

Dirty Hands: A New Perspective on the Original Order¹

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One of the basic concepts propounded by the Manual for Arrangement and Description by Muller, Feith and Fruin - and probably the one most criticised and misunderstood - is the Respect of the Original Order. The Manual focuses on a logical order rather than on the original physical arrangement. In particular, Muller did not attach great importance to the work of the originating secretaries. For him and his colleagues the binding of the records with the administrative function, not the way that the records were stored, was the predominant consideration. This opinion, however true, may be considered somewhat limited. Often the physical arrangement demonstrates how the creator used its records - or did not use them. As an example, a reconstruction of the physical arrangement of the medieval, seventeenth and eighteenth century records of the Dutch town of Dordrecht show clearly that the town administration did not and could not use a part of its most critical

records. Instead they used duplicates, or copies. However, in accordance with the Manual, the first generation of professional archivists in Dordrecht destroyed the basic physical arrangement, because they could not see any system in it.

This article argues that archivists should respect such an original order and leave the interpretation to the user. Whereas in the past archivists could not deal with parallel original orders, today database technology enables them to logically arrange a fonds by means of archival description simultaneously from various perspectives. The next step is to develop new, powerful user interfaces to represent over time the complex relationships between records, between records and the administration, and between records and their storage. Such a plural (not just multi-level) description methodology must be built into current recordkeeping systems, to safeguard the variety of original orders for the future.

Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him
(William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene II)

A Nice Pair of Gloves

In a country - far away - sits an archivist, a freelance archivist to be precise, who is at work in an archives, wearing a pair of gloves. I can imagine that she wears them, since most of the archives in that country are covered with dust, buried under the stacks and shelves that once carried them, swept together with old typewriters, ashtrays, furniture, and other remainders of a previous bureaucracy.

I have been with her, once, just at the moment that her gloves, white and elegant, found the *indicateur*, the agenda, the very backbone of that particular local administration. The book contained the original classification code of the filing system. When she wiped the dust from the containers, she saw the same numbers as were calligraphed in the register. The Discovery of the Original Order. The Big Dream of Every Archivist - with or without gloves. Alas, my being there brought bad luck and misfortune. Although the numbers looked the same, they did not refer to the classification scheme, but to the yearly budget and account system from five decades later. A stupid miscreant had mistakenly rearranged the whole fonds before it got lost under dust and stacks.

Is this the archivist's eternal fate, to discover that predecessors have had in their turn successors who knew better than their predecessors? That is the

subject of this paper, commemorating the 100th Anniversary of Muller, Feith and Fruin's *Manual for Arrangement and Descriptions of Archives*. I want to consider predecessors and successors - what is left behind; original order in the archives, and original orders which did not exist any more; archival theories inherited from our predecessors, and what other predecessors (who were the successors of their predecessors) did with their inheritance. In short, I will consider the particular piece of archival theory on which the *Manual* has been most criticized: its Prussian-style interpretation of the Principle of Provenance.

The Manual, Original Order and Archival Science

Original orders have not only been disturbed in foreign countries, far away from us. They have not only been disturbed by over-active but illiterate clerks. With an appeal to the customer - the eternal alibi - archivists have thrown archives on a pile to rearrange them according to somebody's assumed needs. Large fonds usually escaped this doom, not because of archival principles, but because of lack of resources. I will try to approach the idea of Original Order, and what happened to it after the publication of the *Manual*, from an archival science standpoint.

Ptolemaic Archivology

The authors of the *Manual* did not intend to write a scientific book. We do not find an archival science in the bold printed statements; the lighter printed elucidations, however, contain many archival scientific explanations and observations. Not all scientific statements have eternal life. When scientific statements obtain a kind of character of permanent value the followers are at risk of rigidity. Ptolemy thought, on the basis of scientific observations, that the earth was flat. Ptolemy was an honorable man. His writings certainly had authority. Furthermore, they were close to the daily observations of everyman, and fitted into the ideas of what the Church thought that the Bible taught.

Scientific or not, the *Manual* observes a relationship between the structure of the fonds and the structure of the organisation which created it. The *Manual*, on this basis, prescribes the preservation of the original order. The authority that the *Manual* and its authors acquired would eventually lead to a misunderstanding that the original order should be based on the structure of the organisation. This is a highly questionable archival construct. The *Manual* is more or less the instigator of this unlucky combination of

observation and prescription. Muller held a distinct opinion about what constituted the original order. The heritage of his predecessors, the original secretaries and registry clerks, was not his concern. Their administrative inventories did not meet his 'scientific' standards, their arrangement did not provide access. (Here 'the customer' makes his first appearance!) Muller's ideal-type original order is an arrangement which reflects the functions and the procedures of the creating body.

The Archival Inventory (or Catalogue - the ultimate Dutch finding aid), is the practical result of the *Manual's* unintentional archival science, just as the medieval world map is the application of Ptolemaic geography. Inventories designed after this distinct view of the world are, above all, flat, or bi-dimensional. I'd like to call that Ptolemaic archivology (*archivistique, archivistica applicata*). Ptolemaic archival debates revolve around what piece of information should be placed at what position in the Inventory.

The principle Muller expressed is valid, just as many of Ptolemy's findings still have value. However, it is not the whole story: the world is more complex than the picture that Ptolemaic applications can make.

