

ARCHIVAL LITERACY AS DESKTOP ARCHAEOLOGY: TRACING THE ORIGINS OF INFORMATION AND THE INTEGRATING POWER OF HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

Demetra Papaconstantinou, Ph.D..

The American College of Greece, Gravias_6, 15342, Athens, Greece

dpapaconstantinou@acg.edu

Abstract. As the implications of the digitization of information resources in memory institutions (LAM) increase and there is a demand for good practices in documentation, the aim to produce new insights into the Provenance of Knowledge in the community is more significant than ever. The use of digital applications for user services in libraries, archives and museums, however, seems to concentrate more on the “management” of information than methods of knowledge verification, interdisciplinarity, and provenance. As a result, “fake news” constitutes a common and widespread problem which is difficult to control. One could argue that archives constitute the “natural habitat” of provenance, since they preserve primary sources and help researchers get access to them. The present paper, in its attempt to contribute to the interdisciplinary discussion on the topic of provenance, will outline the insights one can gain from archival concepts and practices, and discuss their relation to other fields in the humanities that share a common interest about the origins of information. Archival practices could be seen as a way of engaging with information physically, through a process of active inquiry, almost identical to the way archaeologists engage with material culture in the field. As such, they are part of the historical thinking heuristics and they have a lot to contribute to the understanding of the whole process for the search and study of origins.

Keywords: Archival literacy, Provenance, History

1 Introduction

“For UNESCO, a document is “that which records something with a deliberate intellectual purpose”. A document is considered to have two components: the informational content and the support in which it is recorded. Both elements can have a large variety of forms and are *equally* important parts of memory.” [emphasis added]

UNESCO, 2017

The aim of the present paper is to highlight the importance of interdisciplinarity and strengthen the common threads that can be observed in the concepts and practices of memory institutions and their efforts to understand past human behavior.

Libraries, archives and museums often share the same or similar metadata schemes in order to describe their physical or digital resources, but their emphasis on different types of data as well as the different historical and sociocultural environment in which they operate, forces them to have different priorities with regard to documentation. Archives have a special connection to provenance, because the creator of each collection is the one which defines more or less its integrity and authority. Provenance in other memory institutions though significant does not seem to be so tightly interwoven into their scope and mission. There is, however, a dynamic relationship between documentation and social-cultural demands and practices, and this is reflected in the modifications of the policies and goals of memory institutions. The changing values in relation to illicit trade and the provenance of archaeological finds observed in museums from the 19th, to the 21st century is a good example of the changing interests and values (see for an example Gill and Chippindale 1993).

The difference between artifacts and documentary evidence is often considered too big to allow any comparison about their use and evidential significance, but for somebody who has been involved in the study of both fields the comparison is almost inevitable. Both types of evidence are material expressions of human activities and they can both play a significant role in the way humans interact with each other and the world. We are usually accustomed to approach archival material mostly for its content rather than its physical presence, but “clinging” to one’s own personal records (photos, diaries, papers) is a habit and an experience most, if not all, humans have. Sometimes, this is a much stronger and “intimate” relationship than the “eclectic” one developed for art collections. In any case, the present attempt is not a step by step comparison of the two fields but an investigation of those principles and aspects in archival work that could contribute to the understanding of the multi-layered and complex nature of human activities.

Archaeology, as the discipline that examines historical change through the material basis of human identity and a fieldwork in search for evidence of origins, the “oldest/earliest periods”, has been discussing and exploring the issue of context and provenance for several decades (Gamble 2007; Papaconstantinou 2006). History, on the other hand, has also stressed the significance of contextuality and provenance for its sources, through its methods of analysis and its involvement and study of primary sources, the “historical thinking heuristics” (Wineburg 1991; Wineburg 2001). Archival literacy “bringing together” the two disciplines through its practices can play a more active role in the tracing of the origins of information and “cultivate” historical thinking heuristics across a broader spectrum of scientific fields and research interests.

2 Provenance and archival practices

Questions about the origins of objects, events, and ideas are very common in the world of archives. This is what archivists do: organize, preserve and provide access to information which has been created, used and discarded by organizations and individuals for public or personal use. The educational aspects are often considered to have a secondary role in the professional activities of the archivist, with the emphasis placed on processing and quick access of the material to the public. In academic institutions, however, the collaboration with faculty members for specific learning objectives is not so rare and it often results to a pleasant surprise about the potential and the benefits this type of partnership could have for both.

A recent example of such an activity from the Department of Archives and Special Collections in the American College of Greece is a request to help students understand the processes involved in the production of a published work. The activity was based on the papers of Kimon Friar Collection, the eminent greek-american scholar, writer and translator of modern greek literature and, more specifically, his translation of the book “Odyssey: a modern sequel” by Nikos Kazantzakis published in 1958 by Simon & Schuster. The students were invited to “inspect” different types of archival material, such as manuscripts, scrapbooks, photographs, notebooks, diaries, galley proofs and books, and reconstruct the chain of events that led into the creation of the autographed edition of the book that was part of the collection.

