Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part VI)

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> "After all is said and done, it is the record which is our special area of knowledge."
>
> Barbara L. Craig[1]

Over the centuries, the focus of diplomatics has remained the archival document, the record embodying action. Diplomatists have dissected it in its constituent parts and observed it as a whole; they have linked it to act, procedure, person, function, system and analysed its relationships with those entities; they have studied its causes and effects, its reality and the idea behind it, and its individuality, and context.

In the nineteenth century, European archivists, recognizing the archival document as the focus of their scholarly activity, and the knowledge of it as the intellectual foundation of their institutional and professional functions, included diplomatics among the sciences constituting the core curriculum of the schools created to educate members of their profession. Today, diplomatics remains a fundamental subject in all European archival schools; its relevance and its formative function in the education of archivists are not questioned; its usefulness for the identification and control of archival documents of the past centuries is a proven fact; yet doubts arise in the minds of those archivists who work only with modern documents about the direct applicability of its methods and the use of its concepts.

After World War II, the dramatic increase in document production obliged archivists to shift the focus of their attention from the document to larger and larger groups of documents. With modern records, physical arrangement of items has given way to intellectual arrangement of files and series;[2] calendars and analytical inventories have been abandoned in favour of inventories at the series level or even summary inventories; appraisal has gone from the weeding of duplicates and ephemera (destruction of the redundant and useless), to identification of the series to be preserved (selection of the significant and useful); and, most importantly, the analysis of the archivist is gradually moving from the immediate documentary context of the material under examination to its broad functional context and, further, to its socio-cultural context; that is, from the reality of the records to the "image" of records creators.[3] Moreover, electronic information systems are producing a records reality apparently so

different from the one archivists are used to seeing that it is difficult for them to believe that there is a record reality at all: virtual documents, dynamic documents, compound documents, smart documents, hyperdocuments, documentary views — even the names reflect a sense of uncertainty, instability, and confusion.[4]

What is the role of diplomatics in all this change? Does it indeed have a role? The answer can hardly come from Europe, because European archivists are all educated in diplomatics: its principles, concepts and methods are an integral part of their mind-set and outlook. If they are not fully aware of how a knowledge of diplomatics contributes to their work with modern records, they certainly would not know whether its absence would make such work more difficult and, if so, in what manner. Rather, the answer can come from North American archivists (for whom diplomatics is a recent discovery) in two ways: one direct, the other indirect. On the one hand, they can try to apply diplomatic concepts in the course of their work; on the other hand, they can observe more closely than they have done so far the work of European archivists who are dealing with the same issues and problems with which North American archivists are confronted, but are using different approaches which sometimes have a clear diplomatic matrix.[5] The first way seems to be the more difficult at the moment, because this series of articles is the first exposition of general diplomatics in the English language, and its content appears to be very abstract, if not exotic. This final article will try to overcome the difficulty by explaining how the concepts illustrated in the previous five articles can be useful to North American archivists, that is, how they can inspire and permeate their work. An Appendix contains a list of the diplomatic definitions presented in this series, which guides the reader to the article, the journal number, and the page on which they are offered.

Diplomatics as a Formative Discipline

It has been repeatedly said that for the archivist diplomatics is a formative discipline.[6] Its function is the same as anatomy for the medical doctor, physics for the engineer, and grammar for the linguist or any literate person. The analogy between diplomatics and grammar is particularly evident, not only as relates to the structure and function of the discipline, but also with regard to its evolution. In the Middle Ages, grammar was one of the seven liberal arts taught in the monastic and cathedral schools, and later in the universities.[7] Over time, its centrality in the education of the man of letters was usurped by less analytic and more holistic disciplines; thus, grammar gradually disappeared from the general curricula of study, to be almost exclusively relegated to the realm of the linguist. The times of the "grammar, which can govern even Kings" seem to be gone forever.[8] Is this a good thing? Few people would say so. Grammar allows for easy and accurate communication by making explicit the set of principles by which a language functions. By learning those principles, the persons who share the same language share a single standardized system of communication. Such a system includes traditional grammar, which defines parts of speech by their meaning and function; structural grammar, which defines them primarily by their order in a sentence; and transformational grammar, which moves the emphasis from analysis of the parts of speech to the way people produce all the possible sentences of the language.

At this point, the parallel between grammar and diplomatics should be clear. The first important contribution of diplomatics to archival work is its definitional component,

which identifies the meaning and function of the constituent parts of the document, and names them in a consistent and significant way. This is not a minor thing, not only from a communication point of view but also from a standardization point of view. Modern archivists use terms such as "medium," "form," "logical relations," "physical relations," "logical structure," "layout structure," "document profile" in a very inconsistent way, and keep creating arbitrary terms every time they encounter an entity which appears slightly different from those with which they are familiar. Failure to recognize the substance of things leads to the false impression that the reality is changing fundamentally, and this generates panic in those who have to deal with it. The precision of diplomatic terminology gives communication between archivists and among the information professions a clarity which is lacking in much of the terminology currently in use. For example, the term "hypermedia documents" is used to refer to documents which differ as to information configuration (i.e., the main attribute of the script: text, graphic or image, what David Bearman calls "sensory information modality"), format or layout, and intellectual forms, but which, at the creation stage, are all stored in the same medium and linked together as elements in a Hypertext system. As another example, the term "textual documents" is usually contrasted with the term "electronic documents," when "textual" connotes an information configuration and "electronic" a method or agency of creation, preservation and transmission; it is a fact that a textual document electronically stored in a magnetic tape (the carrier or medium) remains a textual document, while an electronic document is a document electronically created, maintained or transmitted independently of the configuration of the information which it contains[9].

