

Bogdan Florin POPOVICI*

PHYSICAL OR INTELLECTUAL ARRANGEMENT OF ARCHIVES? A CASE WITH SCOPEARCHIV

Abstract:

The core principle of archival science is the Principle of Provenance. Since its articulation at the midst of the 19th century, a great debate started, about what provenance and what order to respect: the physical one or would an intellectual one be enough. Modern tools, like scopeArchiv, might answer some of these questions. In the paper, we are going to present how a stress on intellectual arrangement eased the work in our institution.

Key words:

archival arrangement, principle of provenance, original order

Izvleček:

Fizična ali intelektualna ureditev arhivskega gradiva? Primer za scopeArchiv

Temeljni princip arhivistike je princip provenience. Od njegovega oblikovanja sredi 19. stoletja potekajo intenzivne razprave o tem, kateri izvor in katero ureditev spoštovati - ali fizično ali pa bi bila dovolj vsebinska. Moderna orodja, kot je scopeArchiv, lahko podajo odgovore na nekatera od teh vprašanj. Prispevek bo predstavil kako poudarek na vsebinski ureditvi olajša delo v arhivski instituciji.

Ključne besede:

arhivska ureditev, princip provenience, prvotna ureditev

It is a common place to admit that the advance of new technologies in many ways enhanced the archival activities. The veritable revolution of web-released finding aids and web-supported set of access points to archival resources speak for themselves. In this paper, however, I would like to focus on one practical experience: using IT technologies for archival processing, in a way that accommodates both the respect of traditional archival principles and less effort in archival work.

1 PRINCIPLE OF PROVENANCE (POP)

As it is known, the backbone of archival profession is the Principle of Provenance. It was elaborated in several layers of understanding and it gets its full formulation at the end of the 19th century. Principle of Provenance claims that records of different provenances should not be intermingled and the original order (established prior to the transfer to Archives) should be respected or (if missing) re-constructed. In this regard, *provenances* designates both the *archival provenance* (corporate body, person, family from which archival materials originate) and the *custodial provenance*

* Bogdan Florin Popovici, Ph. D., director, Romanian National Archives, Brasov department, Str. Gh. Baritiu nr. 34, 500025 Brasov, Romania, contact: bogdanpopovici@gmail.com.

(information on successive transfers of ownership or custody of records) (Duranti 1998, p. 98).

This principle was not “discovered” or “inspired”, but it was decanted by practical experiences and (in some opinions) endorsed by the historical trends of the time. With the development of state-run archives in France and Prussia, the increasing volume of incoming records made the Principle of Pertinence impractical and promoted keeping the records based on the original creator arrangement as “the only realistic way to cope with large volumes of archival material from different provenances” (Horsman 1994, p. 54). Hence, it obviated the need for contentious rearrangement according to the subject (Schellenberg 1961, p. 18). In the same time, it was a convenient method for retrieval, by gathering and describing records generated and received by the same institution or person (Duchain 1983 p. 67). Moreover, it was noticed, documents can only be interpreted with knowledge of the administrative, legal and social context, which will be preserved by respecting provenance (internal/external); applying PoP will thus preserve the objectivity of records and provide insight into the functions, processes, and personal relationships of the records creator (Schellenberg 1961 p. 20 sqq).

The theoretical rationale was said to be developed from historical science in the nineteenth century¹. “Historians strove to achieve objectivity and therefore wanted the original source material. The remnants (sources) should be kept as unaltered as possible. The motto was to be able to establish what really took place, or in German *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (Ranke). This means that written sources should be maintained in their original order and must not be rearranged and attached to new orders” (Graenstroem 1994, 13).

