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Archives in extreme contexts: wars and disasters

Introduction to Issue 28 of *Tábula*

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And when the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals... another horse came out, a red one, and its rider was given power to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword... And I looked, and behold, a pale horse; its rider's name was Death, and the Abyss followed him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts... The sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place.

Revelation 6:1–14

Evil, war, social conflicts, disruptions of order, persecution, natural disasters, and those caused by human action have long been linked to the violation of individual rights, the persecution of knowledge, and the fracturing of being, existence, presence, and possession. These evils are often carried out through the destruction and concealment of records and archives. The Horsemen of the Apocalypse—and the opening of the seals associated with their appearance (ah, the seal: that element which validates, authenticates, inspires trust, and guarantees confidentiality)—ride through contemporary societies; their horses continue to gallop over records, archives, and information. The analysis of the relationship between records and archives and the existence of conflict and destruction caused by natural, climatic, or human-induced disasters therefore remains an ongoing concern. These realities are addressed in this new issue of *Tábula*. This journal, dedicated to the study of current developments in and around archives, encounters on more than one occasion—as in this case—a past that persists in its relationship with records and archives.

Archiving Emergencies: Records in Conflicts and Disasters examines a pressing present that, both theoretically and—above all—through evidence drawn from the recent past and an unsettling present, demonstrates the actions perpetrated against archives and their repercussions and consequences. These consequences extend far beyond the loss of documentary heritage and the disappearance of essential sources for history, and for the histories of countries, communities, or

individuals. They leave lasting effects on people themselves—on their rights, their property and possessions, their identities, and their lives.

Violence—in any of its manifestations—lies at the deepest core of the events analysed by the authors, and these actions persist within the ancestral abyss of record destruction, prompting a number of questions: who decides on destruction? How are the guidelines for action established? In the case of events resulting from natural disasters, records have been, are, and will continue to be prey to annihilation. This reality must be understood in light of two evident circumstances confirmed in the studies presented here: on the one hand, the fragility of the medium—the physical or intangible elements that sustain information and constitute the record; on the other, the delicacy of informational content, the relevance of what is recorded, and—without contradiction—the forcefulness of what is documented.

That constant and ancient struggle to destroy, devastate, conceal, or seize archives endures, even as efforts continue to protect and safeguard them. It is an atavistic battle between the need for the record and the urge to evade it. Fire, water, mud, cataclysms, collapses, erasures, and the like are Horsemen of the Apocalypse that threaten vital records—documentation and essential information for individuals and communities alike. They seek to eliminate accountability and erase traces of what may constitute part of a community's symbolic essence; horsemen who raise their weapons against identity, rights, thought, and history. Horsemen who rode in the past, ride in the present, and will do so in the future, wielding weapons that are now also employed by the darker side of artificial intelligence.

The authors of the works presented here examine a range of events and analyse the general and persistent nature of the relationship between archives and armed and social conflicts, as well as disasters and catastrophes. These studies explore the causes and consequences of such events, the lessons learned from them, the measures adopted in response, and their impact on archival theory and on methodologies for working with records. They also underscore the essential need for the training of those who work in archives.

Archives are present in current conflicts, and their destruction is never a fortuitous act; it forms part of the strategies employed by all parties involved (Cristina Betancur Roldán). Archives are also regarded as essential elements for resistance and survival (Sarah Nantel).

In the current landscape of migration—largely driven by armed conflicts, extreme violence in many countries, and disasters and pressures generated by climate change—the term “people without papers” has emerged. This term starkly reveals both the power and necessity of possessing records, as well as, paradoxically, the urgency of relinquishing documentation in order to survive. Forced human mobility must also encompass exile, an issue addressed by the project Europe Archives and Traces of Migration (AtoM) (Cristina Díaz Martínez; Miguel Ángel Bermejo Alonso).

The disappearance of records and the massive deterioration of archival holdings as a result of climatic and natural disasters finds, in Spain, a paradigmatic case in the events of 29 October 2024, caused by an isolated high-level depression (*Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos*, DANA). The work undertaken to recover records—both public and private—demonstrates the immediate response of various professionals and institutions, the approaches adopted for damage management, recovery strategies, lessons learned, and practical recommendations derived from this experience, as well as the commitment of archival professionals. All of this is presented in two studies published in this issue of the journal (Rosina Herrera Garrido; Mercedes Rojas Granero). Water, mud, and destruction emerge as major enemies of archives; in this regard, the floods in Emilia-Romagna in 2023, which affected several municipal archives, are analysed in a study that highlights the importance of risk management, specific protection plans and systems, and preventive planning (Rita Capitani; Francesca Del Giacco; Andrea Magnani; Massimo Rossi).

Other aspects concerning the disappearance of records and archives must be considered within the context of extinction, almost always brought about by those who fear what is documented. This practice is not unrelated to the violence currently exercised by the State of Israel in Palestine and Lebanon, where “destructive practices” that could be described as ancestral are repeated, together with the development of a new conception of the principle of provenance centred on land (Jamila J. Ghaddar); that is, one in which the place addressed by the records has equal or even greater importance than the creator. Events that cause destruction—often irreparable—must be addressed through a theoretical framework that must be known and implemented: a theory and practice that go beyond archival science and the technical knowledge required of archival professionals. Such knowledge must also be understood, applied, and sustained—perhaps first and foremost—by political authorities responsible for archival systems and networks. This includes appropriate analysis of archival siting, consideration of construction standards for archival buildings, and all matters related to preventive conservation and safeguarding plans. At present, this represents a serious deficiency, as none of these aspects are addressed with sufficient seriousness by those political authorities responsible for their development and implementation, who fail to acknowledge the vulnerability of archives (Juan Miguel Álvarez Martínez) and do not integrate them into disaster risk management frameworks (Martino).

The pairing of destruction—arising from diverse causes—and archives is, as noted, ancestral. There is extensive scientific and technical literature on the subject, as well as numerous laws and regulations that address it, albeit often in a diffuse manner. In professional archival practice, this is a daily concern; yet devastation will occur again, because neither the causes nor the solutions are addressed with real determination, and the criteria of professionals are disregarded. Moreover,

the shortage of technical staff must be recalled, as these professionals are required to work within “a worrying reality in a context of uncertainty” (Ángel Sánchez López). Alongside long-standing problems, new ones emerge, such as artificial intelligence in relation to the “debate surrounding digitised historical information” (Monika Sukyte; Leonardo Cervera Navas). Archives are, and will continue to be, essential for memory, for history, for personal histories (Javier del Olmo López; Beatriz Esteban Muñecas; Noemí García Martín), and for carrying out administrative procedures that require records from any period and on any subject, including those necessary for the preservation of historical heritage of all kinds (Ricardo Sanz Escobar).

The Horsemen of the Apocalypse will continue to ride over records because “archives are unable to gain political, social, or cultural recognition and have been relegated to the darkest corners of public administration” (Luis Martínez García); and because records always attest to existence, possession, belonging, and individual and collective memory—concepts and realities that are essential for all, vital for some, and unsettling for others.

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