These examples show that there is a very real risk that the method of transmission of documents will become the paramount element in archival discourse, to the point that a facsimile is already considered by many to be an electronic document on the grounds that it is electronically transmitted. Using such standards of terminology, we should have to call all documents delivered by regular mail "postal documents" and those delivered by hand "courier documents"!

Diplomatics has always maintained a distinction between the "method of transmission" of a document and its "form of transmission." The latter refers to the information carrier, or medium, on which the document is received by the addressee, and therefore, with respect to electronic transmission, to the physical final product of that operation. Thus, diplomatically, a facsimile received on paper is a manuscript and must be treated as such, while one received on a computer screen is electronic and must be treated as a computer document.[10]

Diplomatics also distinguishes between the "method of transmission" and the "status of transmission" of a document, the latter being its degree of perfection.[11] For example, with regard to its status of transmission, a facsimile on its own is an "imitative copy." It may be certified as an authentic copy, that is, a copy with the validity and effect of an original, by its method of transmission, if the technology used can guarantee its trustworthiness. However, technological devices can only ensure that the facsimile conforms to the document transmitted, not that such a document was genuine (i.e., had not been tampered with). Moreover, a facsimile can never be considered a "copy in the form of original" (i.e., an original lacking the quality of primitiveness) and consequently have the same weight as an original; and not only because it lacks some of

the extrinsic elements of the document transmitted. In fact, an original is the first complete and effective document, that is, an original must present the qualities of primitiveness, completeness and effectiveness. With facsimile transmission, the first two qualities belong in the document transmitted while the latter belongs in the document received. This implies that the two documents together constitute the original document, that they support each other, and that neither can be considered primary evidence on its own. The weight of a facsimile as evidence will remain subject to verification that it was sent, received and maintained in the regular course of business, as demonstrated by the "hearsay rule" (see, for example, the *Evidence Act*, R.S.B.C. 1979, c. 116, s. 48 (1)), which advises against the rather common habit of copying facsimiles on archival quality paper for preservation purposes (either in the creating office or in an archives), and destroying those on thermal paper without going through a formal certification process (a process similar to that carried out for microfilm). Also, this rule places in a position of liability those who destroy the document which was transmitted and those who act on a facsimile when the transmitted document is disposed of. In fact, while a verification of the date of transmission and of the machines involved in the transmission is made easy by modern technology, that of the identity of the sender may be determined by established office routine (e.g., a log of those who use the fax machine), and that of the context in which the document was received by the addressee's record-keeping system; verification that the document received has the same content as the document that the sender claims to have transmitted is only possible by comparing the two documents.[12]

The above discussion does more than demonstrate that a significant contribution of diplomatics to archival thinking is the strict connection that it establishes between archival documents and the juridical system in which they are created. It shows how important it is for archivists to be able to identify the status of transmission of a document. It is often argued that, because they deal with groups of documents rather than with single documents, modern archivists should not be concerned with originality. This statement is correct if its only intended meaning is that the archivist preserves archival material having different status of transmission, not just originals. But this does not, and should not be taken to, imply that the status of transmission of documents need not be considered by the archivist while accomplishing every archival function. If it is true that each file contains originals of the documents received and drafts and/or copies of documents sent, the archivist will have to be certain that this is really so, that the "file" under consideration is the original file (i.e., the first, complete and effective file), not a copy of it.

With electronically produced records in particular, the grounds for dismissing the status of transmission of a document as a relevant issue is that electronic records are always copies: "the archivist's concern should be that the documents in his/her possession are authentic and accurately reflect what the juridical person created at the time of the action."[13] It is certainly important to establish whether the records the archivist acquires are genuine, that is, are those made and received by the records creator in the usual and ordinary course of business. However, it is equally important to establish their status of transmission. In fact, electronic records are not *always* copies, because a copy is by definition a reproduction of an original, a draft or another copy (the first copy made being always a reproduction of a document in a different status of transmission); therefore, electronic records having a different status of transmission

must be created for copies to exist. It is more appropriate to say that electronic records are all made as drafts and received as originals, in consideration of the fact that the records received contain elements automatically added by the system which are not included in the documents sent, and which make them complete and effective. Also, an electronic document comes into existence as a draft when its maker decides to save it for the first time, and comes into existence as an original when its addressee decides to save it for the first time, because information which is not affixed to a medium is not a document. When a document is made not to be sent but to be available and produce consequences within the creating body, it would probably be saved in its original (primitive, complete and effective) form only. So far, there is no substantive difference between electronically produced and paper records as to status of transmission. However, it is fair to say that electronically produced records are generally used and maintained in the status of copy. The electronic copy of a draft would simply be a subsequent identical draft. The electronic copy of an original, if made while the record is current, would be a "copy in the form of original", that is, complete and effective but lacking the quality of primitiveness. The electronic copy of a record which has exhausted its effectiveness, if made within the same system or by transfer to another system, but using the same software, would be an imitative copy, because it would be identical to the original; the purpose for making it would not be the accomplishment of the transaction in which the original was actively involved, but the preservation of the evidence of it: the fact of not being created in the usual and ordinary course of business would diminish the authoritativeness of the copy. The electronic copy of a non-current record made by transfer to another system in a software-independent way would be a simple copy if the data structure, or physical (and partly intellectual) form of the original were not explicitly captured. All this should demonstrate that it is important to ascertain (1) whether the electronic record copies we encounter at any given time are copies of drafts, originals or other copies, and (2) when they were made with respect to the actions and transactions in which the drafts or originals they reproduce were involved. These factors impinge on the record copies', effectiveness, authority, weight, authenticity and, possibly, on their genuineness.

