

The heroic study of records: The contested persona of the archival historian

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Abstract

The archival turn in nineteenth-century historical scholarship – that is, the growing tendency among nineteenth-century historians to equate professional historical studies with scholarship based on archival research – not only affected the profession’s epistemological assumptions and day-to-day working manners, but also changed the persona of the historian. Archival research required the cultivation and exercise of such dispositions, virtues or character traits as carefulness, meticulousness, diligence and industry. This article shows that a growing significance attached to these qualities made the archival turn increasingly contested. As the case of the German-Austrian historian Theodor von Sickel and his critics shows, it was not the necessity of archival research as such on which historians in late nineteenth-century Europe came to hold different views. Sickel’s critics were rather concerned about the potentially detrimental effects that the increasingly philological ethos of archival studies could have on the historian’s character. What was primarily at stake in late nineteenth-century debates on the gains and losses of increased commitments to archival study was the persona of the historian – his character traits, his dispositions and the virtues and skills in which he excelled.

Keywords

archive, historiography, intellectual virtues, persona, Theodor von Sickel

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Introduction

When, in 1913, Paul Fridolin Kehr, Director of the Prussian Historical Institute in Rome, looked back on how the historical discipline had changed during the nineteenth century, he observed that nothing had transformed the profession as profoundly as the increased accessibility of archival documents. It was an ‘event of utmost importance’, said Kehr, that historians had increasingly been granted access to archival depositories, which prior to the nineteenth century had often been inaccessible for reasons of state security (Müller, 2013). ‘[A]ll of a sudden, a colossal, almost endless amount of historical source material, especially charters, became freely available for research’ (Kehr, 1994[1913]: 253). For Kehr, it was hardly a question of whether or to what extent historians should benefit from these increased research possibilities. ‘Today’, he wrote, ‘complete and firm mastery of source material counts as a first requirement of all historical research’ (ibid.: 254).

These words provide a neat summary description of what has been called the ‘archival turn’ in nineteenth-century historical scholarship: a growing tendency, especially though not exclusively among historians, to equate professional historical studies with scholarship based on archival research (Eskildsen, 2008).¹ Kehr’s contention, moreover, aptly illustrates to what extent this ‘turn’ was fueled by, and contributed to the spread of, a new epistemological idea – the idea of historical knowledge being justified if and only if inferred from eyewitness accounts that had been checked for factual accuracy (Eskildsen, 2013). Kehr himself, however, did not waste too many words on epistemological issues. He was rather more interested in the question of how changing epistemological assumptions affected the practice of historical studies. He cared about the day-to-day realities of historical research, which,

in his perception, the increased accessibility of archives had made more demanding than ever: ‘Today, a problem like the politics of Charles V can no longer be tackled with RANKE’S genial intuition; his solution can only be tried on the base of vast amounts of source material resting in Vienna, Rome, Brussels, Paris, Simancas and Madrid (to mention only the most important ones)’ (Kehr, 1994[1913]: 254). In Kehr’s assessment, it was not only specialists of early modern history who had to develop such new working manners:

Whoever wants to study the history of the popes in the Middle Ages has to collect their diplomas and charters, dispersed over the entire Occident into even the smallest archives. In a word: due to the opening of the archives, the tasks of historical research as compared to former days have completely changed . . . (Kehr 1994[1913]: 254-5)

How historians’ professional working manners were affected by the nineteenth-century archival turn – how professors turned into avid note-takers, initiated their students in the delicate art of source criticism, and employed the most promising of them as personal research assistants – has been analysed already in some detail (e.g., Smith, 1998; Trüper, 2007; Tollebeek, 2008; Müller, 2009). Less attention has been paid, however, to the demands such changing working manners made on what I call the *persona* of the historian.

