

# Articles

## The Last Dance of the Phoenix, or The De-discovery of the Archival Fonds\*

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**RÉSUMÉ** Le principe de provenance, probablement plus encore en Europe que dans le reste du monde, entraîne de la confusion et des débats intenses entre archivistes. Les racines de ce principe semblent être dans le respect des fonds, exprimé en France en 1841, mais elles remontent en fait encore plus loin et manquent à l'origine de tout fondement théorique. La diversité des pratiques administratives dans les traditions européennes n'a pas contribué à un réel consensus, tant pour la définition du fonds, que pour la question de savoir si l'ordre primitif des documents doit être préservé ou restauré. Dans les pays où la tradition du registre central existe, les archivistes ont tendance à respecter l'ordre original alors qu'ailleurs, les archivistes le trouve encombrant. Mais même le fonds comme entité à respecter est remis en cause, puisque les changements administratifs brouillent souvent ses limites. Pourquoi les archivistes à travers le monde tentent-ils de respecter un concept ou une situation qui pose tant de problèmes? Pourquoi les penseurs dans le domaine de l'archivistique tentent-ils autant comme autant de résoudre le casse-tête causé par l'indiscipline de leurs documents? Pourquoi tentent-ils de faire entrer toutes les situations dans un même paradigme? Pourquoi le Phoenix renaît-il toujours de ses cendres? C'est par une relecture de la littérature existante, tant européenne, nord-américaine qu'australienne, que l'auteur tente de découvrir de nouveaux modèles.

**ABSTRACT** Probably even more in Europe than in the rest of the world the principle of provenance caused confusion and heavy debates among archivists. Its roots seem to be in the *respect des fonds*, expressed in France in 1841, but as a matter of fact are much older and initially lacked any kind of theoretical foundation. The diversity in administrative practice in various European traditions did not contribute to a real consensus, either about what a fonds is, or whether the original order should be preserved or restored. In those traditions where strong registry systems exist (or existed) archivists tend to respect the original order, whereas in other traditions archivists may find it cumbersome. But even the fonds as an entity to respect is challenged, since often administrative changes in the originating administration blurred its boundaries. Why

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do archivists all over the world try to respect a thing or a situation that is so problematic? What is the reason that again and again archival thinkers try to solve the puzzle caused by the unruliness of the material with which they work? Why do they try to get all situations to fit into their paradigm? How is it that the Phoenix can be reborn from any fire that it burns? In a re-reading of existing literature, European, North American, and Australian we may discover new patterns.

The archival fonds is more complex than it may seem. At first glance a manifestation of the nineteenth-century French respect des fonds, itself reflecting an external dimension of respect for provenance and an internal dimension of respect for original order, the fonds is believed by many archivists to embody the core principles that the profession must use for the arrangement and description of archives. The fonds concept protects the integrity of the record, by protecting its context. The fonds is considered the central building block of archival description. It is allegedly more pure in its respect for provenance and original order than Schellenberg's record group, or Jenkinson's archive group, and supposedly offers more inclusive contextuality than does the Australian series system. Thus, the modern fonds, from France originally, and in Canada revitalized as the core of *Rules for Archival Description*, has become in the past decade the international standard for describing the fundamental organizing unit of archives.

Yet the now-apparently sacrosanct acceptance of the fonds is not without problems, either historically or conceptually. The German archival theorist Adolf Brenneke, in the thirties of the last century, Director of the Prussian Privy Archive at Berlin, and archival educator, did not think very highly, for example, of the Dutch *Manual of Arrangement and Description of Archives*, written by Muller, Feith, and Fruin, which extolled the merits of the fonds. He objected to their ideas about the principle of provenance, particularly about respecting the original order, as integral to the fonds concept.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, Brenneke was implicitly even challenging the Prussian archival tradition of his own institution. There, *Provenienzprinzip* was the flourishing principle, and one that, according to various authors, is not only similar to ideas expressed in the Dutch Manual, but even their very origins.<sup>2</sup> Brenneke asserted that a strict following of the principle of provenance might have

1 Adolf Brenneke, *Archivkunde. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Geschichte des europäischen Archivwesens* (Leipzig, 1953). The bulky book is a compilation of Brenneke's teaching at the Berlin Institut für Archivwissenschaft und geschichtswissenschaftliche Fortbildung (Institute for Archival Science and Historical Education), mainly collected by one of his students, Wolfgang Leesch. A short biography precedes the text. Brenneke was born in 1875, and died in 1946. Brenneke used the German translation of the Dutch Manual from 1905.

2 For example, see Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 3 (1940), pp. 159–172. Reprinted in *Archives and the Public Interest. Selected Essays* (Washington, 1967), pp. 23–25 and in Maygene E. Daniels and Timothy Walch (eds.), *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington, 1984).

worked in the past, during the glory days of the Prussian *Registratur* (registry systems), but by his day the filing clerks had lost the required skills, and therefore modern archives lacked the strict, ordered quality of the past. As a consequence, Brenneke believed that the archivist should not respect archival fonds that were not well constructed by the registrars, but instead should be creative. Archival work ought to be more than the mechanical preserving of acquired record systems when these systems were error-ridden, or misfiled, or inaccurate.

Brenneke's opinions about preserving the original order had been said before, and it would be repeated after him by many archivists. From Carl Weibull in Sweden to the "reactionary radical" Frank Boles in the United States, most of the discourse on the principle of provenance has focussed on respecting or disrespecting original order. Arrangement of the fonds preceding description meant respecting or re-establishing the original orders *within* the fonds. The application of provenance in its *external* dimension, sometimes exclusively labelled as *respect des fonds*, has been commonly accepted as not problematic within the profession. Indeed, respecting the fonds as a whole has hardly been challenged in the archival literature; the fonds being merely accepted as simple archival orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

However, in the context of this paper, I am equating the principle of provenance with that of *respect des fonds*, as Johannes Papritz did in his outstanding report for the ICA congress in 1964.<sup>4</sup> This implies respecting the fonds as an entity and its original order. Most of the literature on the principle of provenance starts with the key question of what a fonds is, that is to say, what is the thing that is to be respected. Respecting or disrespecting the internal order within the fonds is then the next question to answer. Thus the external dimension of respecting the fonds is addressed necessarily before its internal dimension. Traditionally, the internal dimension comes as the second stage. As Gerhart Enders wrote in his textbook in 1962, the principle of provenance, as we define it today, demands that the files closed by an organizational entity, or a juridical, or natural person, form one group in an archives, clearly separated from other groups in the same archives. Originally, the principle of provenance does not state anything about how the group must be internally arranged,

3 For one overview, see Peter Horsman, "The Taming of the Elephant. An Orthodox Approach to the Principle of Provenance," in Kerstin Abukhanfusa and Jan Sydbeck (eds.), *The Principle of Provenance. Report from the First Stockholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance 2-3 September 1993* (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 51-63. Also see Johannes Papritz, "Neuzeitliche Methoden," full citation in note 10 below. The adjective "reactionary radical" was attributed to Frank Boles by Colin Smith in "A Case for Abandonment of 'Respect'," *Archives and Manuscripts* 14 (1986), pp. 154-168 and reprinted in Biskup et al. (eds.), *Debates and Discourses. Selected Australian Writings on Archival Theory 1951-1990* (Canberra, 1995), pp. 180-203.