When the archivist has to understand the relationships among interacting records creators, an important clue is the status of transmission of the respective documents. When appraising for legal or intrinsic value, deciding on conservation issues, 'migrating' electronically produced documents, even when arranging and describing groups of documents, archivists must consider, at every step, the status of transmission of the documents they are dealing with and its implications. As professionals whose primary functions are the "identification" and "communication" of documents,[14] archivists must be rigorous in their use of terminology; be certain that the terms they adopt reflect the substantive nature of the entity they name; and, with respect to those terms which, notwithstanding their ambiguity, are commonly used, be aware of what they are referring to at any given time. For example, when legal or official records are defined as "recorded transactions,"[15] the intended meaning of the definition is all contained in the word "transaction." Usually, to a computer scientist and to archivists who have dealt mainly with electronic information systems, a transaction is any form of communication with a store of information, such as a database. All too often, specialized language interferes with our work. Archivists have to keep in mind that records are created in an administrative context, within a juridical system, not within the

limited boundaries of a specialized discipline or technology; therefore, the terms that they apply to the records must have the meaning given to them by the administrative-juridical context of the records themselves. Diplomatics recognizes this contextual relationship and emphasizes it. In the case of the word "transaction," for example, the diplomatic definition is "an act or several interconnected acts in which more than one person is involved and by which the relations of those persons are altered." This means that to have a transaction it is not sufficient to have a communication, but it is necessary that such a communication creates, modifies, maintains or extinguishes a relationship with other persons. If it is done only for the purpose of viewing information, accessing a database is not a transaction and does not produce official records; rather, it is a mere act the result of which only relates to consciousness. If instead a database is accessed as part of the process of carrying out a transaction, this action may produce official records. To have an archival document, it is necessary to have an action manifested in writing for the purpose of bridging space and/or time, that is, it is necessary to have a communication with other persons or with oneself. While only the former type of communication can be part of a transaction and generate official records which participate in a procedure, the latter type can only be an action and generate non-official records, or documents of process, such as those usually called "working papers," diaries, personal agendas or notes, or . . . documents of access to information systems. With regard to artificial intelligence, if the juridical system recognizes an expert system, for example, as a person, that is, as an entity capable of acting legally, then communications with it are to be considered transactions.

However, terminological rigour is not the only way in which diplomatics contributes to functional consistency and allows for meaningful standardization.[16] It is often stated that archivists must become directly involved in the process of creating archival documents, and specifically in the design of electronic information systems and the definition of the standards governing those systems. To do so, archivists must be able to see the archival document primarily as embodiment and evidence of action. Diplomatics makes explicit the links between the intellectual components of a document and the elements of a typical act, and in so doing facilitates the determination of a document's profile, just as knowledge of structural grammar facilitates the composition of a text and makes it understandable to the reader.

Diplomatics also emphasizes the relationships among documentary forms, types of acts, and procedural phases, and shows all the types of interaction between persons and documents. A clear understanding of such relationships and interactions enables the archivist to advise records creators on what Schellenberg called simplification of functions, work processes, and records procedures, and considered to be the foundation of any records management activity;[17] and, with respect to electronic information systems, to advise records creators on capturing information about their systems in "metadata systems" which document the input and output products, the relationship among files, the nature of software facilities, and the functions supported by the systems.

However, more than anything else, this understanding serves to balance the modern societal trend towards information and away from documents. Now more than ever, the first responsibility of the archivist is the preservation of the nature of archival documents as means for action, of their evidential quality, of their ability to perpetuate

the deeds of our society.[18] The concrete record with its stable form and direct relationship to activity stands in contrast to the intangibility of the concept of information. "Records are at the 'still point of the turning world' possessing 'neither arrest nor movement' to use some lines from an archivist/records manager's favourite quartet of poems (T.S. Eliot — *Burnt Norton* — one of the *Four Quartets*). Records have evidential value precisely because they have an element of stability."[19]

What about "virtual documents"? — more than one archivist has posed this question. Virtual documents are documents of process; they are directly related to actions and have established internal relationships, just like any first draft of a document of any type; they stay with their creator in their virtual form, but, if communicated to other persons, they reach the addressee(s) in a complete and effective form, as records of a transaction.[20] Virtual documents are archival documents, not representations of facts and figures meant for processing and interpretation, such as, for example, the data in a Geographic Information System. Diplomatics provides the concepts and the principles necessary to clarify these distinctions in the mind of the archivist, because, just like transformational grammar, at a well defined point it moves the emphasis from the analysis of documentary components to the way persons interact by means of documents. But does diplomatics also provide a method for accomplishing archival functions?

Diplomatics as a Method of Inquiry

> From our personal experience in the arrangement of archival fonds prior to 1940, [and] from a certain number of problems encountered in the course of the appraisal of contemporary archives, ... we have derived ... the conviction that it is not possible to manage archives if they have not been identified and analysed.
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> Gérard and Christiane Naud[21]

Any scientist would appreciate the need to study the elements in order to understand the cosmos. That is axiomatic. Just as the scientist strives to understand the elemental constitution of the physical world, so do we with regard to the object of our work, the archives. Diplomatics offers the instruments for gaining such an understanding. However, some modern archivists consider diplomatics to be reductionist or atomistic; forgetful of the global, holistic aspects of human activity and of the archival axiom that the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. They point out that modern archivists work almost exclusively with aggregations of documents, that it is misleading and essentially impossible to start our description of a fonds with the analysis of the documents, and that we have rather to go from the functions to the records, from the general to the specific. The main argument of these archivists is that the historical/administrative/juridical context of the document is almost always *known* or *knowable*, and that diplomatics may offer clarification but not a method of analysis.[22] The words at issue here are those emphasized: "known" and "knowable."