This term refers, very broadly, to the qualities that historians were supposed to display in practicing their profession (Daston, 2003). More precisely, it consists of virtues and skills that historians had to display in order to count as a professional

scholar. How such constellations of virtues and skills looked like – which virtues or skills were seen as most important and to what degree they needed to be practiced – depended on the goals they were supposed to serve. Different scholarly goals (factual knowledge, historical understanding, moral instruction, aesthetic judgment, political usefulness etc.) required different virtues and skills and, accordingly, different types of scholars (Paul, forthcoming). The scholarly persona, then, is a technical term for a ‘scholarly self’ whose virtues and skills testify to commitment to goals recognized as worthy of scholarly pursuit. It is a model of what it takes to be a scholar or a template that asks for cultivation of certain virtues and skills (Condren, Gaukroger and Hunter, 2006: 7), thereby ‘schooling the mind, body, and soul in distinctive and indelible ways’ (Daston and Sibum, 2003: 3). In the late nineteenth century, such scholarly personae were usually referred to in terms of ‘character’, ‘personality’ or, more specifically, *wissenschaftliche Persönlichkeit* (Paul, 2012), so that debates on the historian’s persona not seldom focused on the character traits characteristic of a good historian.²

What makes this persona a promising focus of research is that agreement on the goals historical scholarship had to serve and, accordingly, on the virtues and skills characteristic of a good historian did not remotely exist: the historian’s persona in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe was essentially contested. This became especially clear in a number of late nineteenth-century debates on the gains and losses of the so-called archival turn. Criticism of excessive devotion to archival research often focused, not on time or energy that could have better been spent on other tasks, but on the historian’s persona that was in danger of being deformed by focusing too much on issues of relatively minor importance. By putting a premium on

accurate historical information, or so the argument went, historians like Kehr emphasized one scholarly goal (factual knowledge) at the cost of others (historical understanding, moral instruction, aesthetic judgment etc.). To what extent this was desirable, for the sake of ‘professionalization’ or otherwise, was what sharply divided the historical profession around 1900.

I shall substantiate this claim by analysing some divergent views on the persona of the ‘archival historian’ – the kind of historian who, following Kehr’s recommendations, spent long days in archival reading rooms – as articulated in and around the historiographical school in which Kehr had received his training in the 1880s. Focusing on Kehr’s teacher, the German-Austrian historian Theodor von Sickel,³ and the historiographical institutions with which Sickel and Kehr had been affiliated – the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung in Vienna and the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* in Berlin – I will examine what sort of demands Sickel and his students made on the persona of the nineteenth-century archival historian and investigate how these requirements were challenged by critics such as Sickel’s Viennese colleague, Ottokar Lorenz. If historians applied themselves to what Lord Acton, speaking about Leopold von Ranke, famously called ‘the heroic study of records’ (Acton, 1906[1895]: 7), one might argue that this late nineteenth-century debate on the persona of the historian focused on the question of which virtues and skills constituted scholarly heroism: boundless devotion to philological precision, brave defiance of disorderly archives and uncooperative archivists, or intellectual self-control, understood as the ability not to lose oneself in a well-nigh infinite number of archival sources?⁴

Working manners

Sickel and Acton met in a Viennese archive in the summer of 1864. The by then 30-year-old John Dalberg-Acton was accompanying his teacher, the German Catholic historian Ignaz von Döllinger, on an archival journey through Austria and Italy, where Döllinger hoped to find new sources for his study of the papacy (Bischof, 1997: 112). The 37-year-old Sickel, who had been affiliated with the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung (IÖG) in Vienna since 1857, was an obvious source of advice in these matters, given that he had travelled widely through Europe, in search of Carolingian charters, hundreds of which he had transcribed and prepared for publication. ‘At Vienna’, Acton would later remember, ‘Sickel, who was not yet known to Greater Germany as the first of its mediæval palæographers, showed him [Döllinger] the sheets of a work containing 247 Carolingian acts unknown to [Johann Friedrich] Boehmer, who had just died with the repute of being the best authority on Imperial charters’ (Acton, 1890: 734).

