

Including the Archival Context in the Historian's Materials: The Advantages of Archival Standard Databases in Historical Research

VINCULUM Project Database and Information System Guide

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Abstract This paper examines the challenges and solutions in designing historical databases, focusing on maintaining archival context and relational integrity. Databases often prioritize specific inquiries, neglecting the comprehensive relationships and temporal transmission crucial for accurate historical analysis. The VINCULUM Project's database demonstrates the benefits of integrating international standards in order to preserve the integrity of information and enhance its reliability through design rationale, practical implementation, and the importance of an accompanying 'Information System Guide' to aid researchers. The conclusion underscores the necessity of providing comprehensive guidelines to ensure effective information-seeking and knowledge organization.

Keywords VINCULUM Project. Information System Guide. Entail. Historical-archival databases. Archival footprint.

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1 Introduction

Databases developed in response to historical inquiries often exhibit a tendency to diminish the archival context of the data, limiting it to a mere identification of provenance primarily conveyed through reference or access numbers. Furthermore, such databases tend to organize archival information based on specific inquiries rather than the comprehensive relational foundation of the empirical basis of the inquiry. Consequently, there is a potential risk of neglecting both the horizontal dimension of data, which encompasses the intricate web of relationships between data points, and the vertical dimension, which represents their temporal transmission over time. The significance of these dimensions in the context of historical analysis, particularly in ensuring the accurate sequencing of events to construct historical narratives, tends to remain obscured, if not entirely disregarded.

The judicious utilization of archival description databases, which adheres to the integrity of archival fonds and to international archival standards and the principles of diplomatics concerning document transmission, offers a viable solution to address the issues encountered in historical databases. By upholding the comprehensive nature of information and adopting 'neutral' structures rooted in information and document production, archival description databases can attain heightened permanence and reliability. Firstly, they achieve this by carefully analysing the available historical information. Secondly, their capacity to elucidate the transmission of information across centuries and the potential alterations in the transmission process further contributes to their durability.

Additionally, these databases can furnish researchers with access to materials through diverse categories of indexes, encompassing anthroponomical, toponymical, and subject-based classifications, among others, employing controlled vocabularies. These indexes may also undergo enrichment by various users, based on specific research inquiries.

The relational aspect of archival databases is strengthened through the synergistic utilization of various standards, such as ISDIAH, ISAAR-CPF, and ISAD-G.¹ An illustrative example of the

¹ It is important to note that the VINCULUM project was conceived in 2018, during a period when several developments in the field of archival description were underway but not yet completed or publicly available. We recognize the significance of models such as Records in Contexts (RiC), as well as the various knowledge organization tools and theories developed over the past decade in the field of Archival Science. Indeed, we have made concerted efforts to promote their adoption by historians, who, on the whole, remain largely unfamiliar with them, often unaware even of the International Standard Archival Description (General) [ISAD(G)] and other related standards employed in the VINCULUM database (Rosa 2024). It is important to emphasize, however, that this text is written from the perspective of a historian who relies on archival

potential benefits derived from the integration of multiple standards lies in the introduction of authority records for creators that can be interconnected in multiple ways. Additionally, it is imperative to accompany these databases with an 'information system guide' that provides a comprehensive account of the institutional history of the creators, the methodologies employed in the production and documentation of information, as well as the historical evolution of document transmission and the constitution of records within historical archives, including custodial and archival histories.

This text endeavours to delve into these themes with a primary focus on the experiences and developments within the VINCULUM Project's database, which has been in progress since 2019. The discussion will commence with a succinct introduction to the project, followed by an elucidation of the underlying rationale behind the database's design. Subsequently, the second part of the text will concentrate on practical aspects and the presentation of outcomes, encompassing the database's construction and an in-depth exploration of the characteristics of the associated 'Information System Guide'. The discourse will culminate in a contemplation of the challenges associated with the selection of an archival database as an option, underscoring the critical need to equip researchers with comprehensive guidelines that draw upon insights from studies on information-seeking behaviour and knowledge organization.