How do we acquire a knowledge of the provenance of a fonds? Statements of mission, mandates, legislation, regulations, official reports, organizational charts, internal circulars, and other similar documents are usually indicated as the archivist's main sources. But we know that a continuous mediation takes place between the

legal/administrative apparatus and its human component, and that law and administration have a natural inertia and adjust to change long after it has taken place. Even more importantly, we know that function and competence influence the content of archival fonds, and that organization influences its overall structure; but it is the actions and transactions, and the procedures by means of which they are carried out, that determine the form of the documents, their interrelationships, and their quantity. It is essential to recognize how the informational content of the archival fonds is determined by the functions of its creator, how its shape (the organization of collectives of documents within the fonds) is determined by the organizational structure within which it was produced, and how the form and interrelationships of its records (within each collective) are determined by the activities and procedures which generated them.

Even if the sources which archivists normally use to acquire knowledge of the functions, capabilities and organizational structure of a records-creating body were entirely reliable, the knowledge we could obtain from them would be limited to the kind of informational content we may expect to find in the records of any given agency. This knowledge would not only be hypothetical, but also grossly insufficient for making any kind of archival decision. It would be necessary to know the specific activities of each agency, but, while looking for them, one would soon discover that "all activities are to be brought back to procedures," because every activity follows a certain pattern in passing through certain well defined steps, and those procedures are fully revealed only by the form of the records.[23] Furthermore, one would discover that record forms correspond to informational content, that is, each record form typically carries a certain type of information and is linked to the other record forms by a well defined kind of relationship. This is the reason why Dutch archivists have embarked on the very complex endeavour of examining single record forms independently of specific organizational contexts, and writing a commentary for each of them which details when and where it appeared for the first time; why it was created; what its purpose was with regard to the type of activity generating it; what kind of informational content it held; how it looked; how it changed over time as to appearance and purpose; why it disappeared/if it did disappear; to what other record forms it was and/or is usually connected by functional and procedural relationships; and finally, which type of juridical person normally creates it. This study is conducted not only for record forms which pertain to isolated documents, but also for forms of record aggregations, such as various types of registries, volumes and, supposedly, files.[24] When work of this kind is completed for all recurrent (as opposed to unique) forms of archival material, this knowledge will inform how current records are described and listed in records inventories, classification schemes, retention and disposal schedules, metadata systems and indexes, because all of these will presumably be based on controlled vocabularies and authority files for terms referring to actions, procedures, and forms. To a degree, archivists will then not need to see the records to know what they are all about, because terms, when linked to procedures and actions, can communicate content.[25]

It may be argued that with electronic records, the relationship between record forms and procedures, and between record forms and the type of information they carry, are still evolving.

> We do not have a comprehensive or stable set of categories for different types of electronic records forms, nor have we established clearly the

> relationships between certain forms and content or procedures. In my view, there are two reasons for this. One is that these relationships are changing (largely through trial and error). The other is that stable forms of electronic records have not been subject to thorough analysis.[26]

This is true, but does not diminish the relevance of diplomatics with respect to electronic records. In the article introducing this series, it was stated that where there are not rules governing the creation of records, a knowledge of diplomatic principles and concepts "gives those who try to formulate those rules a clear indication of the elements which are significant and must be developed." Briefly, where records creation is consciously controlled, diplomatics guides the recognition of patterns and facilitates identification, while, where records creation is uncontrolled, diplomatics guides the establishment of patterns, the formation of a system in which categories of records forms are devised, which is able to convey content and reveal procedure. Once a system is established, then its description in a metadata system will have to reflect it by expressly articulating the relationships among record forms, procedures, actions, persons, functions, and administrative structures.

The main problem identified by Gérard and Christiane Naud is that the various record classification schemes, metadata systems and records descriptions tend to confuse the actions generating the records with the subjects of the records.[27] Naud and Naud believe that appraisal is difficult because classifications, and generally any description of current records, fail to represent them adequately, and that those descriptions fail because identification is based on inconsistent and inappropriate criteria. As a consequence, the archivist entrusted with appraisal is often in need of reanalysing the records. To do so, the top-down approach, that is, an approach which begins with an understanding of the creator by means of acquiring knowledge of its functions and organization on the basis of laws, regulations, and the like, is a useful starting point; but, as Heather MacNeil asserts it, it

> should properly be viewed as a supplement to, not a replacement for, the more traditional bottom-up approach. The illumination of the provenancial and documentary relationships that are embodied in organizational structures and bureaucratic procedures, and embedded in documentary forms, depends upon an analysis that continually mediates between acts and the documents that result from them. These relationships can only be brought into unconcealment with the simultaneous application of a bottom-up analysis, which is most clearly typified by the diplomatic analysis of the genesis, forms, and transmission of documents. Such analysis is critical to ensure that the documents we bring into archival custody actually reflect, accurately and meaningfully, the functions, activities, transactions and rules of procedure that shaped their formation; in other words, that they do what they are supposed to do.[28]

