



**The Exeter College Oxford Summer Programme
at Exeter College in the University of Oxford**

Historians and the Problem of the Archive

Course Description: The use of archival records is at the core of modern historical scholarship. The authority of the archive as a repository of fragments of the past, however, is heavily questioned today. The course provides the opportunity to engage with an issue that is of vital importance to the discipline of history as we know it, particularly at a time when regimes and practices of establishing and communicating truth based on evidence and objectivity are contested. Philosophers and anthropologists have argued that archives inherently select and organise their materials in ways that necessarily obscure fundamental elements of historical experience, with special reference to empire, colonialism, race, and slavery. The challenge that this radical critique poses to contemporary historians will be carefully discussed. At the same time, special attention will be given to the work of a growing number of historians, who have transformed the archive into a subject of historical research. They have turned to the multiple practices of record-keeping, which led to the birth and evolution of archives and other types of repositories, and the expertise, motivation and epistemology that lay behind them. Such a move has also made historians more aware of differences and similarities in the dynamics through which human societies remember and forget. New questions have thus been raised about the nature of the archive by exploring its elusive relationship with libraries and museums as well as by changing the terms of the old debate over the existence of societies without the archive. In dealing with these and other related questions, the course will address crucial topics in current research in the history of knowledge and global history.

Through 12 lectures and 6 seminars and the required reading students will gain a fuller understanding of the many implications of a critical approach to the archive and a deeper sense of their centrality to the historical practice today.

Course Objectives

The aim of the course is to develop students':

- understanding of the history of archives, their emergence, and evolution from the Middle Ages to the present;
- ability to engage with the ongoing scholarly debate over archiving across time and space;
- critical attitudes towards the archive and the theoretical and methodological problems that it raises;
- preparation to read archival records critically in their context of production, preservation, and reception among the wider society.

The course is designed to be multidisciplinary and is suitable for students of all disciplines who have a strong interest in history. There are no prerequisites, and previous knowledge of history is necessary but would be an advantage.

Teaching Methods and Assessment

- 12 x 1.25hr Lectures (15hrs)
- 6 x 1.25hr Seminars (7.5hrs)
- 2 x 1.25hr Tutorials (2.5hrs)

Twice weekly lectures will present how the archive can be approached both as a theoretical issue and as the subject of historical research in different cultures and societies. The final module will be devoted to microhistories of the archive, which will centre on specific case studies. Students will be expected to have read the specified historiography before the relevant lecture. A weekly seminar will focus on discussion of sources relevant to each week's method or theme, or the archival challenges and practices addressed in the lectures. In addition, students will be expected to give short oral presentations on one of the sources in the context of the broader questions related to the problem of the archive raised in the course. Optional training through visits to Oxford archives, museums and libraries' special collections will also be organised.

Final assessment: An essay of no more than 3,000 words (40%), a final three-hour written examination (40%), oral presentation (10%) and participation in seminar discussion (10%).

Lecture Schedule

Module 1: The archive and its discontents

1. What is an archive?
2. The archive and its logic
3. The archive and its power
4. Challenging the archive

Module 2: The archive in historical perspective

5. The birth of the archive
6. The rise of archival theory
7. Social histories of record-keeping
8. Archiving globally

Module 3: Microhistories of the archive

9. Nahua pictorial evidence from the inquisitorial archive
10. Fragments of voice from the archive of slavery
11. Palm-leaf deeds and the making of a colonial archive
12. The afterlife of British imperial records

Indicative Bibliography

Introductory reading

Craven, L., ed., *What are archives? Cultural and theoretical perspectives: A reader* (2008).

Farge, A., *The allure of the archives* (2013).

Blouin, Jr., F.X., 'History and memory: The problem of the archive', *PMLA* 119, no. 2 (2004).

Blouin, Jr, F.X., and Rosenberg, W.G., *Processing the past: Contesting authority in history and the archives* (2011).

Burton, A., ed., *Archive stories: Facts, fictions, and the writing of history* (2005).

Cook, T., "'The archive(s) is a foreign country': Historians, archivists, and the changing archival landscape", *American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011).

Cook, T., "'We are what we keep; we keep what we are': Archival appraisal past, present, and future," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011).

Derrida, J., *Archive fever: A Freudian impression* (1995).