Archives have a whole set of concepts related to the origins of information, and provenance is a very significance field in archival documentation, since it safeguards the evidence of ownership, referring to the “individual, family or organization that created or received the items in a collection” (Society of American Archivists, n.d.). As description and processing mostly refer to the first level, that of the collection, information

about provenance usually reflects the processes related to the acquisition of the whole collection and not individual items. The interrelations and evidential significance of specific items are either recovered by the archivists through the process of arranging the folder of the collection or by researchers through specific requests. Information about the biography of the creator and the custodial history about the chain of ownerships until the moment of the acquisition, constitute important additions in the general understanding of the collection and its arrangement.

The main principles for the processing of archival material focus on the context of their creation. The principle of “respect des fonds” was initially introduced in France in the 19th century and referred to the “natural unity of the records based on shared function, activity, form or use” placing emphasis on the rearrangement of the records according to their subject content (Gilliland-Swetland 2000, 12). The principle of “provenance” was a later attempt to keep collections from different creators separate from each other in order to preserve their context, while the principle of the “original order” indicated the importance of the creator’s own arrangement of a collection, even in cases where subjects and functions were not followed in the most strict way (Gilliland-Swetland 2000, 12-13, see also Society of American Archivists, n.d.; Hensen 1993).

The nature of the collections with regard to the structure, content and context of the items often dictates the specific choices made with regard to the above principles, but in general, the use of functional themes is preferred. In administrative records the use of functional themes is more flexible and there is an attempt to accommodate the activities of specific offices within broader functional categories (i.e. governance, student support services, public services, etc.) in order to compensate for the regular changes in the structure of the organizations and the confusion they create (Samuels 1998). Administrative records are also characteristic for their mobility and multiple owners and for this reason detailed research on provenance of certain types of documents within the institution is especially significant in their case. Sometimes, it is necessary for archivists to conduct small “oral history” projects about their institutions in order to recover the history of their departments or retrieve vital, missing, information for the understanding of the arrangement and the content of the records.

Person papers have different characteristics and the biography of their creators is more significant here as it often provides the key to decipher the nature and character of the collection. In this case the original order, when it exists, is preferred and there is again the opportunity to ‘fill in the gaps’ through the communication with descendants who are the main source of the custodial history but might also provide valuable information about the creator of the collection. Biographical notes and custodial history are usually equally significant for the reconstruction of the general socio-cultural context in which the collection was created.

3 Provenance and documentation practices

The “necessities and practicalities” of the information age and the need among memory institutions to make accessible their digital resources have resulted in the intensification of documentation processes and the creation of a number of conceptual models for the management and dissemination of information.

For reasons that reside in the history of the two disciplines, archival documentation was connected from its initial steps to library practices and the first cataloging standard in the 1980s, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (APPM), was designed in order to work in relation to MARC cataloguing (Greene &

Meissner 2005, 217; see also Hensen 1993). The “finding aid”, i.e. the final product that was related to that standard, was a document with a standardized form which presented all the details about a collection at a general, first level description and included among other fields: provenance, biographical notes, inventory of folders. The finding aid remains today the main source of information for archival collections.

Libraries were much faster than archives or museums into creating conceptual models for the description of their collections and the first Study Group on Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) was completed by the International Federation of Library Associations in the early 1990s (Tillet 2003). The International Council of Museum designed its own Conceptual Reference Model (CRM) in 1996 and in 2009 created a revised version harmonized to FRBR (Bekiari et al. 2015). The International Council of Archives produced its own archival conceptual model *Records in Context* (RIC) as late as 2016 (Gueguen 2013, 575-576; International Council on Archives 2016). This delay was not without a reason.

The complicated nature of archival material and the decision to describe the collections at the first level, created several problems to the documentation of archival collections. This is the reason why soon after the completion of the first statement of principles, the *International Standards Archival Description* (ISAD(G)) created by the International Council on Archives (ICA) in 1993, there was a second set of standards created to separate the record description from the authority control of the collections and to focus on the documentation of the importance of the creators, the *International Standard Archival Authority Records – Cooperate Bodies, Persons, and Families* (ISAAR(CPF) (Gueguen 2013, 569). The analytical spirit with regard to archival information intensified in the next decade and two more standards were developed, one for the control of Functions (*International Standard Description of Functions* (ISDF) and another one for Institutions *International Standard Description of Institutions with Archival Holdings* (ISDIAH) (Gueguen 2013, 569-570).

