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Libraries and Archives in the Former Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE): Arguing for a Distinction

Abstract: The imperial collection of the Former Han dynasty, the oldest Chinese manuscript collection of which we possess a catalogue, has both been called an archive and a library. This paper discusses the fundamental difference between an archive and a library in the manuscript age. On the basis of this distinction, it argues for the imperial collection to be identified as a library and provides evidence of a clear distinction between ‘archive’ and ‘library’ in this period of Chinese history.

1 Introduction

The imperial collection of the Former Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) is the oldest Chinese manuscript collection about which we have detailed information in the form of a catalogue. This catalogue, in turn, has come down to us in the form of a chapter in the *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) entitled *Treatise on Classics and other Texts* (*Yiwenzhi* 藝文志).¹ As is well known, the compiler of the *History*, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), shortened an earlier catalogue for the *Treatise* composed by Liu Xin 劉歆 (c.50 BCE–23 CE), but this earlier version has now been lost. The former catalogue known as *Seven Epitomes* (*Qilüe* 七略) was based on elaborate editorial reports, most of which have also been lost. These were written down as part of the grand collation project initially headed by Liu Xin’s father, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BCE) and continued by the son after the latter’s death. This project, which began in 26 BCE, aimed at assessing the holdings at the imperial court, but also included major editorial work. It signifies a crucial point in the history of most if not all early Chinese literature, because it involved the fixation of editions and documentation of these.

Researchers variously refer to this manuscript collection as a ‘library’ or ‘archive’. Scholars working in the field of library history generally label the collection a library or even the first library in Chinese history.² Those working on the history

1 HS 30:1701–1781.

2 This is true of Western scholarship (e.g. Koh Thong-ngee 1964, 40; Drège 1991, 19–24; Lewis 1999, 325–331; Dudbridge 2000, 5–6), but also of Chinese scholarship, where we have a few arti-

of archives, on the other hand, tend to identify it as an archive.³ One reason for this is the often repeated argument that there was no clear distinction between the two in early China; the same places are said to have been used to store documents and literary or historical works.⁴ It is typically argued that the archive came first and the library gradually developed out of this.⁵ There seems to be no general consensus regarding what point in time a clear distinction is possible. To some, this division can only be made fully with the introduction of printed books in the tenth century CE.⁶ This obviously is based on modern notions, according to which libraries keep published and thus printed books, while archives store what is unpublished and thus not printed. This is a concept that is clearly unsuitable for the pre-printing age, though.

Essentially, this is a problem of definition. Most of the above-mentioned scholars do not define their use of the terminology; they use the modern terms without giving much thought about either their origins or the concepts behind them. To begin with, there was no genuine term for 'library' in the Han era. The modern word for 'library', *tushuguan* 圖書館, was adopted as a loanword from Japanese in the late nineteenth century to denote modern public libraries.⁷ Older terms, such as *cangshulou* 藏書樓 (lit. 'book collecting building'), *cangshushi* 藏書室 (lit. 'book collecting chamber'), *shuku* 書庫 (lit. 'book repository') and *wenku* 文庫 ('literature repository') did not exist in Han times, but were introduced later.⁸ Some scholars,

cles specifically devoted to libraries under the Han (Chiang 1963; Lu Hesheng 1983; Wang Qiming 2003) and, of course, standard library histories such as Xie Zhuohua 2005, 45–64 and Ren Jiyu 2001, 382–390.

3 Again, there are a number of specialized articles on Han archives (Li Deyun 1980; Huang Caigeng 1988; Zhang Wei 1992) as well as standard works on the history of the archive in China (e.g. Zou Jiawei/Dong Jian 1985, 33–34; Zhou Xueheng 1994, 124–127).

4 Zhang Wei 1992, 49–50; Zhang 2004, 25. Based on this assumption, Nylan 2014 puts forward the argument that Liu Xiang's collation project, which eventually led to the compilation of the catalogue of the imperial collection, was a 'conversion of part of the administrative archives into a real library' (160).

5 Di Chongde/Chen Bolan 1981. The same argument is also made about the emergence of the library in the West: see Harris/Johnson 1999, 14. To me, it is questionable whether using the term 'archive' is appropriate. It would seem advisable to use a third term such as 'repository' or 'storage room' from which a distinction between 'library' and 'archive' evolved.

6 Drège 1991, 84.

7 Wu Xi 1996, 9–10. Wu purports that the term was first used by Liang Qichao 梁啟超 in 1896. Many new terms for Western ideas and concepts were imported into China from Japan in this period; see Amelung/Kurtz/Lackner 2001.

8 According to Wu Xi 1996, 9–10, *cangshulou* first appeared in Tang times (seventh–tenth century CE) and was initially only used to refer to private collections. For a preliminary list of terms used for libraries throughout Chinese history, which I put together myself, see Delhey/Lorusso 2015, 4–8.

like Wu Xi and P. A. Herbert, make a sharp distinction between the modern library (*tushuguan*) as opposed to the traditional library (*cangshulou*), and Wu Xi even comes to the conclusion that China did not have any libraries at all prior to the introduction of the modern public library. According to them, the main difference is that the modern public library aims to make books available to everyone, while the traditional Chinese library aims to store and preserve books.⁹ The traditional library is thus very close to a mere repository. The dichotomy of traditional versus modern also denies any kind of development prior to the introduction of the modern concept, which surely is oversimplifying things.

The picture is somewhat different in the archive's case. As will be shown later, a genuine term for 'archive' did indeed exist in Han times. However, it is not the same as the modern word for 'archive', *dang'an* 檔案 (*dang'anguan* 檔案館 or *dang'anqu* 檔案庫 for the place). It is a fact that *dang'an* was first employed during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), as it does not appear in any sources prior to 1638. Whether the term also has its origin in the Manchu language is contested, though.¹⁰ Archival practices in the Qing period nonetheless differ from the modern European archival concepts. Like the case of the library in China, what is found to be characteristic of the traditional Chinese archive is its mere storage function and a lack of systematic organization for the purpose of retrieval. At the same time, it is argued that the state, which was the dominating force in archival preservation, was more interested in controlling historical records than preserving them; there was no special interest in keeping original documents. According to Western scholarship, pre-modern Chinese archives completely served the needs of official historiography. As soon as official historical compilations were put together, the original documents were of no interest anymore and were simply destroyed.¹¹

As already mentioned above, the modern notion of the difference between 'library' and 'archive', which is based on the physical appearance of the objects found in a collection, is not suitable for understanding the situation for the age prior to

⁹ Wu Xi 1996, 1–2; Herbert 1980, 120–121.

¹⁰ Fitzgerald 2015 argues that it stems from the Manchu *dangse* with the meaning 'wood on which a document is written' (77). Because of the shortage of paper, the Manchu had used wooden slips for their administrative documents. Later, the term supposedly fused with the Chinese *an*. Zhao Zhiqiang 2016 summarizes the various explanations of the origin of the word. Basing his thinking largely on linguist grounds, Zhao comes to the conclusion that the term rather stems from older Chinese words. Also see Wagner 2006, 28 (Wagner 2004 is basically identical to the introduction in Wagner 2006).