According to Acton, Döllinger was caught off guard by this encounter with Sickel. Although the German historian usually sifted and weighed his sources as critically as possible (Oeyen, 1990), such ‘huge quantities of transcripts’ were new to him. With a mixture of amazement and admiration, he assessed the diligence of his younger colleague. Was this the future of historical scholarship? Would a history of the papacy from now on be written on the basis of ‘secret information gathered in thirty European libraries and archives’? As Acton wrote in rather melodramatic prose: ‘Conventional history faded away; the studies of a lifetime suddenly underwent transformation. . . . The ecclesiastical history of his [Döllinger’s] youth went to pieces

against the new criticism . . . and the revelation of the unknown which began on a very large scale in 1864' (Acton, 1890: 734).

In Sickel, Döllinger met a typical representative of what Acton not incorrectly perceived as a new historiographical trend. Born in Germany, Sickel had attended the *École des Chartes* in Paris and conducted archival research in France, Italy, and Austria (Sickel, 1947: 1-6). In Vienna, the IÖG had hired him because his competence in palaeography, diplomatics, and other auxiliary sciences had surpassed that of any Austrian historian at the time. With energy and industry, Sickel had subsequently launched one major project after another. As early as 1858, for example, he had co-edited an expensive facsimile edition of medieval charters with the help of advanced photographic techniques (cf. Saxer, 2010). He had since become increasingly known, not only for such source editions, but also for the new palaeographic standards he had set in his work (cf. Rosenmund, 1897: 69-72). Under Sickel's influence, the IÖG had even come to devote itself almost exclusively to the study of auxiliary sciences (diplomatics in particular). In fact, when Kehr had arrived in Vienna, in 1884, the IÖG had almost become identical to the 'Sickel School' – a school driven by the utopian dream of providing historical scholarship with reliable editions of as great as possible a number of medieval sources (Lhotskey, 1984: 115).

What distinguished Sickel from Döllinger, then, were not primarily epistemological assumptions or methodological skills, but rather a high degree of commitment to what he perceived as a major element of the historian's task. Although both men agreed that this task consisted of producing reliable knowledge about the past, Sickel, in comparison to Döllinger, assigned significantly more weight to the

necessity of substantiating such knowledge by reference to the entire corpus of known source material. Given his conviction that the reliability of such source material could only adequately be determined through comparison with all available variants (copies, transcripts, cartularies), in whatever domestic or foreign archives they happened to be located, Sickel, moreover, deemed it necessary to travel widely in order to consult all this material. As he clearly stated in his *Lehre von den Urkunden der ersten Karolinger* [On the Charters of the First Carolinians], which appeared just three years after Döllinger's visit to Vienna:

In order to collect and consult the material, in so far as it consists of manuscripts, I have personally visited archives and libraries in the following places: Vienna, St. Paul, Berlin, Kassel, Fulda, Munich, Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, St. Gallen, Zurich, Bern, Venice, Udine, Cividale, Verona, Colmar, Strasbourg, Nancy, Metz, Paris, Sens, Auxerre, Chaumont, Dijon, Besançon, Rouen, London. (Sickel, 1867: ix)

And this was not yet all:

At other places, colleagues appeared ready to furnish me with transcripts and facsimiles and to provide answers to all my questions, and still elsewhere, friends have collected [source material] for me on their travels. Thus I obtained all known material from Bamberg, Gotha, Koblenz, Münster, Hannover, Osnabrück, Chur, Mailand, Turin, Florence, Siena, Piacenza, Modena, Nonantula, Marseille, Montpellier, Nîmes, Albi,

Carcassonne, Perpignan, Clermont, Limoges, Lyon, Orléans, Autun, Mâcon, Cambrai, Tournai, Ghent. (Sickel, 1867: ix)

As far as Sickel was concerned, the time when historians worked solitarily in the privacy of their studies was clearly over. If consultation of archival items from all over Europe became the new standard, then historians had to become organisers and networkers, who could call in their friends, but also secure the cooperation of colleagues abroad. This is aptly illustrated by Sickel's correspondence. Whereas Döllinger's letters primarily dealt with church matters (Döllinger, 1963-71), Sickel's correspondence largely consists of requests for information, verification of transcripts, or even, in some cases, original medieval documents (to be sent by registered mail).⁵ Sickel did not merely work in private, in the seclusion of his study, but transformed the historian into a traveller, organiser and networker.

