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RECOVERED VOICES, NEWFOUND QUESTIONS

FAMILY ARCHIVES AND
HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

This book is born out of the realization of silences. Of protagonists of History, of voices of the past, of documents. It is also born of the conviction that these silences are not always (are rarely?) due to incidents or catastrophe. Therefore, its central task is to reflect on them, professing that it is necessary to understand the reason for absences before attempting to satisfy them, and understanding absence as integral to the process of the historiographical construction. To that end, the book proposes to “return” to a starting point which, more than a “fixed point”, is a process: the production of social information, its fixation on durable media — the documents — and the uses that these are subjected to from then on — uses that include their conservation in historical archives, their study and classification by archivists, and their historical analysis by historians. The understanding of historical sources as a social process to be explained through historiographical inquiry, the incorporation of “silences” in the analysis, and the partnership between historians and other social scientists, namely the archivists, in this: these are the pillars of this book.

In compliance, simplistic views must first be avoided. The imbalance between the voices and the silences in the archives bears upon different elements. It largely results from a historical process, conscious or unconscious, that reflects the evolution of societies and their activity in information production and conservation. However, historians and archivists also play an active role in this dialectics, whether they recognize it or not. When historiography favours certain types of sources to the detriment of others, voices are heard and others are silenced. When archival acquisition policies favour the integra-

tion of certain types of documentary sets over others, there are voices heard and others silenced.

Then, it is necessary to accept the worth of scientific reflection. If it is true that the participation of historians and archivists in the process of giving voice or silencing is not always intentional and conscious and does not always depend on their will, the opposite is however possible and desirable. As the book *Recovered voices, newfound questions. Family archives and historical research* demonstrates, when both historians and archivists strive to identify the silences in the archives and retrieve something of their lost voices, results can be very positive.

In fact, family archives are an example of archives that, due to vicissitudes of many sorts, tend to have been little explored in works of a historiographic or archival nature. The reasons for this partly relate to a problem of accessibility. Many of these documentary sets are, or have for a long time been, in the custody of private owners, usually the descendants of the families that created the archives. Thus, access to documents depends on the will and availability of these owners and does not abide by the rules followed in the public archives.

Secondly, family archives constitute an archival heritage at risk. Several survive in a precarious state of conservation, sometimes intensified by neglect or lack of interest from their owners. Even in cases where investment in preservation is clear, it is not always possible to properly accommodate large documentary masses and to ensure the special care that such accommodation demands. Finally, as private property, family archives are part of an inheritance dividable among several heirs, and dividing them means destroying their organic unity. Hence, in many cases only fragments of a whole — meanwhile dispersed across several private or public repositories — are known.

Additionally, the historiography dedicated to family history has tended to privilege documentation originating in, and preserved by, public or state institutions, resulting in a writing of family history based mainly or only on documents produced about the family groups, rather than on documents created and preserved by the family groups. This was not only the result of the preferences of historians, but also derives from the fact that the public and

state archives are usually the finest in archival institutions, both in terms of numbers and the quality of archival treatment.

In spite of these difficulties, in recent years studies related to family archives and their promotion within society in general have increased, driven by universities, public archives and also by the owners of archives. The initiatives dedicated to these archives specifically are multiple and diverse: master's and doctoral dissertations; international research projects; publications; exhibitions; scientific meetings; and visits to the archives at the invitation of their owners.

As brief examples, mention should be made of 1) the collective work *Arquivos de Família, séculos XIII–XX: que presente, que futuro?*, published in 2012¹; 2) the project “ARCHIFAM — Arquivos de família na Península Ibérica (finais do século XIII–início do século XVII)”, under the aegis of the École des hautes études hispaniques et ibériques (Casa de Velázquez, Madrid, Spain) between 2013 and 2015²; 3) The book *Arquivos de família: Memórias habitadas. Guia para salvaguarda e estudo de um património em risco*, published in 2014³; 4) the project “INVENT.ARQ — Inventários de arquivos de família, sécs. XV–XIX: de gestão e prova a memórias perdidas. Repensando o arquivo pré-moderno”, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology between 2014 and 2015⁴, which resulted in the publication of *Rethinking the Archive in Pre-Modern Europe: Family Archives and their Inventories from the 15th to the 19th Century*⁵; 5) the project “Censo de Archivos Familiares y Personales de Canarias”, developed at La Laguna University between 2016 and 2017⁶; and 6) VINCULUM, “Entailing Perpetuity. Family, Power, Identity. The Social Agency of a Corporate Body (Southern Europe, 14th-17th Centuries)”,

¹ ROSA (dir.), 2012.