¹¹ Wagner 2006, 27–29; Ye/Esherick 1996, 4–5. It should be noted that the main focus of the two studies is on archives in the People's Republic of China. They only deal with traditional archives as precursors to the modern archive.

the invention of printing technology. In our case, it is worth looking at how disciplines dealing with ancient manuscript cultures other than that of China have discussed this issue. Due to the rather imperishable nature of clay tablets, the field of Assyriology is in the fortunate position of being able to work with numerous extant collections. Although scholars have lamented about a similar confusion concerning the use of the two terms in question, they have made a considerable effort to distinguish between ‘library’ and ‘archive’. In the 1950s, Mogens Weitemeyer differentiated them according to the function and content of a particular collection, for instance:

[...], a distinction between library (bibliothèque) and archive must be considered practical, seeing that they differ essentially in their functions. An archive consists of a collection of documents drawn up and used in some administrative, legal or economic process and forming part of the same; [...]. [...] While the archive contains documents recording phenomena of material life, the library holds products of the mental activity of man: a library is a collection of works (religious, literary, mathematical, legal, philological, etc.) gathered with a view to immediate or later use by the group of persons served by the library.¹²

In a more recent study, Olaf Pedersén has drawn a similar distinction between the two, adding that even in the age prior to the invention of mechanical reproduction, the number of copies of a text in a collection may be regarded as a further point of distinction:

The term ‘archive’ [...] refers to a collection of texts, each text documenting a message or statement, for example, letters, legal, economic, and administrative documents. In an archive there is usually just one copy of each text, although occasionally a few copies may exist. ‘Library’, on the other hand, denotes a collection of texts normally with multiple copies for use in different places at different times, and includes, e.g. literary, historical, religious, and scientific texts. In other words, libraries may be said to consist of the texts of tradition. With rather broad definitions of the terms ‘document’ and ‘literary text’, it may be simplest to say that archives are collections of documents and libraries are collections of literary texts.¹³

At the same time, Pedersén is aware of the possibility that both types may be found in one and the same collection. However, in his analysis of 253 collections, he found that only 27 (11%) were of the mixed kind. In all the other cases, a clear distinction was possible based on the content.¹⁴

Further research on the topic of the archive in ancient times stresses that ‘[a]rchives were not merely a storage place for “all kinds of records”. Rather, it

¹² Weitemeyer 1956, 218.

¹³ Pedersén 1998, 3.

¹⁴ Pedersén 1998, 278–280.

is evident that documents placed in an archive were specifically selected for retention. Documents must have been classified by different types, and a selection of these made to identify those for storage'.¹⁵ The same argument is also made about the library: 'Libraries are not simply storehouses of books. They are the means of organizing knowledge ... of controlling that knowledge and restricting access to it'.¹⁶ A certain degree of organization is what essentially differentiates both libraries and archives from incidental assemblages of manuscripts. What obviously differentiates the two from each other is their function, which is reflected in the different types of texts found within them.

2 The imperial collection of the Former Han

Turning to the Han dynasty's imperial collection, one of the first things that are apparent about it is that unlike the collections Assyriologists deal with, it is a collection that has completely vanished. Very few manuscripts were discovered during the archaeological excavation of Weiyang Palace in Chang'an 長安, the capital of the Former Han, which took place in the 1980s. Only 115 wooden slips were unearthed, most of which were severely damaged and all of which had been burnt. According to Xing Yitian's research, they largely contain records of various benevolent omens. He links the scorch marks to the pillaging of Chang'an by Red Eyebrows rebels in 25 CE. This rebellion is also believed to have inflicted major damage on the imperial collection.¹⁷ Although the *Treatise on Classics and other Texts* (hereafter: *Treatise*) does include titles with reference to omens and both Liu Xiang and Liu Xin are known to have written about and used omenology, it is unlikely that these slips once were part of the imperial collection, because they were not found at the site identified as the place mentioned in historical sources where the collection is said to have been kept.¹⁸ In recent decades, numerous

¹⁵ Brosius 2003, 6.

¹⁶ Harris/Johnson 1999, 6 quoting Mary Beard (London Review of Books, Feb. 1990, 11). Jacob 1998, 94 equally stresses that it is not just the accumulation of books, but the classification of them that defines a library.

¹⁷ Xing Yitian 2011a. For details of the Red Eyebrows, see HS 99B:4193 and Bielenstein 1959, 91–102.

¹⁸ The *Treatise* includes *Divine Communication* (*Shenshu* 神輸, see HS 30:1703), which according to a text fragment of Liu Xiang's editorial report talks about the link between the emperors' conduct and the emergence of calamities and propitious omens (cited in commentary by Yan Shigu, HS 30:1704). There are five other titles with reference to baleful omens (*zaiyi* 災異); see HS 30:1703, 1768. On Liu Xiang's use of omenology, see Yang 2015. The place most directly linked to the collation project is the Celestial Deer Pavilion (*Tianluge* 天祿閣/天鹿閣). This is probably

manuscripts have been brought to light dating to the pre- and early imperial period (roughly the fifth century BCE to third century CE). However, none of these were found in the core regions of the Han Empire, but in its outer periphery to the north and south. Hence, it can be ruled out that they once belonged to the imperial collection.¹⁹

Although none of the manuscripts in the imperial collection have survived the ravages of time, and even though well over 80 per cent of the catalogue's 631 entries are only known by their title,²⁰ the *Treatise* nonetheless tells us exactly what kind of texts the collection once contained. More importantly, we can also tell what was *not* in the collection from the little information we do possess.

Apart from an introductory section at the beginning of the *Treatise*, it is basically a classified catalogue divided into six main categories and 38 sub-categories. The six main categories are as follows:

1. Six Arts (*liuyi* 六藝), which include the classics and manifold commentaries on them.
2. Various Masters (*zhuzi* 諸子), which include the writings of various thinkers for the most part from the pre-imperial period, including the well-known *Mengzi*, *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.
3. Poems and Rhapsodies (*shifu* 詩賦), in which we find various poetic works listed.
4. Military Writings (*bingshu* 兵書) with manuals on strategy and tactics in warfare.
5. Calculations and Methods (*shushu* 數術), which collects texts concerning occult or cosmological matters, such as almanacs, works on astro-calendrical science and divination.
6. Recipes and Techniques (*fangji* 方技), which is devoted to medical matters, including general medical writings, works on pharmacy, on techniques for the prolongation of life and on sexual practices.

also where the collection was kept. Archaeologists have identified the remains of the Pavilion, and this is not where the wooden slips were found. See the excavation report: Zhongguo shekueyuan kaogusuo 1996, 17–18, 238–248.

¹⁹ There is, of course, the possibility of copied manuscripts from the imperial collection being given to local dignitaries. In one case, a sealing clay (*fengni*) relating to the imperial collection was found in a tomb dated to the Western Han. It has been argued that the tomb's owner must have received manuscripts from the imperial collection. However, the excavation did not bring any manuscripts to light. All the manuscripts are thought to have rotted away. See Liu Zunyan/Liang Yong 2003.

²⁰ For more exact numbers, see my dissertation: Fölster 2016, 72.

The first three categories in particular may be readily identified as bringing together ‘texts of tradition’. The latter three categories group texts of a more technical nature, which were certainly not administrative documents. The only entries seemingly related to the administrative realm are the *Memorials with Opinions* (*Yizou* 議奏) found at the very end of each listing for four of the six classics.²¹ However, all of these are clearly linked to the famous scholarly debate about the meaning of the classics, which took place in 51 BCE at the Stone Ditch Pavilion (*Shiquge* 石渠閣).²² These are probably summaries of the different scholarly positions regarding the classics and not documents of the administrative machinery. There is yet another entry with the title *Memorializing Matters* (*Zoushi* 奏事). However, from an additional remark to this entry, it becomes clear that these are not administrative documents either, but rather acclaimed memorials and epigraphic texts from the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE), the predecessor to that of the Han.²³

What is not found in the *Treatise* is, in fact, more illuminating. Beginning with Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–1296), Chinese scholars have noted that the collection was not all-encompassing. However, a thorough examination of the many titles identified as missing reveals that most of them are either variant titles, mere chapter titles of works found in the *Treatise* or later works attributed to men of the Former Han period.²⁴ Legal texts, or more precisely what is listed in later catalogues as *Statutes and Ordinances of the Han* (*Han lü* 漢律, *Han ling* 漢令), are conspicuously missing.²⁵ It is only through the manifold manuscripts excavated in recent decades that we have learnt more about the content and *modus operandi* of these statutes and ordinances since they include many texts of this kind.²⁶

Judging from the following statement in the *History of the Han*, the reason such texts were not included in the *Treatise* is simply that they were the responsibility of a special government agency and were thus kept in a separate place:

²¹ HS 30:1705, 1710, 1714, 1716.