Personal qualities

This change in working manners did not leave the historian's persona unaffected. The skills and competences needed for archival research required the cultivation of certain dispositions, virtues or character traits. Vivid examples of how consciously such a new, archival-oriented view of the historian's persona was developed over the course of the century can be found among Sickel's students and assistants. Although some of these younger colleagues were affiliated with the IÖG, quite a few of them were (also) employed by the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH), a prestigious German source editing project, to which Sickel had contributed as supervisor of a series on imperial charters (Bresslau, 1921: 527). In this capacity, the German-Austrian historian had not only set a stamp on one of the largest historical enterprises

established in the nineteenth century (Knowles, 1960), but also contributed significantly to the training of a younger generation of historians. Unsurprisingly, these students felt indebted both to Sickel's personal example and to his organisational achievements:

We ask, what is the secret of his successes, what the essence of his scholarly personality [*wissenschaftlichen Persönlichkeit*]? – It is the combination of two rare features that are even rarer to be found together in one and the same scholar. Sickel belongs to those researchers who not only provide scholarship with truly *new* insights [and] *new* methods, but who also are *organisers*, capable of *practically* implementing their achievements in the general scholarly enterprise, (Steinacker, 1943[1906]: 495).

On the one hand, the students praised Sickel for his exemplarily rigid source criticism, for his 'exceptionally clear-sighted and skilful treatment', and for the meticulousness of his 'perceptive, deeply-penetrating gaze' (Tangl, 1908: 778; Ottenthal, 1908: 551; Erben, 1908: 355-6). As several of his admirers concluded, Sickel had been a 'master of criticism' (Bretholz, 1906: 283; Ottenthal, 1908: 559). On the other hand, however, these pupils drew attention to his 'practical, energetic character' and organisational skills, which had manifested themselves not only in the founding of the Istituto Storico Austriaco (1881) in Rome, but also in editing projects and in the creation of educational opportunities for archivists (Erben, 1908: 350, 345; cf. Hageneder, 1989). As Harold Steinacker observed, Sickel had cared not merely about historical scholarship itself, but also about its infrastructure: 'He has not only given diplomatics

a new method and laid the foundations for a new educational system [*Lehrgebäude*] in diplomatics; he has also personally erected great parts of this system' (Steinacker, 1943[1906]: 498).

That Sickel's students conceived of the persona of the archival historian in terms of philological virtue and organisational talent is hardly surprising, given that these had been precisely the qualities that Sickel had encouraged them to develop. They needed no small dose of practical skills, first of all, for conducting archival research in often badly organised archives abroad (Esch, 2000). Their travel reports almost invariably contain juicy anecdotes about mistrusting officials, clerical surveillance, limited access, badly lit rooms and fragile forms of transportation, all of which, in one form or another, required a certain talent for improvisation, organisation and persuasion – not to mention networking skills for securing recommendation letters or finding archivists who had gone out of the city with the keys of the archive in their pocket (e.g., Pabst, 1877: 36, 45; Arendt, 1877: 238; Bresslau, 1878: 85; Winckelmann, 1880: 19; Frensdorff, 1880: 44). Of overriding importance, however, were their philological competences. This becomes particularly clear from Sickel's instructions to his employees. Anyone who transcribed a charter, stipulated these instructions, had to imitate the handwriting in detail and be capable of reproducing preferably all of its palaeographic features, including the smallest dots, the character sizes, and the strokes composing the letters (the so-called *ductus*). It was, indeed, impossible to be 'too precise': to Sickel, nothing mattered more than utmost meticulousness (Sickel, 1876: 474-6, 482).

Judging by the necrologies and book reviews that Sickel's students published in the *Mittheilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, they had rather thoroughly appropriated this 'philological ethos' – Franz Schultz's term for a scholarly mentality characterised by 'dedication to details, attention to trivialities, a secluded way of life', and 'diffidence for subjective provisionalities and mere impressions' (Schultz, 1930: 37; cf. Kolk, 1989). The highest praise, for instance, that the *Mittheilungen* bestowed upon deceased historians was the assurance that these colleagues had served as paragons of philological precision to which posterity would continue to look up. Along these lines, Engelbert Mühlbacher also applauded 'professional precision', 'conscientious carefulness', and 'well-considered criticism' (Mühlbacher, 1880: 172; 1885: 198; 1886: 207). Emil von Ottenthal employed similar standards when he praised the editor of a volume under review for his 'exact rendering of the charters, the meticulous archival research, . . . complete mastery of the relevant literature and conscientious employment of the newest critical research' (Ottenthal, 1880: 631).

