Using Information in Archives

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The information to be found in archives is generically called documents and these may take the form of: manuscripts, protocols, contracts, an individual’s or institution’s memoirs, photos, or maps. It can be accessed in archives and that falls under European or national legislation. The digitalization of archives is nowadays’ trend and that allows for both quick access to information and its preservation in classical form. The transparency of archives is ensured via the opportunities granted to researchers to quickly find the information they need and multiply it. For archives to be studied by all those who take an interest in them it is mandatory to guarantee their right preservation and processing. Unfortunately, many archives in Romania do not respect the preservation conditions and hence some of the valuable documents, especially from the medieval period, can no longer be saved. This article focuses on the digitalization of archives and the conditions that have to be upheld in using documentary information. The analysis and interpretation of some documents in the archives along with the technique I employ lead to a manner of work that can be applied to other documents, as well, and thus, might prove useful for other researchers.

Keywords: sources, legislation, digitalization, processing, free access

Introduction

Gathering precious objects of a community is an old trade. Ever since Antiquity the treasure of the kingdom, namely statues, coins and precious jewellery was safely stored. The Athenians had a special storage place for such purposes—on the Acropolis in the temple of Athena—where they not only kept their treasury, but they also organized a pinacotheca where works of art were gathered. Naturally, all Greek citadels were built by similar models. In the dawn of the Middle Ages, the peregrines crossing Europe gathered and carried with them valuable objects, mostly made of gold. Some of these have been well preserved in the tombs of their leaders. With the establishment of the medieval states and the state centralization process, the imperial court set up the chancellery for drawing up official documents and correspondence. Documents were preserved in such places and the latter actually become known for the first collections of chancellery documents. Nobility assigned to new positions in the newly formed states puts up their own collections of objects, mostly manuscripts and then printed books. Documents attesting property, personal correspondence and parochial logs were written and stored in nobles’ houses and therefore it is safe to state that they made the personal collection of noble families. In the Middle Ages the monasteries were the places where documents were written, manuscripts were transcribed, and when a document no longer existed, witnesses were brought to validate and make a new one. Thus, in parallel with the

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royal and nobles’ chancilleries, monasteries were also places where documents of all kinds were created and preserved. In modern ages the trend is for documents to be gathered and stored in specially designed places. However, most of these belonging to personal collections are passes on as family heritage.

On the territory of the Romanian states, archives are established during late modernity and are related to the provisions of the organic regulations of 1831 and 1832. Nonetheless, the latter did not contain the methodological norms by which the institution of archives was to be organized. But efforts were made by a number of intellectuals who ran the archives and inventoried, gathered, and processed existing documents. Some of these were: I. H. Rădulescu, Ghe. Asachi, G. Alexandrescu, B. P. Hașdeu, and A. Sacerdoțeanu. The changes brought by the WWI led to the establishment of territorial archives: in Cluj (1920), Cernăuți (1924), and Chișinău a year later. Moreover, the institution of archives is legally regulated: “In 1951 the Directorate of State Archives is subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and in 1996 a new law regulates the activities of archives and its name is changed into the National Archives of Romania” (History of National Archives of Romania—NAR—web page). The province of Transylvania has a special status in this respect due to the Hungarian and later on Habsburg influence. As a result, rigorously written and preserved official documents along with personal collections are no longer on Romanian soil ever since WWI. Thus, in order to study the history of Transylvania it is necessary to do research in the National Archives of Hungary (Budapest) and the Austrian National Archives in Vienna, an endeavor I also made for several years. The methodology used for this article focuses on elaborating and developing a model that leads to more efficient research methods in archives.

The initial hypothesis is that a standard matrix for the swift analysis and interpretation of documents that allows for the latter’s inclusion in specific categories can be developed. The following descriptive elements are to be taken into account to that end:

- The form of the documents (original documents in classical form, documents converted to microfilm, or copies);
- The language of the documents;
- The introductory and closing formulas in the documents;
- The issuing person or persons;
- The person or persons who write the documents;
- Interpretations of the documents, if they are edited or if not, the elements I employ.

