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Archival literacy as desktop archaeology:

Tracing the origins of information and the integrating power of historical experience

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As the implication of the digitization of information resources in memory institutions increases 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 (LAM) seems to concentrate more on the “management” of information than methods of knowledge verification, interdisciplinarity, and provenance.

The aim of the present paper is to explore “provenance” and the processes related to it, by comparing two seemingly different sets of data, i.e. archaeological material and archives, and emphasize the integrating power of historical experience. Archival records and archaeological material are both tangible artifacts of the past and, as such, provenance is a significant concept in their understanding.

Archival literacy is a type of instructional service that highlights the contribution of archival concepts and skills to different learning goals: the relationship between online primary source and the archival collections in which they belong, the interrogation of evidence for credibility and trustworthiness, the understanding of the “materiality” of archival records and the distinction between “information” and “evidence”, the idea of transliteracy in a non-digital environment.

Archival practices could be seen as a way of engaging with primary sources through a process of active inquiry, almost identical to that of an archaeologist’s experience in the field, and from that respect they could help “bridge” the “great divide” between the two disciplines: history and archaeology.