: Its Meaning and Use in the Italian Context,” published in *Archival Science* in 2015,¹ has already accomplished the goal of tracing the history of the term and explaining its controversial meaning to a non-Italian audience. Mata Caravaca’s article cites a few paragraphs from Bologna’s original essay; however, the translation introduced here exposes all the richness and complexity inherent in the sedimentation metaphor. Providing a translation of Bologna’s text almost in its entirety seemed to be an appropriate way of bringing English-speaking readers closer to an original work that addresses local issues from a specific cultural background and, at the same time, delves into the archival sensitivity of our era in a global sense.

Bologna’s perspective is deeply rooted in the debate that developed in Italy between the 1970s and the 1980s about the nature of archives, and which has in Isabella Zanni Rosiello – frequently mentioned in Bologna’s article – one of its most influential representatives. Zanni Rosiello supports the view that archives are not the inert outcome of the activities of their creators, but rather dynamic entities that are continually reshaped by the actions of subsequent generations of users and custodians. Each body of archives bears the traces of the specific ways in which it was organized and reorganized, both before

1 María Mata Caravaca, “The Concept of Archival ‘Sedimentation’: Its Meaning and Use in the Italian Context,” *Archival Science* (October 2015): 1–12.

and after its “institutional consecration,”² that is, both when it was still used by the creator for its “self-documentation” purposes and after its transfer to an archives for its permanent preservation as “source-memory” for history.³

The process of sedimentation, as Bologna sees it, encapsulates the complex “micro-history” that archival materials participate in when they are set aside, arranged and rearranged, appraised, selected, and physically and intellectually “conditioned” (processed – that is, described but also rehoused) for their preservation. Archives’ “modes and times of sedimentation” are always intentional, planned (sometimes ill-planned), and often involve “trivial facts and ordinary activities” as well as material considerations that may escape those archival investigators who focus only on the bigger picture and sketch out high-level histories of transmission or custody. Describing the relationship between the “history of sedimentation” and the more general “history of archives” is one of the purposes of Bologna’s article.

To conclude this brief introduction, a few words on the translation. Like any translated work, this too suffers from the loss of the original prose and “ambient,” which means that “the structural rhythms, the subtle implications, the complexities of meaning and suggestion in vocabulary and phrasing”⁴ that are present in the original text can only be partly reproduced in another language. The reader should also be aware that Bologna devised and executed his original writing project for a specific audience and with specific purposes in mind. Besides the addition of a few footnotes and the omission of references and examples that might have required lengthy explanations for a non-Italian public, the translation has not been adapted to suit perfectly the understanding of archives of its new readership. The English-speaking reader is invited to consider the ideas proposed in the following pages and to assess them against his or her archival traditions and cultural background. Some of these ideas might not make sense outside of the context in which they were generated. Some might provide new, unanticipated insights. It is from the sedimentation of “lighter” and “heavier” ideas that knowledge can evolve.

The Concept of Sedimentation

In order not to lose the thread in such an important matter, it might be a good idea to begin by establishing where the card indexes and the archives are kept and how they

2 Isabella Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1987), 49.

3 One of Zanni Rosiello’s most innovative contributions to archival scholarship in Italy is the introduction of the two opposite concepts of “self-documentation memory” (*memoria-autodocumentazione*) and “source-memory” (*memoria-fonte*); see Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica*. An explanation of both concepts is included in footnote 23.

4 Edith Grossman, *Why Translation Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 9.

work. They are divided, structurally and essentially, or, put more simply, according to the law of nature, into two large areas: the archives and card indexes of the dead and the card indexes and archives of the living. The papers pertaining to those no longer alive are to be found in a more or less organized state in the rear of the building, the back wall of which, from time to time, has to be demolished and rebuilt some yards farther on as a consequence of the unstoppable rise in the number of the deceased.⁵

The registry office depicted above by author José Saramago is, despite its many profound meanings,⁶ quite paradoxical, with its back wall that has to be periodically demolished and rebuilt a few yards farther back in order to make room for the files of those who have died most recently. The arrangement of files, as well as the constant destruction and reconstruction of the wall are absurd as well as paradoxical. However, they both belong to the archives model adopted by Saramago. An archives built in this way is the result of a specific, predefined sedimentation process. As a matter of fact – as also explained in the novel – at some point in time, the head of the Central Registry decides to change such processes and stop moving the files of the deceased to the back of the archives, for “the dead will remain in the same place that they occupied in the archives while alive.”⁷

The new archives concept, metaphorically representing life and the place where memory is kept alive, is bound to change the sedimentation process of the elements constituting memory itself. Indeed, it is one thing when memory is considered a marginal, subsidiary element of our present and another thing when memory becomes an essential part of it. Therefore, axiomatically speaking, sedimentation of archival materials could be claimed to be the result of an act of will, which is consistent with the importance assigned to memory by the creator/custodian of materials from the past. And yet, as we all know, real life does not necessarily follow assumptions. Hence, we end up with a number of different variations on the same theme, which nonetheless still show traces of the common principle that inspired them

The first mistake one must avoid when studying archives is to believe that they grow spontaneously and that they are “natural.” The issue of sedimentation of archival materials must be tackled by resorting to the evolution of long-established archival doctrine and to the more recent developments of archival theory, the latter substantiating both an empirical and a pragmatic view of archives as “formal memory of activities.” There is nothing

5 José Saramago, *All the Names*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (New York: Harcourt, 1999), 3.

6 See also Stefano Vitali’s comments on Saramago’s novel in “Memorie, analogie, identità,” in L. Giuva, S. Vitali, and I. Zanni Rosiello, *Il potere degli archivi* (Milan: Paravia Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2007), 73–75.

