Exhibition Review Article

Medieval Archive meets the Post-modern World: The Inaugural Exhibition of the Archive of the Crown of Aragon, Barcelona, Spain


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Wander through the Barri Gòtic (or Gothic Quarter) in the heart of medieval Barcelona and you will find a tranquil courtyard opening onto the Plaça del Rei, on one side, and onto Carrer dels Comtes de Barcelona, the street bordering the Cathedral, on the other. In one corner a short ramp leads to a modern glass door bearing letters so familiar to Canadian archivists: ACA. As you approach, the door slides open and, once inside, you find an exhibition celebrating almost 700 years of a different ACA – the Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó in Catalan, the Archivo de la Corona de Aragón in Spanish, the Archive of the Crown of Aragon in English. Here, in state-of-the-art environmental conditions, is a quiet retreat from the bustle of the big city, a space where the medieval archive meets the postmodern world.

This inaugural exhibition, opened in January 2007, occupies the newly renovated space in the Palace of the Viceroy, which was home to the Archive from 1858 to 1993. Now under the Directorate General of Books, Archives and Libraries within Spain’s Ministry of Culture, the Archive of the Crown of Aragon was created in 1318 by King Jaume II as the Royal Archives (Archivo Real). Housed in the Royal Palace, just across the square, it was considered strictly the property of the monarch for more than four hundred years. When cracks in its walls forced a move to the nearby Palace of the General County Council of Catalonia (Palau de la Diputació del General de Catalunya) in 1770, the Archive was reorganized and renamed, the Archive of the Crown of Aragon. Less than a century later, in 1858, space requirements necessitated
yet another move to the Palau del Lloctinent (Palace of the Viceroy). More recently, in the wake of Barcelona’s “facelift” for the 1992 Olympics, the Archive moved to new, modern headquarters where the reading room and collection are now open to the public.

The title panel of the exhibition proudly proclaims that the archives “have been looked after by sixty generations of archivists” – a formidable achievement and an impressive acknowledgement. Strangely familiar to a Canadian visitor used to seeing captions in both English and French (the order depending on the province), is the bilingual format of the captions, in Catalan and Spanish, bringing to the fore, in overtly linguistic forms, the longstanding issues and political tensions of collective memory and national identity in this part of Spain. Proceeding down, around, and up an island of eight large, glass-covered cases, arranged side-by-side the length of the room, the exhibition unfolds in clearly delineated sections: “The Functions of the Archive” (three cases); “The Archive as a Museum” (six cases); “The Archive for General History” (three cases), and “The Archive for Private History” (four cases). There are also eight wall panels and two DVD terminals with touch-screen controls. Dominating the far wall is a black-on-yellow banner bearing the seal of the Archive. In a small adjacent room with two rows of theatre-style seats, a ten-minute video plays continuously on a flat-screen monitor.

If the Archive is old and the documents are historical, the presentation is contemporary and the interpretation cutting-edge. One wall panel points out how, in the eighteenth century, when the Archive went from closed premises to public institution...

... [civil servants] changed the former organization of the Archive. They grouped the material (records, volumes, sheathes of parchments, and bundles of notebooks and loose papers), and classified them by kingdoms. They believed that this would make things clearer. And perhaps it did, although they changed the original structure and relationship of the archive contents. To this day, the attentive eye can still see documentation that had belonged to the Templars (1307), to the Sicilian estate of the Alagona family (1396), the monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses and Santa Maria de l’Estany (1610).

