
Midway on the Pilgrimage The Development of Standards for Archives

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AT the XII International Congress on Archives, held in Montreal in September 1992, two documents were presented to the international community of archivists for acceptance. These were the *Statement of Principles regarding archival description*¹ (the Madrid Principles), and the draft *General International Standard Archival Description, ISAD(G)*. The presentation of these standards marks a significant moment in the development of the archival profession. Nothing like this has been attempted previously, and it is quite remarkable that sufficient agreement has been possible to allow the production of an international text, however tentative it may still be. A brief account of the movement that produced them may be useful to explain the processes which have been set in hand.

The International Council on Archives (ICA) set up its Ad Hoc Commission on Archival Description in 1990, under the chairmanship of Christopher Kitching. Funding was received from Unesco to pursue the first stages of its work, and it is hoped that further funds may be available to carry it on to a more final conclusion. The document which has now taken shape as the Madrid Principles was first drafted at a meeting in Hohn-Grenzhausen (Germany) in 1991. It was then circulated through ICA channels for comment, and a number of responses were received by the Commission. APBAD was one of the organisations which sent in a reply, and Portugal is indeed represented on the Commission, by Ana Franqueira. A revised version was agreed on in Madrid

in 1992, and formally presented to the Congress.

ISAD(G), which was drafted at the Madrid meeting, is now being submitted for comments, and was debated in Montreal. Although the formal period for receiving comments ends in October 1992, professional associations and individuals who have responses to make, are urged to make them at any time. The Commission's secretary, Hugo Stibbe, can be reached at the National Archives of Canada by mail, telephone, fax or email.

One process which is still incomplete is the translation of these international documents into the different languages of member states. The Commission has worked throughout in English, although it has members from France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and Sweden, as well as from anglophone countries. It is the English text which has been received by the ICA. Since translation is likely to be complex, involving the development and establishment of a number of technical terms, we expect this work to take some time. One of the objectives of the Commission was to set up a technical terminology which archivists would henceforth be able to rely on. The first section of each document is a glossary of terms.

The central principles of archival description are set out in the form of brief statements. The statements are indeed so brief as to need quite a lot of explanation, and one of the tasks

of the working party, no doubt, will be to suggest how this might be provided. The following is an attempt to summarise the *Statement of Principles*.

The purpose of archival descriptive standards is declared to be to ensure the creation of consistent records; to enable the exchange of information, and to share authority data; and to make possible the integration of descriptions into a composite information system. For the purpose of these principles, the basic unit of archival description is the fonds («fonds d'archives»; in English, «group»). Each country should take steps to standardise the way in which fonds are delineated. It is appropriate to describe the fonds as a whole, and then its component parts, so creating a hierarchical set. Descriptions should then be done by using data elements chosen from a table. It should be possible to retrieve information about the provenance of a fonds, and there should be access points subject to authority control.

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The document ends with a diagrammatic representation of the structure of an archival fonds, showing how it can be broken down into component parts, subfonds, series and files. (From a British point of view it is troublesome that these terms are not the ones established by *MAD*², group, subgroup, class, item, though the underlying concepts are the same). This diagram has been criticised as being too static; but it does correspond with the experience of archivists in many countries, and seems to be one of the major standards on which we can all agree. However, it does need testing and elaboration.

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Levels of Arrangement and Description

The diagram in the Madrid Principles is concerned only with the structure of an individual fonds. It makes it plain that not every possible level need be present in every case: levels that are not appropriate in arrangement are not used, and are therefore not present in description. As we all know, archival fonds are

different, case by case; archives are unique. Therefore it must be possible to arrange a fonds in as many levels as are necessary. One fonds will need a large number of levels (say, 8), while another fonds will need only two (in practice, probably the minimum). But the hierarchy of levels which results from arranging a complex fonds is not a free continuum. It is tied at three points to empirical observation of material reality:

1. The fonds itself is defined by material phenomena. A fonds is the total archival product of an individual, corporate or personal. Fonds are divided into subfonds, which are composed of the archival product of structural or functional divisions of the creating person or organisation. (Some further comments on the problems of defining the fonds occur later in this article).
2. Series are sets of archival materials which belong together in the administrative system that produced them.
3. Items («files» in the Madrid language) are the units of handling: the bundles, dossiers, volumes or other physical gatherings which are actually produced for users in the reading room. Items may contain component papers («pieces»), and these too are recognisable by their material character.

The Commission has made efforts to find out whether this model does in fact correspond to the reality of archival arrangement in every country. It has to be admitted that we have so far not had a response from Chinese colleagues, nor a significant one from the former Eastern bloc. If an important new perception should emerge from these sources, we may have to embark on some fundamental redefinitions. Until then, a good degree of international agreement seems to have been reached.

