



Close Encounters of the Primary Kind: Strategies for Navigating Archives and Archival Sources (2.5.2023, KOL 035, 1 - 5 pm)

An interactive workshop with Maarten Halff, hosted by the Basel Graduate School of History

Engaging with primary archival sources presents challenges and thrills for the researcher at different levels. There is, firstly, the immersion into the richness of an archive. In order to “find” something – anything – one must often first understand the history of the archive’s creation, discover its structures, and master its unique processes. (Sometimes even navigate the whims of its custodians). And once a “discovery” has been made or a relevant source identified, our initial comprehension may be obstructed by puzzling handwriting, unknown abbreviations and symbols, arcane references, or simply unfamiliar vocabulary and syntax. Having solved the paleographic and linguistic puzzles, the historian will next encounter the problem of “making sources speak” – that is, the process of retrieving relevant and contextualized information that may provide valid historical insights. Often, the breadth of available source-critical tools adds to, rather than alleviates, the confusion: after all, the very idea of an historical source encapsulates a far-ranging and heterogeneous notion of evidence that may appear in written, material, digital, and even oral forms.

This interdisciplinary graduate workshop sets out to address and tackle some of the common (and less common) interpretative, methodical, and paleographical challenges in navigating archives and dealing with historical sources of all periods. Open to graduate (and advanced undergraduate) students of history and related disciplines, the workshop aims to provide a collaborative learning platform enabling participants to gain new analytical impulses by means of diachronic and methodical comparisons. In the way of an open roundtable discussion, participants will be invited to outline their work and current source-related challenges to their peers, thus identifying common problems and jointly developing solutions. On the basis of specific source examples provided by the participants, the discussion will revolve around questions such as

- What are useful navigational tools or “shortcuts” when entering an archive for the first time? What are the elements of a successful archival research strategy or plan?
- How does one “learn to read” archival sources?
- What kind of information does the source reveal with respect to the question(s) asked?
- What type of evidence (micro/macro, anecdotal/general, positive/circumstantial) does it contain, and how does it relate to/ stand out from the historical context at large?
- What are its limitations and/or points of connection to other types of sources?
- How does it fit into/ challenge a given historical narrative?

Maarten Halff has spent a lot of time in archives and in close encounters with archival sources. His particular scholarly interests lie in the early Italian Renaissance, especially the social and political cultures of Venice as well as Venetian-Byzantine relations. A lawyer and political scientist by training, Maarten also has decades of experience as an international electoral adviser, having worked on numerous UN conflict resolution and peacekeeping missions. Through his professional experience, his interests also extend to modern and contemporary history.