Public Records and Archives in Classical Athens. JAMES P. SICKINGER. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999. x, 274 p. ISBN 0-8078-2469-0.

James Sickinger explores the nature, preservation, and use of records in ancient Athens from approximately 600 to 400 B.C.E. in this reworked and much expanded version of his doctoral thesis. In addition to shining much light on the largely unknown world of public record-keeping, Sickinger revises the anachronistic approach to studying archives in the ancient world that sometimes characterized Ernst Posner's well-known work, and he takes issue with several scholars whose views on literacy rates and thus democratic participation in ancient Athens are based on a misunderstanding of archival realities. For Sickinger, archives are not the usual storehouse of information for historical research, rather, archives themselves are fit subjects for historical study.

Sickinger's task is all the more difficult because virtually none of the archival records he is addressing have survived. Yet by extremely thorough and well-documented research, he has been able to piece together the archival story from surviving stone inscriptions, implications of certain legal decrees, passing references to the existence of records in literary and philosophical texts, logical inference based on the nature of administrative practices, and much educated guesswork. One wonders if future historians of today's archives will be much better off: while many of the records in modern archives will survive, one hopes, for many centuries, how well do archivists now document what they do and why they do it, and how and why this changes over time? How well do they note which fonds were appraised, acquired, arranged, described, and made available at different times, accordingly to which of many constantly changing archival concepts and processes, within each separate (and sometimes internal parts of each) archival institution?

Unfortunately, if perhaps understandably, Sickinger only makes scant and passing reference to scholarly writing by archivists on the history and theory of archives that might well have illuminated his arguments. Yet he knows enough to discern that archivists in different parts of the world mean different things by "record" and "archives." For this study, he adopts the non-life-cycle view that the two are indistinguishable: archives exist from the moment of their creation, and those having enduring value are preserved longer than those having only temporary value. Yet the vast majority of what he discusses as "archives" are really current or dormant "records" according to North American terminology, with their use (with rare exceptions) being limited to administrative/judicial purposes for one, two, or occasionally a few decades after creation. Thus, although his title distinguishes "public records" and "archives" as separate entities, the text *de facto* deals only with the former, and there is no consideration of archival records created in personal life

outside the public sphere, or of the cultural or heritage values for preserving archives. These caveats aside, Sickinger constructs a fascinating model of ancient Athenian archives and the role of records in the conduct of public affairs.

The Athenian records now most familiar to scholars are stone *stelai*, which are slabs of marble on which Athenians inscribed various treaties, decrees, financial accounts, and other state documents. These were erected in public and sacred places to inform citizens and thus hold the state accountable for its actions on their behalf. Scholars have assumed from the surviving *stelai* (often in fragmented form) and from the absence of any surviving archival records, that, until the time of the establishment of the Metroon in 410–405 B.C.E. as a formal Athenian archives, there were no other archives and, therefore, that written documentation was not an important part of Athenian administration. This paucity of archives, combined with the selective, symbolic, and promotional nature of the *stelai*, furthermore suggested to these revisionist scholars that there were much lower levels of literacy than previously assumed, and thus a weaker basis than often thought for the fabled Athenian democracy based on an informed and literate citizenry.

Sickinger rejects this revisionism and, in his counter-revision, demonstrates that Athenians in the previous two centuries or more before the Metroon did not adopt a careless attitude to records, rather, they created an ever-growing number of more temporary records on wood tablets or papyrus, and stored them in predecessors of the Metroon. The erected stone *stelai* were a mere selection from this much larger whole. The establishment of the Metroon as a centralized archives building does not reflect the previous inadequacy of record-keeping or a sudden break from a non-record-keeping past, but rather the large volume of records accumulated from earlier activity and the needs of ongoing and increasingly complex administrative activity for recourse to such records. Archives were neither crude nor primitive, nor incidental to the development of democracy, rather, they were a critical pillar of ancient Athenian society. Sickinger, in short, posits a higher and earlier level of literacy among Athenian citizens than is often assumed and a concomitant level of genuine accountability using records as an important element in the development of democracy.

The essence of Sickinger's arguments are available to archivists in his article, "Literacy, Documents, and Archives in the Ancient Athenian Democracy," that recently appeared in *The American Archivist* (62, Fall 1999, pp. 229–46). That article, in fact, contains more pointed historiographical discussion of the work of other historians and their failings, in Sickinger's view, to appreciate the nature and significance of Athenian record-keeping than does his book, as well as marginally more references to works by archivists. The latter is no doubt the result of recommendations to the author from editorial review for an archival journal! Yet the book itself is still very much

a worthwhile read, with a clarity of argument and wealth of detail not available in the summary article.

But why should archivists care? Faced with challenges of modern appraisal, descriptive standards, electronic records, and demanding clients wanting instant Web site access to holdings, does it matter what our predecessors in ancient Greece were thinking and doing 2,500 years ago? There are several ways of answering this question positively, and thus several reasons for recommending this book to archivists. First, as Canadian archival educator Barbara L. Craig has reminded us, "just as personal identity is anchored in a strong historical sense[,] so is our professional identity–both come from the ability to experience ... continuity. Surely if you have nothing to look backward to, and with pride, you have nothing to look forward to with hope" ("Outward Visions, Inward Glance: Archives History and Professional Identity," *Archival Issues* 17 [1992]). Luciana Duranti's well-known linking of certain current archival issues to ancient Rome is but one fruitful example, if one that has not been without controversy. Sickinger takes the historical story of archives back further still, and in much more detail, to ancient Greece.