4 So does Peter Walne (ed.), *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, 2nd rev. ed. (München, 1988), pp. 352. However, the *Dictionary* defines a separate term for respecting the original order.

only how it should be kept apart from other groups.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see later, this definition is not without controversy, and in fact may have things rather inside out.

### Naming and Defining the Principle

In 1964, Johannes Papritz, an observer of the rich literature and various interpretations on the theory of provenance, as well as of the practical difficulties in its application, discovers at least one phenomenon: the desire to name, re-name, invent, re-invent, define, and re-define the principle and ultimately, almost as a consequence, to break it down into what we might call numerous sub-principles, each with its own meaning, application, and definition. Such a sub-principle sometimes refers only to a part or an aspect of the concept (e.g., original order), or applies only to closed fonds or open fonds. In 1960, the East German archivists, H.O. Meissner and W. Leesch, listed no fewer than fourteen such principles, all connected with arrangement and description.<sup>6</sup> Elsevier's *Lexicon of Archival Terminology* (1964) has half a dozen.<sup>7</sup> Some of these principles are not principles at all, but rather methods for arrangement, such as the usually rejected principle of pertinence. But that only begs the issue of whether there is such a sharp difference between a method and a principle. According to Elaine Svenonius, a (bibliographic) principle is used "to refer to the objectives of a bibliographic system, to general rules in a bibliographic code, and to directives that guide the construction of a bibliographic language."<sup>8</sup> That definition of a principle sounds pretty close to being a method or methodology. Samuel Muller, one of the three authors of the famous Dutch Manual, himself one of the principle's strongest advocates, as early as 1908 called the principle of provenance simply a method.<sup>9</sup> Yet

5 Gerhart Enders, *Archivverwaltungslehre* (Berlin, 1962), p. 93. Translation by the author.

6 H.O. Meissner und W. Leesch, "Grundzüge einer deutschen Archivterminologie," *Archivmitteilungen* (1960). East-German terminology is interesting, not least for its politically flavoured definitions. See Eberhard Schetelich (ed.), *Lexikon des Archivwesens der DDR* (Berlin, 1976).

7 Elsevier's *Lexicon of Archive Terminology* (Amsterdam, 1964). It must be noted that the book is heavily inspired by Dutch terminology: J.L. van der Gouw, H. Hardenberg, W.J. van Hoboken, en G.W.A. Panhuysen, *Nederlandse Archiefterminologie* (Zutphen, 1962). The latter publication listed 7 principles.

8 Elaine Svenonius, *The Intellectual Foundation of Information Organization* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 67 ff. See also Terry Eastwood, who makes such a distinction: "...but the concept rests on certain well established precepts. The challenge to the centrality of the concept of the fonds seems not so much to question those precepts as the manner in which they are realized in the treatment of archives, that is in questions of methods and practice." Terry Eastwood, "General Introduction" to Terry Eastwood (ed.), *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992), p. 2.

9 In his annual address as president of the Society of Netherlands Archivists, published in *Nederlandsch Archievenblad* 17 (1908/1909), p. 14.

whether a mere method or lofty principle, as Papritz demonstrated in his 1964 ICA report, the fonds certainly stands revealed as a Babel of archival principles, and a jumble of definitions and interpretations and methodologies.<sup>10</sup>

What then, one may ask, is wrong with this principle of provenance, which lies at the heart of archival theory, or with archival theory in general, or with the archivists' theoretical competencies, that they cannot articulate a firm consensus on so central a concept to their identity and work? What are the difficulties both in understanding and applying a principle that emerged as a guiding concept for controlling archival work, but apparently can itself hardly be controlled by archivists in their manifold theoretical discussions? Brenneke remarked that ever since the international congress of librarians and archivists in Brussels in 1910, "the Principle of Provenance was almost *sacrosanct*, and had become a dogma. If younger archivists resisted against it – how well founded, intelligent or practical they might have been – they were corrected by the teacher and even threatened with disciplinary measures."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps archivists have made too much of the principle.

The starting point for considering this dilemma must be the ideas expressed in the Dutch Manual. After all, whether seriously or ironically, various authors have elevated the book, originally meant to be a set of guidelines and practical rules, into the bible of archival theory.<sup>12</sup> Going back to the origins of the ideas in the Manual may help to contextualize its meaning. Even the self-confident Muller openly confessed that he and his co-authors did not invent these concepts: "it was in the air."<sup>13</sup> And equally, reaching after the Manual, it may be useful to see how leading archival writers from different archival traditions reacted to the Manual, and created their own interpretations, building on what was common opinion in the very tradition in which they stood, whether heretic or dogmatic in terms of the Manual's assertions. This paper will, therefore, necessarily summarize the various current theories on the concept of the archival fonds.

### **"Il faut respecter les fonds anciens"**

The fundamental concept upon which the Dutch triumvirate built their theory

10 Johannes Papritz, "Neuzeitliche Methoden der archivischen Ordnung (Schriftgut vor 1800)," *Archivum* XIV (1964), pp. 13–56, here in particular p. 14.

11 Johannes Papritz, *Archivwissenschaft* (Marburg, 1976), Band 3, 16. Translation by the author.

12 Th. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives* (Melbourne, 1956), p. 175; Johannes Papritz, *Archivwissenschaft* (Marburg, 1976); E. Lodoloni, *Archivistica. Principi e Problemi* (Milano, 1984); C. Dekker, «La bible archivistique néerlandaise et ce qu'il en est advenu,» in O. Bucci (ed.), *Archival Science on the Threshold of the Year 2000* (Macerata, 1992), pp. 69–79.

13 S. Muller in *Nederlandsch Archievenblad* 16 (1907/1908), p. 8. Reprinted in P.J. Horsman en J.P. Sigmond, *Het Land van Herkomst. Een bundel artikelen rond het herkomstbeginsel*. See the introduction to the reprint of the English version of the manual, to be published by the SAA in 2003.

was certainly the French articulation of *respect des fonds*, even if it is only occasionally mentioned in the Manual. In 1873 Muller, doubtless the *primus inter pares*, had attended seminars at the École des Chartes in Paris shortly before he started his career as city archivist of Utrecht.<sup>14</sup> A few years after the publication of the Manual, he would publicly recall that his professor there repeatedly emphasized the importance of *respect des fonds*. In Muller's own handwritten notes from 1873, preserved in the library of the Netherlands National Archives in The Hague, there is the maxim: "règle absolut: il faut respecter les fonds anciens."