7 Saramago, *All the Names*, 187.

spontaneous in archives and in the records that constitute them, nor is there anything like a simple and involuntary archive-forming and records-sedimentation process; instead, it derives from an intentional, although at times poorly conceived, decision that is deeply rooted in its historical context.

The verb *sedimentare* means “to deposit,” “to settle,” as well as “to decant.” When the word *sedimentation* is used, it refers to both the idea of “accumulation” as well as to a more refined “decanting” and “separation” process. Therefore, *sedimentazione* of archival materials not only means the apparently random piling up of files – accumulation – but also the process by which such files are sorted and separated depending on their individual “weight.” In other words, on the one hand, the term “sedimentation” refers to a mechanical, almost random process of accumulation, whereby files are simply stored in one room, on a table, on a shelf, on the floor, etc., producing a mass of papers piled up and stacked according to some chronological progression for the most part; on the other hand, it implies a process of selection and sorting, whereby “heavier” files are separated from “lighter” ones.

Decanting, as is well known, actually refers to liquids. Hence, when we talk about the decanting of an archives, we must accommodate some differences owing to the necessarily different physical state of the records. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the two meanings of the word “sedimentation,” as illustrated above, are linked to two actions that occur at different points in time, with an interval in between, varying in length depending on the type of material: namely, first records accumulate, and only later – sometimes even much later – they might be decanted.

Let’s now imagine a room where the files produced during and by a certain activity have been placed (deposited or dumped) for a long time. Without doubt, sooner or later at least one of the two following events is likely to occur: either one or more of those files will be needed again and will therefore have to be retrieved in order to be used, or the room will have to be repurposed and thus the files will have to be moved elsewhere. In either case, the mass of records will have to be quickly and cursorily examined in order to identify which ones are needed or which are worth keeping longer, for it would be foolish and expensive to have obsolete files transferred to a new location. During these operations, sedimentation takes place as decanting, whereby all papers related to activities deemed to be important are roughly and preliminarily separated from those that resulted from less relevant activities. It is something vaguely similar to so-called “pre-arrangement”: all files or papers produced by certain specific activities or by certain specific creators are physically sorted according to changing and incidental criteria, which might also be meticulous and “historical.” Records are thus decanted by those in charge of sorting the paper piles according to varying criteria, which depend on when and why such arrangement is being performed, even

if it originated from a mere historical investigation.⁸ After decanting, the files begin to acquire a well-defined shape and to be aggregated according to some simple serial logic, which may already have been present in the papers in the case of, for instance, purely physical arrangement, or may have been assigned by those who have either created or decanted the papers following some classification system. Therefore, when the whole sedimentation process is complete, the files contained in the above-mentioned room may be assumed to have been sorted and grouped together by, for example, physical appearance (registries having similar size, files with the same headings), or arranged according to consistent identifiers or classification entries, and so on; by creator (i.e., person or department); or by subject, year, place, and so on. In other words, in all possible combinations that, in one way or another, may prove useful for the purposes for which the entire sedimentation process was carried out.

Thus, the sedimentation of materials is no spontaneous or involuntary process. It requires a specific intention: first, when piling the records in a certain place and in a certain way; and then when decanting and arranging them in a preliminary fashion.⁹ It only seems as if these are random acts, for they are not immune to the multiple effects of the passing of time, nor are they impervious to methodological patterns – some of them foolish – designed by the people storing the records in a certain place or in charge of sorting them (decanting).¹⁰ Furthermore, sedimentation occurs patchily, without constant and uniform rules, even within the same country or historic/geographic area, or even by the same records creator, especially if the records are being arranged at different times.

In many instances, the type of physical storage media adopted for the material is also determined in whole or in part by sedimentation: the type of container is often decided by the author of the individual records – as is the case for registers – but it could also be changed and modified especially when

8 It is worth mentioning briefly the debate on the alleged “objectivity” of the documents used by historians and the “naturalness” of their sources. The opinion that historians do “select” the documents they use in their research is by now well accepted, without detracting from the validity and truth of historical reconstructions that can, in any case, be just “reconstructions” of something that cannot be repeated.

9 We all know that both in past centuries and today records have usually been accumulated by those few people in charge of this task. Archivists are often the first to arrange the records in a place designated for this purpose. In any case, anyone who has been in charge of moving records from the place where they were produced to a storage location has undoubtedly followed at least some empirical or ergonomic criteria for stashing them away.

10 On this issue, I would like to refer to a film by Lawrence Kasdan, *The Accidental Tourist* (1988). The family portrayed in the film stores their food supplies in an awkward yet amusing way: they do not stock them by type or content (i.e., tomatoes, oil, rice, etc.), but rather in alphabetical order by product name, and they place them on a big shelf that has many different compartments labelled with the letters of the alphabet.

loose papers must be filed away. Storage media are generally changed during sedimentation, mostly with a view to compacting the files. Conditions of storage used to be generally established on the basis of the following two guiding principles: the first involved practical and cost-related considerations, while the second depended on the expected use of the records in question as well as existing habits. When practical and cost-related considerations prevailed, less expensive and more common materials were chosen. Conversely, safer and longer-lasting storage media were used for records thought to be potentially more useful than others.¹¹

So far, reference has been made to sedimentation mostly intended as a “physical” process, whereby records are piled up and decanted. However, this term can have another, even more undefined meaning, as it has at different stages in the evolution of the archival discipline. When Isabella Zanni Rosiello wrote that “archival materials ... are affected by ... specific types of conditioning, as well as by sedimentation modes and times,”¹² she was undoubtedly referring to a more or less long sedimentation process, namely to the latent period between the time when records are accumulated in one place and the time when they are used again for some contingent need. During this varying interval of time, archival materials remain – hopefully – untouched, and sedimentation works silently and slowly. However, while records are kept in storage, there might be something affecting them in various ways and promoting some “specific conditioning” of the records, often triggered by mice, various pests, moulds and fungi, not to mention floods, earthquakes, riots, and wars. Hence, sedimentation time cannot be considered in isolation from the modes of physical preservation of materials. In other words, the very health of materials is a prerequisite for every kind of sedimentation of archival materials: records must continue to exist as physical objects and be correctly preserved in their original form under controlled temperature, humidity, light conditions, and so on. If not, our entire debate, just like any other debate about archives and cultural heritage, would simply become superfluous.