Occasionally, representatives of the 'Sickel School' felt an urge to apologise for their potentially one-sided dedication to 'work that is troublesome, focusing on details, and requiring painful meticulousness' (Redlich, 1906: 197; cf. Schaller, 2002: 26). Nonetheless, Ernst Perels' judgment about IÖG member Michael Tangl was as plain as it could be:

Monographs – these doubtless most befitted his character: he clearly valued the methodical and exact investigation, which yields secured results and provides a solid fundament for further research, over the well-rounded,

summarizing narrative [*Darstellung*]. The latter perhaps more or less appeared to him as a continuously changing plaything of subjectivity. And just as he himself did not feel called to the work of synthesis, so he has often responded skeptically to what others achieved in this respect. (Perels, 1924: 2).

Although Sickel himself hardly fitted this philological model of the historian's persona – he had written poems and fictional stories, engaged in political journalism, and promoted the Protestant cause in Austria (Erben, 1926: 26-120; Mayr, 1951, 1954) – many of his pupils appeared unable to transgress the limits of philological scholarship. This was painfully proved in 1926, at the hundredth anniversary of Sickel's birth. When, after many years of labour, Wilhelm Erben presented his *Denkwürdigkeiten aus der Werdezeit eines deutschen Geschichtsforschers* [Memorabilia from the Formative Years of a German Historical Researcher], this pupil of Sickel admitted that his book, despite earlier hopes to the contrary, had not become a 'biography, but a selection of sources pertaining to the history of his [Sickel's] formative years [*Werdezeit*]' (Erben, 1926: v). The sources in question – letters, articles and autobiographical notes from the *maestro* – were edited in the best tradition of the IÖG: with the 'greatest meticulousness' and a diligent attempt to discriminate between *verum et falsum* (ibid.: v). Wrestling with a literary story in which Sickel had intermingled his impressions of an archival journey through France and Italy in the summer of 1854 with a fictive love story, Erben did his utmost best to separate *Wahrheit* and *Dichtung* in this account, as if the story were a medieval charter (ibid.: 13). Although many expressed hopes for a biography (e.g., Redlich, 1927: 164), a narrative account of Sickel's life never appeared.⁶ Did such a biography

perhaps require other qualities of the historian than those in which the IÖG trained its students?

Character deformation

This sceptical question was raised in Vienna as early as 1857. Shortly after Sickel's appointment at Vienna, IÖG staff member Albert Jäger issued a memorandum in which he warned against overemphasis on philological virtuosity. In his judgment, the Institute must not become 'a kind of Ecole des Chartes, in which the study of auxiliary sciences is elevated to essential status'. Under reference to Sickel's classes, Jäger argued that – as a matter of principle, but also from a job market point of view – 'someone with knowledge of the auxiliary sciences is not yet knowledgeable in history itself and therefore employable in an archive, but not as a professor of history at an institute of higher education' (quoted in Lhotsky, 1984: 74, 75). Although this warning hardly obtained a hearing at the time, it shows that Sickel's reshaping of the historian's persona was recognised at an early stage as dangerously one-sided.