In its most straightforward form, *respect des fonds* is not an invention of the French, despite Fenyo blaming them for it.<sup>15</sup> Many European countries had anticipated its practical application in the early nineteenth century and before.<sup>16</sup> In all such cases, pragmatism gave birth to the notion – not pure theory. Papritz noted that the idea not to intermingle documents from different origins (or provenances) had evolved in daily archival work before the French articulation of the principle, an observation fifty years before confirmed by E. Wiersum in a report to the international archival congress in Brussels in 1910.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these many local antecedents, the global archival community still owes something to France. Natalis de Wailly, the principle's founding father, not only ordered the separation into various fonds for the *archives départementales* ("provincial archives"), but he also articulated in 1841 a definition of a *fonds d'archives* in modern sense, prescribing that archivists should "Rassembler les différents documents par fonds, c'est-à-dire former collections de tous les titres qui proviennent d'un corps, d'une établissement, d'une famille ou d'un individu."<sup>18</sup>

14 E. Kelelaar, "Muller, Feith and Fruin," *Archives et bibliothèque de Belgique/Anchief-en bibliothekwezen in Belgic* 57 (1987), pp. 255–268. Reprinted in E. Kelelaar, *The Archival Image. Collected Essays* (Hilversum: Verloren), 1997. A collection of 10 handwritten notebooks, preserved in the library of the National Archives at the Hague, Netherland, are witnesses of Muller's attending lessons in civil and canonical law, palergraphy, decorative arts, diplomatics, and classement des archives; the teacher for the latter course was M. De Montaiglon.

15 Mario D. Fenyo, "The Record Group Concept: A Critique," *American Archivist* 29, no. 2 (1966), pp. 229–239. Quoted with critical intent by Duchein in "The Concept of the Archival Fonds."

16 Johannes Papritz, *Archivwissenschaft*; Adolf Brenneke, *Archivwissenschaft*; Elio Lodolini, *Lineamenti della storia dell'archivistica Italiana* (Roma, 1991). Revised as *Storia dell'archivistica italiana* (Milano, 2001); Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development."

17 Johannes Papritz, *Archivwissenschaft*, p 9. E. Wiersum, "Het herkomstbeginsel," in J. Cuvelier and L. Stainier (eds.), *Actes [du] Congrès International des Archivistes et Bibliothécaires 1910* (Bruxelles, 1912), pp. 135–143. Laurence D. Geller, "Joseph Cuvelier, Belgian Archival Education and the First International Congress of Archivists, Brussels, 1910," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 26–34.

18 Collect together the various documents in fonds, that is to say, form collections of all deeds (documents) originating from a body, from an institution, from a family or from an individual. "Circulaire du 16 Avril 1841," in Henri Bordier, *Les archives de la France* (Paris, 1855), p. 51. Also Gustave Desjardins, *Les service des archives départementales* (Paris, 1890).

Before 1841, most of these “fonds” when transferred to departmental archival repositories had lost their administrative meaning and context, and been rearranged as sources of history. During its first half century since the French Revolution, the National Archives at Paris had implemented an arbitrary subject classification schema for the arrangement of both institutional and family records from the *ancien régime*, thereby mingling within these classification categories records from numerous origins and blotting out their provenance. For the departmental archives, Natalis de Wailly rejected this tradition by insisting that archival records be kept together according to their provenance. Challenged by opponents in the National Archives, de Wailly had to defend his ideas, and therefore formulated his famous brief theoretical statement. Yet within fifteen years after its introduction, Bordier, writing about French archives, asserted that *respect des fonds* was the only and right method for archival arrangement.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it may be said that this call to respect the fonds is the laurel-wreath of French archival science.<sup>20</sup>

But it must be repeated that, despite his insights, Natalis de Wailly was not the first. In many places all over Europe the method was spontaneously born as a practical solution for problems in archival arrangement. For a better understanding of these early applications of *respect des fonds*, we should recall that during most of the nineteenth century Europe archival repositories contained a very limited number of organically related fonds (archive groups), for example, the records from various bureaus of a town administration or a local state government. The archive in this sense represented a community. The post-Napoleonic administrations in many parts of Europe, both on a national and local level, assigned to their newly nominated archivists (in the modern sense, as dedicated keepers of historical records) the task of bringing together in one place valuable documents of defunct administrations, partly because of the rights these records might contain, but mostly because of their value as historical sources.<sup>21</sup> In this historical context, it is not easy to make a

19 Henri Bordier, *Les archives de France*, p. 51.

20 Johannes Papritz, “Neuzeitliche Methoden,” p. 15. More modest is Jean Favier, *Les archives* (Paris, 1959), (Que sais-je?): «Énoncé dès 1841, le principe du respect des fonds n’a pas connu jusqu’à une date récente de développements théoriques en France. C’est aux Italiens, aux Allemands et aux Hollandais, que revient le mérite d’en avoir exposé la nature et les conséquences».

21 “Het archiefwezen in Europa omstreeks 1800 / Les Archives en Europe vers 1800. De lezingen ter gelegenheid van de gelijknamige studiedag in het Algemeen Rijksarchief te Brussel op 24 oktober 1996 / Les communications présentées dans le cadre de la journée d’études du même nom aux Archives générales du Royaume, Bruxelles le 24 octobre 1996,” *Miscellanea Archivistica Studia* 103 (Brussel-Bruxelles 1998). See also the “Introduction” to the reprint of the English version of the *Manual*. This section is based on T.H.P.M. Thomassen, “Van evenement naar structuur: ordenen en beschrijven in de eeuw voor de Handleiding”, in P.J. Horsman, F.C.J. Ketelaar en T.H.P.M. Thomassen (eds.), *Tekst en Context van de Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archieven* (Hilversum, 1998), pp. XXI–LXXVII.

clear distinction between an archives as a repository and an archives as a *fonds d'archives* – it would not even make sense to try. A whole repository could be (and was) considered to be one archive (unconsciously a Derridaian metaphor of the archive is forced upon us), and eventually divided into smaller groupings according to the structure of the administration.

For most (if not all) archivists, a conceptual difference between archives and fonds did not exist, or at least was not apparent to them. In the mid-nineteenth century, Francesco Bonaini – said to be father of the *metodo storico*, the Italian equivalent of the principle of provenance – grouped the records in the central archive in Florence (by then still housed in their original physical and administrative context, the Palazzo Degli Uffici) along the lines of the political and administrative history of Tuscany. He basically respected the fonds in our modern sense, but occasionally disrespected them in those cases where the archival structure did not fit into his image of history.<sup>22</sup> He and his mid-nineteenth-century colleagues recognized explicitly that the archives ideally would (or should) mirror the originating administrative structure. So, too, did P.J. Vermeulen, Muller's predecessor in the provincial archives at Utrecht in the Netherlands, writing in 1850 that, in the catalogue of an archive, there should be an outline (Vermeulen used the Dutch word for "sketch") of the history and structure of past administrations.<sup>23</sup> But reality did not always coincide with the ideal, and consequently the inventories of those early days do not exactly meet the post-Manual requirements of respecting the fonds. As mentioned above, one reason for this ambivalence was that archivists then could not see a firm dichotomy between an archive and a fonds.

### **The Manual and the Internationalization of the Concept of the Fonds**

One of the important achievements of the Dutch Manual was to remove this ambivalence and articulate a clear theoretical distinction between a fonds ("archieff") and archive, the latter in both senses of the repository or depot, and of the archive of a community. In the Manual, the notion of the fonds, as the

22 Stefano Vitali, "L'archivista e l'architetto: Bonaini, Guasti, Bongi e il problema dell'ordinamento degli Archivi di Stato Toscani," in Ministero dei beni culturali, direzione centrale degli archivi, *Atti della conferenza Salvatore Bongi nella cultura dell' 800: archivistica, storiografie, bibliologia. Lucca 31 gennaio – 4 febbraio 2000* (Roma, 2002). Stefano Vitali kindly sent me the full text of his paper. For more on Bonaini see E. Lodolini, *Storia dell'archivistica italiana*. The *metodo storico* attributed to Bonaini was quite different from what is now understood and laid down in Italian archival legislation. Upon Lodolini's authority, Terry Eastwood pays too much honour to Bonaini.