²² The debate is mentioned in HS 73:3113, 88:3598. Also see Tjan 1949, 6.

²³ HS 30:1714. Also see Fu Rongxian 2007, who equally argues that Liu Xiang did not work with administrative documents during the grand collating project.

²⁴ Fölster 2016, 73–83, 197.

²⁵ *Jinshu* 30:922.

²⁶ The most authoritative publications in Western languages in this field are Lau/Lüdke 2012, and Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015. On legal manuscripts dated to the Qin dynasty, see Hulswé 1985 and Staack/Lau 2016.

今叔孫通所撰禮儀，與律令同錄，臧於理官，法家又復不傳。²⁷

Now the rites and ceremonies compiled by Shusun Tong (d. in 188 BCE) were recorded together with statutes and ordinances and stored at the regulatory office, and the legal experts²⁸ did not transmit them again.

Unfortunately, we do not know much about the regulatory office. The seventh-century commentary by Yan Shigu 顏師古 defines it as the ‘legal office’ (*faguan* 法官).²⁹ In the Han period the term ‘regulatory office’ is said to be an unofficial name for the office administering lawsuits.³⁰ Furthermore, it has been suggested that a sub-unit—the Bureau for the Direction of Legal Principles (*dianfa cao* 典法曹)—‘probably organized and archived the voluminous written statutes and ordinances’.³¹ Despite the details we have being rather scant, they suggest that there was a specific office responsible for storing statutes and ordinances.³²

The fact that other administrative documents were also archived is mentioned in the *Embellishments on the Heart of Writing* (*Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍), a literary critique composed many centuries later by Liu Xie 劉勰 (c.465–c.521):

按七略、藝文，謠詠必錄；章表奏議，經國之樞機，然闕而不纂者，乃各有故事，布在職司也。

We find included in the *Seven Epitomes* and the [*Treatise on*] *Classics and other Texts* records of all poetic writings; and yet the petitions, presentations, memorials, and opinions, all crucial in the conduct of government, are omitted, because they each were concerned with precedents and were kept in the files of government offices.³³

This explanation follows the above distinction between literary texts on the one hand and administrative documents on the other quite closely.

²⁷ HS 22:1035.

²⁸ Judging from the context, these legal experts (*fajia*) are not the Legist Experts (*fajia*) under the Various Masters category of the *Treatise* (HS 30:1735–1736), but probably regulatory office staff. For the Later Han period, such legal experts are mentioned among the staff of the Director of the Imperial Clan (*zongzheng*); see Bielenstein 1980, 42.

²⁹ HS 22:1035. In another commentary, Yan Shigu identifies the term to denote the staff of the Minister of Justice (*sikou* 司寇); see HS 23:1088.

³⁰ Hucker 1985, 3618. For details about the offices, see Bielenstein 1980, 38.

³¹ Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015, 131.

³² In Mogens Weitemeyer’s opinion, legal texts were kept in libraries (see above). This obviously was not the case in Han time China.

³³ *Wenxin diaolong*, *Zhangbiao* 22, 5:243 (modified transl. of Shih 1959, 127). The term ‘precedent’ is discussed below.

We may conclude that in terms of its content, the collection documented in the *Treatise* complies with the above definition of a library. The same may be said about the other criteria that are mentioned. The *Treatise* itself is evidence of a clear organization, even though we lack definite proof that it was also the basis for the physical organization of the manuscripts in the collection. As for the function of the collection, from the little we know about the collation project, which basically created the collection as we know it from the *Treatise*, the editorial reports address the emperor and were probably presented to him together with the respective work. Despite the reports' assessment of the texts' usefulness to the emperor—one could say they recommend what the emperor should read—the set phrase '[so that] this writing can be neatly copied (書可繕寫)' found at the end of the reports seems to imply that it should also serve to make further fair copies.³⁴ However, there only is one reference attesting that the emperor did actually give away copies of manuscripts from his collection.³⁵ Apart from producing further copies, the collection contained various duplicate texts to begin with. The identification and comparison of these duplicates was one of the main tasks in Liu Xiang's collation project. The few editorial reports we know of include the exact number of duplicates employed. This underpins Olaf Pedersén's argument about the library being a collection of works containing multiple copies of each text. Although the ostensible purpose was to create a collection of items for immediate and later use by the emperor, this 'library' evidently also served the scholarly community. The entire collation project was a scholarly endeavour involving not only Liu Xiang and his son, but many other men, about a dozen of whom we know by name. Certain people are conspicuously missing here, however: the Erudites (*boshi* 博士), i.e. the official court scholars appointed to academic chairs for the imperially acknowledged classics.³⁶ This reinforces an accurate remark by Marcel Lepper, according to which libraries are places for the production and reproduction of texts and not predominantly places of safekeeping and registration.³⁷

³⁴ Fölster 2016, 84–87, 139.

³⁵ HS 100A:4203. It is telling that the beneficiary of the emperor's gift was an ancestor of Ban Gu, who was involved in the collation project. The manuscripts were kept within the family and the collection attracted scholars who came to view them; see HS 100A:4205.

³⁶ See Fölster 2016, 133–139.

³⁷ Lepper 2012, 66.

3 Archives of the Former Han

As for the archives in the ‘various organs of government’, we unfortunately lack information that is as detailed as that in the *Treatise*; no substantial catalogue or inventory of the central archives has come down to us. However, it is clear that administrative documents were produced, circulated and probably stored in large quantities. This is simply due to the fact that the Han maintained an elaborate bureaucracy with more than 120,000 officials employed throughout the entire realm, which in turn was divided into 13 provinces, 103 commanderies and more than 1,500 county-level government units.³⁸ That the task of storing such large amounts of documents created its own problems is evident from the following two statements about statutes and ordinances:

方今律令百有餘篇，文章繁，罪名重，郡國用之疑惑，或淺或深。自吏明習者，不知所處，而況愚民！律令塵蠹於棧閣，吏不能遍睹，而況於愚民乎！³⁹

Nowadays, the statutes and ordinances amount to more than a hundred chapters. Their paragraphs are numerous and the offences [therein] repetitive, so the implementation in the commanderies and kingdoms has become uncertain and confused. Some [officials] have superficial [knowledge of the statutes and ordinances], while others are very [knowledgeable about them]. If even well-versed officials do not know how to assess [statutes and ordinances], how much less would untaught people know! The statutes and ordinances lie in stacks gathering dust and get eaten by worms, [so many that] officials are unable to look at them all. How much less able would untaught people be!