An even more outspoken critic of Sickel was Jäger's former pupil, Ottokar Lorenz, who occupied a chair in general and Austrian history at the University of Vienna before moving to Jena in 1885. A medievalist who paired unease about increasing specialisation in academia to frankness of expression (Srbik, 1951: 105-7; Srbik, 1988: 238), Lorenz had shortly been affiliated with the IÖG and significantly contributed to Sickel's appointment in Vienna in 1856 (Lhotsky, 1984: 460). In later years, however, the collegial friendship waned, partly because Lorenz increasingly came to regard the likes of Sickel as being in danger of losing themselves in trivia. Rumours about Lorenz ridiculing the IÖG's excessive devotion to source editing

began to circulate in Vienna (Lhotsky, 1984: 114). In 1887, shortly after his move to Germany, Lorenz challenged the ‘critical school’ even more seriously by complaining in print about the *MGH*, accusing the monumental enterprise not merely of ‘thoughtlessness’ and ‘blind reverence’ for the philological methods that it employed, but in particular also for hampering the historian’s work by publishing ever more versions and variants of the same medieval sources. Assuming that most historians eventually want to understand the past and write about it, Lorenz argued that such historians are in most cases better off with univocal, if sometimes uncritical, transcriptions than with the philological labyrinths offered by the *MGH* editions. For what mattered to Lorenz was ultimately not philological accuracy, but ‘historical knowledge’ (Lorenz, 1887: ix, iv, v, vii).

Outraged by this attack, a number of Sickel’s friends and students rushed to their desks to defend the *MGH* against Lorenz’s assault (Weiland, 1887; Holder-Egger, 1887; Wattenbach, 1888; cf. Lorenz, 1891: 282-4). Ironically, however, their defences mostly focused on the factual accuracy, or the lack thereof, of Lorenz’s accusations, despite the fact that excessive devotion to matters of accuracy was precisely what Lorenz disliked about the ‘Sickel School’. Lorenz wanted historians instead to apply themselves to historical narrative, preferably on a large or possibly even world-historical scale. Unsurprisingly, then, among his heroes were such celebrated figures as Friedrich von Schiller and Friedrich Christoph Schlosser – two eighteenth-century German authors who had openly denounced the antiquarian tendencies of their own times and mustered the courage to write history on larger canvases. Lorenz approvingly quoted their protests against ‘day labourers’ in the scholarly vineyard and ‘slave souls’ in the ‘realm of absolute freedom’ (Lorenz, 1889:

9). With a thinly veiled *argumentum auctoritatis*, he also recalled Frederick II's 'mercilessly devastating judgment about historical collector's mania', suggesting that historical scholarship in his own days ran a serious risk of returning to that antiquarian state that had aroused the wrath of Frederick the Great (ibid.: 14, 17).

With such metaphors as 'slave souls' and 'collector's mania', Lorenz clearly indicated that his criticism was not only directed at the historian's *practice*, or at his tasks and working manners, but also at his *persona* – his virtues, skills and character traits. Quoting the German Jewish historian Samuel Sugenheim, who as early as 1867 had complained about a growing neglect of character traits required for synthesising work, Lorenz declared: 'Only the rarest few of our professional historians have some inkling of the historian's virtues that are especially in our time urgently necessary, those of *self-discipline* and *self-restraint*, which allow the results of prolonged study to be squeezed together on a single print sheet' (Lorenz, 1891: 286, quoting Sugenheim, 1867: vi).

'Self-discipline' and 'self-restraint' were, of course, anything but widely neglected virtues. 'Self-discipline' summarised in one word the whole range of ascetic attitudes and exercises that such influential textbook authors as the Greifswald historian Ernst Bernheim deemed necessary for the pursuit of 'objectivity' (Paul, 2011). For Sugenheim and Lorenz, however, self-discipline and self-restraint designated a different type of virtue. What they required was not a disciplining of the historian's imagination, or a virtuous restraint of the historian's personal sympathies, but the courage not to lose oneself in endless research and trivial detail. If self-discipline appealed to the historian's strength of character, then this strength, in their

eyes, did not consist of self-restraint for the sake of objectivity, but of firm resistance against the growing dominance of a philological ethos in historical scholarship.