The admission that archivists in the eighteenth century “changed the original structure and relationship of the archive contents” – believing “that this would make things clearer” – surely confirms that the way we do things is historically situated, and that there is no “right” way to define and organize archives. The Canadian archival community’s questioning of total archives and the

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1 Depending upon the king/period, viceroy were termed lloctinents (Catalan) or lugartenientes (Spanish).
adoption of RAD; the integration of archives and libraries or archives and museums, and attendant musing over the competencies of the new information professional; Library and Archives Canada’s abandonment of meaningful accession numbers in favour of meaningless, random-generated numbers, its “one fonds, one archivist” approach and consequent potential loss of specialized media expertise; and, at the international level, ongoing debates over the adoption of the series system or ISAD(G), are some of the most recent manifestations of well-intentioned, sometimes visionary, sometimes misguided initiatives, which dismantle, replace, or cover over, but never completely erase, the traces of previous, historically grounded organizational, classification, and descriptive systems – to say nothing of the value-laden process of appraisal in forming the archive in the first place of what records and media are of significant or lasting importance! Selecting, forming, and describing any archive, numerous studies inside and outside the profession now show, is (and always has been) very historically contingent, depending on and reflecting their time, place, and circumstances, not some neutral or passive or value-free process.

As noted, wall and case texts are provided in Catalan and Spanish; however, for visitors who read neither language, the Archive provides a complete translation of text and caption information in attractively produced, spiral-bound booklets in separate English and French editions for consultation in the exhibition space. Prefatory remarks, resonant with Arthur Doughty’s celebrated quotation, set the larger context of the archive in society:

This room contains information on the Archives: on their history and contents. You will realise that they have had a long life and that they house an [sic] unique treasury of cultural heritage. They have been looked after by sixty generations of archivists. The exhibition you are about to visit has been prepared by the present-day archivists, in the hope that you will leave the room knowing more about the legacy, bequeathed to us by our ancestors: a legacy that we are bound to take care of and pass on.

The primary exhibition publication, available only in Catalan and Spanish, is a forty-two-page booklet, which contains the text of all the wall panels, the case introductions and captions, as well as reproductions of more than forty items in the exhibition, including items of outstanding visual appeal and historical significance from each of the exhibition’s sections. However, for the casual exhibition-goer to take away, there is a small, colour, three-fold brochure with the opening text and quotations in Catalan and Spanish, illustrated with an iconic image from an early illuminated manuscript juxtaposed with a contemporary colour photograph of the façade of the former home of the Archive in the Palace of the Viceroy. Also available in various languages is a sixteen-page souvenir booklet, again generously illustrated in full colour, which serves as a general introduction to the Archive of the Crown of Aragon,
its history, and its holdings. It describes what is – and is not – in the Archive, and contains a centrefold entitled “Organización de los Fondos,” showing the nine sections into which the documents of the Archive have been divided “in keeping with the historical periods of the archives and the arrival of documents it houses”; each section is described in greater detail in the text.

For a Canadian archivist, the bilingual Catalan-Spanish texts and captions present a familiar linguistic manifestation of national identity. This serves as a reminder of the importance, not only of original order, but also of original language. Language, like medium, represents the choice of a way to communicate. In those places – Quebec, Catalonia, Wales, Ireland, New Zealand, for example – where language represents a political statement and a badge of identity, the language of the original must be noted on all archival documentation – whether hard-copy finding aids, virtual exhibitions, or on-line descriptions. Unacknowledged translations or bilingual formats, provided by an institution for reasons of political necessity or public access, may conceal or confuse the author’s original intentions where the deliberate choice of language is an important part of the way in which the content of the record – its message – is communicated.

The Exhibition

The wall panels present an attractive combination of text and image. While particular attention is paid to the “sixty generations of archivists who have looked after the Archive,” one is clearly the Arthur Doughty of Catalan archives: Próspero de Bofarull (1777–1859). Singled out for his work “organising the parchments and registers, drawing up inventories that were exemplary by the standards of the time” and “fully integrating [the Archive] into international historiographic currents,” he served as Archivist from 1814 to 1840 and again from 1844 to 1849. When he took over the post of Archivist in 1814, he “reverted to the historic meaning of the Archive,” and embarked on the systematic transfer of the documentation of public institutions. Called “a man with a vocation, endowed with obvious intelligence and an extraordinary insight into the value of documentation,” Bofarull is said to have refused to consider archives a “tomb for ancient documents” and was dedicated to their “role as living archives, at least for Catalonia.” And, as is so familiar to archivists everywhere, he fought to secure new premises better suited to house the Archive. “After endless wranglings,” he obtained approval to move the Archive’s headquarters to the nearby Palace of the Viceroy in 1838, but “sundry difficulties delayed relocation of the documentation” for another fifteen years.