及至孝武即位，[...]. 律令凡三百五十九章，大辟四百九條，千八百八十二事，死罪決事比萬三千四百七十二事。文書盈於几閣，典者不能徧睹。

Coming down to the time when [Emperor] Xiaowu (r. 141–87 BCE) ascended the throne, [...]. The Statutes and Ordinances [contained] in all 359 sections: for the death penalty 409 articles [covering] 1,882 cases, and 13,472 cases of judicial precedents for crimes [deserving] death. Writings and documents filled tables and cupboards and the officials in charge were unable to look at them all.⁴⁰

38 The most authoritative study on the Han bureaucracy in a Western language is Bielenstein 1980. See Loewe 2006 for a less technical account. For briefer accounts, see Loewe 1986 and more recently Ding 2015.

39 *Yantielun* 55: *Xingde*, 10:566.

40 HS 23:1101 (modified transl. of Hulsewé 1955, 338).

Statutes and ordinances were only one type of document. We can safely assume that the elaborate communication system used by the central administration created even larger numbers of documents, which probably involved frequent copying of documents for archival purposes. Imperial decisions handed down to the regions and provinces and certificates of appointment were probably copied,⁴¹ but there also is evidence that the imperial secretariat forwarded memorials to the emperor ‘not in the original, but only in transcription, which was checked against its copy text’.⁴² Indirect evidence of archived documents existing is found in the ‘[r]eference to a precedence in the form of [...] (the rest shall be) like the ... precedent (它)如故事’, a formula frequently found in various sources.⁴³ The imperial secretariat and other agencies probably routinely filed documents ‘as precedents’,⁴⁴ which complies with Liu Xie’s statement about ‘petitions, presentations, memorials and opinions’ being precedents ‘kept in the files of government offices’. Further evidence of the practice of submitting multiple copies is also found in the *History of the Han*:

又故事諸上書者皆為二封，署其一曰副，領尚書者先發副封，所言不善，屏去不奏。

Another precedent was that all letters submitted to the throne had to be [presented] in duplicate. One of them was inscribed with the term ‘duplicate copy’. The supervisor [of the affairs] of the imperial secretariat opened this copy first. If the wording was improper, it was rejected and not memorialized.⁴⁵

In fact, Wang Guihai argues that the final draft of an imperial instruction (*zhao-shu* 詔書) was kept and filed away while copies of it were being sent out.⁴⁶ He also takes the term ‘precedent’ (*gushi* 故事) to mean archived documents in general.⁴⁷ The actual meaning of the term *gushi* is somewhat more complicated, as Xing Yitian has discussed extensively: precedents ‘were decisions, policies, or actions of the past that had been either incorporated into the legal code or otherwise constituted a usually esteemed and growing body of reference that could be used in order to argue for the re-enactment of a former political decision’.⁴⁸ Xing Yitian

⁴¹ Giele 2006, 208.

⁴² Giele 2006, 166.

⁴³ Giele 2006, 239–245, quote 239.

⁴⁴ Giele 2006, 242.

⁴⁵ HS 74:3135 (modified transl. of Giele 2006, 67).

⁴⁶ Loewe 2004, 530 mentions the possibility that two copies were made, a practice we know of from Tang times.

⁴⁷ Wang Guihai 1999, 121–124.

⁴⁸ Giele 2006, 239. Giele’s discussion is based on Xing Yitian 1987.

further notes that *gushi* could also refer to conventions or practices that were not written down.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, there is abundant evidence of the recourse to ‘precedents’ noted in writing:⁵⁰ although evidence from the Later Han (25–220) far exceeds that from the Former Han, this ‘may just be a simple reflection of the proportional increase of precedents’, as Enno Giele says.⁵¹ Moreover, the continuous use of Former Han precedents during the Later Han period shows these documents must have been archived. The following example indicates that such documents were stored:

Wei Xiang 魏相, who served as chancellor from 67 to 59 BCE,⁵² not only emphasizes the great importance of ‘precedents’, but also clearly makes use of them to support his argument in a memorial to the emperor.

好觀漢故事及便宜章奏，以為古今異制，方今務在奉行故事而已。數條漢興已來國家便宜行事，及賢臣賈誼、鼂錯、董仲舒等所言，奏請施行之，曰：《 [...] 臣相不能悉陳，味死奏故事詔書凡二十三事。臣謹案王法必本於農[...]》

[Wei Xiang] delighted in looking up precedents of the Han and [former] memorials that had argued for expediencies. He was of the opinion that although the institutions of the past and present were different, one’s duty today was merely to follow the precedents [of the past]. He frequently drew up accounts of the measures adopted by the government since the founding of the Han to meet expediencies as well as accounts of what eminent statesmen like Jia Yi, Chao Cuo, and Dong Zhongshu had stated, and submitted them to the throne with the request that they should be put into practice: ‘[...] I cannot go into detail [here, but instead], risking capital punishment, I submit a total of twenty-three [former] edicts containing [or constituting] precedents [that may serve to illustrate my point]. [In sum,] I would like to state that the policies of the ruler must be rooted in [a desire to promote] agriculture [...]’.⁵³

This clearly shows that officials resorted to documents constituting precedents. Hence, these documents must have been stored in some place. Xing Yitian even

⁴⁹ He also points out various alternative terms used for the same phenomena; see Xing Yitian 1987, 336–338.

⁵⁰ Xing Yitian 1987, 385–409 puts together all the cases of *gushi* he found in the relevant historical sources, presenting them in 12 categories. Tang Yongping 1990 includes a less extensive collection, differentiating between just three categories.

⁵¹ Giele 2006, 241.

⁵² For Wei Xiang’s biography, see Loewe 2000, 578–579.

⁵³ HS 74:3137–3138 (I have made use of previous translations by Giele 2006, 240 and Watson 1974, 180–181). Loewe 2004, 530 takes this as evidence that ‘a complete file of decrees was included in the records and documents that were kept under the control of the Imperial Counsellor’.

goes as far as to speak of a state archive (*guojia dang'an* 國家檔案) in this context.⁵⁴ According to a commentary by Yan Shigu, the Recorders of Precedents (*zhanggu* 掌故) were the officials whose task it was to manage these precedents.⁵⁵ However, it has been noted that at least from the reign of Emperor Wu onwards (141–87 BCE) there are no more examples mentioning the Recorders in connection with the precedents. In fact, all the textual evidence suggests that the officials at the Secretariat (*shangshu* 尚書) were in charge now.⁵⁶ Members of the Secretariat are often described as being ‘well versed in the precedents (明習故事)’.⁵⁷ The same holds true for the chancellors, like Wei Xiang, who was mentioned above. Another chancellor, when asked who should succeed him in office, recommended a man on the grounds that he ‘had a clear understanding of the laws and knowledge of the state’s precedents (明於法度，曉國家故事)’.⁵⁸

This may also be seen as an indication that not only the Secretariat kept copies of documents containing precedents. For the Later Han, at least, there is one case of a letter submitted to the throne, ‘copies [of which] were forwarded to the Three Offices (移副三府)’.⁵⁹ The term ‘Three Offices’ refers to the Three Excellencies (*sangong* 三公), denoting ‘the three (or at times two) officials who stood at the most senior level of the [...] imperial administration’. During the Former Han, these were the Chancellor (*chengxiang* 丞相), Imperial Counsellor (*yushi dafu* 御史大夫) and Supreme Commander (*taiwei* 太尉). In Later Han times, the Grand Minister of Works (*da sikong* 大司空) replaced the Imperial Counsellor and the Grand Minister over the Masses (*da situ* 大司徒) replaced the Chancellor.⁶⁰ An epigraphic source dated to 169 CE corroborates this practice and mentions that the Senior Tutor (*dafu* 大傅) and the office of the Grand Minister of Agriculture (*da sinong* 大司農) also received copies of a submitted letter.⁶¹

54 Xing Yitian 1987, 382.

55 HS 57B:2605. Also see Xing Yitian 1987, 349–350. I have followed the translation provided by Loewe 2000, 764. Bielenstein 1980, 207 translates it as ‘Authority on Ancient Matters’, which I find rather misleading.