These words clearly explain the contribution of diplomatics to the analysis of archival material. Diplomatics gives importance to the broad context of creation by emphasizing the significance of the juridical system (that is, the social body plus the system of rules which constitute the context of the records), the persons creating the records, and the concepts of function, competence and responsibility; but never distances itself from the reality of the records. Furthermore, the diplomatic axiom that record forms convey and

reveal content is essential to the formation of the missing link between the provenance and the pertinence approaches. The principle of provenance, as applied to appraisal, leads us to evaluate records on the basis of the importance of the creator's mandate and functions, and fosters the use of a hierarchical method, a "top-down" approach, which has proved to be unsatisfactory because it excludes the "powerless transactions," which might throw light on the broader social context, from the permanent record of society. This difficulty has opened the door to the principle of pertinence which, as applied to appraisal, enables us to evaluate records on the basis of the matters to which they pertain. Sometimes pertinence is viewed as the umbrella within which a provenancial approach can be used: first, relevant topics or issues are defined; then the records creators involved with those topics and issues are identified; and finally, their records are evaluated according to provenance. Sometimes pertinence is viewed as a subsidiary approach which could compensate for the shortcomings of a purely provenancial one, and is subsumed under provenance: first, significant creators are identified, then the important topics or issues they deal with are defined, and finally the records are evaluated according to their subject matter. At other times, pertinence is viewed as a pure method of appraisal. In all cases, this approach is invariably criticized as being extremely subjective. The real problem is that provenance and pertinence have been transported from the realm of arrangement to that of appraisal, as two antagonistic "principles," and have been used *de facto* as two alternative "methods," while they are extraneous to appraisal both as principles and as methods. However, they are relevant to appraisal as "conceptual goals": the societal records must reflect their creators' mandates, functions and activities, *and* the societal interplay, the societal fabric, the main events and issues of each era. The method for reaching this goal must find its theoretical foundation in the nature of the records themselves. Their nature, having been determined by the circumstances of creation, imposes a contextual and analytical approach, and requires that appraisal be conducted by examining the records' creators functions, activities and procedures, *and* the relationships between these and the records created, and among the records themselves. But in order to understand these relationships we have to focus on the records themselves and on their form and genesis, that is we need a "bottom-up" approach which complements the "top-down" approach. At this point, provenance and pertinence converge, because, if form conveys and represents content, when we consider form we are at the same time considering content, and our provenance and pertinence goals can be reached by means of the contextual method. Therefore, the use of diplomatic analysis has the capacity of eliminating the dichotomy between provenance and pertinence, and providing the channel which allows the one to flow naturally into the other. This is to be remembered not only when we conduct appraisal for the selection of records within fonds which our archival institution must acquire by mandate, but also, first and foremost, when we undertake appraisal for the acquisition of private archival materials in order to complement our institutional holdings, or to fulfil the mission of a thematic archival repository.

This is not the proper place to discuss the relative merits of the various approaches to acquisition. Whatever the method we use to determine the acquisitions policy of an institution, be it focused on a geographical area, a legal jurisdiction, a type of records creator or a subject area, once that policy is developed, we need a systematic approach to implementing it. Locating records dispersed among the relevant records creators, identifying the "documentary problems"[29] and which records to acquire, necessitate an

analysis much deeper than the study of published literature and official sources. It is quite obvious that we need that type of information for our initial inquiry, in order to understand the types of records creators, their history and characteristics, their general purpose, and even their functions. However, this can bring us only as far as the identification of some records creators who *may* have the records necessary to fulfil our goals. We still have to *see* those records and understand how they are procedurally and formally interrelated. This is not a "records survey." Rather it is a "records analysis," which may guide us to other, more significant, records creators who are "procedurally" linked to the activities generating the records under examination.

For example, let us consider the copies of clinical studies held by a pharmaceutical company. These may tell us that the originals are in the hands of the research group responsible for those studies; their documentary form can tell us the procedure followed in the research, and guide us to drug tests the existence of which we would not have suspected; their relationship with the procedure (e.g., they are part of the deliberation phase rather than the execution phase) can reveal how responsibilities were distributed and again guide us to complementary records; whether that procedure was instrumental or constitutive can suggest the relative value of the records we encounter; and the intrinsic elements of form can show us whether we are confronted with routine documents or with a special dossier. We must let the records speak for themselves, not by reading their content or calculating their extent, or looking at their classification or preparing lists, but by analysing their forms, formation and relationships. These other activities may come after we have decided whether to acquire and what to acquire, and this we can decide only when we have gained an understanding of how the actions and transactions of the records creator resulted in records, and how those records relate to others within the same fonds and to those in the fonds of different records creators. It is not by reading regulations and identifying functions that we discover the societal interplay; what determines that interplay are the transactions, that is, the actions in which more than one person is involved and by which the relations of those persons are altered. Although the general study that we conduct at the outset can provide us with more than mere clues, it is the reality of the records themselves which provides us with knowledge. To say that our analysis must start from the records does not mean that we can neglect the prior historical/juridical/administrative research; it only means that *archival processing proper* starts from the records, after the *historical-juridical* work has prepared the ground for it. And proper archival research, conducted on "innocent and impartial" sources, may uncover a reality which is inconsistent with that revealed by previous research.[30] As well, archival work may be hampered by our understanding of the reality based on that research: expecting to find certain things, we may have trouble recognizing the different things that we actually see, and our eyes may be so blinded by our preconceptions that we may try to constrain the reality to fit our hypothesis.[31] Therefore, our initial study should be just a beginning, and no more.

After all is said and done, appraisal, either for acquisition or for selection, is "a work of careful analysis."[32] As Barbara Craig puts it, we need "a more sympathetic orientation to records where respect replaces control as the basis for decision."[33] And she adds

> It seems to me that we need not just documentation plans, nor plans with the addition of administrative context, but plans, context and a knowledge

> of documents, records and their forms. The reality of the record base is an indispensable component of all acts of appraisal. Without an understanding of documents and records, of their forms and of their functions and of how they were created and used, plans can easily be divorced from reality .... it will be a sad day and a dangerous step when faith in planning replaces the study and knowledge of records.[34]