No matter how well we maintain our files, sedimentation time is not only responsible for the above-mentioned biological and physical conditioning, but also for some specific conditioning. Changes take place outside the records themselves. Times, people, and the whole world change. Any document

11 An example from family archives: All business correspondence with the most important places of business was separated from the other letters and kept in more robust containers – for example, in cardboard boxes. Conversely, any other less “useful” correspondence was kept in simple bags. Other storage media were also used, depending on the expected retention time.

12 Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica*, 49.

retrieved after centuries of uninterrupted preservation is projected, as if in a time-travel machine, into a completely different world: it will be read, handled, examined, and used by people who, no matter how good their intentions and how accurate their investigations, are nonetheless total strangers.

Therefore, “sedimentation time” encompasses all those changes that occur during a certain period of time, corresponding to the preservation time of a specific record, from the moment when it was first produced to the time when it was used again after a period of sedimentation. Therefore, based on this second meaning of “sedimentation,” its effects are seen by those retrieving the record in question and “reading” it in their contemporary world as evidence of a past world. Sedimentation, substantiated by the historical interpretation of the record, becomes, as a result, “historical sedimentation.” At this point, we must acknowledge the existence of various forms of sedimentation of archival materials with regard to their physical condition as well as the possibility that the accumulated records will be used again after long periods of idle storage.

Historical Sedimentation

These survivals have never been ‘ruins’; they are better compared to a composite building of archaic structure, never deserted but constantly remodelled by each fresh generation of occupiers. It is not surprising to find that few field systems have come down to us in their original form. Our villages wear an ancient dress, but one that has often been made over. Deliberate refusal to notice and investigate these changes is tantamount to a denial of life itself, since all life is change.¹³

Yet another paradox, like the one described by Saramago. However, according to Marc Bloch, sedimentation is not mere stasis, accumulation, slow decanting of files, or time passing by almost without interference: it is also movement, change, and life. The wall which, absurdly enough, had to be pulled down and moved a little farther away, although paradoxical, proved that life was going on. Conversely, the decision by the head of the Central Registry to keep the files of the dead “in the same place that they occupied in the archives while alive” meant denying the change ineluctably brought about by death. In this light, with sedimentation meaning movement rather than stasis, the study of all processes generating sedimentation needs to be thoroughly redesigned.

According to a scholar whose research focuses primarily on issues related to the transmission and history of archival materials:

13 Marc Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), xxix–xxx, Taylor & Francis eBooks.

Archives acquire their own autonomy and meaning through the very processes involving their formation, changes, and layering. The very “historical” approach of modern archival studies helps define the concept of archives as a historical source, by highlighting the link between the archives and the record creator. Actually, this is the main historiographical crux of archival science: namely, the problem of relations and connections, mismatches and discontinuity between the archives and those producing and managing them, the latter having different behaviours that are mainly determined by their ever-changing institutional roles.¹⁴

Both the archives and the record are to be considered intrinsically historical, not only because history is written inside them, but also because they contain traces of all those agents that have changed them as well as those that failed to have any impact on them, despite all this being at the same time an integral part of the context in which archives are produced and passed down.

Sedimentation of archival materials has always involved – and still involves – some very concrete and practical implementation contingencies that cannot be neglected. Sedimentation takes place in time and space. Thus, it is a historical event, carrying the marks of all those who created the records and who lived in a well-defined time and place. Anybody accumulating files and hastily and perfunctorily placing them in a set place only in order to meet some practical requirements – e.g., the files should not take up too much room, should not fall out, etc. – is likely to consider this job a mere sequence of trivial, boring, and purely mechanical actions. Conversely, anyone carrying out what was referred to above as “decanting,” or those engaged in both accumulating and decanting files, are likely to look at this job differently. They will think of archives not just as a heap of papers; they will also consider them to be the memory and self-documenting activity of the individuals producing them. Arranging files so as not to take up too much room or simply in a safe manner will not be enough: from the very start, they will have to be organized with some future (even if still unknown) reasonable use in mind.

When I intend to organize, study, and describe an already “sedimented” archives – i.e., an archives as source-memory – sedimentation will acquire yet another meaning. That is, as pointed out by Zanni Rosiello, I will realize that “archival records carry the signs and traces of the specific manners in which they were organized, both before and after their institutional consecration as perennial historical memory.”¹⁵ Therefore, in this latter case, “sedimentation” will refer to the entire period of time from an archives’ formation to its use

14 Attilio Bartoli Langeli, “Premessa,” in *Archivi e comunità tra medioevo ed età moderna*, ed. A. Bartoli Langeli, A. Giorgi, and S. Moscadelli (Trento, Italy: University of Trento, 2009), viii–ix. (This and other quotations from Italian sources have been translated by Gabriella Sonnewald.)