Archivistics and Legislation on Archives in Romania

Archivistics as a science has developed for the past 100 years and its main object is the study of how archives are constituted, as well as the methods of processing and preserving these. It also allows to do research in relation to the former with a view to writing scientific papers. “Archivistics is a discipline that focuses on sources written on frail materials and that underpin fundamental research, while documentary information studies information, data included in documents, publication and then elaborates efficient evaluation means” (Berciu-Draghicescu, 2007, p. 28). According to the author, there is a clear distinction between how archives are organized and the use of sources for documentation. Historical sources are the main pillar for thorough research. They are diverse and each of them shares a moment from a person’s, family’s, or community’s life. In this respect, Luciene Febvre indicated that
It is all that historians’ imagination allows them to use to make their honey in the absence of regular flowers; in other words, it is the writing, the landscapes, the clay plaques, the flowers and the weeds, the moon eclipses and the harnesses, the stone examination of geologists and the metal swords’ tests of chemists—in a nutshell, all that belonged to humans, served them, signals their presence, activities, gestures and behaviors. (Febvre, 1965, p. 428)

The way in which the documents were written reveals how their authors relate to the institutions they represent or the institutions to which they ask for something. All of these accessible ways of being situated sketch and restore to the researcher the atmosphere of the investigated period. (Sorea, 2011, p. 335)

Historical sources serve research and documentation efforts made not only by historians and humanists, but also by other categories of specialists: cadastral, statisticians, builders, or architects. However, information needs to be legally regulated at state level. Thus, in Romania, the archivist norms and their methods of enforcement were not stipulated in the Organic Regulations issued between 1832 and 1834 and which underpin the establishment of archives in Romania. That only occurred through Act No. 16 as of 1996. Currently, there are efforts made by people from within the institution of archives to update this law and make it more thorough. I henceforth quote and paraphrase several provisions of this law. According to the Act on Archives, the definition of information to be found in archives is as follows:

It is hereby defined by this Act that a document that belongs to the National Romanian Archivistics Collection is any official or personal, diplomatic, consular papers, memoirs, manuscripts, proclamations, calls, posters, maps, sketches, cinema rolls and any other testimonies, seal matrices, as well as photo, video and audio recordings, as well as the information of historical value created domestically or abroad. (Act on Archives, No. 16/1996, General Dispositions)

Another part of the legislation on archives was issued in 2006 and apart from the 1996 text it additionally stipulates the right of researchers to do their documentation in archives: “The documents that belong to the Romanian National Archivistics Collection can be used for scientific research, dealing with administrative and informatics’ work, education, elaborating papers, releasing copies, extracts and certificates” (Act on Archives, Chapter IV). In this respect, it is worth noting that many people resort to archives in order to look for information that may help them gain monetary compensations or other rights. The archives’ personnel are efficient and manage to swiftly solve most of the requirements.

However, the legal framework leaves no room for interpretation when it comes to the interdictions to access documents and that actually overwrites the right to documentation specified by the Law on Archives No. 677/2001: “The documents that could damage national interests, citizens’ rights and freedoms as a result of the data and information they contain or could endanger physical integrity cannot be accessed for research purposes” (Act on Archives, Chapter IV, Art. 30). This provision also created problems for archivists since they are supposed to process the collections and, as a result of the aforementioned article, they cannot research it. Concerning that, Bogdan Florin Popovici highlights some internal issues of the Romanian archives: “The security of personal data in the historical documents from Romania has been incompletely implemented, leaving room for arbitrary and abuse” (Popovici, 2001, p. 27). Thus, if anyone wants to do research in the archives and gets access to the needed collection, how can that person know for certain that the collection has not been tampered with and hence, information considered of national interest, has not been removed?

This legal framework coordinates the activity of an institution and needs to be respected by those who need information from that establishment. Most certainly, the methodology needs reformulation and reorganization
and a new act on archives that reflects nowadays’ realities is expected. Moreover, storage and preservation areas for archive collections need reorganization and modernization, as well as additional specialized personnel.