23 Vermeulen in a (printed) report to the provincial council. He repeated the statement in his 1878 catalogue (inventory) of the provincial archives. Reprinted in Horsman en Sigmond, *Het Land van Herkomst*. Muller, who after all did not find his predecessor extremely bright, complained in 1878 that in reality he couldn't find his way in the repositories. (Introduction to the reprint of the English version of the Manual forthcoming from the SAA.)



whole of records created by an administrative body or an individual, rather than from a community of shared interests, comes basically from Muller, possibly remembering his lessons at the *École des Chartes*.<sup>24</sup> While his thinking had certainly evolved since the 1870s, the resemblance between his formulation in the *Manual* and the French concept of the fonds is too strong to be coincidental.

The concept as articulated in the *Manual* did not spring full-blown in the late 1890s, but reflected intense discussions in the previous two decades in the Netherlands, especially after the minister of the interior tried to impose rules for the inventorying the various state archives.<sup>25</sup> The chief of the department for museums, archives, and archeology at the ministry, Victor de Stuers, an extraordinary personality, asked Muller and one other state archivist, Th.H.F. van Riemsdijk, for advice. In the following discussion, particularly in the correspondence between both archivists, Muller honed his ideas of how to arrange an archive respecting the fonds it contained. To a certain sense, this included as well the idea of respecting original order, applied primarily to respecting a fonds, and not so much the internal order of the fonds.

As early (or as late) as 1879, the Dutch minister of the interior had planned to adapt the Belgian archival instruction – which in turn was the same as the French one drafted by Natalis de Wailly. This envisioned having in a state archive the individual fonds clearly separated and then, within each fonds, the order of the items arranged according to their nature, alphabetically, geographically, or chronologically. But in 1879 Muller was just at the very beginning of his career, and did not have extensive practical experience. By then he was basically dealing with the inherited arrangement from his predecessor, dominantly based on the form of materials. Yet working with complex medieval fonds sharpened Muller's awareness of the importance of the original order, just as Van Riemsdijk would discover working in the National Archives with the complex archives of the old States General (the supreme Dutch governing body, 1576–1795). For Van Riemsdijk's work, the original physical arrangement as established by the original registry was the key defining criteria, whereas Muller's notion of original order was rather more conceptual than physical. The fonds from which Muller derived most of his experience were less structured, not formed by a formal registry as were the archives which

24 The *Manual* mentions *respect des fonds* explicitly in the explanation to section 8. Even if this section had been written by Feith, there is no need to doubt that Muller's ideas are behind it. It would be worthwhile to investigate the role of the *École des Chartes* in the dissemination of *respect des fonds*. See note 22 above about Lupi from Pisa, who after a visit to Paris, changed his opinion about Bonaini's Florentine system of arrangement: Cesare Lupi, *Gli archivi e le scuole paleografiche in Fancia e in Italia* (Pisa, 1875).

25 Most of this paragraph is based on the introduction to the reprint of the English version of the *Manual*. Protagonists in the discussion were, apart from Muller, Th.H.F. van Riemsdijk, and Victor de Stuers, chief at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Van Riemsdijk, who was about the same age as Muller, former state archivist in Gelderland, was nominated deputy national archivist in The Hague in 1879, to become national archivist in 1887.

Van Riemsdijk had analyzed. Muller, unlike Van Riemsdijk, actually produced inventories in which his ideas were demonstrated, and these were noticed by the minister, who offered one of them as an example for other archivists.<sup>26</sup> Muller also had strategic positioning on his side, for as of 1891 he could use the Society of Archivists in the Netherlands as a platform for theoretical discussion, getting around the yearly meeting of the state archivists chaired by Van Riemsdijk. And from those discussions in the bosom of the Society sprang the Manual, reflecting essentially Muller's thinking. His definition of a fonds, with which the Manual opens, slightly modified according the minister's wish, became for more than a century a beacon for Dutch archivists. Since its publication in 1898 the book, represented by its authors – in particular Fruin and Muller – gradually indoctrinated archival thinking in the Netherlands.

International dissemination of the ideas of the Dutch Manual – perhaps an early archival globalization – soon began with its translations in German (1905), Italian (1908), and French (1910), and, above all, in Brussels in 1910 at the International Congress, the first world-wide gathering of librarians and archivists. There Muller was president of the archives section, and his well-known opinions dominated the debate.<sup>27</sup> The city archivist of Rotterdam, E. Wiersum, accordingly defined for the Congress the *Provenienz Prinzip*, the Principle of Provenance, using Muller's wording from 1908: "The method of archive organization by which each archival document has to be brought to the archive (fonds) to which it belongs, and within that archive to the series to which it belonged at the time the archive was still a living organism."<sup>28</sup> This definition is essentially a condensed summary of the most important sections of the Dutch Manual, including respect for the original order, an extension to the primitive *respect des fonds* with intellectual roots both in Prussia, the Dutch province of Utrecht (Muller's home base), and possibly Tuscany.<sup>29</sup> Unanimous acceptance (or was it merely not rejecting?) of this Dutch interpretation of the principle at the Brussels Congress had the unintended (and

26 Notably Muller's catalogue of the Chapter of St. Peter, Utrecht, from 1886 (*Catalogus van het archief van het kapittel van Sint Pieter*). The introduction to the inventory contains the first printed expression of Muller's ideas, abstracting from his work on the complex, mostly medieval fonds.

27 *Actes [du] Congrès Internationales Archivistes et Bibliothécaires 1910*; Lawrence Geller, "Joseph Cuvelier," p. 26: "Also [present] was the redoubtable Dr. Samuel Muller ... whose well-known opinions were voiced many times at Brussels."

28 It is not easy to translate the original Dutch wordings of the definition, largely because of the basically nineteenth-century terms Muller used. Purposely I translated "archieff" by "archive," leaving it open to the reader to replace this term by "fonds." Wiersum's report is published in Dutch.

29 The origin of intellectual relationships between various national traditions has rarely been the subject of research. A partial attempt was a four-day seminar in Florence to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State Archives of Florence. Proceedings forthcoming.

undesirable) effect of dogmatizing the Manual, where a no doubt sound opinion gradually became a rigid doctrine.<sup>30</sup>

The question remains unanswered: to what extent in 1910 did each representative at the international congress in Brussels understand the same thing? Wiersum's report, for example, had been closer to the original French meaning of the *respect des fonds* than the definition that was included in the Congress' conclusions. As Papritz's 1964 report demonstrated, despite the 1910 consensus on both the definition of *respect des fonds* and its application, the existing local variations in place before this internationalization never died out, and this regionalism, combined with possible misinterpretations of what was said or understood at the Congress, would hamper, and still hampers, real and full agreement between archivists from different traditions.