2 VINCULUM Project: A Presentation

Few social phenomena have been as pertinent to premodern societies in southern Europe as entails (*morgadios*, *mayorazgos*) and chantries. These institutions, the subjects of analysis within the VINCULUM project, are collectively examined under the term 'entailment'. They evolved as a means of preserving property within particular family structures by establishing a legal entity managed by carefully chosen successors in perpetuity. This entity constituted a corporate body, overseen by the designated successors, operating within the

description, believing in its fundamental importance for historical research, yet must contend with the specific challenges posed by data from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. This involves dealing with handwritten documents (which require strong palaeographical skills) produced by non-contemporary institutions, which have entered public archives through long and disorganized processes of incorporation, and which have often been poorly and anachronistically described by archivists. The VINCULUM project reviewed thousands of documents, characterized dozens of information-producing institutions, and identified and defined approximately 150 documentary typologies. The application of the latest and most sophisticated models would have been extremely challenging while the project was already in progress; however, we hope that these models may serve as the foundation for future projects.

framework of enduring continuity. It encompassed the living, the deceased, and future family members, holding significant authority. Rooted in the deeply ingrained cultural figure of the *founder* – whose will was regarded as law in its most comprehensive sense – the corporate body governed interpersonal relationships within and outside the family sphere. It established distinct connections with property and the economy, negotiated tradition, and controlled change. To a large extent, the corporate body served as the social agent dictating the actions of its human members, their circumstances, and strategies.²

Between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, approximately 7,000 entails and chantries were established across what is now continental Portugal, as well as in the Atlantic regions colonized during this period of institutional expansion and consolidation. These institutions played a vital role in enabling the nobility to maintain their social standing and facilitating social mobility among other social groups. In the island communities of Madeira and the Azores, entailment rapidly organized society and property within a few decades, imbuing them with distinct characteristics. Meanwhile, in Cape Verde and the territories occupied along the Brazilian coast, entailment was primarily introduced through chapels, gaining significance at a more gradual but consistent pace. Existing studies suggest that this trend mirrored developments in other Iberian kingdoms, particularly Castile. Resembling the peninsular *morgadio* in many aspects, during the modern era, entailment evolved into a defining characteristic of numerous regions in southern Europe and served as a fundamental model for elite reproduction. Consequently, it exerted a profound influence on various facets of society.

Although entailment gradually waned and eventually vanished in later centuries – in the Iberian territories, it became extinct in the second half of the nineteenth century – its concluding phases were not without turmoil. The discussion of its legal abolition spanned decades. On the eve of its demise, numerous entail owners officially chose to preserve it, despite the associated high administrative costs. Even after its formal abolition, it persisted on a significant scale through private agreements until at least the mid-twentieth century. An influential outgrowth of the socio-political relationships shaped by entailment was the figure known as the *cacique*, a pivotal presence in post-liberal, rural societies. Remarkably, entailment was formally resurrected, in various configurations, by the fascist regimes that gained prominence in twentieth-century southern Europe. In reality, the framework of entailment transcended mere social solutions; it constituted a cultural phenomenon, deeply ingrained in the societies

² See a recent state-of-the-art in Rosa 2020.

under examination. Key elements such as the paternal figure's prominence, the allure of paternalism as a political solution, the role of the extended family (always present though in the background), and the influence of familial obligations (both material and spiritual), are recurrent themes in sociological portrayals. Furthermore, the subject resurfaces in the literature and other cultural expressions of southern Europe, particularly in Portugal and Brazil. An illustrative example is the *morgadio*, which remains a central figure in nineteenth-century romantic medievalism and its extensions.

Historiography has not overlooked this profoundly significant topic. Prominent historians, encompassing both medievalists and modernists, have long underscored the impact of entailment on the formation of Iberian societies. In recent decades, scholars specialising in medieval and modern periods alike have reexamined the timing and forms of lineage transformations in these societies, emphasizing the pivotal role of the *morgadio* in consolidating such processes. This feature appears to be characteristic of Iberian societies, both in terms of the institutional element's significance and the early adoption of primogeniture legal systems (Sottomayor-Pizarro 2011; Monteiro 2001). While these historiographical perspectives lay the groundwork for scholarly contemplation, they also underscore the absence of a comprehensive study of this phenomenon.

The project focuses on a vast and intricate subject, one in which multiple social forces converged within a legal framework. This framework conferred a unified identity as a corporate legal entity, shaped around the figure of the founder and governed by internal laws. However, the study of entailment thus far has been approached from one-sided perspectives, whether they be legal, social, or cultural, which tend to overlook its holistic nature. Alternatively, it has been explored through site-specific monographs that seldom engage with broader issues. The project is grounded in the premise that a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon can only be achieved by considering it in its entirety, especially because the autonomy of analytical domains such as politics, economy, society, and religion corresponds to an epistemological paradigm of a different era (Guerreau 1980; 1990).