The Multi-Level Rule

Description must go from the whole to the parts. On this basis, the international effort has been confined so far to examining description models for the fonds, not for any other unit. (This has given rise to some controversy, referred to later). The Madrid Principles simply state this generalisation. ISAD(G) sets out a more detailed rule. There should be, first, a description for the fonds as a whole, and then linked descriptions of the components according to their level.

This rule does lay down that common information should be given in the higher levels of description, but it does not go as far as the comparable rule in MAD2. This gives instructions for the separate characteristics of descriptions which are linked at different levels. In the MAD2

analysis, descriptions of larger levels of aggregation are said to *govern* the descriptions of component parts of the aggregation. So, a fonds description governs the descriptions of sub-fonds, series and files which together make up the fonds. The fonds description in this case has a special character and is termed a «macro» description. It provides:

- a) Provenance information: generally, the administrative and custodial history of the group, and also the immediate source of its acquisition by the archives, if this is public information;

Most archivists will find that the Commission's most innovative act was to adopt the principle of the «access point» into archival description. The concept is foreign to many national traditions. It is derived from information science rather than from librarianship, and provides a useful conceptual tool for the analysis of archival description. Access points are the handles provided for users, by which they can identify relevant sets of descriptions.

- b) information relevant to the accumulation as a whole, its physical characteristics and general condition, access

conditions, past and present use;

- c) a summary of the informational content of the group. No direction is given about how this data might be structured, so that either free text or data structured into dedicated fields would be equally acceptable to the international standard.

The corresponding «micro» descriptions, of component parts of the fonds, should assume that this common and background information has been given, and would contain only data specific to the component aggregate (or unit) being dealt with, on a case by case basis.

Access points

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The most important thing about access points, in the long run, is that they are intended to be controlled by authorities. Here again is an innova-

tion, at least for many archivists. Judging by my own experience, archivists have used the concept of authority files in small ways, and generally without using the term, but there has been little discussion of the use of authorities generally, in either the national or the international forum. If authority work is seriously to become a staple of professional activity, a good deal of educational work will have to be undertaken⁴.

It is clear that if there is to be any systematic exchange of data from archival sources at international level, there will have to be a structure of authorities. Possibly this is a task that the ICA's Ad Hoc Commission should undertake, but there has not been any clearly defined guideline for it. There is a general but vague understanding among archivists that published lists of subject terms, such as the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, are not likely to be acceptable for use with archival descriptions. One reason for this is that archivists must perforce use terms which existed in past situations, and which are not the preferred terms in today's discourse. We may even be about to fall foul of some vested interests, since it may be necessary, in archival description, to use terms which are not, in American parlance, «politically correct». There may be other reasons why we must develop our own subject headings, but since the question has hardly yet been examined, these remain obscure.

Similarly, place and name authorities must be developed nationally or regionally, before an international authority can be embarked upon.

Access points must be provided for provenance information as well as (or even rather than) for content information. It is agreed that access by way of provenance is likely to be very significant for users. In fact, there is an assumption that access by provenance gives better results than access by subject. There has been little systematic study of this question. It was the central issue examined in an important American study more than a decade ago, but as far as we know has not been taken up in a archival context since⁵. The professional community should therefore be looking intently at the outcome of the experiments being conducted in Oporto by Fernanda Ribeiro at the Municipal Archives⁶.

The sources of the International Standard

The Madrid Principles and ISAD(G) are the product of nearly a decade of exploratory work within certain of the member states of ICA. Indeed, it is possible that most countries have professional groups which have been giving attention to the subject of standards, particularly description standards. The sudden appearance of cheap computing has alerted all the information professions to the need

to plan for data exchange. This has certainly been an important factor in stimulating interest in the question of standards, but there may be more to it than this. Movements of the spirit are unchartable.

Not unsurprisingly the earliest work was done in the USA, which was also the earliest country to set up a working collaborative network for archivists⁷. Working through voluntary committees organised through the Society of American Archivists, they completed a specialised MARC format, Archives and Manuscripts Control (AMC)⁸. This format, which was formally approved by the ruling authority for USMARC, immediately made it possible for archival descriptions to be added to the electronic online database systems which were developed during the 1980s to link American libraries. The fact that a number of important academic libraries took a leading part in this development was also a factor.