The first section of the exhibition explains “The Functions of the Archive,” noting that:
... the basic work of the archivist is to look after the material, classify it and produce
inventories to facilitate sourcing of documents. Subsequently, drilling down to lower
levels, he or she has to create indexes. Nevertheless, the most time-consuming work
of archivists are the specific searches for information or for certificates.

The three cases in the section include a selection of lists of properties, invento-
ries of parchments, royal orders, reports, charts, and guides, as well as docu-
ments relating to the lending of documents and the appointment of various
archivists. One of the most interesting of the twenty-two items is an 1844 draw-
ing of the arrangement of the material in the main room of the Archive, showing
the records and volumes placed on the top shelves, while the parchments in
bundles, are located in the lower compartments.

The brief text which introduces the section entitled “The Archive as a
Museum: Precious Objects and Curios” dismisses the “clichéd image of historic
archives as rooms stuffed with old and dusty papers” and notes that “one often
uncovers extraordinary things which are striking by virtue of their unusual form
and contents, apart from the historical importance,” and concludes, “[t]he func-
tion of the Archive is not the same as the museum, naturally, but there is no
reason why Archives cannot contain museum pieces.” Ledgers, registration
books, bound proceedings, public ordinances, and private contracts are exhibit-
ed for their leather bindings, velvet covers, silver clasps, gold-leaf embossing,
and decorative tooling. While archives have always felt uncomfortable with
three-dimensional objects, one is surely left to mourn the fate of books and
museum objects in Canadian archives over the past half century with the repeat-
ed “rationalization” of holdings, the “re-discovery” of the fonds, and the
marginalization of “collections” and single items by proponents of a narrow
view of what archives are or should be. The six cases of the section present a
selection of documents in uncommon formats and foreign languages (including
documents in Latin, Hebrew, Greek, French, German, and Arabic), scientific
and religious manuscripts, fourteenth- to seventeenth-century bindings, and
sixteenth- to nineteenth-century maps and plans. This inclusion of maps and
plans in the section on “The Archive as a Museum,” with its subtitle, “Precious
Objects and Curios,” raises the question of whether these documents are viewed
primarily as “museum objects” or whether their curio value is in addition to
their administrative (or informational or research) value.

Philosophically, and theoretically, most interesting are the two sections on
“The Archive for History.” The first, on “General History,” is presented as
material which “loses its value over the years in terms of being up to date, but
gains in value as a historic reference. Documentary deposits become ‘quarries’
of historical material, whether or not that was the intention of those who found-
ed the archives.” This recognition of the changing value and function of the
archival record is further emphasized in the statement that the parchments and
papers are “originals that have a perennial value and which each generation

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should rethink and reinterpret.” This admonition to “rethink and reinterpret” opens the archive to postmodern interrogation and circumvents the traditional search for (and belief in the possibility of) the closure of meaning. Juxtaposed with a parchment from 889, in an institution with medieval European roots, this statement is refreshingly contemporary in outlook. What follows is a selection of seventeen items from the Royal Archive, largely relating to monarchical succession and territorial expansion, dating from the twelfth to the early nineteenth century.