Starting from the Portuguese-Iberian context, 'entailment' (*vinculação*) is examined as a multifaceted, yet pivotal practice deeply embedded in law, aristocratic discourse, and kinship-based organization. The aim is to formulate a definition that accommodates its global nature. The research program seeks to comprehend and interpret this historical phenomenon in a global and innovative manner, proposing a new paradigm for analysing entailment with the goal of arriving at a novel conceptualization that allows for a comprehensive interpretation of this social practice.

Although the term 'entailment' already possesses a suitable definition in English, referring to "the restriction of property by limiting the inheritance to the owner's lineal descendants or to a particular class thereof", its historiographical usage requires further elaboration and comparative analysis. The VINCULUM project is grounded in the analytical significance of the idea that entailment, as a corporate body, played a pivotal role as a social agent. The project endeavours to elucidate how this agency was established, how it operated, and why it endured for numerous centuries. By assuming that this distinct legal entity acted as a social agent within a society where non-personal legal entities were commonplace, it becomes possible to illuminate and scrutinize the historical problem, comprehending entailment in its entirety, including its various functions related to people, kinship, suffrages, community integration, economic management, and archival production (Rosa 2012).

Consequently, the core structure of the research program has been crafted around what are identified as the central elements of the agency of the entailment corporate body, namely kinship, power, and identity. The ultimate objective is to propose a fresh conceptual framework for this phenomenon.

3 Gathering Archival Records as a Scientific Problem

The decision to propose a comprehensive database as the central outcome of this project was not made lightly. We held a firm conviction that databases have the capacity to shape realities, which can be potentially hazardous if not thoroughly and transparently elucidated for users. Furthermore, our awareness of numerous databases that had relatively short lifespans, often designed for highly specific historical inquiries, gave us pause. However, in this particular instance, it was not merely a matter of choice but rather a necessity driven by the complexity of the issues at hand, a viewpoint we shall briefly elaborate upon.

In the realm of Iberian historiography, the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed a growing interest in this subject, emerging within both historiographical traditions. This burgeoning interest was fuelled by distinct institutional circumstances, notably the significant activity of the *Seminario Familia y Elite de Poder* at the University of Murcia, along with the effects of modernization and increased openness within scientific environments in Iberian universities. These factors facilitated the modernization of historical approaches, marking a significant qualitative advancement from the predominantly erudite and monographic studies of the past. For instance, scholars began to delve into more specific facets of *mayorazgos* (primogeniture) – such as their economic constraints – which

were perceived as being rather adaptable (Quintanilla Raso 2004). There was also a heightened focus on the religious dimension of entailment, particularly evident in funerary chapels (Roth 2007; Irigoyen 2004). Nevertheless, even amidst these positive developments, figures like Soria Mesa, a prominent authority in the history of Iberian nobility, emphasized the pressing need for holistic perspectives on entailment.

In fact, following his initial attempts at extensive data collection (Soria Mesa 2007), the scholar soon concluded, through a comprehensive historiographical review of research on the Spanish Modern period nobility, that the

mayorazgo was conspicuous by its absence from the historiographical scene, despite the fact that it had been, paradoxically, the main protagonist of the evolution of Spanish nobility, at least from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. (Soria Mesa 2009, 225)

This assessment resonated closely with my own research experiences within the Portuguese context. Consequently, the imperative for 'large data gathering' was recognized as a fundamental requirement for the VINCULUM project from its inception.

The reasons behind the rapid proliferation of entail foundations in the Iberian Peninsula, particularly in the realms of Portugal and Castile, remain largely unknown, partly owing to the inherent challenges associated with their documentation. This predicament is multi-faceted. Firstly, the registration of entails within Crown administrative offices was a development that occurred relatively late. Secondly, invaluable repositories for research, such as notary offices and family/house archives, have suffered significant losses, with the latter yet to be comprehensively catalogued or exploited. Thirdly, archives directly linked to entails experienced substantial losses following the dissolution of the legal institution, accompanied by the subsequent disbandment of corporate families.

Within the ARQFAM program³ and the INVENT.ARQ project,⁴ we have identified approximately thirty private archives that have become accessible to our project, either through the documents themselves or via antiquated inventories containing dated and substantial summaries (Rosa, Head 2015). Some family archives are also housed in state archives, and recent efforts have been made to access this material. However, contemporary archival theories regarding family archives have had limited influence, necessitating

³ <https://arqfam.fcsh.unl.pt/>.