Further work continued to back up and extend this valuable standard. A set of cataloguing rules was developed, and this acted as one of the essential underlying authorities⁹. A considerable number of archival descriptions are now available in the online database RLIN, and a smaller number in each of the alternative databases, OCLC and UTLAS. Although use of these is still more common in the academic world than in government and administration, American

archivists and many of their users are now accustomed to the habits engendered by habitual use of electronic media. In particular, they have got used to being able to check the whereabouts of related papers.

American archivists have continued to work on developing strategies for the use of standards. For example, The working group on standards for archival description has issued a volume of papers which provides a theoretical basis available to everyone¹⁰. Discussion of the issues continues, and there is usually comment on them in current periodicals.

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Parallel developments have occurred in Canada, where the National Archives has taken a leading role. A series of officially funded working parties have produced, first a series of theoretical studies with guidelines for implementation of a standard; then the first parts of an important new description standard.

The initial study and guidelines appeared in 1985, and are in a form which would make them useful for any country, particularly since they

are available in French as well as English¹¹. Publication of the actual rules for archival description began in 1990, and is proceeding¹². Further developments have followed rapidly. General guidelines on authorities (cited above) and a study of the nature of archival fonds have appeared in 1992¹³. A general study of the problem of authorities in subject indexing for archives is to appear¹⁴.

British archivists appear to be divided between those who would support a description standard and those who reject it in principle¹⁵. Despite this division of opinion, the Archival Description Project was set up at the University of Liverpool in 1984, with intermittent funding from the British Library and the Society of Archivists. This project has produced two successive versions of a description standard, *MAD*. This standard has been endorsed by the National Council on Archives and by the Society of Archivists, though it should be added that the concept of an officially approved and promoted standard on anything is somewhat foreign to British archival tradition.

Current controversies

After the closure of the Montreal Congress in September 1992, both the Society of American Archivists and the Association of Canadian Archivists provided opportunities for the work on these descriptive

standards to be discussed and compared. On both occasions, radical criticism was heard from David Bearman, who argues that to codify existing practice (or at least what was implicit in existing practice) is to close off chances for a flexible response to new technological developments. In the Bearman approach, archivists would be in contact with an archival series at the moment of its creation, and its archival control would grow out of its design, current use and disposal¹⁶. Set up against this perception, it cannot be denied that analyses which start from existing finding aids and work back to the underlying principles, as MAD does, look rather old-fashioned. The MAD team would argue, against this, that their view does actually correspond to normal everyday practice at the present time.

The Australian delegates to the Montreal Congress made a strong intervention in support of what has become their particular practice in archivalistics. In this approach, the series, and not the fonds, is the fundamental unit of aggregation for archival control. Provenance information is of course recorded, but is kept in an authority file which can be called up when required. Series descriptions (as indeed is noted in MAD) can be more easily standardised than fonds descriptions, and there is an Australian national standard for them¹⁷. The purpose of the series-based administration of archives is to

enable archivists to control materials in a highly volatile managerial structure. Governments may constantly change their administrative hierarchies, but since they continue to discharge their functions in society, the records of these functions tend to be continuous. In this situation, series descriptions are the best control. Constantly updated administrative histories can provide the necessary provenance information.

Since the ICA documents explicitly make the fonds the basic unit of archival description, it is clear that an Australian input is required to make sure that their methods can be acceptably included in the international standard. It is understood that there is to be an Australian delegate at future meetings. This is very much to be welcomed.

The debate is to be taken up again by the Ad Hoc Commission in Stockholm in January 1993. It is to be hoped that they will be able to take into account the latest work towards producing an international standard for defining the fonds. This should accept the Bearman contribution: indeed the Ad Hoc Commission's chairman referred to the question as not «what is a fonds?», but «when is a fonds?». Those who work in the context of government records are probably very ready to adopt both the Bearman principle (of the continuity of records from origin to disposal) and the Australian principle (of the continuity of function through

discontinuity of administrative structures). There are other methods of working, though. From the British point of view, room must be kept for those who base all their work on the fonds, and for whom a fonds is a fixed historical point.

The MAD team have already tried to make some progress on producing a workable definition of what is a «group» (fonds). Their observations, made independently, tend to coincide with those of Canadian analysts.

«It is apparent that there are two hierarchies, a documentary and a provenancial one»¹⁸.

If there is a difference of principle and treatment between two types of archive accumulation, it would seem likely to be between «traditional» archives (whether personal papers or governmental files), and machine readable files generated within a records management scheme.

