WHAT IS OUR HISTORICAL *A PRIORI*?
THE STATE AS COMMON SENSE AND THE FORGOTTEN MUNICIPAL ARCHIVE

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Allow me to begin southwest of Paris on 5 July 1194, four months after Prince John of England's notorious defection by signing a pact with French King Philip Augustus. At the Battle of Fréteval, John's betrayed brother, King Richard, ambushes Philip and comes away victorious. Among his treasures are the French royal baggage containers, which contain various kingly treasures: gold, jewelry, and so on. Yet the royal baggage also contained some more peculiar items: an undisclosed amount of furniture, which the king apparently could not do without in battle, and of greater interest here, archival documents. At the time, these were probably considered part of Philip's treasury, but they included accounting books, fiscal charters, inventories of the royal domain, tax books, even a primitive census and the royal seal.[1]

Why would a 12th century king carry his archive around into battle? The origins of medieval archives suggest not a pragmatic but a symbolic purpose: even at the turn of the 13th century, the archive had immense symbolic significance. It signaled political authority; it marked the material and visual manifestation of the power of documents. Some of this we may attribute to the sacrality the written word acquired as a result of the Church's near-monopoly on literacy at this point in Medieval Europe.[2] Yet modern history suggests the symbolism to be more convoluted: somewhere between sovereignty and sacrality.

Indeed, it is the modern state, which more than any other political actor, has adopted a sense of archival grandiosity. President Hoover, when inaugurating the Archives of the United States called them, "a temple of history, an expression of the American soul."[3] French archival buildings, furthermore, are typically designed to resemble cathedrals – another indication of the sacred importance and the symbolism embodied by archives. Yet in order to unpack this association of archival monumentality and state sovereignty, a distinction must be drawn between *the* archive and archive*s*. A core underpinning of my argument here is to challenge the monopoly of the modern state on administrative political archives.

I choose to do this by examining the history of the municipal archive in late medieval Europe, focusing on autonomous cities across western Europe and the archives they held as autonomous political actors.[4] Remember that Europe was in this period certainly not a system of states; rather it contained an array of political actors, all of which *could have* prevailed as the dominant form of political organization: the kings gradually building states, autonomous cities, city-leagues, ecclesiastical and feudal lords, and the Catholic Church.[5] Moreover, the institutions of each of these actors may have contributed to the "final product," what we know today as the sovereign nation-state.

The accepted wisdom regarding state formation theory is that medieval kings, by collecting

taxes in order to wage wars and waging wars in order to collect more taxes, created a war-tax-war cycle which eventually precipitated the bureaucratic core of the modern state. The resulting administrative apparatus included increasingly sophisticated royal archives and chanceries, where official royal documents were produced and stored. Documentary practice became more regularized, complex and voluminous.[6] Yet very little research has been done on the origins of the administrative methods which enabled that first flurry of royal state-building and document gathering. Moreover, state formation theories focus exclusively on the apparatuses of the state's predecessors, the royal courts later described anachronistically as nascent states. Theorists have been hesitant to fully assess the role of other political actors in state formation.[7] For example, it is typically postulated that the city contributed to state formation primarily and solely as a site for capital accumulation, capital tapped by the state to fund its wars of expansion.[8] Consequently, theorists reify the idea of the "state," seeing late medieval and early modern feudal monarchies not as the royal amalgamations they were, but as incipient forms of the modern state.[9] In addition to suffering from numerous logical pitfalls, such a narrative is problematic in that it excludes an entire class of histories, of which the autonomous city and its municipal archive are only one.

Furthermore, it is evident that the state did learn administrative methods from other political actors, including the Church, cities and merchants.[10] Such institutional learning could potentially have occurred through conquest. Spanish rule in Northern Italy in the 16th century, for example, coincided with sophistication of the Spanish royal archiving system, a process culminating in the creation of the Castilian royal archives at Simanças.[11] Institutional transfer of bureaucratic methods may alternatively have corresponded with the movement of individual municipal administrators and merchants to royal court bureaucracies. 13th century Italian and Jewish financiers are known to have moved from trade fairs such as those in Champagne to the princely administrations of northwest Europe.[12] Similarly, around the turn of the 16th century, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian began to prefer burghers (urban citizens) as candidates for his own administration, eschewing the typical choice of nobles for such roles.[13]