2 VIRTUAL ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION

Once the principle was accepted and promoted in and by the professional community, its effects started to be seen in practice. In this regard, one common activity of archivists was to arrange records and folders in the repository in order to recreate the original order (whatever that means). Where archives were described at folder level, the codes and physical arrangement followed the order by which folder-descriptions were listed in inventories. Physical work involved was significant, the need for larger spaces for grouping record being a common place. When new accessions were received, they were often considered distinct structures of the creator archives, even though many folders inside might have belonged to series already accessioned. The original order and respect for the provenance had, in such cases, a very relative interpretation.

Some issues of respecting provenance and the original order were already revealed by archivists long time ago. For instance, it was questioned if the original order and the archival provenance can truly be identified. Italian archivist Claudio Pavone argued that an archives is, in fact, only the way an organization organized its memory and not a passive, organic accumulation of records. Filippo Valenti, in the same prospect, noticed that “the *order* is something which is given on purpose to a specific whole”, while “a *structure* is something which is discovered, that is searched, is identified and is understood, apart from the fact that it has been 'given' in the course of the time or it has been spontaneously generated.” The “structure” discovered in

¹ P. Horsman questioned a theoretical reflection in development of the principle (Horsman 1994, p. 54).

the *fonds*, according to Valenti, is in general meaningful and worth defending and preserving, whether “original” or not (apud Savoja M, Vitali S, 2007, p. 121-147).

Although I agree with these arguments, in practice we faced a situation where records were brought to Archives in a perfect lack of original order. Moreover, a previous attempt of arrangement destroyed any potential original order that might have existed and the pressure of time asked for quick decisions and effective actions. This is why we opted for a virtual arrangement, delivering a “proper” archival arrangement to users, considering, in the same time, the shortage of personell and time for processing the records in the “usual way”.

The case was about a small fonds named *Inspectorate for Agriculture and Agrarian Reform* whose extent was about only 2 linear meters and 129 folders. It was acquired by the Brasov Archives with no finding aids and probably would have been stored in the repository until proper resources of staff would have been available. But high public interest for property restorations forced us to process those records earlier and, most important, in a very short time.

A short preliminary survey over legal mandates of the creator revealed its two main functions: the regional representation of Ministry of Agriculture and Domains and inspection and control for agrarian services, agricultural chambers, agrarian schools and other organizations involved in agricultural activities. Besides, of course, there were the supportive functions (HR, Accountability etc.). Despite our efforts, we could not identify a clear, relevant organizational chart. Regional units were not so present in legal publications and among records of the fonds no such information was found. Therefore, we were forced to consider for arrangement a function-based structure.

The preliminary investigation of the records showed that there was an attempt to process the fonds, as it had a chronological arrangement. Of course, this intervention, made for easier processing, rather obscured a possible original order of the records than helped for a proper archival arrangement.

Considering both the need for a closer adherence to PoP and the need for a quicker access than reading pages of folder-level description, we decided to describe briefly every folder, with larger summaries, where the public interest required (i.e., identification of land owners). Also, we assigned a physical reference code consisting of folder position within the chronological (by year) order. Each folder description also contained, besides the content of folders, the broader functions and the potential series that would belong to; series were determined by the broader topic of files within one function of the creator.

We proceeded to this action and all the descriptive information were introduced into scopeArchiv, our archival information system. After finishing the folder description, we simply filtered the data based on the functions and series, and we could identify the (intellectual) groupings. More, we assigned codes for each function and series and then new codes for folders within these series were generated. In the end, each folder had two codes:

1. the (pre-processing) reference code, reflecting the physical order (on the shelves), that serves for retrieval in the repository;
2. the (post-processing) arrangement code, reflecting the logical (intellectual) arrangement, resulted from the archival processing.