Other, more prominent critics than Lorenz also located the main problem of Sickel-style scholarship in its one-sided conception of the historian's persona.⁷ In circles of the Prussian historical school, for example, the distinguished voice of Johann Gustav Droysen complained that German historical studies had 'unbearably submerged themselves in so-called criticism', due especially to the influence of Leopold von Ranke and Georg Heinrich Pertz. Without a higher intellectual aim than critical source elaboration, Droysen argued, historians would remain 'ignorant despite all education' and 'thoughtless despite all methods' (Droysen, 1972: 82).⁸ Droysen's pupil Jacob Burckhardt, in Basel, likewise focused his complaints on what he perceived as character vices nurtured in such institutions as the *MGH*. He repeatedly scoffed at what he called *Urkundionen* – scholars deformed by overexposure to medieval charters – and ridiculed 'a particular type of philologists and historical researchers, who think themselves superior to everyone if they have found out that Kaiser Conrad II went to the toilet at Goslar on May 7, 1030' (Burckhardt, 1955: 68; see also Fournier, 1923: 102-3; Pastor, 1950: 641).

Even Sickel's student, Paul Kehr, reluctantly agreed that the archival turn had not only transformed the historian's working manners, but also, in a sometimes detrimental sense, the character traits in which they took pride. When, in 1921, the University of Greifswald sought his advice about the filling of a vacant chair, he wryly observed that talented *MGH* researchers were not necessarily the most gifted lecturers. For example, in his judgment, Ernst Perels, who had been working for the

MGH for seventeen years, was ‘very diligent, but narrow and spineless, alas’. As for the merits of Adolf Hofmeister, another *MGH* veteran, Kehr judged that the man could be entrusted with a seminar, but was also unlikely to reach great intellectual heights:

He is . . . a descendant [*Ausläufer*] of the Waitz school and the Monumenta tradition, the preservation of which must be of great importance to historical scholarship and also to the academic enterprise [*Betriebe*]. That is to say that he is not a synthetic person, not a thinker, not a man with horizons. Therefore a born professor at an average university.⁹

Although Hofmeister eventually acquired the chair – thereby joining the ranks of German medieval history professors who had received their training at the *MGH* (Fuhrmann, 1996: 93) – Kehr noted with concern that source publishing did not always serve as a springboard to an academic career. Among his employees, he had several ‘academic wallflowers’, whom he considered capable of little more than archival research. ‘What must become of them?’ (quoted in Fuhrmann, 1996: 95-6). Academic lecturing, especially outside the seminar room, required other qualities than those cultivated in the ‘Sickel School’. If, for this very reason, Sickel had already aroused the suspicion of his academic colleagues, his pupils, with their often ‘even increased one-sidedness’, sighed Kehr in 1922, sometimes really priced themselves out of the academic market (Kehr, 1922: lxxxiii).

Conclusion

The archival turn, then, was not only a change in the historical profession's epistemological assumptions and day-to-day working manners. It also represented a shift of emphasis in what I have called the persona of the historian, or the virtues and skills that historians were supposed to display. I have argued that for such archival historians as those trained in the 'Sickel School', nothing mattered more than meticulousness, diligence and industry. When this school became increasingly influential especially through the *MGH*, protests began to surface against its rather philologically oriented conception of the historian's persona. What was primarily at stake in this dispute was the historian's character – the skills and virtues in which he tried to excel and, by implications, the goals to which he devoted this attention.

So, when Burckhardt ridiculed *Detailurkundionen*, or when Droysen complained about historians who remained 'ignorant' and 'thoughtless', the target of their criticism was not archival research as such. Neither was their point that archival research did not require accuracy and attentiveness. They rather argued that such intellectual virtues were not to be practised at the expense of other virtues, such as scholarly creativity, empathy and synthetic power (Droysen, 1868: 9-12), or that the goal of factual knowledge should not come to overshadow other, equally important goals, such as historical understanding and moral instruction. Lorenz, too, did not object to the archival research of his Viennese colleague, but castigated the 'increasing one-sidedness' displayed by Sickel's students (Lhotsky, 1984: 114). The debate thus revolved around the relative weight that could be or ought to be attributed to some of the more philologically oriented character traits in the historian's catalogue of virtues. In short, what was at stake were the 'virtues of the historian' [*Tugenden des*

Geschichtschreibers] (Sugenheim, 1867: vi), or the scholarly commitments that make some virtues appear more important than others.