Hence the primary insight I hope will resonate with the participants of this conference: archives are not merely a resource for the writing of history or the preservation of film. Rather, they have been central institutions of the bureaucratic apparatuses of political entities for centuries. As such, archives should also serve as a subject of historical analysis in themselves. Thus I want to look, through the archive as institution, at the administrative legacy left by city upon the state. Such an analysis requires a deeper look at the place of community in the archive – for that is the essential difference between the archives of kings slowly forming states and the archives of autonomous municipalities in late medieval Europe. The term community here refers to the urban "textual community" coined by historian Brigitte Bedos-Rezak.[14] She sees the municipal archive as the place where a civic liturgy is practiced: archives held the documents which would be available as "sacred" texts and icons for the rituals of enacting that civic community. By holding them the archive itself came to play a role in the textual community.[15]

Several communal aspects of archiving were exclusive to municipalities. First, public accessibility: as a rule, municipal archives were accessible for free. 14th century London contained two archives which recorded land transactions: the archive of the City of London and the King's royal chancery. The London municipality's Husting Rolls recorded land transactions within the city walls, and were free for the use of any and all.[16] The King's rolls, on the other hand, were limited to those who could pay a fee, and thus served a wholly different function and population.

Another expression of the textual community in the urban archive was its incorporation and activation of vernacular texts. Urban archives were much quicker to leave the republic the letters – that is, the written language of Latin – and begin recording texts in local tongues. As early as

the 14th century in what is today Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, France and beyond, urban administrations began to translate charters and city privileges, documents which autonomous or semi-autonomous cities held as crucial expressions of their rights and identity.[17] As a result, such texts could be easily mobilized for urban politics and were sensible to the gathered crowds: for frequent oath-swearing ceremonies of new officials, for rousing revolts and so on. However, in the feudal monarchies, later to become states, as late as the 16th century the different regions of a royal realm might speak different languages; they might have different names for the entity of which they were ostensibly a part and be governed by distinct rules and by separate kingly councils.[18] The fact that kingly archives and chanceries remained loyal to Latin texts until a much later date is an expression of this disparity. Imposing a common language upon the "French" citizens of Provence, for example, would take centuries more.

Once the archive is viewed as subject of research, as an institution in its own right, a variety of arguments can be re-examined. The historian Almut Höfert's argument about the city's legacy as it lives on in the state can be critiqued in this way.[19] Höfert sees the legacy of the city as an administrative one: the documentary practices developed in the city somehow made their way into the state apparatus, and became a part of it. She proposes, however, a rather bleak view linking oligarchic urban politics with subsequent royal absolutism. In the 14th and 15th centuries, German and Italian urban politics indeed became more exclusive and more oligarchic. Italian communes often came under the seigneurial rule of a single family, while in Germany the number of families represented on city councils shrunk drastically.[20] This shift in cities towards narrower ruling institutions coincided with massive documentary innovations, including the ways in which archives were organized, the types of documents kept, the sophistication of city books, tax codes, indexing and censuses. Höfert continues by arguing that such administrative methods, in the hands of the newly entrenched urban elite, led not to the enforcement of equality among the citizens, or even to the enforcement of the rule of law, but rather served to monopolize this new elite's understanding of the *utilitas publica*, the public good. By means of these new documentary and archival methods, urban elites were better able to enforce their worldview and force it upon the city's residents. Pointing to Bodin's concept of the *civis* in which he refers specifically to the urban subject, Höfert claims that this use of documentary practices, which made citizen into subject reached the state royal absolutist state.

Thus archival methods made their way from the city into the state and brought with them the mechanisms which subjected citizens to more centralized, efficient and nefarious control of a knowledgeable sovereign. Documents and the urban archives, which made them accessible, were the precursors of States "knowing" their subjects – in censuses, cadastral maps, urban planning, and social controls. How can this be reconciled with my findings suggesting the urban communalism expressed in the archive? Staying within the archive as a subject of research suggests a key difference in the way urban and royal polities wielded their sovereignty – an alternate explanation for Höfert's argument that the state learned absolutism, as it were, from the city. A fascinating example of such a difference is what I term "archival annexation," the conquering and seizure of archives by state-building rulers.