The second section, on “Private History,” suggests that the Archive’s “vast” accumulation of books, papers, and parchments offers “material suitable for three very different types of historical study.” First, with its rich collection of documents on the Templars, the Archive supports historical study on the history of the Order of the Temple (which was abolished in 1312). Second, texts signed by “monarchs, men of letters, scholars and politicians, both medieval and modern” constitute a strong basis for “creating a discourse on culture and writing.” Third, and least exploited, are letters, written by women – impoverished and wealthy, royal and religious, including a widow, a housekeeper, a chambermaid – or in their name (excluding sovereigns), between 1308 and 1477, which demonstrate access by women to writing during the medieval period in Spain. The exhibition includes a request to John I from the abbess and Franciscan nuns of Saint Daniel, of Barcelona, requesting two slaves in consideration for their prayers which led the Infante Martin to obtain the Kingdom of Sicily, 1392, and a petition dated ca. 1340, to Peter III from the prioress and the convent of St. Inés asking for release “from the oppression caused to them by the archdeacon of the cathedral.” Underpinning this section is the overt acknowledgement that “when searching for documentary material for history, the fact that the Archive is a royal archive is neither a conditioning nor excluding factor.” In other words, here the archival can be historical, the evidential can be informational, books can coexist with records.

The video presentation offers a visual celebration of the physicality of archival records. Opening with the gargoyle atop the Palace and ending with a model of the new facility, it offers a rich panoply of size, shape, and colour, of materials, textures, bindings, and casings; of script, illumination, and embellishment; of tears, worm holes, shelving, cabinets, enclosures. The visual presentation is mesmerizing, with nothing to distract from the allure of the physical objects – there is no voice-over, there are no texts, just atonal musical accompaniment, composed specially for the video, which juxtaposes stark contemporary sound with rich historical documents.²

² The exhibition is on-line at http://www.mcu.es/archivos/MC/ACA/index.html (accessed 29 August 2007); click on “Exposición virtual Archivo de la Corona de Aragón.” Also offered is a virtual exhibition of maps and plans, a virtual tour of the Archive, and a two-minute video of the new Archive building.
The New Archive

Three visits to the exhibition prompted me to visit the new Archive, now located in a thoroughly modern, purpose-built facility on Almogávares, easily accessible by Metro (subway) or bus, and within view of Antoni Gaudí’s masterwork, Sagrada Familia. The modern reading room with sixty-four work stations, each with a connection for laptop computers, is open to the public from 9:00 to 18:00 Monday to Friday and Saturday 9:00 to 14:00, except July, August, and September when it closes at 14:00 weekdays and is closed on Saturdays. A brochure explains the history of the Archive, its services, and the regulations governing its use. However, and more importantly, Canadian archives might take a lesson from the brochure, which also spells out, in no uncertain terms, its relationship to its users. Here is a sort of User Manifesto, which details the rights of users, the ways in which users can “aid in improving service”; the procedure for presenting complaints and suggestions; the Archive’s commitment to quality; and the statistics gathered as indicators of quality. Not only are maximum turnaround times for various services and requests clearly specified (for example, “Attention to written requests for information on archive collections in 72 hours” or “Attention to requests for paper copies of microfilmed documents within 7 days”), but there is an established and advertised procedure for submitting Complaints and Suggestions. Especially noteworthy is the Archive’s policy that “Suggestions can be anonymous, and can be sent by letter, telephone, fax, or e-mail,” the very thought of which sends chills down the spine of so many North American archival administrators. Along with the list of “Indicators of Quality” used to assess service, this articulation of the rights of users and the obligations of the Archive offers a level of public accountability, which trumps the standards sometimes set but seldom met in equivalent Canadian research institutions.

What is most striking in the exhibition cases, in the reproductions in the wall panels, in the video presentation in particular, and on the shelves of the Reading Room in the new Archive, is the materiality of archival documents – their size and shape, format and colour, texture and binding. Contrary to what some marketing and communication officers think, this materiality is an obvious attraction for visitors; however, the physical location of the exhibition space in the Palace of the Viceroy also plays an important, if easily overlooked role in the visitor’s experience of the Archive. Situated just across the Plaça del Rei from the Palau Reial (Royal Palace), where the tour of the Museu d’Història de la Ciutat (Barcelona’s history museum) disgorges a steady stream of tourists, the Archive offers a logical continuation of the historical narrative of Barcelona’s development. The exhibition furnishes a textual complement to the story told in the excavated archaeological ruins of Barcino, taking the story of the city from Roman times to the present, all within a stone’s throw of the Royal Palace, the Cathedral, and the walls of...
the medieval precinct where the Archive began. The sense of history, generated by stones and paper, is not lost on the tourists who are drawn into the exhibit.