² Project coordinated by Véronique Lamazou-Duplan. More information at: <https://www.casadevelazquez.org/pt/investigacao/programas-cientificos-ehehi/anciens-programmes/archifam/archifam/apresentacao-geral/>.

³ ROSA; NÓVOA (coord.), 2014. Available at: <http://fesh.unl.pt/arqfam/?portfolio=arquivos-de-familia-memorias-habitadas>.

⁴ Projecto coordinated by Maria de Lurdes Rosa. More information at: http://fesh.unl.pt/arqfam/?page_id=2269.

⁵ ROSA; HEAD, 2015.

⁶ Project coordinated by Juan Ramón Núñez Pestano. See the author's paper in this book.

funded by the European Research Council through a Consolidator Grant starting in June 2019⁷.

The book at hand was born within the scope of these initiatives and, not excluding other readers, had the historians as its precise target audience. Ten years after the program about family archives began — which endeavoured especially to summon historians, archivists and archival owners to research and debate on an equal footing — it was considered opportune to offer historians a synthesis of the findings, presented in a way that is convenient to historiographical research, but without losing the richness of their birth in a multidisciplinary and pluriprofessional on set that even stretches beyond academic borders.

In essence, the contributions in this book reveal the great wealth of family archives in the context of historical research as well as that of the conservation, accessibility and promotion of cultural heritage. They also reveal the problems that these archives raise and demand addressing in the construction of historical knowledge which, as Terry Cook has written, begins “not when the historian opens the box, but when the archivist fills the box”⁸. Finally, they reveal the potential of these documentary sets for the creation of bridges between the archives and the communities that surround them and seek representation in them.

Overall, the analysis of the texts compiled in this book should take into account three central ideas linked to the role played by family archives in the writing of history and in building a community memory at local, regional and national levels.

The first of these ideas is that the history of family archives is divided into two major periods. The initial period corresponds essentially to the so-called *ancien régime*, which extends from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. The fifteenth century witnessed archives consistently being created by family groups, although there are cases dating back to the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, as shown in the essays by Mário Farelo and José Augusto

⁷ Project coordinated by Maria de Lurdes Rosa. More information at: http://fcsh.unl.pt/arqfam/?page_id=2269.

⁸ COOK, 2010: 4.

Sottomayor-Pizarro. At the far chronological end, the political and social changes that declared the end of the *ancien régime* came to undermine the functions that the archives had carried out until then, rendering many of them obsolete or endowing them with new meanings manifestly different from before.

One enters, then, the second period in the history of the family archives in which the documentary sets created during the *ancien régime* are kept as historical archives and as “places of memory”⁹. There is also the emergence of what Cristina Moscatel designates in this book “new family archives”, which assume different characteristics than their earlier counterparts’. Finally, many personal archives were created in the threshold between the two periods, some of which smaller family archives, as Zélia Pereira notes in her contribution. Hence the justification for including in this work examples related to personal archives, which essentially share several identifying traits with their family counterparts.

The second idea to which attention should be drawn relates precisely to the meanings now attributed to family archives and to the awareness — or lack thereof — of their importance for building a shared memory. This perception relates to the notion of what a particular society or group considers worthwhile preserving, according to the values associated with the archives and with the institutions whose function is to protect the archival heritage. It is therefore particularly useful to think of family archives as community archives, reinforcing with this concept the role they have played, and in some cases still play, in forming and consolidating a community identity. It is from this identity role that new forms of valuing archives can be extracted, as well as new ways of spreading knowledge of them and guaranteeing their safeguard.

The third and final idea is not specific to the study of family archives but it becomes particularly clear in the analysis of this type of documentary sets. Olivier Poncet, quoting François Rabelais, writes in his essay that “science without conscience is but the ruin of the soul”. In the same sense, building historical knowledge without taking into account the history of the archives

⁹ NORA, 1989.

as sources for this knowledge amounts to producing science with a ruined soul. It is therefore crucial to understand why and how the archives were created, why and how they have come down to the present time, to know what is missing, what has not survived, and to evaluate how the understanding of the archives affects understanding the past.

The solutions to these problems are manifold, as evidenced by the studies published in this book. Such solutions range from a social history of archives to organic archival treatments, including the study of documentary and archival practices of groups and institutions and, finally, the partnership between archives and communities in reconstituting the custodial history of the documentary sets. Family archives are therefore fertile grounds for the emergence of newfound questions that elevate them to the category of objects of study themselves.

