

Origin and Development of the Concept of Archival Description

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To talk about the origin and development of a concept means to trace the rise and progressive evolution of an idea which includes all that is characteristically associated with or suggested by a term. The term in question is "archival description." The word "description" comes from Latin *descriptio*, meaning copy, design, trace, delimitation or classification. The Latin noun *descriptio* comes in turn from the verb *describere*, meaning to transcribe, copy, narrate, define, distribute, assign to classes. Etymologically, *describere* derives from the preposition *de* and the verb *scribere*, meaning "to write about." Thus, the term "archival description" literally means writing about archival material, and embraces the ideas of representation, identification and organization.

The questions which this article attempts to answer are: (1) What is characteristically associated with the term "archival description," that is, what does the concept of archival description involve? (2) When did the concept originate? (3) How did it evolve? An analysis of the international archival literature which, from the seventeenth century to the present day, directly or indirectly deals with archival description reveals that the issue of what the concept of archival description involves was non-existent until the 1980s, and that the term was not even defined until the 1970s.¹ The first such definition can be found in the Society of American Archivists (SAA) glossary of 1974. According to it, description is "the process of establishing intellectual control over holdings through the preparation of finding aids."² The SAA Working Group on Standards for Archival Description criticized this definition in 1989 on the grounds that it had a "narrow, product-oriented focus"; the Working Group favoured a later definition, provided by David Gracy, which "asserts that the underlying purpose of an effective archival descriptive program is to establish physical, administrative, and intellectual control" over archival materials.³ However, after having supported a goal-oriented focus in defining archival description, the Working Group itself chose for its own definition a process-oriented focus which makes indirect reference to purposes and no reference to products: "Archival description is the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing any information that serves to identify, manage, locate, and interpret the holdings of archival institutions and explain the context and records systems from which those holdings were selected."⁴ One year later, Fredric Miller adopted a definition of description that was

likewise process- and content-oriented, and made a very implicit reference to purposes while no reference to products: "Archival description is the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, controlling, exchanging, and providing access to information about 1) the origin, context, and provenance of different sets of records, 2) their filing structure, 3) their form and content, 4) their relationship with other records, and 5) the ways in which they can be found and used."⁵

It would seem that everything which could be characteristically associated with the idea of description has been addressed by one or the other of the above definitions, namely, (1) a process of analysis, identification and organization; (2) purposes of control, retrieval and access; and (3) a final product which illustrates archival material, its provenancial and documentary context, its interrelationships and the ways it can be identified and used. However, it is necessary to include yet another definition in order to complete the spectrum; this was, in the intention of its author the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, a "preliminary" working definition: "Description is a major function in the processing of archival material, and the products of this function are finding aids of various sorts which give administrators control over their holdings and enable users and archivists to find information about particular topics."⁶ This archival context-oriented definition, which makes direct reference to the products and purposes of description but no reference to process and content, is nevertheless very useful not only because it completes the panorama of all the ideas which modern archivists associate with description, but also because it provides an avenue of investigation into the past by provoking the question, "Has description always been a major function in the processing of archival material?" Given the absence of direct sources of information on the subject, the present attempt to answer this question will be based on the types of descriptive records created over the centuries; on the archival, juridical and historical contexts in which they were created; and on the descriptive methodologies and practices proposed by archival theorists at various times.

The most ancient known remains of archival description is a repertory of documents on clay tablets found in a private archives of Nuzi (Yorgan Tepe) in Assyria and dated 1500 BC.⁷ Why and for whom did ancient civilizations compile repertories? It is known that archives were preserved only for the administrative use of their creators, that they were preserved by their creators, and that documents were retrieved on the basis of their physical arrangement, which was primarily by subject and secondarily by year.⁸ Therefore, the purpose of description was neither to guide users in their research, nor to acquire control over different archival groups, nor to make the retrieval of documents easier for the archivist. Moreover, it is known that in ancient Mesopotamia there was no concept of public trust and credit, as in Greece and Rome; thus, description did not have an authenticating purpose. Probably, the reasons for compiling repertories were to preclude the direct consultation of the documents, and to take and keep stock of the content of the archives in case of sudden dislocation due to war, fire, etc.