Yale, E., 'The history of archives: The state of the discipline', *Book History* 18 (2015).

Truillot, M.-R., *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history* (1995).

Hartman, S., 'Venus in two acts', *Small Axe* 26, no. 2 (2008).

Helton, L., et al, *The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive*, special issue of *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (2015):

Fuentes, M.J., *Dispossessed lives: Enslaved women, violence, and the archive* (2016).

Burton, A., *Dwelling into the archive: Women writing house, home, and history in late colonial India* (2003).

Dirks, N., 'Colonial histories and native informants: Biography of an archive', in *Orientalism and the postcolonial predicament of history: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. C. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer (1993), 279-313.

Stoler, A.L., 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance', *Archival Science* 2, no. 1-2 (2002).

Stoler, A.L., *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (2008).

Sartori, P., ed., *Dismantling colonial archives*, special issue of *Quaderni storici* 56, 2 (2021).

History of the Archive

Friedrich, M., *The birth of the archive: A history of knowledge* (2018).

Berenbeim, J., *Art of documentation: Documents and visual culture in medieval England* (2015).

De Vivo, F., Guidi, A., and Silvestri, A., eds., *Archival transformation in early modern European history*, special issue of *European History Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2016).

Donato, M.P., ed., *Early modern archives*, special issue of *Journal of Early Modern History* 22, no. 5 (2018).

Head, R., *Making archives in early modern Europe: Proof, information and political record-keeping, 1400-1700* (2019).

Head, R., ed., *Archival knowledge cultures in Europe, 1400-1900*, special issue of *Archival Science* 10, no. 3 (2010).

Daston, L., *Science in the archives: Pasts, presents, futures* (2017).

Ridener, J., *From polders to postmodernism: A concise history of archival theory* (2009).

Roberts, J.W., 'Archival theory: Myth or banality?', *American Archivist* 53, no. 1 (1990).

Sternfeld, J., 'Archival theory and digital historiography: Selection, search, and metadata as archival processes for assessing historical contextualization', *American Archivist* 74, no. 2 (2011).

Corens, L., Peters, K., and Walsham, A., eds., *The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe*, Supplement of *Past & Present* 230, Supp. 11 (2016).

Bausi, A., Brockmann, C., Friedrich, M., and Kienitz, S., eds., *Manuscripts and Archives: Comparative Views on Record-Keeping* (2018).

Goldberg, J.L. 'Writing history from the Geniza: Issues, methodologies, prospects', *Jewish History* 32, no. 2-4 (2019).

Rustow, M., *The lost archive: Traces of a caliphate in a Cairo synagogue* (2020).

Bora, F., *Writing history in the medieval Islamic world: The value of chronicles as archives* (2020).

Pickett, J., and Sartori, P., eds., *Islamic cultures of documentation*, special issue of *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62, no. 5-6 (2019).

Sartori, P., ed., *Beyond the Islamicate chancery: Archives, paperwork, and textual encounters across Eurasia*, special issue of *Itinerario* 44, no. 3 (2020).

Burak, G., Rothman, E.N., and Ferguson, H., 'Toward early modern archivality: The perils of history in the age of neo-Eurocentrism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 3 (2022).

Case studies

Burns, K., *Into the archive: Writing and power in colonial Peru* (2010).

Davis, N.Z., *Fiction in the archives: Pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France* (1987).

Hidalgo, A., 'The book as archive', *American Historical Review* 127, no. 1 (2022).

Lyna, D., and Bulten, L., 'Material pluralism and symbolic violence: Palm leaf deeds and paper land grants in colonial Sri Lanka, 1680-1795', *Law and History Review* 41, no. 3 (2023).

Mir, F. (ed.), *The archives of decolonization*, Roundtable of *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015).

Rarey, M.F., *Insignificant things: Amulets and the art of survival in the early Black Atlantic* (2023).

Richards, T., *The imperial archive: Knowledge and the fantasy of empire* (1993).

Van Deusen, N.E., 'In the tethered shadow: Native American slavery, African slavery, and the disappearance of the past', *William and Mary Quarterly* 80, 2 (2023).

Van Gelder, M., and de Vivo, F., 'Papering over protests: Contentious politics and archival suppression in early modern Venice', *Past & Present* 258, no. 1 (2023).