If the most controversial service of diplomatics is that which it provides to appraisal, the most obvious and accepted is that which it provides to arrangement and description. The capacity of diplomatic analysis to uncover the interrelationships of records makes it a precious instrument for arrangement, be it physical or purely intellectual. Its conceptual and terminological rigour allows for the proper identification, naming and formulation of the data elements to be entered into a description. Moreover, diplomatics presents the records universe as "one capable of being broken down analytically and compartmentalized into its constituent elements," that is, one "eminently amenable to standardization." Standardization of archival description tries to do exactly what can be accomplished by applying diplomatics: to extract from what we observe the elements which are relevant, and to name them; to define those elements "in a way that clearly differentiates information pertinent to creators and their functions and activities" and procedures, from that pertinent "to the records created out of those functions and activities" and procedures; "and, finally, to organize those elements in a logical order."[35] The process necessary to carry out this operation can also generate controlled vocabularies, authority files, and other similar instruments, which allow researchers "to act across jurisdictional boundaries and structural accidents to identify commonalities of human action in [the] administrative environment over time."[36] David Bearman writes that

> Research into the nature of documents is now demonstrating not only that 'document formalisms' (structural features of records that signal their contents to the culturally attuned) exist, but also that machines can be taught to distinguish between document types. Computers can parse documents for their internal components and 'mark' them with such document-marking languages as Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML), creating a sort of electronic 'fingerprint' of a form-of-material . . . these files . . . look . . . like records schedules without dates or names of offices; they contain a field for SGML-like 'fingerprints' and fields for data elements typically found recorded in this type of record. . . Such fingerprints might also form the controlled vocabularies that link reference files of document types to databases of archival records.[37]

The above discussion should demonstrate that diplomatic methodology is not a substitute for collective archival processing, but an analytical method of inquiry. While diplomatic principles constitute a fundamental instrument for understanding the object of our professional responsibility — the record — diplomatic methodology is a means for learning about documentary, administrative and juridical context, a context which is the focus of all the archivist's functions. If diplomatics assists us in providing advice to records creators and systems designers, and in appraising, arranging, describing, and communicating the documentary products of societal endeavour, it does so as a mediator which makes explicit for us the elements on which to base our decisions, and their relative value.

One may wonder whether, in carrying out their functions, European archivists set aside a specific phase of their work for conducting a diplomatic examination of the records. Of course, they do not. They are as unaware of using diplomatics in the course of their analysis of the records as a reader is unaware of using syntax while reading a book. However, a reader acquires such awareness when he or she is confronted with a book in a foreign language. And a fonds no part of which we have ever acquired before is just like a foreign language to us: we may already know its origin and cultural foundations, and much of its vocabulary if we have been exposed long enough to it, but we need to learn its grammar and syntax to be able to understand it, and we can do so better if we already know the fundamental concepts of grammar and syntax: that is, what is a noun, an adjective and a verb; the difference between indicative and subjunctive mood; between subject and complement; a hypothetical and conditional sentence, etc. But, even after we have learned the specific grammar and syntax of the language, we may have to stop and reflect on its rules every time we encounter a particularly complex paragraph.

This series of articles was meant to introduce North American archivists to a very old discipline which has the potential of guiding their work in the most unpredictable ways, the discipline of the records. While illustrating diplomatics, this series has focused on the nature of archival documents as determined by the circumstances of their creation and as revealed by their forms. By doing so, it has emphasized context over content, purpose over use, and it has posed some of the most fundamental questions which must be asked in order to gain an understanding of archival materials.

The archival document, with its stability and concreteness, occupies a central place both in our professional knowledge and in our work. Jay Atherton's concept of continuum *versus* life cycle, implying an integrated approach to records and archives management, that is, to all archival functions,[38] makes sense only on the assumption that (1) the reality of the material with which we work is determined by the juridical system in which it was created, by the persons concurring in its formation and their competence, and by the actions, transactions, processes, and procedures which generated it; and that (2) once established, such a reality is immutable in its form as well as in its substance.

Human ingenuity will continue to devise new types of documents. It is conceivable that one day we shall access the information maintained by our planetary system by looking at the sky with a telescope. Shall we be able to recognize what part of it is the record of our society and protect its integrity, which after all is what every user of archives should expect of us? The answer will depend on our ability to identify the enduring substantial components of a record. Perhaps they will be the same as those established by Dom Jean Mabillon in 1681 in his *De Re Diplomatica Libri VI*.

APPENDIX
Index of Series Technical Terms

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Notes

* This article is the last of the series on diplomatics, which began in *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989). Over the past three years many colleagues have generously offered their support, advice, ideas, and expertise to this illustration and exploration of diplomatics for the modern archivist. It is with immense gratitude that I take the opportunity to acknowledge those contributions. My most heartfelt thanks go to Peter Robertson, previous General Editor of *Archivaria*, who believed in this project and made it possible; Terry Cook, who accompanied this effort with criticism and praise, challenges and encouragement, step by step, assiduously and enthusiastically all the way; Terry Eastwood, who first had the idea of introducing diplomatics into the M.A.S. curriculum at U.B.C., encouraged me to write about it, and constantly helped me to gain a North American perspective on a discipline so deeply rooted in the European tradition; Ronald Hagler, who, with infinite patience, taught me the secrets of a clear English style and many "good English words"; Hugh Taylor, who continually offered support and suggestions; David Bearman, who contributed stimulating ideas and enthusiastic interest; Charles Dollar, who played devil's advocate all the time; John McDonald, who with his experience confirmed my intuitions; and Maynard Brichford, Helen Samuels, Margaret Hedstrom and all those readers who spontaneously offered opinions and suggestions. Finally, special thanks go to all the M.A.S. students at U.B.C. who took the course in diplomatics, particularly those who chose to continue the study of diplomatic concepts and methods in their theses, for having provided

constant inspiration and stimuli; and to all the archivists who participated in the workshops which I offered, for their act of faith, their intellectual curiosity, and their inspiring observations and questions. If diplomatics as exposition of doctrine will disappear from *Archivaria* with the present article, I hope that diplomatics as a body of concepts informing the thinking and writing of professional archivists will be more and more present in its pages, as the application of those concepts shows their validity and versatility.