Beginning in the 13th century, French kings conquered the archives of newly-won territories, going to the lands they conquered, finding archival repositories, and taking control of and scouring their contents.[21] Burgundian state-builders in the mid-14th century did the same. To this day, the archives of the Lille Chambre des comptes contain a series composed of both the documents seized from conquered territories and those the Burgundians made themselves.[22]

Evidence of such archival annexation, however, is limited to what we can call state-building

kings, princes and nobles. Autonomous cities did not carry out these annexations, even though they did often conquer and control lands for protracted periods. Venice is a perfect example: it never absconded with the archives of conquered lands. On the contrary: the Venetians willingly and proudly shared their legal and administrative innovations with other cities. When Venice agreed to Nuremburg's request for a copy of its laws in 1508, the Venetians were so proud that they commissioned a painting commemorating the event on the walls of the Doge's Palace.[23] Indeed, municipalities frequently shared administrative methods: their codes of law, judicial proceedings and decisions reached in particularly difficult judicial cases. Across western Europe cities shared such administrative tools: Hanseatic cities shared entire law codes, Lübeck's with 43 other Hanseatic towns, Frankfurt's with 49 others;[24] cities shared the charters granted them by the French and English crowns; the citizens of English cities exchanged letters providing advice on how they had received rights or privileges in their charters.[25]

These signs of urban institutional sharing serve to reinforce the dual communal aspect of the urban archive. Alongside an intercity network of "fellowship between self-governing cities,"[26] there existed the internal fellowship enacted in the urban archive. A final example of this brings us to the Flemish city of Ghent in the 15th century. There, in the midst of a rebellion against the Burgundian state-builder Philip the Good, a group of rebellious citizens marched to the city archive, removed files from it, and translated them from Latin into Dutch. From there they marched on to the city's market square where all the main political events of the city took place, and read the texts aloud from the same balcony that had been used for the purpose in previous rebellions.[27] This episode suggests the archive as both muniment (derived from the Latin *munimentum*, defense) and monument (derived from the Latin *momentum*, memorial), respectively: as a political resource holding documentary weapons to be unsheathed in defense of rights, on the one hand, and as a sacral symbol of urban independence and shared history, on the other.[28] A view of archives as no more than resources for history writing or as the sole purview of the nation-state would thus miss a slew of important meanings and uses, and would occlude the unique interaction between sovereignty and sacrality in the late medieval urban *milieu*.

In this same vein, Derrida argued that there is no political power without control of the archive.[29] Charles Tilly has similarly suggested that the state may have covered its own tracks; that is to say, the archival evidence that we have before us when studying the medieval period may be biased before we've even looked at it: the state was victorious, and the archive is of course shaped by the victors. To this my only response is to quote St. Augustine: "For we have not entirely forgotten anything if we can remember that we have forgotten it. For, a lost notion, one that we have entirely forgotten, we cannot even search for."[30] The municipal archive, I hope, has not been entirely forgotten, as we have much to learn from it.

1 John W. Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1986, p. 56.

2 Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, *Civic Liturgies and Urban Records in Northern France, 1100-1140*, in Barbara Hanawalt, Kathryn Reyerson (eds.), *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1994, p. 35.

3 Quoted in Eric Ketelaar, "The Architecture of Archives: Whose Form, What Functions?," in *Archival Science*, no. 2, 2002, pp. 239-261. On the symbolic power of documents and archives, see James O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," in *American Archivist*, no. 56, 1993, pp. 234-255.

4 On autonomous cities in late medieval Europe, see Wim Blockmans, *Voracious States and Obstructing Cities: An Aspect of State-Formation in Preindustrial Europe*, in Charles Tilly, Wim Blockmans (eds.),

Cities and the Rise of States in Europe A.D. 1000 to 1800, Westview Press, Boulder 1994, p. 227; Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterannean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Harper & Row, New York 1972, vol. 1, pp. 396ff.

5 Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996. The array of political competitors in late Medieval Europe is also described in Charles Tilly, *Reflections on the History of European State-Making*, in Charles Tilly, Gabriel Ardant (eds.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1975.

6 Though there are dozens of variants, the quintessential case is made in Charles Tilly, *Reflections on the History of European State-Making*, cit. A more nuanced version of the argument appears in Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States A.D. 990-1992*, Blackwell, Cambridge 1992, pp. 15-16.

7 For a discussion of this problem, see Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*, cit.

8 Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital and European States A.D. 990-1992*, cit., p. 51.

9 On the idea of feudal monarchy and the medieval conglomerate state see J.H. Elliot, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies," in *Past and Present*, no. 137, 1992, pp. 48-71.