In my three visits to the exhibition, I was seldom alone with the documents, and spent time observing the enthusiasm and care with which visitors, conversing animatedly in a variety of languages, studied the wall panels and poured over the individual items in the exhibit cases. The lesson for archives is clear: it is the stuff of history, not some digital surrogate, that captures the imagination. In seeking public support for our institutions, in our enthusiasm for on-line databases, and in our propensity to abandon actual displays in favour of virtual exhibitions, we ignore the materiality of archival documents at our peril. Where media and subject expertise is being lost, replaced with bureaucratic enthusiasm for the new competencies of the generalist information professional, we abandon knowledge of the physical object and the layers of meaning embedded in it at great risk. But this caveat is not the only lesson the exhibition has to offer.

The exhibition is both thoughtfully crafted and thought-provoking, offering the profession a number of opportunities for professional self-reflection. While emphasis is placed on the accomplishments of Próspero de Bofarull, the generous and conspicuous acknowledgement of the work of “sixty generations of archivists” raises interesting issues of heroes, hierarchy, and gender within our profession. The theme of the archival hero is a familiar one: Jenkinson and Grigg (UK), Muller, Feith, and Fruin (Netherlands), Schellenberg and Norton (USA), Doughty and Lamb (Canada), Mabillon and Letronne (France), among others, are celebrated as champions of archives, either for what they did or for what they wrote. Their names are household words among professionals in and beyond their respective geographical constituencies. Their works are core or landmark texts within the archival canon. Bofarull is part of that pantheon. But beyond these national figures, champions, and leaders, how has the work of archivists and others working with these leaders been recognized in a profession that traditionally has been both rigidly hierarchical and staunchly patriarchal?

In Canada, for example, when the new Gatineau Preservation Centre (GPC) of the then National Archives of Canada opened in 1997, a four-storey Munz metal and aluminum stele was erected in the south-west corner of the atrium; prominently positioned, it carries the following dedication:

THIS BUILDING IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CANADA’S NATIONAL ARCHIVISTS. THEY PRESERVED OUR PAST TO ENDOW OUR FUTURE.

The wording is specific. The dedication is not to the “generations of archivists who have looked after the Archive” since 1872, but to the six men who had held the position of Dominion or National Archivist in those 125
years. The list is a short one. Without diminishing their efforts or their impact, did they do all this archival preservation work single-handedly in those 125 years?

Unlike the expansive Catalan umbrella of “sixty generations of archivists,” under which myriad individuals (intentionally or otherwise) share credit, the GPC’s dedication text is exclusive. Yet, lurking behind the names of Brymner, Doughty, Lanctôt, Lamb, Smith, and Wallot, are all those division directors and distinguished scholars who were largely responsible for nurturing excellence and creating highly respected areas of expertise (many now dismantled or swallowed up in the latest “reorganization” or “transformation” or “catalytic initiative”). While the physical space on the stele is finite, the explicit list of the names and dates of six men allows no mental room for imagining and acknowledging the inestimable contributions of those staff members whose ideas, energy, and efforts put Canada front and centre on the archival world stage.

Nowhere around the “phallic dedication column” of the Gatineau Preservation Centre is there any acknowledgement of the hundreds of working-level archivists who appraised, acquired, arranged, and described the miles of documents, or millions of photographs, or equally daunting numbers of other records, who prepared the exhibitions and the publications, who assisted the government departments, or academic researchers, or media producers, or genealogists, or schoolchildren, or individual citizens – the real people who actually built the world-class collections, did the actual work, developed the new theories, and tested the new concepts that made those six leaders and their institution look so good. And, for that matter, not everyone working in an archive is an archivist; equally deserving of a place under a blanket appreciation are the conservators, librarians, circulation clerks, database managers, records or information analysts, policy analysts, photographers, technicians, and others who have contributed to the well-being and smooth operation of the institution. Six names does not a corporate memory make.