### The Fonds Revisited in the 1970s

From these origins, and soon doctrinaire assumptions about *respect des fonds*, the concept was not revisited in a major way until the 1970s. And this revision did not take place in Europe, but first in North-America – in Canada to be more precise. The trigger once again was a Frenchman explaining what a fonds was and how it should be respected. This key writer was Michel Duchein, whose 1977 article on the concept of the fonds, translated into English in 1983, initiated North American thinking on the fonds. It brought about (combined with other factors), a re-discovery of provenance and the fonds, and eventually led Canadian archivists both to abandon the record group concept and then to lead the world internationally in developing archival descriptive standards based on the fonds concept.<sup>31</sup>

With his feet firmly in the French pragmatic archival tradition Duchein did not ascribe much importance to the concept of original order, even if he agreed that it would have been the logical consequence of De Wailly's reasoning. This French tradition is reflected in the writing of another French theorist, Robert-Henry Bautier, who argued that respecting the original order primarily applied in those countries where a registry is common practice, where documents have been placed within a records classification schema during their operational life. If that placement by classification has been disturbed before

30 The Congress proceedings contain the French definition of the Principle (p. 633): «Une méthode de classement d'archives, d'après laquelle chaque document est placé dans la collection et dans la série de cette collection, auxquelles il appartenait quand cette collection était un organisme vivant.» Note the use of the word "collection," instead of "fonds," neglected in the translation of Duchein's article (see note 31).

31 Michel Duchein, «Le respect des fonds en archivistique : principe théoriques et problèmes pratiques,» *Gazette des Archives* 97 (1977), pp. 71–96. Translated as "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respects des Fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 64–82.

transfer to the archives, Bautier asserted that it should be restored, but “le principe du respect de l’ordre primitif équivaut souvent dans les autres pays à une reconstruction artificielle.”<sup>32</sup> Because in France a registry tradition did and does not exist, the French archival tradition considers respect for the original order to be of secondary importance, with prime importance given instead to respecting the fonds as a whole. Thus, for the French and those following them, provenance came to mean reflecting an external administrative structure or office of origin, much more than an internal record-keeping system or office functionality. (This emphasis reflects as well the different opinions about original order in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century between Muller and Van Riemsdijk, discussed before. The latter aiming to restore the original physical arrangement as it had existed in the established registry, and the former – not having such well organized and registry-based administrations in mind, and rejecting the results his predecessor had left – seeing little merit in some original physical order, and relying instead on an administrative structure reflecting the originating organization as a whole.)

The key in the French tradition for defining a fonds is connecting records to their creating body. Advocates admitted, however, that there were no unambiguous criteria for doing so.<sup>33</sup> Even Duchein recognized that these criteria are often arbitrary. Duchein distinguishes both a maximalist and a minimalist approach. The maximalist approach he attributes to Jenkinson (the archives group): the minimalist approach to Schellenberg (the record group). As well, Duchein wrestles with the same kind of difficulties in establishing a fixed fonds in light of complex, ever-changing modern administrative entities, with open-ended series of records. Peter Scott did the same thing in Australia in 1966, and would explore these administrative complexities and their archival implications more deeply in the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> These administrative realities led Scott to the conclusion that archivists should abandon the record group or fonds. By contrast, Duchein clings to the fonds concept, formulating pragmatic guidelines on how to deal with specific situations of administrative complexity. Duchein saw Scott’s solution as merely an extreme minimalist approach, and a severe violation of the concept of the fonds. Australian archival writer Colin Smith in turn reproaches Duchein for failing to understand

32 But in many countries the principle of respecting the original order often equals an artificial reconstruction. Robert-Henri Bautier, «La phase cruciale de l’histoire des archives», *Archivum* XVIII (1968), p. 146. Duchein (1977) says the same, and Christine Nougaret repeats it in «Classement et description : des principes à la pratique», in Jean Favier et Danièle Neirinck (dir.), *La pratique archivistique française* (Paris, 1993).

33 Georg Enders, *Archivverwaltungslehre*, p. 93.

34 Peter J. Scott, “The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment,” *American Archivist* 29 (1966), pp. 493–504. An overview of Scott’s ideas (including his *American Archivist* article) is in Peter Biskop et al. (eds.), *Debates and Discourses. Selected Australian Writings on Archival Theory 1951–1990* (Canberra, 1995).

what Scott meant with a series, interpreting it as collections of documents forming a chronological and logical set, whatever their origin.<sup>35</sup> While that may be true, in fairness it must be recognized that when Duchein wrote his original article in *Gazette des archives* in 1977, Scott's series of five articles on administrative change in *Archives and Manuscripts* had yet to be published. Duchein based his opinion on Scott solely on the 1966 article on abandoning the record group in the *American Archivist*.

By the seventies, then, when Duchein wrote his article and Scott analyzed Australian organizational change, the difficulty of applying the principle of *respect des fonds* to modern archives of complex administrations and to open-ended fonds was becoming apparent in many countries. The lack of defunct administrations and closed registries or series created major problems. Recall that Muller's notes from the *École des Chartes* refer to "respecter les fonds **anciens**" (emphasis added). And in France, at least initially, the principle, in its pragmatic origins, applied to closed fonds – those created by organizations of the *ancien régime* which by definition ended in 1789. Neither Natalis de Wailly nor Muller, Feith and Fruin, nor even the Prussians, when formulating their instructions, had current archives in mind! Most likely they could not even conceive the kinds of complex archival materials that twentieth-century organizations would produce, those with which, for instance, Theodore Schellenberg had to deal. Even Henri Bordier, writing enthusiastically in 1855 about *respect de fonds*, drew the same conclusion regarding modern fonds: "Il y a toute une catégorie de fonds pour laquelle une ordre logique ouvre une grave difficulté: ce sont les fonds de papiers modernes, ceux qui proviennent, non pas de cours ou de communautés détruites, mais de corps ou d'établissements encore existants, et qui grossissent les archives par versements périodiques." In the copy in the library of the Netherlands National Archives this sentence is underlined.<sup>36</sup>

As a matter of daily practice in France pragmatism reigns in respecting the fonds, wrote Christine Nougaret in the French archival manual.<sup>37</sup> And Duchein, in his own pragmatism, even expresses some sympathy for the North American record group. Like Schellenberg and others who tried to create physically a kind of logical grouping for records created by both defunct and still-operating organizations – with due regards for provenance – Duchein attempted to establish rules for defining a fonds as close to the ideal as possi-

35 Colin Smith, "A Case for Abandonment of 'Respect'," *Archives and Manuscripts* 15 (1986), pp. 154–168.

36 There is one category of fonds for which a logical order gives origin to a serious difficulty: that is the fonds of modern documents, coming not from abolished bodies, but from still functioning bodies, that enlarge archives by regular transfers. Henri Bordier, *Archives de la France*, p. 53 (translation by Peter Horsman).

37 «Dans les fait, le pragmatisme règne». Christine Nougaret, «Classement et description : des principes à la pratique», p. 138.

ble, and applicable in any situation.<sup>38</sup> That, in turn, does not look far from what Brenneke had in mind for organizations which lacked a nearly-perfect registry system. Indeed, examining their concepts of the fonds closely, the supposed differences between Brenneke and Duchein do not seem very large.<sup>39</sup> And since it was through Ernst Posner – German-born and Berlin-trained emigré to the United States before World War II – that Brenneke’s ideas influenced Schellenberg in his classic formulations, Duchein’s concept of the fonds does not, in turn, look too different from the North American concept of the record group, as a physical entity.<sup>40</sup> And so a circle closes.