⁴ <https://inventarq.fcsh.unl.pt/>.

a rigorous analysis of the organisational structure before utilizing the fonds. Furthermore, the voluminous collections maintained by Crown/State and Church institutions responsible for overseeing entails and chantries are predominantly either undocumented or reliant on archival treatments from the nineteenth century. Accessing these fonds demands an intimate understanding of the intricacies of the entail system.

It is imperative to underscore that the significance of this undertaking extends far beyond the mere compilation of concrete information pertaining to entails. It encompasses the reconstruction of the lost archives of entails, or, from a broader perspective, the production of information related to entails. Our decision was to reconstruct the informational and documentary landscape surrounding entailment, whether it be through direct sources (family archives) or indirect ones (Crown/Church institutions connected to entailment). This reconstruction spans from the generation of information upon its initial entry into archival institutions, including the organization of records at that stage (and their enduring presence within family archives, often entailing emotional and social distinctions) (Rosa 2017). This approach holds particular relevance in the study of entails since the institution itself *created archives*. Remarkably, a vast majority of the central documentation found in family archives traces its origins back to entails – a fact that has been largely overlooked by historians and yet bears immense significance. For this project, the archives of entails, replete with their social implications, are considered objects of study in their own right, not merely sources of information for historical investigations.

Hence, among the novel theoretical pathways advanced in this project, the database assumes a central role. It is not merely a means to an end, although historical research employing the database is both planned and underway.⁵ Rather, the database constitutes an end in itself. The primary objective is to construct a theory-driven collection and organization of empirical materials, adhering to specific methodological approaches, which we shall elucidate in the following paragraphs.

The central premise revolves around the notion that reconfiguring entailment heuristics necessitates the reconstruction of the entailment's information system, as opposed to *relying solely on historical archives for data collection*. In advocating for the convergence of novel epistemological sources that encompass the scientific scrutiny of historians' materials, proposals drawn from archival science, and the emerging field of the history of archives and information, this project pledged a substantial commitment to reconstructing the

⁵ <https://www.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/about/>.

contemporaneous landscape of information production, documentation, utilization, preservation, and transmission (Rosa 2017).

This approach encompasses the consideration of existing documents in conjunction with those that have been lost, with the objective of forming a comprehensive overview. Each piece of information is meticulously linked to its respective producer, thereby imbuing it with its full contextual significance. The coexisting centres of information production, namely the entailments themselves, along with entities related to them such as Crown offices, church institutions, and municipalities, are conceptualized as direct or interconnected information producers. The entailment is scrutinized as the generator of official and legally acknowledged information, given that record creation and management are inextricably bound by the foundation charter (Rosa 2019; 2022; Iranzo Muño 2009). A comprehensive exploration of *jus archivi* underscores the operation, as the inherent legality of entailment archives had previously been overlooked (Rosa 2022).

Beneath these tasks lies the fundamental notion that it is imperative to trace the path from *where things are kept* to *where things have come from, why and how*, elucidating the reasons and mechanisms involved. To achieve this, contemporary theoretical concepts concerning the reconsideration of sources will be brought into play. In accordance with Kuchenbuch's formulation (2004), every archival record, prior to being categorized as such, existed as a document of its own era. In the context of archival science, the informational act precedes the creation of the record itself. Finally, adhering to a conception of organizing and utilizing documentary materials that respects the structure of information and documentary production (Cammarosano 1991; Lodolini 1991), it becomes indispensable to have a comprehensive understanding of the institution responsible for generating the record and its administrative operational framework.

Ultimately, the overarching objective is to *engage with organisational archives*, recognizing their existence prior to the establishment of each currently available historical archive. Consequently, this project adheres to a methodology centered on the reconstruction of the institutional system engendered by entailment, both internally and externally. This encompasses the design of an institutional network, exploration of various forms of information production, the process of documentalization, and the constitution of archives.