Table 1: Example of list of folders based on their physical position

Folder Reference Code	Function Code	Series Code	Folder Arrangement Code
1930/1	A	A-1	A-1-1
1930/2	B	B-3	B-3-1
1930/3	B	B-5	B-5-1
1930/4	A	A-7	A-7-1
1930/5	A	A-3	A-3-1
1930/6	B	B-2	B-2-1
1930/7	A	A-4	A-4-1

Table 2: Example of list of folders based on their intellectual position

Folder Arrangement Code	Folder Reference Code
A-1-1	1930/1
A-3-1	1930/5
A-4-1	1930/7
A-7-1	1930/4
B-2-1	1930/6
B-3-1	1930/2
B-5-1	1930/3

Publicly, the information looks in a hierarchical arrangement, offering a quick image over the structure of the fonds and the structure of information, while the actual retrieval codes are visible for each units of description (folder level).

Unități de descriere			
BV-F-00668	Inspectoratul Agriculturii și Reformei Agrare - Regiunea IV Brașov	1919-1938	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1	[Reprezentare regională a Ministerului Agriculturii și Domeniilor]	s. d. (sine dato)	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1	[Aspecte de organizare]	s. d. (sine dato)	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1-1	Educație agricolă evaluarea personalului	1936	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1-2	Acțiunile de mobilizare și apărare pasivă.	1936	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1-3	Aplicarea reformei agrare	1936	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1-4	Înființarea Inspectoratului general de control	1937	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1-5	Mobilizarea și dispensele de mobilizare	1937	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-1-6	Aplicarea reformei agrare	1937	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-2	[Aspecte de resurse umane]	s. d. (sine dato)	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-1-2-1	Probleme de personal, lucrări de mobilizare și activitatea gospodăriilor agricole	1934.01-1934.12	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-2	[Funcția de îndrumare și control]	s. d. (sine dato)	Finalizat
BV-F-00668-3	[Funcții suport]	s. d. (sine dato)	Finalizat

Figure 1: "Intellectual" order (capture from scopeArchiv)

Unități de descriere			
Indicativ în schema de ordonare	Cotă UD	/	Instrument evidență/informare
▶ BV-F-00668-1	BV-F-00668-1		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1	BV-F-00668-1-1		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-2	BV-F-00668-1-2		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-2-1	BV-F-00668-1934-1		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1-1	BV-F-00668-1936-5		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1-2	BV-F-00668-1936-7		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1-3	BV-F-00668-1936-8		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1-4	BV-F-00668-1937-2		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1-5	BV-F-00668-1937-5		<input type="checkbox"/>
BV-F-00668-1-1-6	BV-F-00668-1937-6		<input type="checkbox"/>

Figure 2: "Physical" order (capture from scopeArchiv)

3 FINAL CONSIDERATION - IS (PHYSICAL) ARRANGEMENT AN ISSUE ANYMORE?

Our paper sought to present a practical experience about accelerating the archival processing by making a virtual arrangement, letting the physical records in place as they are and reconstructing the original order based on creator functions. It is an easy and effective method, avoiding too much of physical work and too deep research about the creator organizational structure.

However, this method let room to several questions. Is this original order reconstructed really relevant? In our opinion, yes, it is better than having a simple chronological order. It is indeed an intervention of the archivist, an order *imposed* to archival material; but this was indicated as such (structured assign by the archivists are presented between brackets) and we avoid misleading users by saying this is THE original order of the records. And, considering organizational functions, this order is quite faithful, granting the user with an intuitive and quicker way to access information.

On the other hand, to what extent can this method be applied— is the physical arrangement needless anymore? It is hard to say. Apparently, if there is a physical identification of records (items/folders) and a description associated to them, the answer would be yes—there is no need for physical arrangement, since the records can be physically retrieved immediately, by their reference codes. On the other hand, there might be archivists that would prefer to physically group records together, invoking an even higher simplicity of retrieval.