It is important to remember that the Principle of Provenance, with its related concept of the fonds, was imported to North America from Europe, without the sort of preceding developments European countries experienced in the nineteenth century. While a few American archivists, like Waldo Leland and Van Laer, brought back the idea with them from the Brussels Congress in 1910, the decisive role would be played by Ernst Posner and Theodore Schellenberg in the 1940s. As Posner reflected, “[i]n the field of records arrangement, we owe to the National Archives the concept of the record group, a pragmatic and hence enormously useful refinement of the French *respect des fonds*. It has made this time honored tool applicable to the bulky records of the great agencies of modern times ...”<sup>41</sup> One cannot blame the Americans for bending the principle of *respect des fonds* to cope with the situation at the National Archives in Washington of complex masses of modern records, rather than interpreting the principle strictly as Muller may have intended.

### The Deconstruction of the Fonds

The similarity between Brenneke, Schellenberg, and Duchein relates primarily to the external dimensions of the fonds. All three theorists take some freedom in establishing the borders of their highest level groupings, applying ambiguous criteria and their own judgment as they do so. In logically grouping records together into a physical “collection,” one may even observe some

38 Schellenberg’s notion of the record group, its relationships, and uses is articulated succinctly in *National Archives Information Circular 15: The Control of Records at the Record Group Level* (Washington, 1950) and later in T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives* (Melbourne, 1956). Duchein, “Concept of the Fonds,” *passim*.

39 Brenneke would probably not fully agree.

40 Angelika Menne-Haritz, “Appraisal or Selection. Can a Content Oriented Appraisal be Harmonized with the Principle of Provenance?” in Kerstin Abukhanfusa and Jan Sydbeck, (eds.), *The Principle of Provenance. Report from the First Stockholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance, 2–3 September, 1993* (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 103–131, in particular p. 112. Wolfgang A. Momsen, “Ernst Posner, Mittel zwischen deutschem und amerikanischem Archivwesen,” *Der Archivar* 20 (1967), pp. 217–230.

41 Ernst Posner, “The National Archives and the Archival Theorist,” in Ken Munden (ed.), *Archives and the Public Interest; Selected Essays* (Washington, 1967).

similarity in the thinking of Brenneke and Scott. Brenneke's reluctance to respect the original order at any price influenced his definition of the fonds, both in its external and internal structure.<sup>42</sup> One of his optional criteria for establishing his *Archivkörper* (literally an archive body, or better archive group, without necessarily Jenkinson's connotation) is what he called *Sachgemeinschaft*, which means a community of subjects or cases. An archivist can thus create an *Archivkörper* based on records being derived from the same function, or program, or activity, and this, to some extent at least, independent of possible changes in the administrative structure of the organisations that carried out the function, or program, or activity. Brenneke thus shattered the borders of the traditional fonds as being too narrow for him, as in fact Duchein did implicitly by the logic of his ambiguous rules, and the National Archives at Washington did by its practical needs to accommodate custody of portions of open-ended series from continuing complex administrations. (Originally, "custody" was not one of the key motives behind respecting the fonds, nor even one of its defining characteristics.)

Brenneke, Schellenberg, and Duchein, as before them Muller and his contemporaries, all have in mind the notion of bringing the records together physically, to create an observable whole, something to manage, to shelve – to have in custody. And whether based on a physically-visible classification according to an pre-existing registry, or on a logical or self-designed one, the arrangement within the fonds was viewed as a physical one as well. Muller called his archival constructs an "archieff," Jenkinson an "archives group," Duchein a "fonds," Brenneke an "*Archivkörper*," and Schellenberg a "record group." But only rarely did their constructs satisfy the requirements of the theoretically ideal fonds, as articulated in any of the existing definitions. Such an ideal fonds is a whole is even **the** whole, the beautiful whole, complete in itself. But how many of such fonds have survived over time? And how many organizations meet all of the requirements set by Duchein to justify the creation of a distinguishable fonds?

Australian Peter Scott stepped back, and down, from the fonds level, establishing the series as his highest level archival construct. Scott still aimed for a physical gathering which would fall together with a conceptual or logical grouping – a grouping no longer based on an organizational structure but on functions manifested through record-keeping systems. However, Scott added an important conceptual element by stressing the power of description, indeed, by eventually preferring description to arrangement. I will return to this point below.

42 Before being called to Berlin, Brenneke worked with Max Bär, archivist at Danzig (now Gdansk). Bär was extremely pragmatic. Basically, he respected the fonds, but not being able to restore fully the original structure of the archive, he developed a kind of "quick-and-dirty" method. See Leesch's biography of Brenneke in the introduction to *Archivwissenschaft*; also Max Bär, *Leitfaden für Archivbenutzer* (Leipzig, 1896).

Canadian Terry Cook took the next logical step after the above evolution from Duchein to Scott, and conceptualized the fonds itself.<sup>43</sup> Cook's fonds is not primarily a physical thing anymore, to construct or reconstruct by (physical) arrangement, but a set of relationships between records, between records and records creators, between records and business processes: a multiple and dynamic series of interconnected relationships between records and their context. All of these relationships might well have been changed over time – as both Scott and Duchein pointed out, and Muller's generation knew very well. But for Cook, these relationships do not have to be made visible, explicit, actual, by a physical grouping of records and subsequent arrangement – a custodial approach – but rather primarily through description, independent of the physical location and arrangement of the documents – a non-custodial approach. With Cook the fonds ceases to exist as a physical entity.<sup>44</sup>

Cook wrote his landmark essay at the dawn of archival databases and the opening of the internet for archives. He could (and did) envision methods and techniques for description that were inconceivable for Scott, who designed description tools at the very heart of the series system; but he was still constrained by a paper technology. A few years later, in his report for the ICA Congress in Beijing in 1996, Cook expressed his vision of the rediscovery of provenance in Canada, insofar as this related to arrangement and description, as an “initiative to develop a system of descriptive standards that replaces Schellenberg's record group with the provenance-centred concept of the archival *fonds*; structures description in a general-to-specific, multi-level, multi-media relationship for all record entities within a single *fonds*; and asserts the need to protect provenance further through authority files to illuminate multiple-creator relationships – as well as codifying precise rules for describing archives within such a recorded contextualized universe.”<sup>45</sup>

What is past is prologue indeed: Cook's reconstructing of the fonds concep-

43 Terry Cook, “The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era,” in Terry Eastwood (ed.), *The Archival Fonds*, pp. 31–85.

44 Paradoxically – at least so it seems to me – after the publication of Cook's essay, Canadian archivists abandoned the record group and adopted the fonds as the highest level of grouping, as would the ICA ad-hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards. Where Cook basically defined the fonds as a kind of virtual reality, both *RAD* and *ISAD* still see it as a physical gathering of records, following Duchein's notion rather than Cook's thinking. Therefore such a fonds is closer to the record group than it pretends to be.