15 Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica*, 49.

again as a source. It will include any and all actions performed on the records in question by the creator of said records as well as by all others, including those who will have maintained and transmitted them over time for future generations. Therefore, in such instances, sedimentation can only be “historical,” thus encompassing every single action affecting the archives up until the time I begin to study it. Any subsequent user or scholar will also contribute to the sedimentation of these records, and anyone using them after me will have to consider the traces of my own activity on said archives as well. In other words, sedimentation of archival materials begins immediately after the records are generated and ends only when the physical archives ceases to exist altogether. Actually, if even a few faint traces of the records in question remain in any other written documentation, sedimentation may yet continue.¹⁶

Therefore, the effects and impact of historical sedimentation on archival materials are different and vary according to their weight. There may be superficial as well as deep interventions, which over time may be judged differently from when they were carried out, as often happens. An archival sedimentation process is still a historical process, no matter its outcome, and has to be assessed as such. Its effects must be examined based on the consequences of its various phases on the archival materials. Every event that, during archival sedimentation, has resulted in the ill-considered destruction of records must be condemned, just like any selection and disposition conducted without any criteria or for one’s own convenience.

Sedimentation and Disposition

In almost all instances in the life of an archives, the fact that some records are disposed of is unavoidable. At this point, a distinction must be made between two commonly recurring words – “selection” and “disposition” – as they are referred to in the Italian archival tradition. According to the antithetical distinction between “selection” – meaning appraising and sorting all records to be preserved – and “disposition” – referring to the choice/extraction of all records to be disposed of – it has been historically demonstrated that, during the sedimentation time of every archives, more records are generally discarded than selected for preservation. It was only recently that attempts

16 As a matter of fact, the sedimentation process includes all activities carried out on a specific archives – e.g., arrangement, production of finding aids and other descriptive tools, or just the use of some of its records – given the unavoidable influence these acts exercise on the interpretation of the records and their use. A mere inventory of an archives, or even a partial one, is enough for the archives to continue to survive. Sometimes even copies made several centuries later are sufficient to keep track of the original records and make it possible to use them again.

were made to reverse this trend, whereas in previous centuries, disposition of records was always the case, following criteria of usefulness applied according to practices and rules enforced from time to time.

If, as illustrated above, archival sedimentation coincides first of all with preservation of records over time, it has to be useful, cause no or little problems, and cost no or little money. The whole issue depends on how useful each archives or some of its parts are believed to be. Thus, the concept of “usefulness” should be clarified at this point. This concept, which is obviously highly variable over time, must be put in historical perspective. In the majority of cases, the disposal of records that, in the past, were thought to be useless is later lamented, for these same records would be deemed useful today. Useless or useful for what? It is the variability of this concept that must be put in historical perspective.

We may conclude that those who have the “power” to decide on the purposes of an archives also decide on its sedimentation. For example, if records are to be preserved exclusively for administrative reasons, most of those records will be kept for only a brief period of time, whereas if the records are intended to keep alive the memory of past generations and events, more of them will survive selection. Indeed, when archives are preserved and handed down from generation to generation to perpetuate a whole system of key knowledge and tools – in other words, when records are intended to be the source-memory of a community – the concept of usefulness is applied in yet again a different way and leads to the preservation of a much higher number of records.

Archives have always been “modest, yet precise,” and any related issues must be tackled “in a sound and pragmatic way.” As a matter of fact, “nothing can be known about the past if not handed down by it.”¹⁷ Therefore, selection and disposition are an integral part of the ever more complex process of archival sedimentation, and are instrumental in shaping the source-memory of the times when they were carried out.

Archival sedimentation is historical, because it takes place in the history of the community where a specific archives is preserved. It belongs both to the micro-history of that community, which may be linked to the actions of just a handful of people, and to the legal and cultural macro-history of an entire age because of its natural dependence on political and administrative plans and intellectual fads and trends. When an archives is handed down to us after a more or less long sedimentation period, it carries the signs of all the times and places it has experienced, any neglect in its preservation, the diligence with which it was “purged,” the oblivion in which it was kept, or the secrecy

17 Both quotations are taken from a famous article by Claudio Pavone: “Ma è poi tanto pacifico che l’archivio rispecchi l’istituto?” *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato* 30 (1970): 149.

in which it was shrouded. Actually, whenever a process of decanting – as previously defined – takes place during archival sedimentation, leaving behind a still sufficiently intact archives, that archives is less likely to be touched by later handling, for the very “antiquity” of records has always generated some sort of reverential respect for them, which is stronger the older the records are.¹⁸ Over time, an archives undergoing sedimentation becomes more “consolidated”: while its key components (series) get refined internally, externally it settles into a niche – which is not just physical but, above all, cultural – where it can withstand ageing.

Eugenio Casanova refers to the “hustling and bustling of past generations,” aimed at safeguarding their repositories, and doing so with minimum cost and effort, in order to pass down to their descendants their heritage of knowledge at the “basis of civilization’s progress.”¹⁹ Certainly, the continuous existence of archives, as well as their accessibility, is an important guarantee of civilized life and respect for human dignity.

A History of Sedimentation?

It is arguable that a history of archival sedimentation is an aspect of the more general history of archives; however, the two histories may not necessarily coincide. The former involves a micro-history that has to deal not only with major sweeping events, but also with more trivial facts and ordinary activities, and cannot be generalized if one wants to avoid crippling inaccuracies. For every single archives there exists a sedimentation process that is as unique and unrepeatable as the history of each individual human being. Finding and establishing continuities and elements that appear to be common to the majority of cases is the historian’s responsibility. The history of archival sedimentation offered in the following pages is just one of the possible narratives that can be drawn according to this suggestion.

It seems appropriate to recall Bloch’s quotation, in which he refers to villages and buildings in a way that perfectly fits archives as well: “These survivals have never ... come down to us in their original form. Our villages wear an ancient dress, but one that has often been made over. Deliberate refusal to notice and investigate these changes is tantamount to a denial of life itself, since all life is change.”²⁰ In order to investigate the history of the village and

18 As is well known, this has not always been the case, as confirmed in the Italian context by some repositories in Siena and Turin (but the list could be much longer) that were disposed of in the 18th century. Undoubtedly the intentional disposition of older records was never taken lightly, and it would always require some authorization by the authorities in charge.