Given that we were delving into the realm of premodern information production, the project also places significant emphasis on the novel perspective offered by the *anthropology of archives* (El-Leithy 2011). Comprehending the entailment information system necessitates a comprehensive view encompassing diverse methods of information gathering, utilization, and preservation. Integral components of entailments included armour, tombs, genealogical records, and prestigious symbolic objects (both tangible and intangible, such as evidence of

participation in prestigious battles). These elements were considered a core part of the entails and intrinsic to the foundation document, commemorated on specific occasions or during generational ceremonies, and prominently displayed in the social spaces of the properties (Rosa 1995; Martínez Perera 2010; Contreras Jiménez 2016). Ritual, liturgical, and charitable acts were obligatory for successive administrators and constituted an integral part of the discourse supporting their authority (Clanchy 1980-81; Cook 2013; Rosa 2021).

Furthermore, this perspective necessitates the recognition of archives of a distinct nature, akin to contemporary community archives (Rosa 2020). To fathom this milieu, contemporary perspectives from the field of archival science assume significant importance. The establishment of national archives has fragmented the premodern archival landscape and evolving societal contexts have relegated family/entail archives to the realm of private collections of amateur historians or symbols of social distinction. The few family archives housed in public archives are rarely organized or are classified as a form of administrative output of modern institutions. Additionally, the comprehensiveness of the information system encompassing documents, physical spaces, objects, and traditions was dismantled during the establishment of the modern taxonomy of memory and heritage institutions, demarcated by the triad of archives-museums-libraries (Stauffer 2021, chs 10 and ff.). Consequently, a comparative analysis with currently extant family information systems holds relevance, along with other observations concerning the continuity of entailment in modern societies.

Translating these historiographical suggestions into the conception of the database necessitated a strategic plan. The guiding principle was that the dismantling of Ancien Régime society, particularly the restructuring of its records during the establishment of the National Archives, obliterated prior information production and the archival landscape fundamentally. Therefore, to facilitate effective record retrieval and organization, the initial step involved reconstructing the informational landscape through:

1. an institutional examination of the entailment information system, encompassing archives related to entails and family archives, Ancien Régime control institutions (Crown and Church), and state institutions responsible for the abolition of entails;
2. an exploration of the custodial history of the archives of these institutions, considering their inclusion in either public or private archives, along with the types of descriptions applied;
3. the tangible reconstruction of each institution's information production, documentation, and preservation, utilizing surviving documents and ancient inventories that were subject to previous documentary criticism.

4 Building the Database

4.1 Characterization of the Data

The database aims to furnish comprehensive and accurately structured information on all existing entails (referred to as *vínculos*, encompassing both *morgadios* and *capelas*) within Portuguese territories (excluding the 'Estado da Índia') from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, featuring lay familial administration. Preliminary estimates suggest that the database will encompass approximately 7,000 entail institutions. The scope of information and available documents for each institution will vary widely, ranging from mere mentions to including dedicated archives, some of which may contain hundreds of records. All document types produced or received by the entail will be included, with emphasis on particularly significant and voluminous ones, such as foundation deeds, legal judgments, inventories, and narrative documents. The database aims to incorporate descriptions of existing documents, as well as those that have been lost, utilizing information from ancient inventories when deemed suitable for inclusion.

4.2 Information Structuring

Beneath the development of the database lies a central tenet of the project, namely the reconstruction of the information structure under the concept of an 'entailment information system'. The project posits that information and documents related to entails are sporadically present in archives, with archival fonds often being inaccurately arranged and described. This predicament poses a fundamental question requiring resolution prior to any historical research. The inquiry itself constitutes a form of research – how to deal with a historically fragmented archival landscape, exacerbated by problematic archival and historiographical practices.

This misleading heuristic landscape can be attributed, primarily, to the oversight of the consequences of a protracted process of archival transformation, fragmentation, and dispersal initiated by the nineteenth-century 'Liberal' regime's (1863) abolition of entails. This process was preceded by the Enlightened Reformism's pressure to curtail new foundations and succeeded by the proclamation of the Republican regime in 1910, signalling the end of the nobility. Over the period from approximately 1750 to 1910, entail archives underwent significant changes that substantially altered their nature. Ultimately, these archives faced fates such as immediate destruction, transfer to buyers of the newly 'free estates' who subsequently destroyed them after aligning with the new legal system, or

preservation within families for sentimental reasons, subject to varied destinies throughout the twentieth century, including division or sale in auctions.