In ancient Greece and Rome, description was unknown, other than in the original meaning of the term: copying. Documents were copied either by users or by scribes for external consultation, and were retrieved on the basis of their physical arrangement and form. As a matter of fact, description, even in its simple meaning of "writing about records," was not an archival activity until the rise of municipal autonomy in the twelfth century, that is, until there was a need to study precedents, document rights and defend the interests of the city against the central power. Inventories compiled between the twelfth and fifteenth

centuries in the city-states of the Italian peninsula had the primary purpose of providing evidence of the existence of the documents, in connection with which they were publicly read in the general council of the city; their secondary purpose was to take stock of the material preserved for the benefit of successor custodians. The documents were usually listed item by item and according to their physical arrangement, cabinet by cabinet.⁹

In the thirteenth-century kingdom of Naples and the fourteenth-century Duchy of Savoy, the compilation of inventories became one of the expressly regulated duties of the *archivarius*. The documents transferred by each creating office had to be kept in a separate cabinet and listed according to their physical arrangement, which today would be called a guide. The purpose of these guides was both juridical (to provide evidence of the existence of the documents) and administrative (to maintain control over the holdings, and facilitate retrieval of the documents needed to carry out the business).¹⁰

This concept of description continued through the time of the absolute monarchies, when archives were secret and inaccessible, and the compilation of indexes and cross-referencing tools was usually associated with it.¹¹ The reason for this intense descriptive activity was that the archives of the great monarchies might be considered the first archives of concentration, in the sense that they preserved material created since the early Middle Ages by all preceding as well as current sovereign powers and their offices. The need for physical and administrative control was keenly felt, not only for the purpose of effective retrieval, an operation which was conducted mainly on the basis of location lists and the physical arrangement of the records themselves, but also for guaranteeing that the archival repository served its function of "perpetual memory." Perpetual memory is a juridical concept according to which the documents preserved in an archives are authentic and permanent evidence of past actions. This idea governed every archival endeavour until the eighteenth century, and was the main reason for the preservation as well as for the description of archival material.¹²

All of the above shows that archival description was not part of processing, which instead focused on an arrangement respecting the natural aggregation of the documents in dossiers, series and fonds, and ended with the physical location of the material in storage. This situation remained stable until the end of the nineteenth century, when description and arrangement became one integrated operation. However, long before then, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the relationship between arrangement and description changed drastically due to the development of scientific history and to the increasing use of archives for cultural purposes.

The use of archives for historical research was rather common already in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Evidence of this, besides the frequent citations of archival documents found in works of that period, are documents such as the sixteenth-century "register of attendance of scholars visiting the archives" of Siena.¹³ However, the administrative reforms that took place during the Enlightenment determined the closure of the fonds created by previous offices, and caused a separation between the records-creating offices and the archives, the result of which was that the archives, containing only closed fonds, began to acquire a primary cultural function. Monarchs and lords, ecclesiastical and lay institutions, hospitals and charitable organizations with a long and prestigious history wished to enhance the value of their archives by making them easily exploitable by scholars. Therefore, historians were hired as archivists to produce

descriptive documents that, besides accomplishing their traditional purposes, could guide the researchers towards the most interesting documents. As a consequence, archivists began to devise methods of arrangement which reflected the order in which the material had to be presented in the finding aids. The pattern of arrangement, aimed at facilitating historical studies, was sometimes chronological but mostly by subject, in harmony with the rationalistic and classificatory mindset of the eighteenth century, which reflected the spirit of the Enlightenment and the *Encyclopédie*.¹⁴ Thus, description became strictly linked to arrangement and, intellectually, began both to precede and to determine physical arrangement in the processing of archival material. The documents were described item by item, and the most important were abstracted, so that their description often served as a "surrogate" for the documents themselves. The idea of the organic administrative unity of the individual fonds, which, if not explicitly formulated, had been decisive in the preservation of archives through the millennia, was completely obscured by that of universal classification. The scope of the finding aid, moreover, was not the archival fonds but either specific miscellanea assembled together by form (such as the collections of diplomas, which can be found in most European archives) or by subject, or the entire holdings of the archives.¹⁵