While the shape and assembly of the Gatineau building’s beacon ostensibly refer to electricity and energy, with overt visual references to both lightning rods and beacons, this metaphorical interpretation of archives as gatherers and transmitters of information ignores the “underlying tensions between


5 It also extends the symbolism of the GPC’s architecture, which refers to electricity and transmission of energy, especially the roof supports, which were heavily inspired by the high tension electrical pylons at the back of the site. I am grateful to Mario Gasperetti, of Library and Archives Canada for providing details of the beacon’s construction and symbolism.
male/female dichotomies,” which one scholar sees as permeating the Gatineau building.\(^6\) Thus, not only is the dedication elitist and hierarchical, the “beacon” both embodies and effaces the gendered make-up of the profession. Let us then not forget that among those archivists who have “preserved our past to endow our future” in Canada over the last 135 years, there have been women, many more of whom have entered the archival profession in recent years. Indeed, to take an example from the United States, the March/April 2007 issue of the Society of American Archivist’s *Archival Outlook* reports that “Currently fourteen of the fifty-one state archivists are women, up from a total of ten in 1993 ...,” noting that the upturn reflects the increasing numbers of women in previously male-dominated professions.\(^7\) While the Barcelona exhibition’s nod to “the sixty generations of archivists” may cover a myriad of sexist sins and assumptions, at least it is phrased in the sort of inclusive, gender-neutral, and hierarchy-free language that the leaders of North American institutions might do well to adopt.

Where the Barcelona exhibition, and the archive it represents, seem to lack postmodern sensibilities is in the area of visual materials. Grouped in the case titled “The Archive as a Museum,” the maps and plans are included in the exhibition as “precious objects and curios,” rather than as archival records – records of claims about power and land, about geography and politics, war and peace, government and civil society. The visitor booklet’s comment does not amplify on their inclusion, but merely points out, “Finally, there is a selection of beautiful maps and plans that one would never tire of looking at.” It is difficult to accept such a gratuitous dismissal of maps and plans as fascinating for solely aesthetic reasons, especially when there has been so much written, albeit perhaps not in Spanish or Catalan, on maps as instruments of power, as rhetorical devices, as tools of the state.\(^8\)

Visual materials, it seems, have yet to be recognized as active participants in the life of business and the business of governance, as a form of both communication and documentation, worthy of archival preservation. While the exhibition panels, video terminals, and theatre presentation draw heavily on photographic reproductions, entirely absent from the exhibition are orig-
nal photographs. When I inquired about the acquisition of photographs by the Archive of the Crown of Aragon during my visit to the new facility, I was informed that they were “collected by other institutions.” This, perhaps, reflects the practices of an archive that is 700 years old, but it is surprising given the recent spate of histories of photography in Spain in general and in Catalonia in particular. These richly illustrated and weighty tomes demonstrate that photographs were generated by and for the monarch or the government in the course of royal rule and official business. Their absence from the archival record leaves part of the story untold.

As this medieval archive comes under scrutiny in an increasingly post-modern archival world, no doubt photographs, maps, and other visual materials will take their rightful place within the Archive of the Crown of Aragon. Certainly their legitimacy and power as archival records are likely to attract the attention of the newly launched on-line journal *Archives & Social Studies.* Based in the Archivo Municipal in Cartagena, Spain, it seeks to “integrate knowledge and expertise, derived from different disciplines dealing with information objects,” and offers a forum where archivists and others are encouraged to bridge the “archival turn” and the “visual turn” in the humanities and social sciences. If, like this new journal, the Inaugural Exhibition at the Archive of the Crown of Aragon is any indication of the energy, intelligence, and vision of the current generation of Spanish archivists, the post-modern winds of change are clearly blowing strongly and archives are being seen anew in this corner of the Iberian peninsula.

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