19 Eugenio Casanova, *Archivistica* (Torino, Italy: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1966), 24.

20 Marc Bloch, *French Rural History*, xxix–xxx

its inhabitants, it is necessary to investigate all the changes and makeovers they endured; in order to learn about an archives and the history of the people who have used it, we need to study all the changes that an archives has undergone during its historical sedimentation.

No source from which we may acquire knowledge of the past, no matter its nature, reaches us in its original form, for it is modified by all events that have affected its preservation. Sedimentation always and inevitably has an impact on the documents that come to us “par relais successifs, cahin-caha, pourrie de malentendus, rongée d’omissions et incrustée d’ajouts,”²¹ touched up, adjusted, and transformed. The best practice implicitly recommended by Bloch to all those intending to use archival materials for their research is to consult records that have already been selected and archives that have already been rearranged “grâce seulement à quelques hommes ... qui ont tenté, dans le désordre presque désespéré des affaires du monde, de conserver et de transmettre ce qui leur semblait mériter de l’être”²²; that is, thanks to the work of those who throughout their lives are engaged in passing on to subsequent generations the writings of the past, despite the adversities and almost desperate disorder of human events. These are the people who select and hand down the documentation they believe is worthy of permanent preservation because of its ability to ensure the transmission of memory to future generations. Considering the many and significant changes that an archives is likely to undergo during the time of its historical sedimentation, it is obviously essential to learn about its history and how its sedimentation took place.

From the moment archival documents started to be considered not just “self-documentation memory” but also, and even more so, “source-memory,”²³ “to be sure, if at all possible, of the ‘right location of each record within the context where it was first created,’ or getting fairly close to it..., has become a key principle of an archivist’s professional knowledge and craft.”²⁴ Indeed, this would mean being able to identify when sedimentation and the entire history of archival transmission actually began. Being able to know the exact location

21 Marguerite Yourcenar, *Le Temps, ce grand sculpteur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 10. The original text in French is more effective than its English translation.

22 Ibid.

23 Archival documents initially have the function of documenting the activity of their creator and are preserved by the same entity in order to allow the continuation and protection of that activity. Thus, they are self-produced documents and serve as “self-documentation” of what has been carried out by the creator. Because of the passage of time (years, decades, etc.) and/or in relation to any other events (e.g., disappearance of the creator, intervention of political or economic factors, wars, natural catastrophes), any documents still in existence in that archives tend to lose their practical, administrative, or juridical function and may acquire an exclusively historical value as a (perhaps unique) testimony of what had been accomplished by their creator. The documents therefore become potential sources for historical or other kinds of research, that is, “source-memory.”

24 Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica*, 47.

of records at the beginning of an archive's formation would be the equivalent of being able to see a century-old masterpiece when it was first completed by its creator. It would mean having the ability to temporarily remove any and all encrustations, additions, losses, and signs of wear and tear from the original archival body in order to fully understand its weight and meaning. Otherwise, we need to go backward and understand what happened, based not on what we know regarding an archives' condition before the above events took place, but on the changes brought about by said events.

“That archival records may be used by future generations for purposes that are unrelated to those for which they were created has never been nor is important for either the records creators or their custodians.”²⁵ If public or private entities – no matter whether they are local or central government bodies, religious institutions, private businesses, etc., or simply private individuals – have been considering archives exclusively as self-documentation memory, they have never attributed, nor do they attribute today, any value whatsoever to any possible future use of their records for purposes other than those for which they were produced in the first place. The historical value, in its broadest sense, of an archives will never be appreciated by its creators unless they see at least some potential usefulness, or at least some “return” or “gain” for themselves. Records creators today engage in records sedimentation-preservation activities that are no longer useful for their current business, beyond the retention periods required by law, only if they foresee some benefits, at least in terms of prestige. The government, public authorities, and many other entities are required to comply with applicable recordkeeping regulations. However, after a few decades, records become less and less protected by the law. Records produced 40 or 50 years ago, for example, are *de facto* – not by law – less protected than those produced 10 or 15 years ago for the same reason; namely, because no historical significance is attached to records that are no longer useful for current business.

The process of sedimentation and preservation changes thoroughly in its perspective and approach as soon as records start being examined from a historical point of view. And yet even in the past there have been cases when archives would be approached with historiographical purposes in mind. As a matter of fact, it would be inappropriate to explain the “rebirth” of archives and their use as sources of historical research by linking them almost exclusively with the revolutionary and nationalistic movements of the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries. Such movements certainly relied on the history of peoples as recorded in older texts, even when they had been

25 Isabella Zanni Rosiello, “La trasmissione della memoria documentaria,” *Parolechiave* 9 (1995): 96.

written by the “enemies” of the nation. However, it was often a biased and ideological interpretation of those records, strongly conditioned by hindsight and political needs at the time the records were discovered and investigated. Quite rightly, and with a rigorous methodological approach, Zanni Rosiello points out that archival records “are mostly produced for political, legal, and administrative reasons by individuals exercising a specific power. Such records, however, may also provide evidence of and information about cultural and social behaviours of those individuals who, by reacting to or opposing the rules of power, are being subdued and marginalized by it.”²⁶ More generally, archival documentation is known to be produced, managed, and even studied in view of some activities to be conducted at a later stage. There are complex links between these activities carried out by recordkeepers and how such records are interpreted throughout their preservation time and in the different historical contexts in which they are being investigated.²⁷

Sedimentation and preservation practices

Sedimentation of archival materials carried out by institutions in charge of their preservation began to become popular in the above-mentioned decades. However, even before then, archival documents were used as a source-memory – not for the history of nations and peoples, but for purposes that would nevertheless contribute to maintaining the idea that archives might be preserved not only for practical, legal, or administrative reasons. From the end of the 18th century to the early 19th century, the material mode of sedimentation changed significantly. Although it could be considered to be of marginal importance, this change played a key role in the actual transmission of older files. In that period, actions started to be taken to improve the physical storage media of records.