45 Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 17–63 reprinted in P.J. Horsman, F.C.J. Ketelaar, en T.H.P.M. Thomassen (eds.), *Naar een nieuw paradigma in de archivistiek* ('s-Gravenhage, 1999), pp. 29–67. The quotation is taken from the reprint, p. 55. It should be noted that the quotation only relates to Cook's views of arrangement and description: his post-custodial or postmodern rediscovery of provenance is actually primarily focussed on reinventing appraisal through his articulation of a theory, strategy, and methodology called “macro-appraisal.”



tually by description, rather than physically by arrangement, had in fact been anticipated by discussions at the Brussels Congress of 1910. In the debate following the reports, the German archivist, Gustav Wolf, put forward an objection that restoring the original order would disturb the now-existing order, which might have acquired a meaning in itself – this quite apart from the fact that it would often be legally impossible to bring scattered records together in one archive. As a possible solution, the assembled archivists suggested conceptual description rather than physical arrangement, pointing to an example of the archives at Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) where the existing physical order was kept as it was when the records arrived at the archives, with an indication added to the catalogue cards concerning the original provenance of the records.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, on a conceptual level, a fonds – if we still want to maintain the construct, however, what follows applies equally to any level, including the series – is more than one discrete grouping of records in one discrete arrangement. It is even more than one set of relationships. Conceptually, a fonds can be expressed almost as a mathematical formula:

A fonds (F) is a any set of relationships ( $r_1, r_2, r_3, \text{etc.}$ ), where a record ( $a_1, a_2, a_3, \text{etc.}$ ) is an element in any of the identified (and non-identified) relationships. Evidently, a record can be part of two or more relationships, and two or more fonds.

Some relationships bind records mutually, into what Luciana Duranti has termed the *archival bond*.<sup>47</sup> Most relationships, however, link records with their context of creation and contemporary use, with the number of relationships being virtually unlimited. Archival description is selecting essential relationships and describing them. Analysis of these relationships, rather than arrangement, precedes description.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the description becomes the (virtual) arrangement.

### The Meaning of Order

The new virtual fonds of multiple relationships, becoming so conceptual, so

<sup>46</sup> *Actes du Congrès de Bruxelles*, p. 190.

<sup>47</sup> Luciana Duranti, “The Archival Bond,” *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11, nos. 3–4 (1997), pp. 213–18. The concept is based on the *vincolo archivistica*, see Giorgio Cencetti, “Il fondamento teorico ella dottrina archivistica,” *Archivi* VI (1939), pp. 7–13 reprinted in Giorgio Cencetti, *Scritti archivistici* (Roma, 1970).

<sup>48</sup> A particular example of a type of relationship is given by Paul Druid. In the reading room of an archives one user is smelling documents, sometimes making a few notes without reading the document. It appears that the man is investigating the spread of cholera; he knows that letters coming from infected places were treated with vinegar by contemporaries before they opened them. John Seely Brown and Paul Druid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston, 2000).

fluid, so dynamic, does not serve any custodial purposes, unlike the American record group, and even Scott's series. On the other hand the older physical groupings and arrangements of records do not necessarily reflect any valid reality of organizational structure or functional activity, often considered to be essential for understanding. To what purpose at all, then, does the concept of the fonds serve? And reading what Cook says about description, is any kind of arrangement in a post-custodial era then superfluous? And what should archivists do about respecting or disrespecting previous arrangements?

Several responses may be made here. First, post-custodial should not mean non-custodial. Archivists are after all (also) custodians. That is what the first generations understood all too well. They brought together dispersed archives threatened with loss and destruction, arranged them, described them, and made them available for research. The archive preserved physically the integrity of the fonds. The whole first chapter of the Dutch Manual focuses on creating the archive of a community by bringing under custody those records (or fonds) reflecting its history. "Custody is the 'differentia' between the plain document and the archive," Jenkinson summarized in 1947.<sup>49</sup> That custody implied a physical arrangement for these archival pioneers must be understood within the context of nineteenth-century archival methodologies, including registry-based classification.

Second, every type of order, including physical ones, assigns meanings to the archive. It allows users to interpret how records should and can be understood, or how they were interpreted before, sometimes how they may or may not have been made available.<sup>50</sup> Visualization or reconstruction of previous arrangements allows users to discover past patterns of communication and decision making – but at the same time the opposite may be true as well. The arrangement which is closest to the original operational transactions and to the creator's functionality is probably the most genuine and meaningful: higher-level arrangements, such archival constructs like the fonds and group, perhaps less so.<sup>51</sup> A file or a volume may often clarify more about the creator's purposes, intentions, and context, than what archivists call a series, let alone a fonds. Such a functional order reveals how the records were created by and

49 Hillary Jenkinson, "The English Archivist: A New Profession," in *Selected Writings* (Gloucester, 1980), p. 241. For Jenkinson's role in introducing the respect des fonds at the PRO, see Michael Roper, "The Development of the Principle of Provenance and Respect for Original Order in the Public Records Office," in Barbara L. Craig (ed.), *The Archival Imagination. Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1993), pp. 134–153.

50 Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: the Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001), pp. 131–141, with many references. For the value of physical order, see Peter Horsman, "Dirty Hands. A New Perspective on the Original Order," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27, no. 1 (1999), pp. 42–53.

51 Basically, low-level constructs such as files are archival constructs as well, even if they may not have been constructed by archivists. The difference between these constructs and high-level constructs is a gradual one.

bound to the business process, and that order should therefore be preserved. This understanding of original order is reflected in section 22 of the Dutch Manual, which clearly states that no volume or bundle should be disturbed without rendering an account of its original meaning. Admittedly previous sections, notably 17 and 18, discussed series arrangement; and section 16 provides direction for the fonds level, although leaving much to the discretion of the archivist – much more than Brenneke thought. But these archival interventions in the arrangement and description process themselves become part of the history of the record. For example, a folder, wrapped and closed one hundred years ago, tells us that the record involved has never been consulted since then. Unwrapping the record even for description is already a disturbance, and an altering of the meaning of the record within its broader context of use. Respecting such previous orders means also respecting and documenting their dynamics, their changes. Every new arrangement obscures a previous one, as Gustav Wolf observed in 1910, and the archivist should document these changes as they occur.<sup>52</sup>

One example will serve to elucidate the above. In the fonds of the Roman Inquisition, kept by the current Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome, documents relating to a particular case were, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (and even nowadays still are) usually grouped into files (*fascicoli*). A number of files about similar cases were bound together into volumes with parchment bindings. A careful observer may notice that several volumes have bindings that had been used before to contain other documents, apparently by destroying the original documents, putting the binding upside-down and binding other documents into it. Dozens of these re-used bindings still contain their original title: *Diversorum*. An old inventory from 1835 demonstrates that by then this series still existed. This means that the new volumes had been constructed after 1835, even if the documents within it are from the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth century.