The reaction to this situation found expression in the nineteenth century, in the legislative prescription of the principle of *respect des fonds* in Naples in 1812, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1822, the Papal State in 1839 and France in 1840; and in the theoretical formulation of the principle of respect for original order by Francesco Bonaini in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1869 and by Max Lehmann in Germany in 1882.¹⁶ Of course, these new ideas were easier to formulate and prescribe in theory than to apply in practice. In fact, after almost a century of furious classifying, fonds had been dismembered, administrative and documentary context lost, and even items such as volumes and registers had been taken apart and individual pages included in subject miscellanea. Archivists were presented with a two-fold problem: (1) the material had been cited in published works according to its classification by subject; and (2) even if the original order of most of the material could be reconstructed, this could not be done for all the material, and those records the administrative and documentary context of which was not identifiable would have constituted large miscellanea similar to orphanages. Therefore, the idea of physically rearranging the material was abandoned on the basis of an old proverb conveniently elevated to principle, *quieta non movere* ('do not move that which is still'), and description began to be used as a means of showing the original order of the material. Thus, physical arrangement became quite distinct from intellectual arrangement, and the two activities of intellectual arrangement and description converged into a unified undertaking in which the former was *de facto* preceded by the latter. In fact, in order to reconstruct the original archival groupings, the documents comprising the various miscellanies had to be first described according to their physical order, or disorder, and then, as far as possible, rearranged on paper.¹⁷ This rearrangement often went much beyond an attribution of each document to a series and a fonds. Because of the frequent territorial, and therefore jurisdictional and administrative, changes which had characterized the history of Europe, documents could often be attributed to more than one series and fonds. Theorists of those times agreed on the fact that documents had to be assigned to the last group in which they played an active part, but saw in description and intellectual arrangement a means of showing the vicissitudes of their active life. Sometimes, when documents could not be attributed to a specific creator, they were linked to a function, which over time had been the responsibility of a number of

creators, which were simply listed. This history of records became an integral part of European inventories at the beginning of the twentieth century, and accompanied the history of the offices which had contributed to their creation. The reason why the historical introduction became a necessary component of inventories only relatively recently is that, until the beginning of this century, inventories which were not published were considered internal documents to be consulted only by the archivist, who had to conduct the research for the scholar by using the knowledge acquired in the process of description. Published inventories were really general guides to the holdings of the archives, and therefore did not require such an introduction.¹⁸

It would seem that when new material began to be regularly transferred to archives, at the beginning of the twentieth century, adherence to the principles of *respect des fonds* and original order would have restored the old situation in which processing consisted of storing the documents in the same order in which they had been accumulated by their creator, retrieval was based on location lists and perhaps indexes, and description was only done to account for the holdings. This did not happen, however, for two reasons: firstly, archivists were now dealing with open and quite voluminous fonds; secondly, the general public, rather than the creator and a few specialist scholars, began to use archival material. These two factors determined a further development of the concept of description.

To maintain the original physical arrangement of an open fonds implies the ability to forecast how large that fonds will be by the time the creating office is defunct and to conserve enough empty space to store all its records. Besides, given the continuous partial transfer of material from the creating office to the archives, the whole fonds never exists in the custody of the creator, and thus there is no original physical order for the entire fonds. This implies that the principles of *respect des fonds* and original order can be observed only intellectually, that is, by means of description. Thus, description neither precedes physical or intellectual arrangement any more, nor does it treat the documents separately from their contextual relationships, but begins to act as a "representation," rather than a surrogate, of the material in its intellectual order; description becomes one with arrangement.¹⁹ That is why, more and more frequently, the levels of arrangement proposed by archival theorists of this century seem rather to be levels of description.²⁰ That is also why description has progressively lost the purposes of accounting for the holdings of the archival institution, facilitating physical retrieval of documents and providing access to information. These purposes are now fulfilled by the compilation of accession registers, location lists, indexes and all sorts of retrieval aids. The primary purpose of writing about the records has gradually become in Europe (and is beginning to become in North America) that of illuminating provenancial and contextual relationships. In European literature, it is now quite frequent to find statements such as "the real inventory is the history of the creator, of the way in which it organized its memory, and of the inner relationships of its records."²¹ In the North American literature about electronic records, moreover, we find parallel statements with respect to metadata or Information Resource Dictionary Systems.²²

These statements reveal another development in the concept of description, which is directly linked to the second factor mentioned above, namely, the use of archives by the general public. The increasing number of archives users, and their progressive differentiation as to purpose, background and method made it impractical for archivists both to conduct research for the researchers and to accommodate archival descriptions to

the needs of specific researchers. Thus, already in the 1930s in Europe, description began to be seen as a means for making the user independent of the archivist's specialized knowledge, and to be aimed primarily at compiling "instruments of research" for the user, not the archivist. Moreover, the description activity acquired a non-evaluative character as a consequence of the recognition that its products, in order to be useful for every kind of research, had to serve none in particular.²³ Thus, all documents had to be described in equal depth, independently of their "importance" for one kind of research or another, and the descriptions had to emphasize context and function rather than content. The development of this idea virtually marked the end of "surrogate-like" and research-oriented, as well as analytical descriptions, and the beginning of a new conceptual association of archival description with standards.