If the archival turn in nineteenth-century historical studies contributed to what Acton called ‘the heroic study of records’, then, in a sense, the debate around 1900 revolved around the question what exactly was heroic about archival research. Was it heroic to verify the reliability of a medieval charter through meticulous comparison with alternative sources? Did such heroism consist of making uncomfortable travels, persuading suspicious clerks and facing draughty, humid, badly lit cellars?¹⁰ Or was a truly heroic historian a man who, following Burckhardt’s advice, dared to write a monograph of no more than a hundred or a hundred and fifty pages, ‘very plain and crystal clear’, based on archival research, but without ‘himself becoming an *Urkundion*’ (Burckhardt, 1980: 213)?

Notes

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1. How this archival turn was influenced by and, in turn, contributed to the rise of philology to what Hans Aarsleff calls its status as ‘the model humanistic discipline’ (Aarsleff, 1982: 32) is a question beyond the scope of this essay. Likewise, the relation between archival research in the nineteenth-century and the antiquarian tradition of primary source research (Grafton, 1991), often unduly neglected in modern histories of historical scholarship, will be left unexplored. Arguably, however, historians like Leopold von Ranke, whose name is inextricably bound up with the archival turn in nineteenth century historical studies (Eskildsen, 2008), often downplayed their indebtedness to

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- the antiquarian tradition as well as to classical philology as practiced by, for instance, Barthold Georg Niebuhr.
2. This concept of persona should not be confused with what Robert C. Elliot calls the ‘literary persona’ (Elliot, 1982). In Paul (forthc.), I discuss at greater length how these two concepts relate to each other, arguing that scholarly personae, just like literary ones, are shaped by discursive conventions, but that they differ from what Elliot describes by extending themselves beyond the scholar’s written discourse to the classroom, the library and the archival reading room. Unlike the literary persona, the scholarly persona makes its presence felt, not only in writing, but throughout the range of activities in which scholars *qua* scholars find themselves engaged.
 3. On Kehr’s relation to Sickel, see Schubert (1998).
 4. Although such debates, of course, took place across Europe (e.g., Jones, 2007; Paul, 2010; Tollebeek, 2011), I focus on Sickel because the ‘archival historian’ was nowhere near as thoroughly cultivated as at the institutes which he was affiliated. Also, because both of these institutes – the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung in Vienna and the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* in Berlin – acquired paradigmatic status as icons of the ‘archival turn’, polemics directed against these institutions and the kind of historians they produced offer helpful insight in the sort of criticism the archival turn provoked.
 5. See, e.g., Munich, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, inv. no. B414, letters to Theodor von Sickel (607 in number). Sickel’s letters in the IÖG archive at Vienna, which I have been unable to consult, also largely consist of ‘practical’ correspondence, for example in relation to the facsimile project mentioned

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- above (as Paul Herold kindly informed me). On sending medieval documents by registered mail: Largiadèr, 1954: 583-5. See also Erben (1927).
6. On the occasion of the ninetieth birthday of the IÖG, Leo Santifaller, who directed the institute from 1945 to 1962, again provided not a biography of Sickel, but an edition of autobiographical material (Sickel, 1947).
 7. On Lorenz's somewhat eccentric status within the historical discipline, see Srbik, 1951: 106-7; Mehr, 2009: 244.
 8. On Droysen's disdain for source criticism, see Nippel (2010: 81).
 9. Munich, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, inv. no. 338/197, Paul Kehr to University of Greifswald, March 19, 1921.
 10. If it is true, as Charles Purton Cooper claims (Cooper, 1832: 8), that the British lawyer, politician and archivist William Prynne as early as the seventeenth century spoke about 'the heroic study of records', then this second meaning perhaps best approximates what Prynne, grumbling at his dirty work in the Tower of London, had in mind with these words. '[W]hilst you are sucking in the fresh country air', he complained in a letter to Harbottle Grimston, in September 1661, 'I have been almost choked with the dust of neglected records (interred in their own rubbish for sundry years) in the White Tower, their rust eating out the tops of my gloves with their touch, and their dust rendering me, twice a day, as black as a chimney sweeper' (Hardy, 1906: 58).

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