As long as documentation was mostly considered a form of “self-documentation memory,” its creators and keepers would either preserve it or not, depending on how useful they thought the information contained therein would be for them in the short and medium term. The types of media employed for carrying and storing the records did not matter at all for preservation purposes, until such records also began to be considered as a source-memory.²⁸

26 Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica*, 54.

27 These complexities are related to the passive position of the document being preserved and read and the concurrent action on the reader brought about by the act of reading the document. In other words, both passive and active roles of the document happen simultaneously.

28 Zanni Rosiello, “La trasmissione della memoria documentaria,” 97–98.

Up until the 19th century, older documents were rarely restored nor was their condition improved because of their alleged historical value. If something of the like was done, it was always for practical reasons and under the pressure of some contingent situation external to the archives itself, i.e., destruction, moves, etc. All records from the *ancien régime* that have reached us are on the original media and contained in their original housings, except in some cases concerning fonds that have been rearranged or simply reboxed after transfer to the state archives for permanent preservation. In most of these cases, however, only some external preservation features have been changed: a folder made of documents threaded together (*filza*) may have been replaced by a folder as a container (*busta*),²⁹ or a box may have substituted for an old wrapper, but full rearrangement and physical reallocation of archival materials were exceptional cases.³⁰ There is, however, an evident and clear connection between sedimentation times and the media and housings employed for archival files. This link not only confirms a belated interest in this aspect of sedimentation, but it is also indirect proof of the deep cultural change that occurred between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. The neoclassical and then the romantic model that emerged during these few decades both focused on carefully preserving any traces of the past in all the possible forms handed down to us. Monumentalizing traces of the past is typical of transition times. When new cultural identities are being sought, conventional models show all their limitations and inconsistencies, and the new models are not yet defined and certain. Consolidating what is left from the past guarantees a stable reference point, which then becomes as evident and impartial as a monument in a public square.

For the very same reasons, these documents also became “public,” and all those who were able to read and understand them gained possible access to them. However, once they became public, they required adequate storage conditions for their new uses. They were indeed used in new ways: whereas until then such documents had been produced and preserved for business or administration reasons, they were now considered to be source-memory, like a mine or a quarry where you have to dig in order to find signs of the history of peoples and nations.³¹ There is a certain significant, effectual, and heuristic

29 For definitions of these terms, see Direzione Generale Archivi, *Glossario dei termini archivistici*, ed. P. Carucci, accessed 19 February 2017, <http://www.archivi.beniculturali.it/index.php/abc-degli-archivi/glossario>.

30 A typical example is the one concerning Milan’s public administration archives, which were rearranged according to the principle of pertinence, as interpreted by Luca Peroni. This led to a systematic rehousing of all documents as well as the loss of all original folders and the folders’ front jackets (*camicie*). Actually, the back of the original 17th- and 18th-century front jackets were sometimes reused for housing different files.

31 The mine and quarry metaphor is used in the *Relazione* by Commissione Cibrario, which was established in 1870 to solve many of the problems of archives in Italy.

component in the “invention of tradition” that took place between the 18th and 19th centuries. Archives are one of the fields where this process was more evident and deep-rooted.³²

However, even during the long period of time when archival materials failed to be recognized as a valuable form of source-memory, several preservation techniques had been developed and implemented in different ways. Mostly aimed at meeting legal, operational, and political requirements, depending on the time period and geographical area, early preservation methods would be more or less effective and not always planned or consistently applied. And yet they allowed a huge amount of documentary evidence to be handed down to posterity.³³

Preservation practices related to archival sedimentation implemented during the *ancien régime* do not stand out for their accuracy. Even archival arrangement, as we understand it today, was not seen as being problematic, nor was it perceived as such most of the time: what mattered was to know the location of records in order to retrieve them when they were needed. Records would always be available when required by their keepers, but always and exclusively in connection with the purposes for which they had been created. They were providing evidence of the activities carried out as recorded in the files, activities that were always consistent with the legal, political, and economic conditions under which the whole archives had been created and was being managed.

The arrangement of an archives was part and parcel of its sedimentation, and how such sedimentation was to be carried out was decided upon by its keepers – whether or not they were the same entities who had created the records – provided that they had *jus archivii* over that specific material.³⁴ Therefore, archives would be arranged according to mere empirical criteria, for there were no “historical” or “modern” files to be distinguished; they were all “current.” As a matter of fact, the types of governments and overall normative framework in which all these files were embedded used to be quite constant and stable. Hence, if all files were “current,” sedimentation-preservation practices were, obviously enough, entrusted to staff with administrative

32 See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *L'invenzione della tradizione* (Turin, Italy: Einaudi, 1994).

33 See Zanni Rosiello, “La trasmissione della memoria documentaria,” 97–98.

34 *Jus archivii* was the right to keep an archives. In Europe during the Early Middle Ages, only a few supreme powers held that right: the emperor, the pope, and the kings. Those who exercised power in their name, such as feudatories, vassals [i.e., feudal tenants], abbots, judges, and notaries, enjoyed *jus archivii* as well. In the Late Middle Ages, the right to keep an archives was extended to numerous other local entities. *Jus archivii* involves both the right to hold the documents created and received in the course of the creator's activity and the right to make them fully effective as original and authentic documents in any place, thereby providing them with legally binding value as evidence of what is written on them. *Jus archivii* is at the origin of the notion of archives as instruments of power.