This book is organized in three parts that intentionally avoid the canonical chronological division adopted by historians, that is, the “medieval”, the “modern” and the “contemporary” periods. If this may cause difficulties to historians seeking more immediately to identify what is “useful”, the truth is that an alternative approach would betray the analyses presented. Without losing sight of the contextual specificities, these “think” of the archives as products of a conservation path which, in some cases, went through all of those chronological divisions. Thus, it proved difficult to fit the history of these archives into one period out of three. In fact, that would have been hardly useful, even reductive. It is not possible to fully understand, for example, the medieval documentation preserved in a family archive without relating it to the documents produced in later periods and without taking into account the transformations that the documentation suffered before reaching the present day. As such, a thematic organization was preferred, emphasizing the main subjects transversal to each group of texts.

Thus, the first part of this book — “Recovering, reconstructing and (re) discovering family and personal archives” — gathers examples of recovery, reconstruction or (re)discovery of family or personal archives that no longer exist or whose whereabouts were unknown or had fallen into oblivion. These examples are divided into three categories. The first concerns the clues that can be followed to (re)discover family documentation that, from a certain

point in time, was no longer preserved by families, as José Augusto de Sotomayor-Pizarro found in the case of family documents preserved in monastic institutions and Olivier Poncet for the case of the papers of the French Monarchy “ministers”; the testimonies in the second category exemplify how it is possible to reconstruct archives that no longer exist through other documents, especially archival inventories, as shown by Margarida Leme, by Rita Sampaio da Nóvoa *et al.*, and by Maria de Lurdes Rosa. The final section is composed of the censuses, with Tiago Sousa Mendes *et al.*, Juan Ramón Núñez Pestano, and Zélia Pereira demonstrating the interesting results yielded by the efforts to identify all of the family and personal archives existing within certain geographical limits.

The second part — “From a social, political and cultural history of the families to the social history of the archives” — is composed of case studies that privilege specific family archives or themes that can be explored from the documentation produced and preserved by the families. The first set integrates the works of Mário Farelo on the Nogueiras of Lisbon; of Filipa Lopes on the archives of the viscounts of Vila Nova de Cerveira and marqueses de Ponte de Lima; of Alice Borges Gago on the Almada and Lencastre Bastos archive; of Maria João da Câmara Andrade e Sousa on the archive of the House of Belmonte; and Vilma Cardoso on the Casa das Mouras archive. The second set comprises the contributions of Rita Sampaio da Nóvoa on the archival practices of the nobility and on the social logic of documentary conservation; of Judit Gutiérrez de Armas on the importance of archives for the social and political affirmation of the families who settled in the Canary Islands; of Nuno Pousinho on the relevance of the documentation produced and conserved by the families for the study of *caciquismo* and the local political elites; and of Pedro Urbano on the role played by family archives in the analysis of the history of women from their own discourse.

Finally, the third part — “Public preservation and promotion of family and personal archives” — reflects on the experience of public archives in the preservation and promotion of family and personal archives. In this part the problems and solutions found at this level are presented, as well as the bridges sought to be built with the owners of this type of archives and with the communities whose history is reflected in this documentary heritage. The

essay by Maria João Pires de Lima reveals the reality of the Arquivo Distrital do Porto; those by Cristina Moscatel and Fátima Barros introduce the Arquivos Regionais of the Azores and Madeira, respectively; and Gracinda Guedes and Sónia Pacheco report examples of archives preserved by universities, namely the University of Coimbra and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, where the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese–American Archives, linked to the Portuguese–American community based in the United States of America, are kept.

The contribution of Francis X. Blouin Jr. is central as an epilogue to the book. The author, in collaboration with William Rosenberg, labels the *archival divide*, that is, the ever-deeper separation between the conceptual spheres of History and Archival Science. A long history of convergence has recently evolved into a movement of divergence in which each field, armed with its own conceptual tools and imbued with its own understanding of historical documentation, develops independently and unconnectedly. As Blouin writes in the conclusion to his contribution, “to visit the archive now is to engage an institution with its own well developed set of intellectual, cultural, political, and/or technical constructs largely removed from the conceptions and language of academic historical discourse”.

This book represents a belief that the study of family archives can be a channel of convergence. Convergence between historians and archivists and convergence between these and the communities whose past the former interpret and safeguard. The unpublished or unexplored character of many of these archives is attractive to historians and ultimately allows them to rethink or rewrite a comprehensive set of versions of History, in its many facets. The tools of Archival Science play a crucial role here in helping to decipher complex archival structures, as are family archives. These, having been created and maintained for centuries outside institutional, state or public archival systems, do not follow standardized models and often resist traditional archival norms. Finally, archive owners and community organizations force historians and archivists out of their academic and technical domes. They also remind them that many family archives continue to be active instruments in the construction and maintenance of a family or community identity. They are not, after all, historical archives, they still have a voice.