56 Xing Yitian 1987, 150, Tang Yongping 1990, 43. Yan Shigu tells us that the Recorders of Precedents were subordinate to the Grand Master of Ceremonies (*taichang* 太長) and therefore did not belong to the Secretariat. It is stated that there were a total of thirty Recorders of Precedents, but there is no reference on them for the Later Han; see Bielenstein 1980, 22, 98.

57 HHS 27:902. For further references, see Xing Yitian 1987, 354–356 and Tang Yongping 1990, 43.

58 HS 74:3148.

59 HHS 57:1851.

60 Loewe 2006, 19–20.

61 *Lu xiang Shi Chen zou si Kongzi miao bei* 魯相史晨奏祀孔子廟碑, in *Quan Hou Hanwen* 101:1019–1.

During Emperor Cheng's reign (33–7 BCE), Xue Xuan 薛宣 was recommended to the emperor as Imperial Counsellor. According to the *History of the Han*, 'the assessments of Xuan's achievements [were] recorded on bamboo slips in the two offices (宣考績功課, 簡在兩府)'.⁶² This seems to imply that the Chancellor's office and the Imperial Counsellor's office both kept records on the performance of officials. This is corroborated by an anecdote about Bing Ji 邴吉, who succeeded Wei Xiang as Chancellor and served in this position from 59 to 55 BCE.⁶³ Bing Ji was known for treating his subordinates leniently. When one of his carriage drivers vomited on the cushions of a carriage, others immediately called for the driver to be dismissed. Bing Ji refused to do so, however. Not much later, the same carriage driver informed his master about an invasion at the frontier, which he had learnt about by pure chance. Since he was originally from the border provinces, he shared his knowledge with Bing Ji, making the following suggestion in the process:

《恐虜所入邊郡，二千石長吏有老病不任兵馬者，宜可豫視。》吉善其言，召東曹案邊長吏，瑣科條其人。未已，詔召丞相、御史，問以虜所入郡吏，吉具對。御史大夫卒遽不能詳知，以得譴讓。而吉見謂憂邊思職，馭吏力也。

'I'm afraid that in the border provinces where the barbarian invasions have taken place, the senior officials are in some cases too old and sickly to take up arms and ride a horse. It might be wise to make a preliminary check about the matter.' [Bing] Ji, approving this suggestion, ordered the clerk in charge of such matters to examine the files on the senior officials in the border provinces and make a detailed report on each man. Before the reports were completed, a command came from the emperor, summoning the Chancellor and the Imperial Counsellor into his presence, where he informed them of the barbarian invasion and asked about the officials in the provinces that were affected. Bing Ji gave him some very thorough answers, but the Imperial Counsellor, having been caught off guard, was unable to supply any detailed information himself and was reprimanded as a consequence. Bing Ji, on the other hand, was looked upon as a man who was truly concerned about the safety of the border and who paid close attention to the duties of this office – all because of the help his carriage driver had given him.⁶⁴

The following account from the *History of the Later Han (Hou Hanshu 後漢書)* confirms the practice of keeping records about the performance of officials and shows that these also served as the basis for making decisions about personnel:

⁶² HS 83:3391. For details on Xue Xuan, see Loewe 2000, 628–629.

⁶³ For more details on the biography of Bing Ji, see Loewe 2000, 12–13.

⁶⁴ HS 74:3146 (modified transl. of Watson 1974, 191–192).

舊制，州牧奏二千石長吏不任位者，事皆先下三公，三公遣掾史案驗，然後黜退。⁶⁵

According to the old rules [of the Former Han?], if a regional commissioner proposed that a superior officer ranked 2000 bushels was not to serve in his post, the matter was sent to the Three Excellencies first, who would dispatch a Senior Clerk to check the records and investigate the case. [A superior officer] could only be discharged after that.

As for the places used for archives in the capital, precedents seem to have been stored in the Southern Palace (*Nangong* 南宮):

弘前後所陳有補益王政者，皆著之南宮，以為故事。

Every [suggestion] that [Zheng] Hong made at some point [during his career] to improve upon his ruler's policies was written down in [the files kept at] the Southern Palace [to serve as] precedents.⁶⁶

There is no mention of the Southern Palace during the Former Han period, though. Rather, the place most often identified as an archive by modern scholars is the Orchid Terrace (*Lantai* 蘭臺).⁶⁷ The *History of the Han* mentions it simply as the office of one of the Secretary Assistants to the Imperial Counsellor, which was situated within the palace. This assistant 'was in charge of charts, registers and the secret writings (掌圖籍祕書)'.⁶⁸ It is not at all clear from this information whether it was also a place to archive documents permanently. Basing his knowledge on later sources, Hans Bielenstein remarks that this assistant 'passed on to the throne memorials from the Three Excellencies, the Nine Ministers, and the local administration, and transmitted imperial edicts addressed to commanderies and kingdoms'.⁶⁹ Enno Giele argues that the men at this office 'were the central government's watchdogs who routinely screened memorials for offensive language. Or they were legal experts who were consulted to supply the policy makers with applicable legal arguments to decide either for or against a matter brought up from among the officials; or both'.⁷⁰ This rather suggests that the Orchid Terrace was an office to supervise the transmission of documents within the central bureaucracy.

⁶⁵ HHS 33:1143.

⁶⁶ HHS 33:1155 (modified transl. of Giele 2006, 240–241).

⁶⁷ E.g. Zhou Xueheng 1994, 127. In the Later Han period, the other another prominent archive was the Eastern Tower (*Dongguan* 東觀).

⁶⁸ HS 19A:725 (modified transl. of Dubs 2009, 23).

⁶⁹ Bielenstein 1980, 9.

⁷⁰ Giele 2006, 62.

Moreover, the term ‘secret writings’ (*mishu* 祕書) is also used to denote those writings subject to Liu Xiang’s collation project.⁷¹ Although the collation project dealt with anything but administrative documents, as we have seen above, the term ‘secret writings’ seems to refer to any writings found in the inner palace and thus directly related to the emperor. In his discussion of the history of the imperial collection, Liu Xin’s *Seven Epitomes* (*Qilüe*) mentions that in ‘the inner [palace] there are the repositories of the Pavilion of Perpetuation, the Spacious Interior and the Secret Chamber (內則有延閣、廣內、祕室之府)’.⁷² But since none of these place names occur elsewhere in the relevant sources, we cannot tell what kind of manuscripts were actually stored there.

Other important documents, such as those recording the enfeoffment of regional kings and other nobilities, are said to have been stored in what is called ‘Stone Chamber and Metal Casket’ (*shishi jinkui* 石室金匱):

又與功臣剖符作誓，丹書鐵契，金匱石室，藏之宗廟。

With his meritorious followers [Liu Bang, the Han’s founding emperor,] split tallies and made oaths, [recorded] in red writing on an iron certificate, [which were put in] a metal casket and a stone chamber, and kept in the ancestral temple.⁷³

Keeping records of this kind in the ancestral temple seems to follow an earlier tradition.⁷⁴ In any case, ‘[m]aintenance of an up-to-date list of the kings and nobles of the empire, and of the holders of other orders of honour (*jue* 爵), would seem to have been an essential duty of government, in the interests of controlling the administration of their estates and their exercise of their privileges’.⁷⁵ The fact that Liu Bang also consulted such a register is suggested in the following passage: ‘When Gaozu (i.e. Liu Bang) reached Luoyang, he summoned all those who had attained [the rank of] marquis according to the register [...] (高祖至雒陽，舉通侯籍召之 [...])’.⁷⁶ That this register was also maintained after Liu Bang’s death can be seen in

71 HS 10:310: ‘[...] Liu Xiang collated the secret writings of the inner [palace] ([...] 劉向校中祕書)’. Also see HS 36:1950, 1967.