competences and who did not need to have any understanding of history, for no historical value was attached to archival material. A link would thus emerge between the archives and its archivists that was stronger than the one between the archives and its creator. A feeling of jealous ownership of archival records by employees in charge of them was common. This attitude was not so much related to the desire to keep one's job, but rather to the yearning to hold a "secret" part of power, master convoluted administrative procedures, and, even more, have access to a critical tool for carrying out government activities, thus having some sort of control and influence over them.³⁵

Evolution of sedimentation practices in Italy

Archival preservation practices during the *ancien régime* would not have distinguished between physical preservation of materials and logical or, for that matter, historical criteria. There were no separations between "ancient" and "modern" sections, nor between "administrative" and "historical" archives: all these distinctions were first introduced during the fateful decades at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The sweeping changes of that period affected all fields and altered any existing rules and conventions while re-designing people's scope of action. All records produced before this revolutionary renewal had lost the administrative, political, and economic importance previously recognized by earlier institutional bodies, by the rules governing them, and by related social and cultural models. The transition from social classes and guilds to elected governments, from an administration ruled by officers who had bought their jobs to one based on the sovereign appointment of loyal and capable individuals also significantly changed archival preservation practices but, at the same time, gave rise to many unprecedented and unforeseen problems.

Pooling together all government archives that had not yet been centralized was one of the first newly established archival preservation practices. However, rather than providing the government with all the necessary archival materials as a tool for better ruling, the objective was to offer historical evidence and a monument of past generations. Hence, the administrative

35 One case in point to mention here concerns Gaetano Pescarenico, an archivist at the State Archives of Milan (Archivio Camerale dello Stato di Milano) from about 1760 to 1770. The chancellor of Austria, Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz, intended to reorganize the State Archives of Milan in a way that he believed would facilitate the ruling government's work. However, that would likely have meant that Pescarenico, who was the only person really familiar with the records in the archives, would not only lose control over the documents, but also over the government's financial activities. Kaunitz tried unsuccessfully for years to force Pescarenico to comply with the orders from Vienna, but the archivist was so stubborn and, at the same time, clever that reforms could only be introduced after his death.

bodies would be stripped of their role as direct managers and keepers of all past records. Deeply concerned about the fate of materials, they made known their opposition. Their main concern was that they would lose not only physical control but also legal control of their materials, while the ruling government acquiring authority over these records could use them according to its own will. In other words, they feared losing the power, control, and restraints they had always enjoyed concerning government actions – since the time when the Spanish government had taken root in many Italian states (1559–1713).

During the previous centuries, public archives had undergone relatively seamless and smooth sedimentation processes. For instance, the archives produced by municipal and then seigneuries' chancelleries mostly contained records and deeds meant to keep memory – self-documentation memory – of all decision-making processes. Only rarely and “owing to a privileged relationship established by a *dominus* with his chancellor,”³⁶ did these archives play a more political role. The archives managed by chancellors were true government tools providing evidence of a government's organization and defining the procedures to be followed by chancellors, who were living in symbiosis with their archives. They have been rightly referred to as “*trésor de chartes*” for the unique value and treasured usefulness that every single record, even a minor one, contained therein would have for the government.³⁷ Sedimentation of these archives, just like the archives of princedoms during the Renaissance, and perhaps more so, was a government matter; it was a matter rulers cared about. It was never left to chance and constantly guarded by chancellors. Similarly, the archives of the chancelleries in the Italian republics (i.e., Genoa and Venice), although managed differently and less dependent on a single ruler, were dutifully cared for by their secretaries. The secretaries' function and their knowledge of the archives would be in most cases passed down from father to son. Republican governments were generally less interested in their archives than princedoms were. They would simply appreciate the archives' instrumental function and leave it completely up to archivists to preserve and bequeath the repositories to the subsequent generations. The archivists, on the other hand, were the only ones who really knew the records held in the archives and valued them much more than the rulers themselves. Thus, they would often behave as if the records were their own property. While under seigneuries and princedoms, the ruling governments were in

36 Franca Leverotti, “Le ragioni di un seminario,” in *Cancelleria e amministrazione negli stati italiani del Rinascimento*, ed. F. Leverotti, *Ricerche storiche* 24, no. 2 (Napoli, Italy: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 1994), 285.

37 This is the expression proposed by Robert Henri Bautier to describe how archives were treasured from the 12th to the 15th centuries. See R. H. Bautier, “La Phase cruciale de l'histoire des archives: la constitution des dépôts d'archives et la naissance de l'archivistique, XVI^e–début XIX^e siècle,” *Archivum* 18 (1968): 139.

charge of the sedimentation of archives; in the oligarchic republics, sedimentation was mostly left to its own devices, with the archives cared for only by their custodians.³⁸

In the 14th to 17th centuries, other types of repositories developed that could be generally defined as “private archives” and which belonged to families and merchants. Church archives should also be mentioned; they underwent even more continual sedimentation processes, although in their own ways. Up until Napoleonic times, church archives only experienced major changes after the Roman Catholic Church reorganization brought about by the Council of Trent (1545–63). Reference will be made here to both family and merchant archives jointly, for they would often coincide. Generally speaking, sedimentation of these types of archives was an unstable and rather turbulent process, linked to the precarious businesses these people would be engaged in and the often violent and sudden turns of events. When examining archival history from the 14th to the 17th centuries, on one hand some very strong institutional powers were gradually acquiring absolute authority and becoming prone to an ever-increasing administrative complexity; on the other hand, the need was felt for private records – which were key to business growth and to the wealth of the state and the ruler – to be produced and preserved in non-institutional ways. While public records would sediment and be organized according to ever more formal methods established over time by the body creating them – i.e., various *magistrature* and *curias* – and would tend toward some stable sedimentation related to their origin, private records were sedimenting and being aggregated depending on the type of business and the more specific activities carried out by their creators.