Moreover, the establishment of the National Archives significantly contributed to the fragmentation of archives from the two central institutions with which entails interacted – the Crown and the Church. Another contributing factor lies in ‘classical’ historiographical practices, such as constructing prosopographical databases, which often overlook or neglect the origin of archival information. Additionally, these practices are sometimes designed without consideration for the institutional nature of entails and the formal production of information, records, and archives. The use of anachronistic or simplistic proposals for the organization and classification of materials by archivists, coupled with a failure to study the institution and acknowledge the institutional distinctiveness of societies like the Ancien Régime, further compounds the issue.

In response to these challenges, VINCULUM has set as its primary and essential task the reorganization of information, facilitated by the AtoM database. Through the meticulous reorganization of documents associated with each entail – considered as both the creator institution and the archival custodian – while transparently documenting the provenance of each document, VINCULUM seeks to mitigate the dispersion of historical information.

4.3 Data Architecture

The database is constructed using AtoM, an archival database employing open-source software with a long-standing and widespread use across various countries, ensuring continuity. This platform adheres to archival standards for record treatment and facilitates the inclusion of digital copies of the documents.⁶ AtoM is structured around several interconnected internal databases, namely, 1) Archival institutions (renamed for clarity as ‘Entail/vínculo’); 2) Authority records; 3) Archival descriptions.

The single unit of data entry and organization adheres to both archivistic principles and the project’s theoretical framework, considering entailed entities as ‘Archival Institutions’ and describing them based on a simplified version of ISDIAH.⁷ Leveraging AtoM enables the tracking of documents back to their creators, regardless of their eventual storage location. The associated ‘Authority Records’

⁶ <https://www.accesstomemory.org/>; <https://accesstomemoryfoundation.org/>.

⁷ <https://www.ica.org/en/isdiah-international-standard-describing-institutions-archival-holdings>.

database, aligning with archival standards (ISAAR-CPF), accommodates prosopographies of individuals and institutions linked to entailed entities.⁸ As the project's historical research progresses, these prosopographies may expand to include supplementary information on people and institutions, facilitated by the inclusion of familial relationships within the methodology of Authority records, aiding kinship analyses (Gago 2017; Dryden 2007).

Document descriptions, following ISAD (G) and diplomatic description rules, are stored in the 'Archival Descriptions Database'.⁹ A foundational project principle involves describing all documents according to the chain of diplomatic and archival transmission over centuries. This entails documenting not only the document conveying information about the historical subject but also its entry into the archive – successive copies, and/or the institutional path that produced it. Given that a significant majority of entailment documents exist only in later copies, this approach introduces additional workload and necessitates numerous description decisions. However, it offers the advantage of situating information within its authentic context, encompassing transcription errors, truncations, and previous archival choices.

Documents of specific typologies in the database, such as institution charters, wills, family partitions, and court sentences, undergo indexing by subject and documentary expression (the semantic of entailment). This indexing employs controlled terminology and thesauri, and the entire dataset is categorized geographically.

4.4 Integration of the Documentary Information in the Global Information System

In addition to finalizing the various 'entail archives', the plan for future years involves establishing connections between the documentary information compiled in the database and information available in other formats, such as images and architectural elements. Written documents of different natures will also be correlated with the entailed entities that produced them, whenever applicable. This second phase of information compilation and integration is likely to be conducted through a sampling method, focusing on selected case studies.

⁸ <https://www.ica.org/resource/isaar-cpf-international-standard-archival-authority-record-for-corporate-bodies-persons-and-families-2nd-edition/>.

⁹ <https://www.ica.org/en/isadg-general-international-standard-archival-description-second-edition>. Regarding diplomatic description, we followed the Portuguese rules, adapted for International standards: Costa 1993.

5 **Constructing the (VINCULUM) Information System Guide**

The database includes a complementary component, the 'Information System Guide', which represents another significant output of the project. This guide systematically presents the materials collected and structured within the database based on the institution that created them and the flow of information. Additionally, it provides an overview of the current archival arrangement and description of the records in their respective archives. Moreover, it aims to elucidate the processes of document creation and subsequent conservation of social information, considered fundamental for initiating any research.

The 'Information System Guide' endeavours to reconstruct the institutional, administrative, and information production system that evolved through the practice of entailment from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, both internally and externally. It comprises two primary sections: the design of the institutional network and the modalities of information production, record creation, and archive establishment.

The central research problem involves challenging conventional notions regarding archives associated with entails, commencing with historical archives as understood in contemporary terms and posing questions such as "What are their origins? Why and how were they created?". This approach aligns with the latest theoretical reconceptualization of the role of 'sources' in historical writing, emphasizing that all archival records were initially documents of their respective eras. According to the tenets of Archival and Information Science, the act of information generation precedes both 'documentalization' and the record itself.