1 Barbara L. Craig, "The Acts of the Appraisers, The Plan, the Context and the Record." Commentary on the paper by Hans Booms, "Überlieferungsbildung: Archives-Keeping as a Social and Political Activity," delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists (Banff, 23 May 1991), p.11. (Dr. Booms's paper is published elsewhere in this Number.)

2 Of course, intellectual arrangement was not a new concept, a surrogate of physical arrangement, because it had always preceded it, but the idea that "walking along the shelves must be like walking along history" — as Francesco Bonaini, the Archivist of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, put it — was completely abandoned.

3 A discussion of the approach which focuses on the "image" of society reflected by records-creating bodies can be found in Terry Cook, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris, 1990), p. 41 ff.

4 More and more often archivists are expressing their frustration by wishing there was a firm definition of what an archival document or a record is. In fact, the most recent reports issued by archival committees start with an attempt to formulate such a definition. One example is *Management of Electronic Records: Issues and Guidelines* (New York, 1990), p.20.

5 A consequence of the fact that European archivists are not fully aware of the contribution of diplomatics to their work is that, in the last twenty years, with a few notable exceptions, they have not articulated this issue in their writings. Moreover, some European archivists have expressed perspectives which may appear to overrule diplomatic methods in the accomplishment of the major archival functions, simply because they tend to emphasize what has still to be achieved rather than what is already an integral part of their cultural background (see, for example, the writings of Hans Booms, Siegfried Buttner and Michael Cook). For this reason, I suggest that North American archivists go beyond reading what European archivists write by observing their work and, when possible, working with them. This kind of observation, comparison and cooperation has already began, if only on a very small scale. Expressions of it are an article by David Bearman and Peter Sigmond, "Exploration of Form of Material Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *The American Archivist* 50, 2 (Spring 1987), pp. 249-253; the invitation to Peter Sigmond by the Association of Canadian Archivists to its Annual Conference in Banff, Alberta (21 - 25 May 1991), where he presented a paper on form, function and archival value [Dr. Sigmond's paper is also published elsewhere in this Number]; and the meeting of specialists on "Electronic Records and Archival Theory," held in Macerata, Italy (13 - 17 May 1991), the final report of which, written by Charles Dollar, will be published by the University of Macerata, in Italian and English, in 1992.

6 For example, see Cencetti's definition of diplomatics, which opens this series of articles, in Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), p.7 [hereinafter referred to as "Diplomatics. Part I"]. Addressing the issue of archival education, James O'Toole writes "we have been less interested in teaching students to think like archivists than we have in getting them to act like archivists," and "our concern has been with what an archivist can be trained to do, rather than with what an archivist should be educated to know" ["Curriculum Development in Archival Education: A Proposal," *The American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990), p.463]. Diplomatics is considered to be a formative discipline precisely because it instils into archival students a way of thinking and a specific knowledge which do not belong to any other profession and are therefore characteristic of the archival profession.

7 The seven liberal arts were grouped in the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music).

8 "La grammaire qui sait régenter jusqu'aux rois," Molière, *Les Femmes Savantes*, II. 6.

9 For a discussion of the terminological confusion which surrounds the entire area of records electronically generated, see Catherine Bailey, "Archival Theory and Electronic Records," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90), pp.181-2; and "Archival Theory and Machine Readable Records: Some Problems and Issues" (M.A.S. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1988), pp. 5-25. To say that diplomatics helps to clarify the terminology currently used is not to suggest that archivists should substitute the commonly accepted terms with diplomatic terms; it rather means that diplomatics explains the nature of the entities we refer to by various, often inconsistent terms. Thus, one can continue to call manuscripts "textual documents" so long as one is aware that this is a conventional term, not a substantial one; or, one can list maps among other media so long as one knows that the term refers to an information configuration in the same category as a chart or a plan, which may be stored in any medium.

10 This is also the point of view of Fred V. Diers, who believes that the method of transmission should not be taken into account when defining a medium: information storage is the first definable element of the "matrix." Fred V. Diers, "The Information Media Matrix: A Strategic Planning Tool," *Records Management Quarterly* (July 1989), pp. 17-23. David Bearman, on the contrary, believes that the method of transmission does change diplomatic forms substantially in the case of electronic mail, because "the manifestation of electronic mail is different to the sender, the system and the recipient in a way that has no analog in paper based communications" (Letter to the author, 20 October 1991). I believe that such a

difference has been present throughout the centuries in all paper-based correspondence. While in the ancient past a first draft (prepared by the sender) resulted in a final draft with insertion of formulas, dates, etc. (prepared and maintained by the chancery, that is, by the system), and in an original containing all the elements necessary to make it effective (received and maintained by the addressee, and often maintained, in a complete but not effective form, in a copybook or a registry, also by the sender), in more recent times, a draft guide letter (handed by the sender to the records office with a list of addressees and instructions to produce individual letters to send via registered mail) resulted in many individual original letters (received and maintained by the various addressees), in as many copies (made and maintained by the records office, that is, the system), and as many delivery acknowledgements (received and maintained by the system). If today, using an electronic mail system, one drafts a message which may or may not have complex formatting, names a list of addressees, and requires an acknowledgement of receipt, the documents sent and received are not substantially different from those sent and received in paper-based communication. The method of transmission has no influence on their nature nor on their form: rather, what has an influence is the medium on which they are stored to produce results. Thus, if one receives an E-Mail message and prints it out to include it in a paper file relating to the transaction in question, one is in fact dealing with a paper record containing information about its delivery, just like so many other paper records.