72 Quoted in HS 30:1702.

73 HS 1B:81 (modified transl. of Dubs 1938–1955, I:146).

74 See SJ 130:3319, which mentions these places when talking about the state of stored documents prior to the Han dynasty.

75 Loewe 2004, 253.

76 SJ 8:381 (modified transl. of Nienhauser 1994–, II:69). Loewe 2004, 319 suggests that this refers to a register going back to the Qin period, since Liu Bang had not conferred any ranks of honour yet at that time.

the following imperial instruction from 187 BCE, which was promulgated by his widow, Empress Lü:

高皇帝匡飭天下，諸有功者皆受分地為列侯，萬民大安，莫不受休德。朕思念至於久遠而功名不著，亡以尊大誼，施後世。今欲差次列侯功以定朝位，臧于高廟，世世勿絕，嗣子各襲其功位。其與列侯議定奏之。

The Emperor Gao[zu] reformed and ordered the world. All those who distinguished themselves received a share of its territory and were made marquises. All the people [now enjoy] great peace; not one who has not received of his bountiful virtue. We have been thinking and reflecting [on this matter]. If, in the distant future, their merits and names have not been made manifest, there will be nothing to honour their great conceptions and exhibit them [for the benefit of] later generations. Now [We] wish to classify and rank the merits of the marquises, so as to determine upon their positions in the court and preserve them in the Temple of Gao[zu] from generation to generation without end, so that their heirs may each inherit their merits and positions. Let [this matter] be discussed with the marquises, settled and memorialized [to Us].⁷⁷

Empress Lü's suggestion was met with approval by the marquises, so a register was stored in the temple of Gaozu accordingly. It is reported that Emperor Xuan (reigned 74–49 BCE) 'opened the treasuries attached to the shrines and had the old registers inspected (開廟臧，覽舊籍)'.⁷⁸ This shows that the register continued to be consulted. It was probably the Director of the Imperial Clan (*zongzheng* 宗正), who was responsible for keeping an up-to-date list of the kings and nobles of the empire belonging to the imperial clan.⁷⁹ Records of other nobilities were presumably the responsibility of the Chief Commandant over the Nobility (*zhujue zhongwei* 主爵中尉).⁸⁰ At the same time, it has to be noted that the *Treatise* includes titles that may be identified as genealogies, probably containing similar information to what would be noted in the nobility register. How far this is related to the fact that Liu Xiang served as Director of the Imperial Clan earlier in his career is unclear, though.⁸¹

⁷⁷ HS 3:96 (modified transl. of Dubs 1938–1955, I:194–195). Also see Loewe 2004, 320.

⁷⁸ HS 16:528 (transl. by Loewe 2004, 253).

⁷⁹ At least this is suggested by SJ 60:2118: 'The Director of the Imperial Clan is in charge of the register for the clan and all lesser members of the Liu [family] (宗正者，主宗室諸劉屬籍)'. Also see Loewe 2004, 319.

⁸⁰ Loewe 2004, 319. He also discusses the different changes in name and the institutional reforms related to this office. Also see Bielenstein 1980, 87. See Loewe 1997, 185 for an actual example of a certificate of bestowal of a rank of honour.

⁸¹ Judging from the titles, these seem to be rather historical or mythological genealogies predating Han times: Generational Chronologies of Emperors, Kings, and Feudal Lords (*Diwang zhuhou shipu* 帝王諸侯世譜), A Yearly Chronology of Emperors and Kings since Antiquity (*Gulai*

Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145/135–86 BCE), compiler of the *Records of the Grand Scribe* (*Shiji* 史記), also names ‘the writings of the Stone Chamber and Metal Casket’ as some of his sources.⁸² Michael Loewe argues that the table of nobilities found in both the *Records of the Grand Scribe* and Ban Gu’s *History of the Han* ‘drew immediately from documents compiled in the course of imperial administration’.⁸³ Although we cannot be absolutely sure whether Sima Qian was referring to the nobility registers when he mentioned the writings of the ‘Stone Chamber and Metal Casket’, there is no doubt that he and Ban Gu both made extensive use of administrative documents. This not only includes the registers, but imperial instructions or memorials to the emperor as well.⁸⁴ Of course, we should not forget that all these are only ‘abbreviated versions of original documents’ and ‘the results of a skilful selection’, as Michael Loewe has put it.⁸⁵ However, it would be wrong to assume that the main purpose of the archives was to preserve documents for writing history.⁸⁶ None of the two histories were initiated by the central government. In fact, when the imperial court found out that Ban Gu was compiling a history, he was first imprisoned on the accusation that he ‘privately altered and produced a state history (私改作國史)’; it was only after Ban Gu’s work had been shown to the emperor that his compilation received imperial sanction.⁸⁷

Finally, the 115 wooden slips mentioned above that were found in the remains of the Former Han capital, Chang’an, have been interpreted as part of an archive for documents on omens.⁸⁸ They may have belonged to the Grand Scribe’s collection (*taishi* 太史), who among other things was in charge of keeping record of portents and auspicious omens.⁸⁹ For lack of any further information, this assumption remains speculative, though.

What are known as ‘bone tags’ (*guqian* 骨簽) are yet another case: around 60,000 of these items have been found among the remains of Chang’an, 57,000 with records inscribed on them. These seem to be inventories of tributes and goods (mostly weapons) produced by workshops outside the capital and presented to the

diwang nianpu 古來帝王年譜) and Origins of the Hereditary Houses (*Shiben* 世本); see HS 30:1714, 1766. Regarding Liu Xiang as Director of the Imperial Clan, see HS 19B:813, 36:1929. Also see Loewe 2004, 209–210.

⁸² SJ 130:3296.

⁸³ Loewe 2004, 288.

⁸⁴ For a detailed discussion of imperial decrees found in the two histories, see Loewe 2004, 524–546.

⁸⁵ Loewe 2004, 528, 546.

⁸⁶ See Wang Guihai 1999, 218.

⁸⁷ HHS 40:1334. Also see Clark 2008, 20–25.

⁸⁸ Xing Yitian 2011a, 140. Xing does not expressly use the term ‘archive’, but speaks of a ‘storage place’.

⁸⁹ Bielenstein 1980, 19.

imperial court. ‘The bone objects were found in piles close to the walls of the rooms, suggesting that they were once stacked on shelves or hung on racks. The objects seem to be of two complementary shapes, inscribed in two different formats. Some paired examples were bound loosely together at the time of excavation’, says Anthony Barbieri-Low.⁹⁰ It is thought that bone was used instead of wood or bamboo because it was more durable. Together with the fact that many of the records have serial numbers on them and that the dates recorded span much of the Former Han period, this appears to be an example of systematic storage. It therefore seems appropriate to speak of an archive here, which probably stored these tags to keep track of shipments and ensure the quality of the items that were to be delivered.⁹¹

3.1 Local archives

So far, we have only dealt with archives in the capital, but as already mentioned above, the administration permeated the realm all the way down to the local level. It was the county-level government units that provided the information necessary to govern an empire as extensive as that of the Former Han. The officials on the county level would send biannual reports to the next-highest level in the administration, the commandery. These reports provided basic information on the area, including ‘figures for the registered population, the acreage of land newly put under the plough, the figures of both cash and grain received and disbursed and figures for the extent of crime’.⁹² Information from every county was gathered and processed by the commandery government before being sent to the capital once a year. This annual submission of accounts (*shangji* 上計) also included reports on the performance of officials, which would be used for decisions about their promotion or demotion. The processing of the reports on the central level was the responsibility of the Chancellor and his ministry.⁹³ This was essential for the government since ‘[t]he registers of population and land were necessary for the collection of tax and the conscription of men for service’.⁹⁴ The population figures for the year 2 CE recorded in the *History of the Han*, the earliest such data available for China, certainly must go back to the central register of the Chancellor,

⁹⁰ Barbieri-Low 2001, 4. For more details see the excavation report: Zhongguo shekeyuan kaogusuo 1996, 91–122.