In a framework of record organization and utilization aimed at respecting the structure of information and document production, it is imperative to comprehend the institutions responsible for generating that information and their administrative operations. Subsequently, it becomes crucial to provide comprehensive descriptions of the documents and delineate the legal boundaries that governed the existence of entails. Accordingly, the 'Information System Guide' is structured into three principal sections, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted aspects underlying the information system of entails:

1. 'institutions' involved in producing, receiving, and/or preserving information pertaining to entails, including the Crown, the Church, and the entails themselves. Information regarding each institution is categorized based on: Chronological span; Normative documents; Competencies; Institutional

- structure and the roles of its agents in relation to entails; Interactions with other institutions concerning entails;¹⁰
2. 'documents' produced by entailment, namely the document types identified and their diplomatic analysis.¹¹ The typological analysis of the documentation regarding entails, provides for each type, whenever applicable: name, specific bibliography, definition, author/creator, addressee(s), legislation, processing, organization of documents within the typology/related documents, administrative validity, and registration and archiving conditions. It was deemed necessary to conduct diplomatic analysis of the identified typologies of documents related to entails rather frequently. This involves presenting, for each typology and whenever applicable: reference and date of the analysed documents, parts of the documents/elements, protocol (*invocatio*, *intitulatio*, *inscriptio*, and *salutatio*), text (*notificatio*, *expositio*, *dispositio*, and final clauses), and eschatocol (the closing protocol noting the topical and chronological date, the validation and secretarial notes). The documents were selected by the project team and are indicated in each diplomatic typological framework;
 3. 'civil and ecclesiastical legislation' comprises the collection of laws that regulated the operation of entails between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, produced by the Crown and the Church, coexisting in a dynamic relationship with the central law of entailment, the 'will of the founder'.¹²

To these three sections are added the bibliographical references that include sources, and working tools used in the preparation of the texts of the 'Information System Guide'.¹³

¹⁰ <https://visg.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/en/instituicao/crown/>; <https://visg.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/en/instituicao/church/>; <https://visg.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/en/instituicao/entail/>.

¹¹ <https://visg.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/en/documentos/>.

¹² <https://visg.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/en/legislacao/>.

¹³ <https://visg.vinculum.fcsh.unl.pt/en/referencias/>.

6 **The Construction of a Database. A Challenge for Transparency and User Education**

VINCULUM database is now¹⁴ approaching 7,100 'entails' (considered as 'Archival holding institutions'), 24,826 document producers' biographies ('Authority records'), and 33,765 documents' summaries (in English) ('Archival descriptions', of which c. 26,692 are items and 7,073 are fonds). It contains c. 13,150 indexations by subject and c. 5,630 indexations by place. It also contains a high number of errors and mistakes, which will have to be corrected before publishing it online. Furthermore, a significant number of documents remain to be inserted, many of which originate from complex and largely undescribed archival collections. These documents necessitate paleographical skills and diplomatic training for accurate transcription and interpretation.

In the realm of historical research, the construction of extensive documentary databases is a task for which historians are typically unprepared during their academic training at universities and research institutions. The development of vast databases such as VINCULUM presents uncharted territory, especially for medievalists and modernists. The following discussion should be viewed within the context of addressing this educational gap within the profession, which cannot be entirely rectified by technology, regardless of how sophisticated and modern the databases may seem.

One primary concern is the necessity for standardization in data collection and processing. In the VINCULUM case it was imperative to establish a set of protocols and guidelines for material collection and input, with ongoing monitoring of their implementation. Initially, a weekly database correction system was implemented, whereby errors were identified by researchers not directly involved in data entry and notified to the members working on the database. However, it became apparent that errors were only effectively addressed when corrected by their creators. Subsequently, a more time-consuming but significantly more effective correction system was introduced. Additionally, a comprehensive set of working documents is being prepared, containing information on examined archival collections, documentary analysis, and rejected documents due to dubious or incomplete content. Weekly meetings and written reports have been conducted since the project's inception to discuss document options, all of which are meticulously documented and will be made available on the project's website.