Access to Archive Information and Its Use

If in the previous years doing documentation work in archives was a time consuming activity requiring travel to the headquarters of the institution, checking the inventory log of collections, ordering and being provided with the collections required—a matter of days, actually—nowadays’ digitalization of archives allows researchers to access them from home. However, the very same digitalization raises problems for the people working in archives since “the conflict between the right to access information and securing confidentiality put pressure on some legal norms concerning the duration for which documents can be kept” (Munteanu, 2009, pp. 186-187). Digitalization allows researchers to select the collections of interest, ordering them and then consulting them. I will use three examples by which I will try to demonstrate the need to facilitate access to information in the archives, namely the County Directorate of State Archives of Brasov, the Archives from Austria, and those from Hungary-Budapest, all of which I am familiar with.

The County Directorate of State Archives of Brasov headquartered in the blacksmiths’ tower from the old fortified citadel of Brasov has an interactive web page: www.arhivele.nationale-brasov.ro and benefitted from a digitalization project in 2014. This was initiated by the University of Bucharest in partnership with Romanian National Archives, Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca and National Archives of Norway. This website hosts information on the archived collections of four counties: Brașov, Covasna, Harghita, and Sibiu, which make the Regional Center of Brasov. The search functions of the website are organized by a specific structure: document hierarchy, issuant, key words, toponym, and onomastic clues, as well as document language. All of the above allows ease of access to information and saves time for whoever searches the site. The access to the books in the library of the archive is also facilitated via online means and that greatly helps in putting together a full bibliographic list. The website also thoroughly details the steps to be taken in order to access information and collections. However, the institution has problems with the storage areas that are affected by a lot of dampness that can lead to document deterioration.

The second example is that of the National Archives of Hungary from Budapest which are to be found at www.mnl.gov.hu. This hosts both modern and contemporary collections of the Buda citadel, as well as the medieval archives. This institution also digitalized is archives and the search can be done using: the inventory of collections by dates, collections, and micro-rolls (actually most of the medieval documents have been on micro-rolls since the 1990s, especially those on frail material), logs of collections spread across Hungary. What Hungary has managed to do for the past years is the digitalization of map collections, all of the medieval collections, the collection of rare books and manuscripts (Libri Regni), and the collection of cadastre documents and military drafts. Digitalization allows researchers to check the status and availability of collections and, in some situations, access to online copies. The archive collections are numerous and researchers can be helped by the institution’s employees in foreign languages as well. Moreover, the working hours of the archives allow for a thorough documentation.

The third case used for exemplification purposes is that of the State Archives of Austria. Its collections are hosted in three locations in Vienna: the House of Habsburg, the Imperial Court, and the Austrian state. The
The Austrian Archives have 183,700 linear meters of archives and 800,000 volumes and publications. There are numerous search options that ensure researchers’ accessibility to the documents: state records, funds of Austrian provinces, funds of cities, church archives, and sources. The archives also have a bibliography organized by topics and allow online access of its library from any location outside the institution. Worth reminding is that the archives also host the collections of movies from Austria, Austria’s media library, and the media library of Austrian museums’ films.

Hence, the access to information for documentation purposes is facilitated. Some of the collections can be accessed via the website and only a part of these require researchers to travel to Vienna. However, even in this case, the collections can be ordered online in order to save time when arriving at the institution or there is information available on their availability. The digitalization of collections is a very efficient action. By comparison, when I did research years ago, documentation took much longer as is result of the need to travel to the institution hosting the collections, the time needed to consult these and then the time required to order and wait for the collections to be brought. Even the work of the personnel in the archives is facilitated by “making documents digitally available and thus allowing for the removal of the classified information in these without deteriorating the original document” (Munteanu, 2009, p. 187). However, as a researcher, I had the opportunity to work on the originals, which nowadays is no longer the case. To have access to the material on which the document is written, to observe several types of handwriting, the original covers, the original signatures accompanied by different seals and inks is work that cannot be compared to anything else and offers great satisfactions. It is original collections that I studied in the Romanian archives from Brașov, Sfântul Gheorghe Sibiu and Cluj, as well as in Budapest and Vienna from where I obtained copies of the documents needed that were not free of charge. Therefore, it is only natural for technical progress to take hold of archives as well and thus reduce the time for documentation. On the other hand, according to theory information represents the organized transmission of a unitary system of knowledge about nature, society, though; through the information are transmitted scientific content, technical, literary, artistic, philosophical, ethical, religious, thus putting the foundations of science and culture (Bolborici, 2010, p. 29).