⁹¹ Zhongguo shekeyuan kaogusuo 1996, 122, Liu Guoneng 2007. For further interpretations on the function of the bone tags, see Barbieri-Low 2001, 4–5.

⁹² Loewe 2004, 44.

⁹³ Bielenstein 1980, 8.

⁹⁴ Loewe 1986, 483–484.

which assembled all the information submitted from across the realm.⁹⁵ It also seems likely that on returning to their commanderies, those officials who submitted the accounts in the capital ‘would have taken with them copies of the latest decisions and orders of the government, in the form of decrees, statutes and ordinances, or the calendar that had been drawn for the ensuing year’.⁹⁶

It is clear that the many documents sent either way would have been archived at the various administrative levels. The manuscript finds of recent decades have brought examples of such documents to light. Take the manuscripts found in a tomb at Yinwan 尹灣 (Jiangsu), for instance, which include documents dated to the late Former Han period. Many of these have been identified as belonging to the annual procedure of submitting accounts to the central government.⁹⁷ Another example is the slips and boards found in a well at Liye 里耶 (Hunan), which are believed to stem from a Qin dynasty county archive.⁹⁸ It is well known—and not only from the Liye manuscripts—that the elaborate bureaucracy was not invented by the Han; they basically took over the system from their predecessors, the Qin dynasty. Furthermore, among the manuscripts found in a tomb in Shuihudi 睡虎地 (Hubei) dated to 217 BCE, there are statutes of the Qin in which we find the term *shufu* 書府 (lit. ‘repository for writings’). Anthony F. P. Hulsewé has aptly translated this term as ‘archive’:

毋敢以火入臧（藏）府、書府中。吏已收臧（藏），官嗇夫及吏夜更行官。毋火，乃閉門戶。令令史循其廷府。節（即）新為吏舍，毋依臧（藏）、書府。

One must not venture to enter storehouses or archives with fire. When the officials have finished collecting the stores, the Bailiff of the office and the officials take turns inspecting the office at night. If there is no fire, they close the doors. The Scribe Directors must be ordered to patrol the [Prefect’s] office and the storehouses. In case of new construction of official hostels, these must not adjoin any storehouses or archives.⁹⁹

More details on local archives can be found among the manuscripts containing Han statutes found in a tomb in Zhangjiashan 張家山 (Hubei) dated to 187 BCE. The ‘Statutes on Households’ (*Hulü* 戶律) stipulate how local officials were to

⁹⁵ HS 28A:1543–1603. Also see Bielenstein 1947, 135–139.

⁹⁶ Loewe 2004, 44.

⁹⁷ For a study on these documents in English, see Loewe 2004, 38–88.

⁹⁸ Yates 2012/2013 offers a brief introduction to these manuscripts, which are still awaiting full publication. Also see Hsing 2014, 155–165. For details of further administrative documents found among manuscripts at other sites, see Hsing 2014, 165–184.

⁹⁹ Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1990, 64 (modified transl. of Hulsewé 1985, A105 (slips 97–98), 89). Xing Yitian 2011b, 19 points out some further sources mentioning special measures of fire protection, which were probably related to archives as well.

handle the various registers containing the information that would eventually be submitted to the next-higher level in the administrative hierarchy:

民宅園戶籍、年細籍、田比地籍、田合籍、田租籍，謹副上縣廷，皆以篋若匣匱盛，緘閉，以令若丞、官嗇夫印封。獨別為府，封府戶。節（即）有當治為者，令史、吏主者完封奏（湊）令若丞印。嗇夫發，即雜治為。其【事】已，輒復緘閉封臧（藏）。[...]

As for the ordinary people's household registers of their homesteads and grounds, the detailed age registers, the land registers indicating neighboring fields, the unified registers of agricultural fields, and the registers of their agricultural field taxes, carefully make copies and forward these up to the County Court, and, in every case, contain them in a bamboo chest or a wooden coffer, bound shut with cords, and seal [the chest or coffer] using the seal of the Magistrate, the Assistant Magistrate, or the Bailiff of the Office. Place them by themselves as a document archive and seal the door of the archive. When it is necessary to put some of the registers in order or create [new ones], the Scribe Director and the official in charge are to ensure that the seals are intact and to match [the impression] with the seal of the Magistrate or the Assistant Magistrate. Once the Bailiff [of the Office] has opened [the archive], they can then manage or create [registers] together. When the affair is complete, immediately bind shut [the archive] with cords, seal [it], and store [it] away once more. [...].¹⁰⁰

Although the term *shufu* is not employed in the statute, it is clear from the context that *fu* 府 must refer to the county archive.¹⁰¹

3.2 Physical organization of archives

The Statutes on Households also show that the management of the documents implied some kind of organization. Evidence of the physical organization of documents in archives has also been noted among other manuscript findings. Among the documents found at Wuwei 武威 (Gansu) there is one bamboo manuscript that refers to 'Orchid Terrace Ordinance no. 33 (蘭臺令第卅三)' and 'Secretariat of the Imperial Counsellor Ordinance no. 43 (御史令第卅三)'.¹⁰² In further bamboo slips found at the same site at a later time, there are more examples, such as 'the ordinance is at Orchid Terrace no. 43 (令在蘭臺第卅三)'.¹⁰³ These numbers are considered to be serial numbers, which were probably used to file and retrieve archived documents.

¹⁰⁰ Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015, *Hulü* 17, 798–799.

¹⁰¹ In an earlier translation of the same statute, Robin Yates actually translated it as 'document repository', not 'archive'; see Yates 2012/2013, 327.

¹⁰² Wang Guihai 1999, 218, 223; Gansu sheng bowuguan/Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 2005, 140–141.

¹⁰³ Wuwei xian bowuguan 1984, 35.

Judging from the institutions mentioned, this obviously refers to documents archived in the capital.¹⁰⁴ Evidence of the numbering of imperial ordinances can also be seen in the *History of the Han*. The term ‘first ordinance (令甲)’ is generally understood to refer to an enumeration system.¹⁰⁵

Wang Guihai also takes some of the Juyan 居延 manuscripts, which were found at garrisons along the military defence lines in the north-west, to represent archives of the lowest unit, called ‘company’ (*houguan* 候官).¹⁰⁶ ‘Here officials maintained registers of the items that they dispatched or received, recording the name of the originator as seen in the seal, the contents or subject of the item, its date, the time taken for delivery and the names of the servicemen who had handled the process’, says Michael Loewe.¹⁰⁷ Among these manuscripts there are also numerous examples of labels referring to the time and content of documents, such as the following two:

建始三年正月以來刺史書¹⁰⁸

Letters of the Regional Inspector since the 1st month of the 3rd year of the *Jianshi* era (30 BCE) onwards

永始四年李敏自言書¹⁰⁹

Letters reported by Lin Min in person during the 4th year of the *Yongshi* era (13 BCE)

The labels often come with a small hole in them, which was probably used to attach them to manuscripts for the purpose of creating files of documents on a certain subject and to facilitate their retrieval.¹¹⁰ Among the Juyan manuscripts there are also some examples of catalogues or file registers, which list the contents of imperial instructions (*zhaoshu*) together with a serial number:

104 Wang Guihai 1999, 218, 223. For a detailed discussion, see Wuwei xian bowuguan 1984, 51–53.

105 HS 8:252 (Dubs 1938–1955, II:227). According to later commentators, this refers to the numbering of the ordinances. Also see Wang Guihai 1999, 218.