MAD already has a rule that administrative or political subordination should not prevent the archives of a body from being treated as a fonds. There are hierarchies of subordinated corporate bodies — sections within departments within organisations, etc — but each of these can perfectly well be the creator of a group. Any number of groups can exist happily within a repository;

there is no requirement that a group should be large or small, or that the numbers of them should be limited. The only requirement is that the creator of the fonds should be reasonably distinct as an institution, with a degree of autonomy in its action, and a recognisable public character of some sort. All these definitions are intended to cover the papers of private individuals as well, at least where those papers have been naturally accumulated over time as the result of the individual's activities. It is sometimes said that the difference of treatment needed by the archives of an official body, and those of a private person, is so great that two different kinds of professional body should hold and exploit them. This difference would account for the existence of manuscript libraries (on the one hand), and public archives services (on the other). However, the debate on the fonds does not support this dichotomy. If there is a difference of principle and treatment between two types of archive accumulation, it would seem likely to be between «traditional» archives (whether personal papers or governmental files), and machine readable files generated within a records management scheme.

Data exchange standards

It was remarked above that the progress made in the USA in develop-

ing standards began with a data exchange standard, the USMARC AMC. There is consequently a considerable body of opinion in the profession that holds that the use of MARC formats for the exchange of archival data should be extended. Some recent developments have reinforced that view. The progress of the University of Michigan's project for compiling a «bibliographic» record of the archives of the Vatican, at series level, is one. There are signs that after a period of consolidation the Research Libraries Group (RLG) which controls the online database RLIN is seeking to expand its outlets. The RLG had a demonstration stall at the Montreal Congress, at which its new user interface was available. The British Library has announced that it has taken out full membership, so that for the first time there is a fully operational RLIN terminal in London. Perhaps European archivists ought to be looking at the possibilities inherent in databases of this type, and in the MARC format which they use.

The problem is that except in Sweden, no European archivists have been accustomed to use MARC or any other bibliographic formats. Nor have academic or reference libraries been accustomed to sponsor archival development work. The Liverpool Archival Description Unit began work on an Archives and Manuscript Control (AMC) version of

UKMARC as long ago as 1987. A draft was circulated for comment. The Bibliographic Services Department of the British Library, then in charge of UKMARC format refused to consider any changes, so the matter dropped. This decision was reinforced next year when the National Council on Archives received a report from its working party on national information systems. This report specifically rejected any further work on MARC¹⁹.

This scene was unexpectedly upset during 1992 when the British Library began to hold a series of meetings with UKMARC users. It was clear that a much more flexible policy was now in operation. At a meeting with representatives of the Society of Archivists, it was agreed that an AMC format could be drafted. The principle was conceded that if new fields were needed, moves could be made to adopt appropriate ones from USMARC. Heartened by this change, the archivists began again to take up the work of drafting a UKMARC AMC, and a preliminary version of this will be ready for testing early in 1993.

The advocates of MARC were still without any vehicle for their work. No existing British database seemed either willing or appropriate to carry archival data. There seemed no immediate prospect of a new database. But at the same time, signs of a latent market for the new format

seemed to be appearing. A group of major museums demonstrated that they were interested in working actively towards the achievement of a working MARC variant. Chief among these was the Archives and Library of the Tate Gallery²⁰. At least two major academic libraries are actively promoting the extension of RLIN to British institutions. These are small signs, but they may possibly signal some very important changes of attitude on the national and European scene.

The outlook for those working with description and data exchange standards in archives at the moment looks reasonably promising. No central source of development money has yet made itself known. The Canadian government has financed much of the development which has been achieved so far, and it is possible that much of this might have been regarded as an investment in the success of the Montreal Congress. That event is now over, and the authorities in Ottawa may perhaps feel that there is less need for further investment. However, Canadian archivists are clearly committed to an ambitious programme of research, compilation and publication. We can all benefit from this.

At the same time, there are some indications that the innovative impulse that could be seen in the USA in the mid 1980s has to some extent lost momentum. At the same SAA confe-

rence in Montreal, the proponents of library-based descriptive standards were expressing the view that data exchange systems in the future would move to quite new technologies²¹. Interventions by dissidents such as David Bearman appeared to have a destructive effect on the will of members of the profession to adopt and extend existing US standards.

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In Britain, there is an intention to continue the development and maintenance of the MAD standards, and an embryonic plan to undertake preliminary work on authorities. Sources of funding remain doubtful. Internationally, Unesco and the ICA (acting as its executive agency) remain committed to the further development of the international standard. The funds available for this are still not sufficient, but are being backed by the enthusiasm of individuals and of archives services in various countries. This is probably enough to sustain the momentum into the next phase of development. Both national and international standards are here, and are available as tools for the working archivist.