The use of information in the archives is done by respecting the norms on quoting sources. Information can be initially included in edited volumes or it may be inedited. Either way, using quotation marks and mentioning the collection name, its location, the inventory number, the folder, the years by which the collection is structured in the folder, the pages where the quote can be found are mandatory and are related to the ethics of research. In the case of larger papers where both edited and inedited documents are used, the observation on the manner the collections are noted is made at the beginning highlighting what short forms are used for the archived collections so that the reader understands these. In the case of articles the sources are referenced either after the quote, or in the footnote (which, in my opinion, is better)—depending on the editor’s requirements. As time needed, the documentation for a scientific paper requires understating the language of the document, analyzing and integrating the information in the archives in a general, as well as specific context. It is only in the case of multiple editions of documents that a parallel presentation of the original document and its translation become mandatory. As for other situations, the copy of the document is included as an appendix to the paper.
Document Interpretation Matrix

From the perused documents I selected some examples that meet the preliminary prerequisites and allow for the formulation of the hypothesis.

Document No. 1 contains the allegiance oath taken by the members of the parish committee from Rupea Chair to the Emperor Leopold I on March 11, 1692. The Document No. 96/2, collection 1362 is in the inventory of Vienna Chamber Archives. The writing in the document is structured as follows: the introductory formula, the handwritten content in German, and the closing formula in Latin that sanctions the oath. In the first part of the document the chairs and towns from Transylvania, along with the officials of Rupea Chair express their intent to swear their allegiance to the emperor. Its content includes the agreement of the representatives of the localities from within the Chair, whereas the closing formula, written in Latin, endorses the allegiance oath of the same elected representatives. Their names are listed at the end of the document: Georg, the judge royal of Rupea and the economic and commerce administrator. The signature of the parish council and its members’ wax seals are also visible: Andreas Lang—the pastor, Johannes Edeliu—deacon, Samuel Herman—deacon, Simon Wester—school principal, Paul Figuli—cantor, Geor Grafii and Lukas Merchelius—Rupea parish committee members.

Figure 1. Document No. 1, Collection 96/2, Hof Cammer Archiv Vienna.
Document No. 2 is issued by the ruler Michael the Brave in Ploiesti on July 23, 1598 and contains his allegiance oath to Emperor Maximilian II. The introductory formula is in Latin: *Serenisimme Cesar king Maximilian, I hereby the signatory of this document, appeal to your clemency*; the content is written in Hungarian and the closing formula is in Latin. The goal of the ruler of Wallachia is to forge alliances in order to counter the action of the Ottoman Empire and, according to the custom procedures of the time, in order to secure the aid or rather the neutrality of the Austrians he issues in this document. Even though it does not bear any direct consequences, it buys the ruler time for his plans to enter Transylvania.
Document No. 3 is addressed to Prince George II Rákóczi asking for his aid and willingness to deduct taxes for the damages caused by the noble Bekes to Rupea Chair and to the localities neighboring the district of Fagaras, as well as the enclave of Alba town. The requirement is made by the representatives of Rupea Chair and they ask for justice since the Prince is the highest resort. The document is written in German and Latin. The end of the document lists the names of the signatories: people with ranks in the hierarchy of Rupea Chair and bourg: Georg Nemeth—mayor, Gerog Ewan—vice mayor, Iakob Bening—senator, Bathos Brez—senator, Jakob Marti—judge. The confirmation of the document is signed by Zaharias Muller—people’s leader and Martin Pildner—notary.
The three examples provided by this article are in the inventory of Vienna archives in various collections in their original form. Two of these, related to Rupea bourg, were published in my paper of 2010 *Din istoria asezărilor transilvane: târgul Rupea* (Romanian for *On the History of Transylvanian Settlements: Rupea Bourg*), and the document issued by Michael the Brave is presented by this article in its unedited form.