106 Wang Guihai 1999, 223–227. Loewe 1997, 191 equally refers to the Juyan manuscripts as ‘parts of official archives, drawn up in the course of administrating the empire’.

107 Loewe 2006, 110. For a brief discussion of the different kinds of documents among the Juyan manuscripts, see Loewe 1997, 177–191.

108 EPT50:182AB; see Gansu sheng bowuguan/Zhongguo kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo 1990, 164.

109 EPT50:199; see Gansu sheng bowuguan/Zhongguo kexueyuan lishi yanjiusuo 1990, 164–165. Also see Wang Guihai 1999, 204–206, who presents a list with a total of twelve labels of this kind. On the meaning of the legal term *ziyan* 自言, see Staack/Lau 2016, 154, n. 755.

110 Wang Guihai 1999, 211–213.

縣置三老二 行水兼興船十二 置孝弟力田廿二 徵吏二千石以符卅二 郡國調列侯兵卅二 年八十及孕朱需頌轂五十二

'Prefectures establish Three Elders, no. 2; requisitioning of boats for traveling on water, no. 12; establishing the filial, brotherly, and strong farmers, no. 22; conscripting officials with [a nominal salary] of two thousand piculs with tallies, no. 32; commanderies and states transfer soldiers of the Marquis, no. 42; commoners eighty years old, pregnant women, and babies free from chaining, no. 52'¹¹¹

In other cases, there are further details on the time documents arrived.¹¹² There are also examples of 'communication registers' recording the compilation and delivery of documents. The information in these includes 'summaries of the subject matter', 'names and titles of the originators and addresses' and records 'of the servicemen responsible for delivery and of the time that was taken'.¹¹³

It is evident that most of the documents that have been discovered are not cases of preserved archives, but rather remains of such—documents which were discarded at some point. The documents found among manuscripts in tombs, such as those from Zhangjiashan or Yinwan, are yet another problem, since there is no consensus among scholars about the question of why manuscripts were entombed in the first place.¹¹⁴ However, it seems very likely that they were not original documents, but rather copies made specifically for the purpose of burial.¹¹⁵

Based on the analysis of different layers in which around 3,000 discarded documents were found at Pochengzi 破城子 (Gansu), Wang Guihai surmises that archivists must have discarded documents that were no longer needed roughly once every thirteen years. It seems that these documents were burned or dumped in the immediate vicinity of the archive. At the same time, there are also plenty of examples of such documents being recycled for various purposes, including use as 'toilet paper'.¹¹⁶ It seems very likely that archivists at the central level of the administration also got rid of 'expired' documents regularly, but we lack explicit physical evidence of this.

111 Xie Guihua/Li Junming/Zhu Guozhao 1987, (5•3, 10•1, 13•8, 126•12), 7 (transl. by Li 2014, 81, n. 132). For a detailed study, see Chen Mengjia 1980, 275–285.

112 Xie Guihua/Li Junming/Zhu Guozhao 1987, (33•8), 51. Wang Guihai 1999, 213–215.

113 Loewe 1997, 178.

114 See Giele 2003, 428–431 for a general discussion of possible motives.

115 Hsing 2014, 177–178; Loewe 1997, 190–191.

116 Wang Guihai 1999, 227–232. Wang also mentions the administrative direction on the disposal of documents every three years stated in the Tang code, which might have antecedents in Han law. Also see Xing Yitian 2011b, 20–21. On recycling expired documents as 'toilet paper', see Hu Pingsheng 1996, 296–297.

Not all manuscript finds outside tombs are necessarily discarded archive documents, though, as one might assume.¹¹⁷ The Liye manuscripts mentioned above were found in a well, which may seem like a clear case of them being discarded. Robin Yates, however, remarks that the layers in which the documents were found within the well do not show any clear temporal sequence; rather, he thinks that when the Qin dynasty started to collapse, the local archive was looted by the local population in an effort to cover up their massive debts recorded in administrative documents in the archive.¹¹⁸

4 Conclusion

My point of departure for this article on the distinction between ‘library’ and ‘archive’ in the Former Han dynasty was the imperial collection as it is presented in the *Treatise on Classics and other Texts (Yiwenzhi)*. It is very clear that this collection constitutes a library and not an archive. The major points in distinguishing whether a collection is a library or archive are its content and function. As the *Treatise* shows us, the imperial collection only contains literary texts (in a broad sense); there are no administrative documents in it whatsoever. There is abundant evidence that the Han bureaucracy had archives for various government agencies on all levels of the administrative machinery, which were intended to store documents containing information that was needed. The archives played an important part in the smooth functioning of the bureaucracy and helped to ensure the empire could be governed properly. The imperial collection or library was apparently intended to serve the emperor. Nonetheless, it is evident from the grand collation project that the collection as we know it from the *Treatise* was the product of a scholarly endeavour involving the production and reproduction of a host of texts. It may be said that while the library was a place for scholarly and literary activities using its holdings, the many archives, on the other hand, stored documents produced, dispatched and employed by a bureaucratic apparatus, of which they were an essential part. Both institutions show a certain degree of organization so as to allow manuscripts to be located within the collections, otherwise we would have to speak of incidental assemblages of manuscripts. The *Treatise*, basically a classified catalogue, shows an obvious form of organization. In contrast, the evidence of archival organization is

117 Xing Yitian 2011a, 21, for instance, argues that the Liye manuscripts are discarded archive documents.

118 Xing Yitian 2011b, 21; Yates 2012/2013, 302–303, 327–328.

very fragmentary. There is no fully preserved catalogue or inventory of an archive transmitted in the historical sources and the excavated documents are usually discarded files, which thus only yield a very fragmented picture of the organizational system.

Obviously, many archives existed in the Han period and they had already existed in the Qin period. This article has only dealt with one library, however: the imperial collection. One might ask whether the imperial collection was, in fact, the very first library in Chinese history (as some have already argued). We certainly know of numerous other collections: Emperor Wu's brother, Liu De 劉德 (d. in 130/129 BCE), who was enfeoffed as King Xian of Hejian 河間獻王 in 155 BCE, is said to have collected manuscripts on a large scale.¹¹⁹ From Liu Xiang's editorial reports we can tell that he made use of other manuscripts than those in the imperial collection, including manuscripts from the Grand Scribe (*taishi*) as well as some from his own (private?) collection. Finally, the Erudites (*boshi* 博士)—the official court scholars—certainly had manuscript collections of their own. In fact, the infamous burning of books ordered by the Qin's founding emperor explicitly excluded the manuscripts of the Erudites.¹²⁰ However, there is no detailed information on the content of all these collections, let alone on their organization. It is because of this lack of information that the imperial collection of the Han is currently referred to as China's first library.

119 HS 53:2410–2411.

120 SJ 6:255. Also see Petersen 1995, 5–12.

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