It is clear that no other memory institution places so much emphasis on the provenance of its collections than archives. This is reasonable because of the nature of the material and the fact that provenance provides integrity and authority to the whole collection. Libraries are more concerned with the identification of a specific item for their users, and not so much the process of its creation, and museums have been rather slow in their identification of the significance of context since their emphasis on the artistic value of artifacts for many centuries, made that piece of information almost irrelevant. Despite the fact that the description of events, namely the procedures that made the creation and use of “participated objects” possible, constitutes an intensively discussed topic in the creation of conceptual models for cultural heritage, it does not seem to have a very significant place in documentation practices (Dionissiadou 2010; Papaconstantinou 2008; see also Croft 2010). Yet, “original order”, “context” seems to define and “hold together” all practices and principles of the fields and disciplines which are related to past human behavior and activity.

In the archival context, issues of provenance are still documented at the first level of collections and they mostly refer to large entities, not individual items. It is clear, however, that the new attempt to reconcile and harmonize ICA standards and create a coherent whole (Gueguen 2013; International Council on Archives. 2016) maintains the integrity of record series/themes, using a more expansive understanding of provenance and moving from a “multilevel to a multidimensional” description of archival material (International Council on Archives. 2016; see also Monks-Leeson 2011).

Digital heritage makes the description of documentary heritage even more challenging and the issues of provenance are often “lost” in the abundance of information as presented through the various digital resources.

The lack of “physical support” that is one of the characteristics of digital data makes Provenance of Knowledge is almost irrelevant and through the confusion that it is caused, critical thinking and even history books seem to be unnecessary and rather redundant. This is the reason why, now more than any other time, it is significant to stress *active* processes of inquiry with regard to provenance and the origins of information. Historical thinking heuristics and research strategies related the familiarization of different types of resources and primary sources can help towards this direction.

4 Archival literacy: a “hands-on” experience

It might seem to be a paradox to want to raise awareness for the benefits of archival practices and principles, when most of today’s activities become, gradually, digital. However, although historical experience is defined locally and refers to specific historical events, the methodological tools of historical thinking have much greater applicability. Furthermore, the emphasis on the material basis of human identity can provide, a different more universal perspective, and transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. As a result, familiarity to the main concepts of archival theory and practice (appraisal, arrangement, provenance, collection development etc.) and the ability to interrogate evidence for credibility, trustworthiness, and accuracy “using sourcing, contextualization and corroboration” (Prom and Hinchliffe 2016, 11-13; Papaconstantinou 2017) can be a very important aspects in the effort to develop critical thinking and awareness to the fact that *things are not always the way they seem to be*. Current discussions about the importance of historical thinking heuristics and the fact that they are not significant only for the examination of historical events are a good indication of the potential of such an attempt (Wineburg 2016).

Tracing the origins of information and moving from the recording of the tangible (material culture) to the intangible (events) is a complicated process and there is always a concern for the “feasibility” of the whole endeavor (Croft 2010; Papaconstantinou 2008). What the evidence from archival processing indicates is that although it might not be feasible to map all possible interrelationships of human activities, getting a hands-on experience on the complexity of the process to understand the origins of information could provide better insights into human activities and decision making. This unique perspective has been recognized in many fields and could expand further (Bucheli & Wadhvani 2014; Prom and Hinchliffe 2016; see also Bearman and Lytle 1985).

The emphasis on *active* inquiry and process does not mean that other archival activities such as the arrangement of material and the concern to make it accessible to the public should be restrained. On the contrary, it is an attempt to broaden the scope of outreach activities, cultivate and present aspects of archival practice that are neglected and contribute to interdisciplinary dialogue. Archivists are often criticized for taking too much time processing, and getting involved into *unnecessary* activities that reduce their ability to produce “narrative content and contextual information as briefly as possible” for public use (Greene and Meissner, 2005, 247). But the archivist’s job cannot be there simply to “represent the materials sufficient to affording acceptable access” (Greene and Meissner, 2005, 247), because archivists through their practices are much more involved into tracing the origins of information, and also, because, if they are not active into highlighting the insights one can gain from that process, the chances are that the process will go unnoticed, since researchers are often too

concerned with their own specific work to get involved in such an attempt. The only other active community is that of history teachers, and education is indeed the area that archivists can find their most productive partnerships (Prom and Hinchliffe 2016). Tracing the origins of information, however, has a much broader field of applications and archivists have the tools to raise awareness to other communities as well.

5 Conclusion

From the perspective of a historian, the inquiry for the understanding of the Provenance of Knowledge is a call and an acknowledgment of historical thinking heuristics. Interdisciplinary dialogue, though useful, runs often the risk of becoming confusing because it brings together different disciplinary traditions, mental maps and vocabularies. Communication is not easy, but the benefits of “not missing the big picture” are manifold and certainly worth the effort.

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