10 On the Church's contribution to the development of the bureaucratic apparatus of the early modern state see Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge: From Gutenberg to Diderot*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000, pp. 120ff; Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton University Press, Princetion-New York 1983, p. 37; Jacob Soll, *Information Master: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Intelligence System*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2009, p. 27.

11 Federico Chabod, *Was There a Renaissance State?*, in Heinz Lubasz (ed.), *The Development of the Modern State*, Macmillan, Toronto 1964, p. 37; Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, Riverside Press, Cambridge 1955, p. 230.

12 Gérard Sivéry, *Non-Literary Sources in the B Series of the Archives of the Department of Lille for the Period 1250-1330*, in Richard Britnell (ed.), *Pragmatic Literacy: East and West, 1200-1330*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 1997, p. 76.

13 Thomas A. Brady, *The Urban Belt and the Emerging Modern State*, in Peter Blickle (ed.), *Resistance, Representation, and Community*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1997, p. 249.

14 Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, *Civic Liturgies and Urban Records in Northern France, 1100-1140*, cit., p. 34.

15 For a similar argument more closely following the role of the urban archive see Eric Ketelaar, "Records out and Archives in: Early Modern Cities as Creators of Records and as Communities of Archives," in *Archival Science*, no. 10, pp. 201-210.

16 The Husting Rolls also displayed some markedly sophisticated innovations in the practice of indexing, a key aspect of modern archiving which royal archives were often two centuries later to develop than were their municipal counterparts. See Geoffrey Martin, *Records and Record-Keeping in Medieval London*, in M.V. Roberts (ed.), *Archives and the Metropolis*, Guildhall Library Publications, London 1998, p. 75. For more on English royal archiving see Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066 to 1307*, Edward Arnold, London 1979, pp. 121ff.

17 See the collection edited by Richard Britnell, *Pragmatic Literacy: East and West, 1200-1330*, cit., especially the chapters by Manfred Groten, Richard Britnell, Manuel Riu, Geoffrey Martin and Thomas Behrmann.

18 Harald Gustafsson, "The Conglomerate State: A Perspective on State Formation in Early Modern Europe," in *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 23, nos. 3-4, 1998, pp. 196-197.

19 Almut Höfert, *States, cities, and citizens in the later Middle Ages*, in Quentin Skinner and Bo Strath (eds.), *States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003. The noted argument is presented on pages 69-71.

20 See Richard Brown, "Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Death of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385," in *Archivaria*, no. 44, 1997, pp. 1-43, p. 10; Thomas A. Brady Jr., *The Urban Belt and the Emerging Modern State*, cit., p. 243.

21 Olivier Guyotjeannin, *French Manuscript Sources, 1200-1330*, in Richard Britnell (ed.), *Pragmatic Literacy: East and West, 1200-1330*, cit., pp. 62-63.

22 This is the B Series of the Archives of the Department of Lille. For an overall survey of this series see Gérard Sivéry, *Non-Literary Sources in the B Series of the Archives of the Department of Lille for the Period 1250-1330*, cit., pp. 74-75.
23 Ann Katherine Isaacs, Maarten Prak, *Cities, Bourgeoisies, and States*, in Wolfgang Reinhard (ed.), *Power Elites and State Building*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p. 218.
24 See Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors*, cit., p. 162, note 57; see also Harold Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1983, p. 376.
25 See for example, Geoffrey Martin, *English Town Records*, in Richard Britnell (ed.), *Pragmatic Literacy: East and West, 1200-1330*, cit., pp. 119-130, pp. 127-128.
26 Ann Katherine Isaacs, Maarten Prak, *Cities, Bourgeoisies, and States*, cit., p. 218.
27 Peter J. Arnade, *Realms of Ritual: Burgundian Ceremony and Civic Life in Late Medieval Ghent*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1996, p. 110; Marc Boone, "The Dutch Revolt and the Medieval Tradition of Urban Dissent," in *Journal of Early Modern History*, no. 11, 2007, pp. 351-375, pp. 356-357.
28 Eric Ketelaar, "Muniments and monuments: the dawn of archives as cultural patrimony," in *Archival Science*, no. 7, 2007, pp. 343-357, p. 345.
29 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, p. 11, note 1.
30 St. Augustine Bishop of Hippo, *Confessions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1991, Ch. XIX.