Second, I have asserted elsewhere that archivists need to ask questions of many different historical contexts. How have "archival assumptions, concepts, and strategies reflected the dominant structures and societal ethos of their own time? Upon what basis, reflecting what shifting values, have archivists decided who should be admitted into their houses of memory, and who excluded? To answer these questions, we need an intellectual history of our profession. We need to understand better our own politics of memory, the very ideas and assumptions that have shaped us, if we want our 'memory houses' to reflect more accurately all components of the complex societies they allegedly serve" ("What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 [Spring 1997]). Sickinger provides a very rich part of that missing intellectual history for our profession, and by implication shows that the assumptions, theories, and approaches to archives – including our own – are not universal or "true," but a constructed product of time, place, and circumstance. Such archival history encourages humility and tolerance as well as the pride of which Barbara L. Craig rightly speaks, and may help us to avoid the worst excesses of inward-looking or self-referential professional hubris that can come from thinking our way is the only possible way.

Third, the old cliché of there being "nothing new since the Greeks" is both supported and contradicted by this book; it makes us reflect on our current professional practice, in other words. While the significance of documents published as stone *stelai* may be controversial amongst historians assessing Athenian literacy rates, there is no doubt that ancient Athenians felt that democratic accountability required taking archival documents "to the people," in aggressive and even costly outreach and public programming efforts (to use

today's archival jargon), since carving, erecting, and maintaining stone documents was essentially that. Athenians also saw the need to be selective, and convert only certain critically important records to lasting, displayable media (i.e., stone) for public consumption and preservation. There are certainly resonances here to contemporary archival debates concerning the desirability (even the morality!) of scanning and otherwise converting paper or film records to electronic form, or migrating electronic records across software generations, in order to facilitate both preservation and Web-based display and thus wider public access. The birthplace of Western democracy was also keenly aware of the need for accountability through record-keeping, a notion that has only re-entered English-speaking archival discourse in a major way in the past decade, and primarily because of the challenges presented by identifying, capturing, and maintaining electronic records and by various administrative scandals involving illegal records destruction. Athenians also wrestled with the relationship between oral sources and written records as evidence for both current administration and the writing of history, a struggle that archivists (and historians, and even jurists) have by no means yet resolved completely. But in terms of differences, Athenians had a more confident "memory" relationship than we do, both in public affairs and in historical understanding, between the heroic and mythical, the spiritual and legendary, the symbolic and the storytelling, on the one hand, and the official and transactional, the written and documentary, and the evidential and judicial, on the other: in short, a greater humanist integration of left-brain and right-brain thinking (and feeling) than is usually exhibited in our rationalist, modernist, and technology-driven professional orientation. Athenians also were comfortable with the mutability of records, erasing or modifying entries on certain records as circumstances changed, recognizing thereby that the record is less a fixed physical medium to be carefully guarded, in contrast to the central tenets of modernist archival theory, than it is an evolving, changing, and constantly mediated concept. And of course Athenians dealt with an age of information scarcity rather than one of information glut and anxiety – although one wonders if historians of our era will be able to write with any more certainty than does Sickinger and his classical colleagues about what actually "happened."

Finally, it is interesting to note that this book continues a very recent phenomenon whereby historians have discovered archives – not archives as sources for documents on a myriad of subjects, but archives as **the** subject of historical inquiry itself. Building on earlier French historical work by Pierre Nora and Jacques LeGoff, among others, and the general postmodern revolution of our era, English-speaking historians in the past decade have been fascinated with the history of memory and commemoration. They are exploring how various societies, classes, genders, ethnic groups, and individuals choose to remember and to forget, and what this tells posterity about past

societies' values and aspirations. There has been a proliferation of such "memory" studies: on public monuments and historic sites, on war memorials and Holocaust memory, and on various institutions devoted to memory making and memory presentation such as museums, galleries, libraries, and even zoos. Yet until very recently, rarely have archives been included among such institutions. To my knowledge, Sickinger's is, in fact, the first such book-length monograph (I exclude here traditional administrative histories of various archival institutions, which are an entirely different genre) dealing with archives in this way, although there have been in the past few years, under the international impact of Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, a growing number of specialist articles.

Perhaps this curious omission by historians indicates that many still cling subconsciously to their traditional belief in the scientific and objective nature of historical inquiry, which by definition requires a neutral and objective archive as its base, and thus one does not (need to?) question or investigate the archive and archive-making processes too closely. That assumption in turn feeds into, and perhaps draws from, the traditional archival myth about the alleged neutrality and objectivity of our own endeavours. These scales of mutual blindness are beginning to fall from both sets of eyes as archivists discover their own historicity in the memory formation processes, and historians discover the archives in an entirely new way as contested sites of memory formation (and forgetting). The implications of this mutual discovery for professional practice for archivists and historians alike are very suggestive, as they are for a refreshed relationship between the two professions, but that is another story for another day.

Reading James Sickinger's fine volume will not help archivists preserve automated office systems, conduct a macro-appraisal, or develop EAD coding, but it will enrich, broaden, and stimulate their minds and professional life. That is why what happened 2,500 years ago matters.

Terry Cook
Archival Studies Programme
University of Manitoba

The Culture of Secrecy. DAVID VINCENT. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 364 p. ISBN 0-19-820307-1.

Secrecy: The American Experience. DANIEL PATRICK MOYNIHAN. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 262 p. ISBN 0-300-07756-4.

These two titles cover the same subject, have the same objective, but take very different tacks and cover different waters to reach the same conclusion.