Another critical issue necessitating specific training for historians is the understanding of standardized document description and

¹⁴ At the date of April 2024.

the inclusion of the document transmission chain. The modernization of research through database creation alone is illusory, particularly concerning prosopographical databases. The notion of collecting 'one more document' about individuals to be studied often obscures the importance of obtaining correct and comprehensive information about data provenance, resulting in inevitable distortions in samples. Moreover, the historians' lack of archival education and their reliance on footnotes, often incomplete or incipient, for document identification is problematic and more so if multiplied in order to show the author's erudition. Instead, it is essential to heed Marc Bloch's call, lately taken up by some medievalist historians, for a rigorous presentation of sources and their treatment at the outset of research endeavours (Anheim 2012).

Archivists, amidst their postmodern self-criticism and elsewhere, now deem it essential to present the 'archival footprint', commencing with a relativization of their neutrality (Cook 2009, 533). Historians, despite decades of acknowledging the subjectivity inherent in their profession, often still rely on a simplified positivist approach regarding their relationship with sources, which, in reality, constitute a complex and diverse world requiring diligently undertaken exploratory endeavours. Regardless of the potential price of this approach being the relativization of documentary evidence, the notion of historicizing the archive has long been advocated by anthropologists, yet not systematically embraced by historians, despite the increasing number of studies on the subject (Dirks 2002).¹⁵

One of the main archival challenges are the vast holdings of royal and ecclesiastical institutions from the Ancien Régime, particularly in Portugal, which remain largely unclassified and undescribed. Their integration into the National Archives was often disorderly, reflecting a lack of institutional and administrative history documentation. The documents were thus transferred between offices, warehouses, and, regrettably, discarded before finding their way into state archives. Consequently, the institutional and administrative history conducted within the framework of the 'Information System Guide' evolved from a theoretical principle into a practical necessity. Despite the technological sophistication of archival databases, they may exhibit flaws akin to those found in historical databases, including a dearth of information on the institutional and collection history data (the pivotal 'custodial history'), significant variability in the

15 The increasing historical approach can be seen through a sequence of journals' special numbers: "Archival Knowledge Cultures in Europe, 1400-1900", *Archival Science*, 10 (September 2010); "Archival Transformations in Early Modern Europe", *European History Quarterly*, 46(3) (July 2016); "The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe", *Past & Present*, 230(11) (November 2016). More recently the trend extends to "Information", cf. Blair et al. 2021.

texts, and incomplete and/or inconsistent descriptions of the fonds. Additionally, the lack of collaboration between the two fields is particularly evident here, with historians largely neglecting institutional and collection history studies, and archivists facing challenges in undertaking this task independently. Now more than ever, collaboration between the two disciplines is imperative.¹⁶

Lastly, it is crucial to underscore the importance of educating users of historical, archival, or archival-historical databases. Promoters of these databases must provide clear and comprehensive explanations of how they were constructed, elucidating the various options involved. Users, on their part, must familiarize themselves with 'reading the instructions'. Those of us who teach history courses bear a special responsibility in this regard. Young researchers often seek 'content' that can substantiate their initial research ideas, with limited patience for longer timelines to obtain results in today's generation. Simply clicking on 'search' and gathering results may seem easier than delving into detailed explanations of the challenges and complexities inherent in archival collections. However, this problem existed, albeit in different forms, even before the digital era. How many history professors instructed their students that the 'reference room' of archives and their 'access tools' were (and are) artefacts, not neutral portals? Conversely, how many urged 'more diligent' students to explore everything, hinting that novelty and legitimization of their research lies in years of archival work, meticulously examining hundreds of scrolls, bundles, and boxes?

An important contribution to rethinking the research practices of various archival user groups, including historians, university professors, and researchers who may believe they do not require such training, comes from studies on information literacy or information-seeking behaviour. Information scientists in the field of archives have extensively developed this area in recent decades, alongside studies on knowledge organization (Rhee 2014; Torou 2006; Troitiño 2018). Both perspectives are of significant interest to database developers and users. On one hand, they provide insights into what different user groups seek and how they search for it, enabling the teaching of effective search methods and the development of user-friendly yet rigorous information access tools. On the other hand, in database planning, the 'organization of knowledge' underscores the responsibility involved and the situationalities that must be considered or avoided.

As we near the completion of several years dedicated to constructing a database aimed primarily at advancing scientific progress, our hope is that despite any flaws it may possess, it also embodies some of these virtues.

16 For an overall revision cf. Poole 2015 and Blouin 2019.

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