During these centuries, as a rule, nothing was stable in private archives, nor could any original relationships between series be deemed immutable. As a matter of fact, not only was the whole archives used as evidence of past actions, but also, at the same time, as a tool to exert any rights vested in such actions. Because of persistent legal uncertainty surrounding the application of private and commercial laws, nothing could be considered certain without proper written evidence and not until it had actually taken place. Hence, archival records were deemed constantly useful for the purpose of validating and maintaining acquired positions. From the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis³⁹ onward, more constant sedimentation methods for government records were made possible by increasing government stability in Italy. Conversely, families

38 See Leverotti, “Le ragioni di un seminario,” 288.

39 The Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis, signed by France and England on 2 April 1559 and by France and Spain the following day, ended the Habsburg-Valois war that Charles V and Francis I had initiated in 1521. This treaty defined the balance of power in Europe for several decades (until the start of the Thirty Years’ War in 1618) and established the Spanish control of Italy, which lasted more than a century and a half.

and any other private records creators and custodians, despite their strong positions among the ruling classes in every country, could not always be sure of holding onto them.⁴⁰ That is why these families would constantly resort to their archives in order to confirm their ruling positions and power – which were never permanent – including their oldest and long-sedimented records.⁴¹ Quite frequently, there were cases when very old files belonging to different series would be retrieved, used again for contingent needs and, after their use, reorganized to form a new series with new titles based on the latest use of the materials.⁴²

The very integrity of private archives was often at stake, whenever sedimented records were thought to threaten the interests of another more powerful private individual. When, for example, records were to be used in court, some “ruffians” would be hired to steal the records, which – mind you – were never eliminated, but rather amalgamated with the archives held by the principal in the burglary.⁴³ And what about all the times when a family archives was pulled apart because of weddings or disputes? Sedimentation of these materials was constantly at risk and ever changing, even after the fall of the *ancien régime*.⁴⁴

Despite the hazards described above, sedimentation processes of family archives became more consolidated and ever more essential for economic life in the 17th and 18th centuries. Even governments had to tacitly recognize the important role played by private archives when the government system was being redesigned, especially during the 18th century – something that could briefly be referred to as “enlightened reformism” – and made possible only by resorting to family files and records. These archives featured old contracts of sales, licences, title deeds of rights, and privileges, and whatever else had contributed over time to building the economic, social, and

40 The two oligarchic republics are somehow an exception, even if there was no absolute guarantee for any family that would ensure its rule forever.

41 See Marco Bologna, “Gli archivi di famiglia,” in Sandra Barresi, *Storia di carte, storie di famiglie* (Milan: Isec-Guerini e associati, 2007), 15–60.

42 The Sauli Family Archive in Genoa, Italy, is an example: For over 70 years between the 17th and 18th centuries, Gio Antonio Sauli and his descendants had been fighting in court against several other parties over a very important public tender. In order for the necessary evidence to be presented in court, they would retrieve information from their own archives. These files would then be rearranged into a new series with its own title and index.

43 Following up on the previous footnote, Gio Antonio Sauli hired some ruffians to steal several files from the archives of his former partners in the above-mentioned tender so that the latter would not be able to defend themselves against his illicit claims. Still today, there are numerous cases of files and even of entire archives being “lost” to get rid of evidence of crimes committed by the records creator/custodian, or to take from the records creator/custodian any evidence that they could use to claim their rights.

44 See Bologna, “Gli archivi di famiglia.”

political framework at the local level, where the new governments were now planning to carry out their functions homogeneously and directly. Land registers set up in several Italian states at that time are a concrete example: without family archives and records and, in many instances, without church archives, land registers would never have seen the light of day. Sedimentation of these archives proved to be fundamental. Even if it had been out of control for centuries and never planned by the institutions, these archives were now unexpectedly reaping their fruits in a way that, perhaps, was not really welcome by their very owners.

The whole body of documents and archives surviving both intentional and unintentional destructions underwent sedimentation under legal and political, as well as social and economic, conditions that persisted without change until the revolutions at the end of the 18th century. With the collapse of the *ancien régime*, the outlook for sedimentation of archival materials changed radically, and it was more likely that sedimentation would be guaranteed.

The revolutionary period and then the Napoleonic era had a major impact on the sedimentation of public archives in particular. Current records began to play an even more important role in administrative activities, while the old records, which were significantly greater in number, would finally acquire historical importance. The process of current-archives formation was beginning to change radically in some areas of pre-unification Italy, and even the preservation and transmission practices of older documents were revised. Centuries of sedimentation products were radically altered, while a new criterion was established whereby sedimentation had to be performed in centralized archives. Private archives, even when actively used, were far from being officially recognized. Yet in order to meet the new criteria, they too had to change their preservation methods. As for family archives, their function gradually lost importance, and they became a mere assembly of memories. At the same time, the great age of business archives was about to begin. Although still private, they were completely different types of archives, with totally different sedimentation processes.⁴⁵

“The main players are changing; they become different juridical entities, namely creators of records and at the same time custodians of records produced by others, or the very institutions in charge of archives preservation-

45 The radical political, social, and economic changes that occurred between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century also led to the total loss of power among the aristocratic families of the *ancien régime*, with subsequent dissolution of all of their assets and often, within a short period of time, even the very extinction of the whole family. Archives had lost their concrete value, while their historical value, far from being recognized by the states, was a mere source of sad memories for descendants of these old families. At the same time, abandoned archives were just a nuisance for the new owners of palaces and mansions.

transmission”⁴⁶; sedimentation of public records is no longer a secret process, nor does it take place without reckoning with historical value, which is at this point officially recognized; private archives have grown in number and are becoming more and more instrumental for our civil society. Secrecy and negligence in preservation practices – the two main causes of document destruction – are gradually losing ground, while the history of sedimentation of archival materials continues as an integral part of our collective memory.

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46 Zanni Rosiello, *Archivi e memoria storica*, 52.