As a closure, I would only want to underline the fact that a limited intervention of archivists over the arrangement of records is under scrutiny anyway. In 2007, David Weinberger claimed that the Third Order of Order consists precisely in letting the users to re-arrange the informational metadata in a way that fits for each one's interest (Weinberger 2007, p. 18-19); apparently, "everything is miscellaneous", but in fact everything has a proper arrangement, fit for purpose. On the same prospect, a presentation in ICA Second Annual Conference in Girona (2014) (Higgins, Hilton, Dafis, 2015) suggested that archival work is quite useless, and argued for crowdsourcing arrangement and description, exemplifying with Amazon or Flickr. Although I do not share this opening-to-the-crowd archival processing, that, in my opinion, shows a vulgar view over archival work, I do consider that provenance and original order are two *possible* contexts of arrangement and the user might have other needs, not covered by these two traditional approaches. This, in exchange, will shift the stress in

archival work from arrangement to description, because describing records in sufficient details (i.e. adding proper metadata) might give to the user the possibility to make the desired arrangement.

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SUMMARY

Bogdan Florin POPOVICI*

FIZIČNA ALI VSEBINSKA UREDITEV ARHIVSKEGA GRADIVA? PRIMER ZA SCOPEARCHIV

Temeljno osnovo arhivske stroke predstavlja princip provenience. Ta se je izoblikoval skozi več nivojev razumevanja in bil dokončno formuliran ob koncu 19. stoletja. Princip sam po sebi ni bil »odkrit« ali »navdihjen«. Oblikoval se je na podlagi praktičnih izkušenj, potrjevali so ga (po nekaterih mnenjih) tudi takratni zgodovinski trendi. Z razvojem državnih arhivov v Franciji in Prusiji, predvsem pa s povečanjem količine prevzetega arhivskega gradiva, je postal prejšnji, pertinentni princip nepraktičen. Provenienčni princip je določal hrambo zapisov na osnovi ustvarjalčeve prvotne ureditve. Hkrati pa je predstavljal tudi primerno metodo za uporabo gradiva. Implementacija principa provenience ohranja objektivnost zapisov in omogoča vpogled v funkcije, procese in osebne odnose ustvarjalca. Za arhiviste, ki uporabljajo princip provenience, je skupna aktivnost urejanje zapisov v skladišču, tako da je ponovno vzpostavljena prvotna ureditev.

Prispevek ilustrira način rekonstrukcije prvotne ureditve za fonde v Arhivu okrožja Brasov. Glede na manko osebja in časa za urejanje gradiva na »ustaljen način«, smo se odločili za virtualno ureditev in uporabnikom tako ponudili »pravo« arhivsko ureditev.

* Dr. Bogdan Florin Popovici, direktor, Državni arhiv Romunije, Oddelek v Brasovu, Str. Gh. Baritiu nr. 34, 500025 Brasov, Romunija, kontakt: bogdanpopovici@gmail.com.

Glede na potrebo po skladnosti s principom provenience in po hitrejšem dostopu do gradiva, kot bi bilo branje strani popisov na nivoju zadev, smo se odločili, da na kratko, z daljšim povzetkom, popišemo zadeve, za katere je javnost najbolj zainteresirana (npr. identifikacija lastnikov zemljišč). Prav tako smo dodali fizično referenco, sestavljeno iz lokacije zadeve v kronološkem zaporedju. Vsak popis zadeve je vseboval, poleg vsebine zadeve, tudi širše funkcije in potencialne serije, ki bi jim lahko pripadal; serije so bile določene s širšo zadevo dokumentov v zvezi z neko funkcijo ustvarjalca.

S takšnim delom smo nadaljevali in vse popisne informacije prenesli v scopeArchiv, naš arhivski informacijski sistem. Po končanem popisovanju zadev smo preprosto prefiltrirali podatke na osnovi funkcij in serij in tako prepoznali (intelektualne) skupine. Še več, vsaki funkciji in seriji smo dodelili signaturo in tako ustvarili nove signature za zadeve znotraj teh serij. Javnosti izgledajo informacije hierarhično urejene in ponujajo hiter vpogled v strukturo fonda in strukturo informacij, resnične uporabne signaure pa so vidne za vsako popisno enoto (na nivoju zadeve).