11 See Duranti, "Diplomatics. Part I," pp. 19, 26 n. 32.

12 For a complete discussion of facsimile documents see Erwin Wodarczak, "'The Facts about Fax': Facsimile Transmission and Archives" (M.A.S. Thesis, The University of British Columbia, 1991).

13 David Bearman, letter to the author, loc. cit. See also: David Bearman, "Impact of Electronic Records on Archival Theory," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1991),p. 6, and the report by Charles Dollarto which Bearman's article refers, which is mentioned in note 5, above.

14 This exemplification of the archivist's functions may seem excessive, but, on reflection, it is clear that appraisal for acquisition and selection, arrangement, description and reference, consist mainly of identification of documents and their context for purposes of communication.

15 See Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part II)," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90), pp. 9-10, 12-13.

16 It is well known to the readers of this series that the definitional component of diplomatics does not encompass only the elements discussed here as examples, but also the persons concurring in the formation of a document, the acts represented in it, the procedures which determined its creation, and its internal components.

17 Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives. Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956. Midway Reprint 1975), pp. 44-51.

18 More and more contemporary archivists are beginning to take a position against the view that records are just a subset of an agency's information system — and not only in North America. See for example the articles by Frank Upward ("Challenges to traditional archival theory"), Michael Sadlier ("Plus ça change ... or Forward to the past or Sir Hilary triumphant"), and Glenda Acland ("Archivist—Keeper, undertaker or author: the challenge for traditional archival theory and practice"), in *Keeping Data. Papers from a Workshop on Appraising Computer-Based Records* presented by the Australian Council of Archives and The Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated on 10-12 October 1990, edited by Barbara Reed and David Roberts (Sydney, 1991), pp. 105-119.

19 Frank Upward, "Challenges," p. 106.

20 Virtual documents are remarkably similar to the "imbreviatures" of medieval notaries. A notary who was asked to prepare a document would take from the first party a blank parchment, fold down its top right corner, and annotate on it the type of action the document was meant to put into existence, the names of the persons involved, dates, terms of settlement, and other details. The document was maintained in this form by the notary who, if needed, would later prepare the original by adding standardized formulas taken from a "formularium" to the data. The original would stay with one of the parties, or both of them (as in the case of an indenture or a duplicate original).

21 "De notre expérience personnelle dans le classement des fonds d'archives antérieurs à 1940, [et] d'un certain nombre de problèmes rencontrés lors du tri des archives contemporaines, . . . nous tirons . . . la conviction qu'aucune gestion d'archives n'est possible sans que celles-ci aient été identifiées et analysées." Gérard et Christiane Naud, "L'analyse des archives administratives contemporaines," *Gazette des Archives 115* (4e trimestre 1981), p. 216.

22 See, for example, Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of an Archival Appraisal," to appear in the *Festschrift* in honour of Hugh Taylor (Association of Canadian Archivists: Ottawa, 1992 [forthcoming]). This type of scepticism as to the usefulness of diplomatics as a method of analysis is usually presented with regard to the records of large organizations.

23 This point was clearly made by Peter Sigmond in his paper "Form, Function and Archival Value: The Use of Structure, Forms and Functions for Appraisal, Control and Reference," presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists (Banff, Alberta, 25 May 1991), and published elsewhere in this Number.

24 See Vereniging van Archivarissen in Nederland [Association of Archivists in the Netherlands], *Handleiding by het vervaardigen van een broncommentaar* [Manual for the preparation of a source commentary]. (Gravenhage - Nijmegen, 1987). Unpublished English translation by Hugo L.P. Stibbe,

"unverified, and done for pleasure for whomever may be interested in this work by Dutch archivists." See also David Bearman and Peter Sigmond, "Exploration of Form of Material."

25 Sigmond, "Form, Function, and Archival Value." Of course, archivists will still need to see the records for purposes of control.

26 Margaret Hedstrom, letter to the author, 4 November 1991; Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics. Part I," p. 10.

27 Naud, "L'analyse des archives administratives contemporaines," pp. 221-225.

28 Heather MacNeil, "Commentary on Peter Sigmond's `Form, Function and Archival Value: The Use of Structure, Forms and Functions for Appraisal, Control and Reference'" pp. 11-12. David Bearman agrees with MacNeil's approach. He believes that organizational and diplomatic analysis must complement each other, "unless only one source of information is available." In electronic systems— he writes — transactions are always products of applications. Only if designers make applications so that they have the same boundaries as organizational business purposes, can the two types of analysis become one (letter, loc. cit.).

29 This expression is often used by Helen Samuels in her writings on documentation strategy.

30 Records are innocent and impartial sources because they are created as a means for action, not as a purpose in themselves. Naturally they contain the biases and idiosyncrasies of their creators, but, because they were not meant for dissemination, they have the capacity to reveal what really happened.

31 The author speaks from personal experience. When examining the supposed records of the French Government in Rome after having conducted a complete historical-juridical and functional study on the subject, I wasted a great amount of time trying to make the records fit into my preconceptions, and might never have seen the truth if I had limited myself to an identification of the structure of the fonds. See Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part III)," *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), p. 19 n. 13.

32 Terry Cook, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information*, p. 38 [ms]. Before Cook, Schellenberg, Brichford and others have stressed this point.

33 Craig, "The Acts of the Appraisers," p. 7.

34 Ibid., p. 11.

35 MacNeil, "Commentary...", p. 8.

36 David Bearman, "Archives and Manuscripts Control with Bibliographic Utilities," *The American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989), p. 33.

37 David Bearman, "Authority Control Issues and Prospects," *The American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989), p. 298.

38 Jay Atherton, "From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management-Archives Relationship," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-86), pp. 43-51.