From this very brief excursus it appears that the historical evolution of the concept of description is directly linked to two elements: (1) the relationship between archival material and its creator, and (2) the type of user of archival material. These elements have influenced the purpose of description, its process and products and its relationship with other archival activities. Thus, the purpose of description has gone from creating surrogates of the documents and providing an account of the holdings to serving society's perpetual memory and providing evidence of the existence of the records; from guiding scholarly research and determining the most useful arrangement of records to revealing the intellectual order of physically disordered or meaninglessly ordered material; and finally, from aiding the archivist in conducting research for the scholar to guiding any kind of user in her/his independent research through illuminating the contextual relationships and the inner history of the records. The products of description have gone from analytical repertories and lists to guides and calendars, and from inventories by physical and intellectual form (or theme) to structural inventories. In the process, description has changed its relationship with arrangement more than once, and has itself undergone an internal fragmentation. The result of this fragmentation is that description proper (that is, the representation of the records in their contextual relationships) has been distinguished and separated from the preparation — in both the records and the archives management context — of internal instruments of administrative, legal and physical control, and from the creation — specifically in the archival context — of tools of retrieval, access and exploitation of the records by external users. Given the variety of descriptive instruments which result from these three activities (i.e., preservation of meaning, exercise of control, and provision of access), it is possible to say that, taken together, they mirror all the ideas that have been associated with the term "description" through the centuries. It is very possible that the new technologies and the records created will bring about both a reintegration of the three activities into a unified concept of description which has entirely absorbed arrangement, and the production of one principal, multipurpose descriptive instrument.

By studying the origin and development of the concept of archival description, the main question addressed here was whether description has always been a major archival function. The conclusion is that description has never been an archival function. Instead, it has been one of the means used to accomplish the only two permanent archival functions: (1) preservation (physical, moral and intellectual) and (2) communication of archival documents, that is, of the residue and evidence of societal actions and transactions. This is probably the reason why there is no universally recognized conceptualization of archival description, no steady progress in its use, and not even

linear development in its application. Description has been carried out or not carried out depending on specific needs and conditions, attitudes and requirements, and its products have consistently reflected the conceptions about archives held by the society of the time.

Notes

- * Paper presented at the 1992 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Montréal, 12 September 1992; revised and edited for publication.
- 1 Most of the archival literature which focuses on description, such as the many Italian and French treatises of the eighteenth century and the Dutch handbook by S. Muller, J.A. Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1968), dwell on the methodology of description with respect to many different practical situations, not on the reason for or nature of description.
- 2 Frank B. Evans, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974), pp. 415-33.
- 3 "Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description," *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989), p. 440; David B. Gracy II, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description* (Chicago, 1977), p. 19.
- 4 "Report of the Working Group," p. 442; also in Lewis Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellardo, *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* (Chicago, 1992), s.v. "description."
- 5 Fredric M. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago, 1990), p. 7.
- 6 Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa, 1985), p. 9.
- 7 Johannes Papritz, "Archive in Altmesopotamien. Theorie und Tatsachen," *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 55 (1959), p. 48.
- 8 Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), pp. 63-70; Godefroy Goossens, "Introduction à l'archivéonomie de l'Asie antérieure," *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* XLVI, no. 2 (1952), p. 100; Elio Lodolini, "Gli archivi di tavolette d'argilla dell'Antico Vicino Oriente," *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato* XXXVI (sett./dicembre 1976), p. 731; Mogens Weitemeyer, "Archive and Library Technique in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Libri* 6, no. 3 (1956), p. 221; Nikolaus Schneider, "Die Urkundenbehalter von Ur III und ihre archivalische Systematik," *Orientalia* IX (1940), p. 3. Each container of tablets carried a label identifying the subject of the documents, the year (and sometimes the month) of creation, and the creating office.
- 9 Elio Lodolini, *Lineamenti di storia dell'archivistica italiana. Dalle origini alla metà del secolo XX* (Rome, 1991), p. 43.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.
- 11 It is interesting that the author of what may be considered the first complete treatise on archives, Baldassare Bonifacio, does not make reference to this sort of guide, examples of which can still be consulted. In fact, he writes, "Let us prepare indices and syllabi, let us make up lists and catalogues in alphabetical order. Adapting to each set of materials its own indices, whatsoever will be needed we shall have immediately before our eyes": *De archivis liber singularis* (Venice, 1632), translated in Lester K. Born, "Baldassare Bonifacio and His Essay *De Archivis*," *American Archivist* 4 (October 1941), p. 236.
- 12 Lodolini, *Lineamenti*, p. 53.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