Respecting original order is not just freezing or restoring one particular past arrangement as “the” original order. (In the case of the Inquisition archive it would even be impossible since of the whole *Diversorum* series only the bindings survived.) The authors of the Manual did not have much choice in this regard, because they lacked proper descriptive systems and methodologies. But they were certainly aware of the multiple layers of arrangement in a complex fonds. Archives originate out of actions and transactions; as well they reflect organizational change – often they are active instruments for these changes or even the means to bring those about. When around 1850 Vermeulen in Utrecht, and Bonaini in Florence, and possibly other archivists in other places, articulated in word and in action that the arrangement of an

52 Emerging post-modernist archival theories emphasize this point. As we have seen before, the issue is not new, being a part of the debate on the 1910 Congress in Brussels.

archives should reflect the organizational structures of the administration that created the records. They lived in a world of stable, definable, small-scale, or at least stabilizable organizational structures. A century later, Peter Scott concluded that such administrative stability and small-scale government were no longer the reality in Australia. As said before, he proposed that the fonds (or record group) should be abandoned, since it was predicated on assumptions about stable nineteenth-century administrative bodies that no longer existed. But perhaps his remedy was worse than the disease. He tried to stabilize organizations by focussing on their functions as expressed through the record-keeping series.

But, indeed, archives are by their very nature as dynamic as the context in which they are created and subsequently used, before and after transfer to the (historical) archives. This notion paraphrases the metaphor from section 2 of the *Dutch Manual*, which refers to the fonds as an organic whole. The continuous dynamics of archive creation and use is reflected in its multi-faceted structure or orders – or which we might call, as Cook does, the whole of identifiable and multiple relationships surrounding a record. This “organic,” internal approach to archival orders (and thus to archival description) is based on the working-world reality of business processes, organizational structures, and record-keeping activities, and this must rank above the “artificial,” arbitrary, external imposition of a constructed fonds.

Brenneke objected to section 2 because it did not fit into his ideas about development in history,<sup>53</sup> and because it was too biologically phrased. He consequently rejected the idea of respecting an order as an organic whole, that is to say, one that had grown organically out of a registry. He also rejected the French option of arranging a fonds according to a structure that would best suit users. He realized that the concept of the fonds was imposed on archivists primarily as a practical measure, and that the existence of the fonds itself did not change the long-standing practice of subject classification within the fonds that he saw as a natural extension of the rational spirit of the French Revolution. Brenneke concluded that the new French archival program of 1841 was, in spite of the concept of *respect des fonds*, not historical but mechanical.<sup>54</sup>

Acting on this conclusion, Brenneke created his own *Archivkörper* based on a subset of those relationships that he found to be most important, or rather, that in a broad sense best reflected the development of the creating administration. Schellenberg, with less philosophical objections to the Dutch phrasing, did basically the same with the record group, giving priority to

53 Brenneke was influenced by German philosophers and historians like Goethe, Herder, Droysen, and Burckhardt.

54 Gregg D. Kimball, “The Burke-Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory,” *American Archivist* 48/4 (1985), pp. 369–376; the quotation appears on p. 373.

practical custodial relationships. Even Scott acted in the same spirit, by simply abandoning the record group (and fonds) rather than respecting it. Even Duchein implicitly does so, despite the apparent magic of the French word, *fonds*, in non-French speaking countries. Duchein's fonds is not really a fonds, but a record group – just like almost all fonds in the custody of archives are just record groups or groupings of records. Of the writers under study, only Cook accepted the “organic” spirit of the Dutch definition. That led him to focus on the many theoretical problems that both the record group and fonds share vis-à-vis consistently respecting complex contexts of records creation, and to recommend the rejection of the traditional physicality of both in favour of a virtual or conceptual fonds centred on the multiple functional relationships.

### **Conclusion: Fonds Follow Structure**

That fonds follow or reflect structure (or better: that record groups follow structure, because the term “record group” actually expresses better the nature of the archivists' construct) was one of the conclusions that Johannes Papritz drew in his famous 1964 ICA survey. While Papritz was referring to archives before 1800, his statement is also reflected in how archivists deal with arranging current records, including those with open-ended fonds.<sup>55</sup>

There remains an intriguing paradox. Those theorists past and present who attack (or at least under-emphasize) the respect for original order, based on function, process, and registry in their defence of the concept of the fonds, as a body or records to preserve as a whole, in fact undermine their own defence. Not only is the fonds, as something to respect as an existing physical thing, an entity that rarely existed as an original whole, but also all too often such a reconstruction (by archivists) of a whole actually distorts the original record-keeping reality, thereby weakening provenance. In fact, the archival construct of respecting a fonds suggests (indeed, presents to users) a whole that very often never originally existed as such, in the sense of being felt, perceived, used, or managed by any one person in one place (an organization) and one time. This is true for even for the almost ideal (small, stable) fonds as may be encountered in European monasteries, families, or private business – not to mention the (large, complex, open-ended) fonds of any modern government or business organization able to survive centuries. Even if we allow the most generous maximalist interpretation of the fonds of Jenkinson's archive group – “the archives resulting from the work of an Administration which was an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently, without

<sup>55</sup> One may ask, does an open fonds really exist? Any record group may be considered to be closed at one, discrete moment, being reopened when a new record is added.

any added or external authority, with every side of any business which could normally be presented to it<sup>56</sup> – the result could still in many cases obscure the reality of how the records were created, perceived, and used within their original context of creation – which, after all, is the provenance we archivists try to protect.

For almost any fonds exhibiting a substantial size and existing across time and space, parts have been banned to attics or cellars (or even to archives!), now forgotten and left apart from daily business operations. Other parts are stored in regional, local, or even overseas sub-offices. When the organization started its business decades ago, obviously the records that were created later, and that we now observe, were not part of it. That is true for the series as well. Moreover, the vast majority (perhaps as much as 95 or 98 per cent) of what once existed has been destroyed, either by neglect, accident, political decision, or through a careful process of archival appraisal and related authorizations for destruction.

Archival methods centred on *respect des fonds*, therefore, serve custody, and the convenience of the archivist in managing collections in tidy and well-defined groupings. They do not necessarily serve users or researchers. Of course archivists pretend – and they may actually believe – that their own administrative convenience also best serves users by protecting provenance. The user, however, has often been seriously misled by archivists and their fonds. The archival methods of arrangement and description, based on *respect des fonds*, present to the user a monolithic “grouping” of records that in reality never existed at any one point in time, outside the archives. Provenance is thereby undermined: the conceptual whole based on the functioning of business processes has been obscured by the physical remnant that survives as the archival fonds.

Perhaps, then, too much has been claimed for the concept of the archival fonds over 150 years of theoretical debate. What started as a pragmatic construct became canonized with the Dutch Manual and its subsequent endorsement at the Brussels Congress in 1910. From then on, the conceptualization of the fonds became oversized, metaphysical, and doctrinaire. Let us downsize the concept. I suggest a rehabilitation of the “record group” – whatever name we may attach to it, including *archieef* or *fonds* – as a custodial construct, nothing less and little more. Such a record group would basically be the result of a series of record-keeping activities and archival interventions (including appraisal and destruction decisions) – an archival construct with meanings as such in reflecting archival decision making, but no longer the kind of holy grail that archivists have seen as the final goal of their quest. If any principle should govern archival theory, it is not the *fonds*, but rather the

56 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, new and rev. ed. (London, 1937), p. 101.

visualisation through description of functional structures, both internal and external: archival narratives about those multiple relationships of creation and use so that researchers may truly understand records from the past. If that is called the principle of (virtual) provenance, I shall not object, for it is the best continuation of the archival tradition of respecting the context of records.