Even though the documents have different content, I use the same interpretation model. The introductory and closing formulas are standard for all three documents. The specificity of each of them is as follows. Document No. 1 containing the allegiance oath to the emperor bears resemblance to documents that have the same type of content. Document No. 2 issued by the ruler Michael the Brave is typical for the medieval vassalage documents that show the allegiance of lower ranks to senior persons like Emperor Maximilian. Document No. 3 is a supplication sent by the officials of the Chair to the Prince of Transylvania, George II Rákóczi. The languages of the three documents are different: the Latin used in the chancellery, Hungarian and the German employed by the documents written by the chairs. My research effort focused on deciphering the texts of the documents and unveils the names of people in lower administrative positions and their names, namely people who contributed to the well functioning of economy and administration such as priests, deacons, mayors, notaries, or senators. Their signatures and seals are in the footer of the documents and represent an important part of our research. In the case of the document issued by Michael the Brave, its relevance is remarkable: The ruler is not beneath the emperor judging by the impeccable Latin he uses to require the assurance of the latter. The elegance of the language reveals a well organized chancellery of Wallachia.
Understanding the political context of the three documents is a prerequisite in establishing the research matrix. Thus, in the XVI and XVII centuries the principality of Transylvania experiences difficult times and is the scene of the frequent incursions of the Turks and the powerful pressure from the Habsburg Empire in the West. Wallachia is the starting point for the ruler’s efforts to unite the Romanian areas for the first time in their history—an endeavor requiring courage, but also a lot of diplomacy and political tact, which are visible in the example provided by this article.

**Conclusion**

Doing research based on archives needs to comply with existing legal framework and the schedule of the institutions hosting the archives. The digitalization of archived collections of documents, as well as of those printed on frail materials has been one of the accomplishments in Romania for the past years. That allows remote access to collections and anyone with an interest can view the contents of the collections and if they are available for research. Most likely one of the projects for the years to come is to create a general collection of the archives to be found in a specific region. Such an enterprise would manage to put all interests together and gather common funding for a given area in Romania. Open access to the collections of documents in the archives has led to knowledge gathering and openness towards Europe, as well as to the flow of information in a normal manner.

Accessing European funding and collaborating with archives from abroad that have managed to digitalize their collections for years now is the model to be followed and “to prepare for an international job experience of their own” (Saunders et al., 2013, p. 33). Such projects have allowed the institution of archives to become an open one and thus gain more transparency. For all of the above, consistent effort is required on behalf of those employed by this establishment. Processing, doing the inventory, and summarizing the archived collections require work that spans for years. The texts of the documents are written in old languages, like the medieval ones, and that necessitates well trained personnel with very good knowledge of paleography. Moreover, modern and contemporary collections also need processing and inclusion in folders and volumes even if their language is very close to nowadays’ language. Thus, we hope that the future will present favorable solutions for the current issues of storage areas and qualified personnel with which the institution of archives is confronted in Romania.

The research method or the work matrix, as I call it, bears results. My hypotheses are also validated. The three documents have different contents: The first is a standard allegiance oath; the second is a chancellery document revealing the diplomacy of the ruler Michael the Brave; and the third a supplication to George II Rákóczi. Nonetheless, they all share a common element: They are historical scraps of reality. The beauty and accuracy of the languages employed in the documents are remarkable and underline the attention paid endeavors like the ones they record.

**References**


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**Unprecedented Documentary Funds**

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