



Internationaler Archivkongress 2004
23.-29. August - Wien - Österreich

Archive, Gedächtnis und Wissen



Archives and Historical Research: A Connection to Redefine?

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Archives and Historical Research: A Connection to Redefine? *Hermann RUMSCHÖTTEL*

Question 1: During which period was the scholarly historical aspect of archival work fully recognized?

A close connection of archival work and historical research, assessed approvingly and uncontested, is characteristic for the German language area during the 19th century and a considerable part of the 20th century. This began at the turn of the 18th to the 19th century with the functional change of the archives, turning from safe-deposits for legal positions and claims of sovereignty to stores of sources for historical research. The main focus of archival work, until then legal, became history, law as the category of reference faded and history as reference point became ever more prominent. Today we would call this a change of paradigm.

The new "archivist" contemplated his charters and older files in the first place with questions of historical auxiliary science and foundation for research on national history, and in the period of romanticism this meant medieval history. The development of historical auxiliary science - diplomacy, chronology, paleography, sigillography etc. - and of territorial, regional and local history would be carried on for the coming years to a considerable degree by archivists. Virtually a symbiotic connexion of archival work and historical and scholarly research developed - in the case of critical editions, in historical societies, historical commissions, academies of arts and humanities, at the universities. It is important to note, that historical research was only beginning to unfold during this period and in part was completely orientated on the archives and the records that now had become accessible.

The new archival curricula and training centres coming into being - graduate and postgraduate - adapted to this notion of an archivist and were completely oriented on historical auxiliary science and the middle ages. The historical orientation of archival training and the job outline of the "historian-archivist" ("archivist-historian") remained dominant till after the second World War.

The new archival journals of the late 19th century, the curricula and examination regulations of the archives schools, professional organisation emerging with congresses and meetings demonstrate a progressive professional nature of the archivist's pursuit on the fields beyond historical research. But the connection between both domains remained very close: when and as far as the archivist was not conducting historical research of his own, but was acting rather "archival" in the narrow sense (that is gathering information on records, arranging, describing, counselling etc.) he did this to support, promote or assist history.

Question 2: Present situation

Since the 50ies of the last century a shift of the thematic emphases can be observed regarding the actual everyday requirements from the historical to the archival actual archival tasks. At the same instance archival science is attempting its great leap towards an individual scholarly discipline. The reasons are multifold:

- new challenges of organisation, conservation, technology and documentation,
- change of method and contents in historical research,
- the increase of potential holdings in the records offices,
- new types of records,
- altogether a new quality and quantity of records,
- an increasingly urging problem of evaluation,
- a growing interest of archival science in the structure and interdependencies of creation of records,
- the increasing predominance of law in archival work, especially by archival legislation,
- and the differentiation of the archival landscape

This can be summed up by noticing, that the shift of emphases from historical to archival tasks was more or less enforced by the steady increase of these archival tasks and the advancing awareness that there are considerable non-historical areas of responsibility. Parallel the spheres of historical research within and without universities have developed considerably, most of all in quantity, but also by permanent diversification. This also applies to the fields of territorial history and historical auxiliary sciences traditionally claimed by the archivists as partially their field of responsibility. An increase of chairs and research institutes, historical commissions etc. guarantees a remarkable and continual progress of academic history also without direct participation of the archivists. This began, at least some of them, to develop a self-confidence within the archival profession; an intense discussion on the job outline began. It has not been concluded so far.

This still very controversial discussion on the relation of archival work and historical research has a deep impact on the design of curricula of archival training, on the question of qualifications required to enter the profession or cooperation of archivists in projects of historical research. Can archival science be determined

as a historic discipline? May the archivists go across the line separating communication (arrangement and description) and utilization? To what extent must he be familiar with history to process his records in a professional manner? Can archivists forgo cooperation with historians regarding evaluation? Does the archivist communicate information or must he add expertise to the records only available for him by direct participation in the process of historical research? These and similar questions are asked and receive heterogeneous answers. The Bavarian Archives School in Munich continues to value considerable units of history and archival science within its curricula. At the Marburg Archives School or the archival faculty at the University of Applied Sciences in Potsdam the subjects of archival science are rather given preference.

Question 3: Perspectives and assessment, and prospects for the future

The archival job outline, that is the archivist's tasks, their characteristics, the present and future demands - all of this encompasses more than the field of theoretical and applied archival science. Slightly overstated we could articulate that since the 18th century we are not only dealing with a gradual change of archival tasks, but with a permanent accumulation of duties.

This accumulation of tasks becomes very evident by drawing on a modern description of the archival area of responsibilities:

The range of professional activities of archivists covers with varying intensity and appearance elements of traditional archival nature, archival and of administrative science, of documentary science, information and communication science, library science, historical and cultural research, science and engineering, elements of teaching, publication and journalism.

Also the definition of the term "archiving" in the German archives laws - that is the legal determination of the essentials of the archivists duties - in most cases ranges from advising government offices and law courts on managing their records to capturing archives to their utilization. Archival work today takes place in an area of conflict of historical research, administrative and information science and history politics of archives owners, that is states, local government, churches, business, private organizations. This conflict area presents itself different for each archives, therefore first must be analyzed in each case.

Surely uncontested is the fact, that we first have to complete our primary duties, to safeguard, communicate the records entrusted to us and make it available as expert as possible. As this usually concerns historical records his naturally implies a historical context.

Therefore I come to the conclusion, from our matter, the archival records, from the cat, that this substance mirrors the past, and because archives always are part of the history politics of the archive owners, that history continues to remain essential for our job outline. Furthermore in the case of Germany I observe an alarming decline of certain historical disciplines at the universities, that is territorial history, historical auxiliary sciences and others. On these fields new (old) missions might arise for the archives.

Nevertheless, together with Michel Duchein I am convinced that Clio, the Muse of history, no longer is or can remain the only Muse of archivists, but that she should remain the most important one. If we see or practice this in a different manner, I fear, we would dig our own grave.