- 14 See, for example, J.G. de Chevrières, *Le nouvel archiviste, contenant une nouvelle méthode de ranger un chartier dont l'ordre chronologique est la base* (Paris, 1775); Pierre Camille Le Moine, *Diplomatique pratique, ou traité de l'arrangement des archives et trésors des chartes* (Metz, 1765). For an ample discussion of the subject, see Arnaldo d'Addario, "Lineamenti di storia dell'archivistica (secoli XVIXIX)," *Archivio storico italiano* CXLVIII, no. 543 (1990).
- 15 For example, in 1768 Prince Kaunitz, chancellor to Empress Maria Theresa, issued from Vienna a decree which imposed a classification of the entire holdings of the archives of Milan in twelve primary classes and a limited number of subclasses: Nicola Raponi, "Per la storia dell'Archivio di Stato di Milano. Erudizione e cultura nell' Annuario del Fumi (1909-1919)," *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato* XXXI, no. 2 (1971), p. 318. However, this decree, like all similar directives issued by governments of the time, was not attributable exclusively to interest in scholarly research. It was believed that a description of the contents of the documents organized by subject classes, subclasses, and categories would facilitate the use of ancient documents for current administrative purposes: Lodolini, *Lineamenti*, p. 106.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 115-22; Antonio Panella, "L'ordinamento storico e la formazione di un Archivio generale in una relazione inedita di Francesco Bonaini," in Antonio Panella, *Scritti Archivistici* (Rome, 1955), pp. 215-18; Ernst Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," in Kenneth Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest* (Washington, DC, 1967), pp. 36-44.
- 17 Elio Lodolini, "L'Archivio di Stato di Roma dallo smembramento alla ricostituzione dei fondi," *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato* XLIV, no. 1 (1984), pp. 43-56; *idem*, "In tema di inventari archivistici," *Nuovi Annali della Scuola Speciale per Archivisti e Bibliotecari* V (1991), p. 117.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 111-12.
- 19 This is not always true. For example, as late as 1961 Schellenberg wrote that "the second thing to accomplish by arranging records is to make them accessible for use. In order to do this it is necessary to arrange them so they can be described effectively. Arrangement, then, should also facilitate the description of records": Theodore R. Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," Maygene Daniels and Timothy Walsh, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, DC, 1984), p. 151. Here arrangement and description are seen as two distinct functions in which the former is accommodated to the latter, very similarly to the manner of late-eighteenth-century archivists. In North America, moreover, the habit of considering description to be the compilation of lists of documents in their physical order, accession unit by accession unit, has been commonplace in the past, and still survives. It might be added that particularly in the United States, the approach to description of public records is very different from the description of manuscripts, the former being much more similar to that illustrated in the text, above.
- 20 See, for example, Oliver W. Holmes, "Archival Arrangement. Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels" (Daniels and Walsh, *ibid.*, p. 167), where the defence of the record group concept is grounded entirely on the needs of administrative and intellectual control. The same approach is clearly visible in the writings of Michael Cook (see, for example, *The Management of Information from Archives* (Brookfield, VT, 1986), pp. 92-97), and of Australian archivists on the series system.
- 21 See, for example, Lodolini, "In tema di inventari archivistici," p. 109.
- 22 "An information resource dictionary system ... would identify all of the information elements, define their relations, explain their context of creation and use, provide audit trails of use, and specify organizational responsibility for their maintenance. In this transformation, an information resource dictionary would constitute a first draft of a rudimentary inventory of an information system": Charles M. Dollar, *Archival Theory and Information Technologies* (Macerata, 1992), p. 62.
- 23 Leopoldo Sandri, "Archivistica," Romualdo Giuffrida, ed., *Antologia di Scritti Archivistici* (Rome, 1985), p. 14.