Notes

¹ This document should be known as the *Madrid Principles*, as its final form was agreed at a meeting of the Ad Hoc Commission on Archival Description, in Madrid in January 1992. These documents are obtainable from the Ad Hoc Commissions's secretary, Hugo Stibbe, at the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

² The British description standard is M. COOK; M. PROCTER, *The Manual of Archival Description*. 2nd ed. (MAD2). Aldershot, Gower Publishing, 1990.

³ It is certainly foreign to the British tradition. MAD2 deliberately does not use several concepts derived from library traditions, such as the «chief source of information», main and added entries and headings. It does refer to access points, but does not provide rules for their use. The origin and purpose of the term is discussed by H. STIBBE, «Implementing the concept of Fonds: primary access point, multi-level description and authority control», *Archivaria* 34 (1992), 109-137.

⁴ L. GAGNON-ARGUIN, *An introduction to authority control for archivists*. Ottawa, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1989. This is an excellent beginning.

⁵ R. H. LYTLE, *Subject retrieval in archives: a comparison of the provenance and content indexing methods*. Ph. D. University Maryland, 1979. Subsequently published as two articles in *The American Archivist*.

⁶ Research in progress at the Faculdade de Letras do Porto, 1992/3.

⁷ SPINDEX, originating in the Library of Congress but supported by a number of large archive services, including the National Archives. The system had been superseded by 1988.

⁸ N. SAHLI, *MARC for archives and manuscripts: the AMC format*. Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 1985.

⁹ S. L. HENSEN, *Archives, personal papers and manuscripts: a cataloging manual for archival repositories, historical societies and manuscripts libraries (APPM)*. 2nd. ed. Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 1989.

¹⁰ *Archival description standards: establishing a process for their development and implementation*. Issued as a consultation paper by the Society of American Archivists, Feb. 1990, and subsequently published as a series of articles in *The American Archivist*.

¹¹ BUREAU OF CANADIAN ARCHIVISTS. *Toward descriptive standards: a report and recommendations of the Canadian working group on archival descriptive standards*. Ottawa, 1985.

¹² BUREAU OF CANADIAN ARCHIVISTS. *Rules for archival description RAD*. Ottawa, 1990. Interested parties may subscribe, and they receive new chapters as they are issued, together with amendments, etc.

¹³ BUREAU OF CANADIAN ARCHIVISTS, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards. *The archival fonds: from theory to practice*, Edited by Therry Eastwood, Ottawa, 1992. This had not yet been issued at the time of writing.

¹⁴ BUREAU CANADIEN DES ARCHIVISTES, Comité de Planification sur les normes de description. *L'indexation par sujet en archivistique: rapport du groupe de travail sur l'indexation par sujet*.

¹⁵ D. ROBINSON, (ed). *The listing of archival records*. Proceedings of a Society of Archivists in-service training course, London, March 1985. Society of Archivists, Training Committee. 1986. This represents the main publication of the opposing group.

¹⁶ D. BEARMAN, «Documenting documentation», *Archivaria* 34 (1992), 33-49. David Bearman also has his own forum the *Museum and Archives Informatics Newsletter*.

¹⁷ A. PEDERSON, (ed). *Keeping Archives*. Sydney, Australian Society of Archivists, 1987, p. 149, 152.

¹⁸ H. STIBBE, *op. cit.*, p. 131. Compare M. COOK, «Description standards: the struggle towards the light», *Archivaria* 34 (1992), 50-57, especially p. 54-55.

¹⁹ *Information technology standards and archival description*. Report of a working party to the National Council on Archives, March 1991.

²⁰ The UKMARC AMC draft is chiefly the work of Alan Hopkinson, well known in Portugal as the Unesco expert on mini-micro-CDS/ISIS.

²¹ This was particularly the view expressed by Dr Steven Hensen, author of APPM. His paper to the conference should be published during 1993.

New Models for Management of Electronic Records by Archives

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The transformation of methods of communications which began in the last century with the introduction of the telegraph and the telephone has been accelerated and deepened in the past decade by the marriage of computing and telecommunications and integration of all forms of information in digital representations. By the end of this century we can anticipate that most business communication and much personal communication will be digitized and will be recorded, stored and transmitted electronically. This will apply equally to text, image, sound and multimedia and will be as prevalent in the home as in the office.

Archives have responded slowly to these dramatic changes and are only now formulating systematic programs to address electronic

records. Some of these programs are simple extensions into the electronic realm of traditional archival practices while others reflect radical departures in philosophy, program structure and strategy towards traditional archival functions. This article reviews the range of program variants and comments on some trends and promising innovations.

I. Program Orientation and Philosophy

Traditionally archives have been seen as custodial repositories for important records. They are what they collect. In this tradition most archives, including the National Archives of the United States, still assume that they will collect electronic records and equate their elec-