The only certain sequence is time. In administrations, moments of document creation precede moments of use. In simple administrations, things happen one by one (ie. sole writers cannot make two documents at a time). The oldest archival catalogues, drawn up by the generation of archivists directly preceding Muller and company, reflected in a way the dynamic of time. They described the medieval documentary heritage piece by piece, in chronological order. That was the then archival standard derived from diplomatics. But gradually administrations became more complex and job specialisation occurred. Business began to be conducted simultaneously, and to make use of registers. The diplomatic style catalogues were not able to deal with the more complex structures this change allowed. The new Muller-type inventories, on the contrary, could reflect, so to speak, this specialisation of disciplines. They did not only reflect *what* business the organisation did, but often also *how* it worked. The new inventories tried to show the parallelity of the Series, and to describe complex Series-systems, such as book-keeping systems. But those Ptolemaic inventories cannot properly deal with occasional re-use of documents. A document, a deed for instance, might be used years after its creation as evidence in a law-suit, and consequently put into a case-file. This kind of multiplicity causes serious arrangement problems to the Ptolemaic archivist working according to the doctrines of the *Manual*.

The Dynamics of the Original Order

The structure an administration uses for its records is rarely a static one. It changes over time, resulting from changes in the organisation, changing technology and changing functional requirements. This is not a new concept; every archivist knows and understands it. Frustration occurs, however, because original filing systems rarely succeed each other in a single discrete moment. New and old filing systems tend to overlap for a period of time. A new structure adapts to incorporate elements of the old structure. Although this is almost a natural phenomenon, it does not happen of its own accord. People are actors in such processes which, as a consequence, are unpredictable.

The Ptolemaic archivology can hardly deal with overlapping filing systems. It must make choices for one particular solution, and usually makes the choice for the last surviving order, or seeks a solution in a frayed caesura. Dynamic multi-dimensionality is hard to capture in a bi-dimensional inventory (just as one, despite Mercator, cannot flatten the world into a map). One may carry boxes from the one place to the other to get an ideal original order, but the only thing one really achieves is dirty hands.

The Inventory is not to blame for that, any more than an atlas can be blamed for being flat. If something is to blame - let's say the Ptolemaic archivology of the *Manual* - it is that its aspirations were too high. At most, the inventory is a freezing of a *status quo*. As such, it has proven its qualities as evidence that a certain set of inter-related documents were at a discrete moment physically gathered together.

In fact, the Inventory was not meant to be a finding aid. As a finding aid, as the *Manual* discusses it, the Inventory has outlived its usefulness. It does not make sense to revitalize it by applying Encoded Archival Description methods to it. Information and communication technology provides us with promising possibilities, not just for the making of an archival globe, but also to capture changes over time and other complex relationships.

This new archivology starts with the analysis of context, structure, form and contents of the fonds and its component parts. The basis for the arrangement - at least speaking about traditional, paper records, is then the physical, or rather logistical structure of the records system, given by the administrators themselves (the despised secretaries, for example). Other structures, such as the logical relationships between records and functions, can be seen as relationships between records and their context. The logistical structure is

a construct, an artefact, but an original administrative artefact, and to some extent the most stable structure.

Before my consideration of the logical and logistical structures becomes too abstract, I will try to elucidate with an example.

A Case Study: Dordrecht

Let us consider the archives at Dordrecht. I went there this spring with a group of students, to conduct a workshop on description, or rather analysis. We looked at the fonds from the so-called French period (1795-1813), a period of major political and administrative change. We tried to analyse the records in such a way that would enable us to reconstruct the decision-making process.

We researched the bond between a few series and the processes in which they were embedded. The research was not only fun, it was also science - archival science! The research followed the methodology of functional analysis (what had been the records' functions, what had been the function of the recordkeeping?). The research had an object (the records and records systems), and an objective: to define the original quality of the records system and to find a way to preserve that quality.

Archival description is not always just a trick, and not even always a craft. The methodology used included (1) diplomatics (the science which made Luciana Duranti famous in North America), (2) context analysis, and (3) structural analysis.

With promising craftsmanship and an eye for detail worthy of Sherlock Holmes, rope holes were analysed in order to find out how the documents passed from one series into another. This was a form of 'archeological archivology', comparable with scraping the sand at an archeological site. We asked ourselves: how it could be that the fonds contained so many single documents whereas, according to the archival theory, a fonds of that particular type should consist of series? Conclusions were drawn about the a-synchrony of the business processes and the recordkeeping processes. It is a fact that the structure of a fonds is determined by the secretaries (records managers), rather than by the administration.

At the level of arrangement and description, the conclusion was clear: the existing, manual inventory was not a representation of the real original structure, neither did it reflect the complexity of the records system.

Allow me to present to you another example of research into various aspects of the structure of a fonds. We will consider the Dordrecht fonds from the mediaeval period, and, as a second sample, that from the time of the Republic (up to 1795).²

The first archival inventory of the Dordrecht town archives, meant as a finding aid in a modern sense rather than as an administrative tool, was the one made by Van den Brandeler. The first volume was published in 1862. Van den Brandeler was at that time the town secretary - later he even became *archivaris honoris causa*. He described the items in the sequence in which they were placed in the town hall: the charters³ in the 'Iron Cupboard'⁴, another collection of charters in the 'Room of the Orphans Masters' (a room in the town hall where these administrators met), the registers, scattered loose documents, deposited fonds. What Van den Brandeler described was the whole of the records of the Dordrecht community, but he did not mix up the records into one big collection, as most of his contemporaries did. Therefore, the review by a leading archivist in a contemporary magazine was quite negative: he should have brought all records into one chronological series.

Van den Brandeler's successor, J.L. Van Dalen, did a better job in the first decade of our century. But Van Dalen had read the *Manual*, and apparently looked at the way Muller made his archival inventories. Like his predecessor he separated neatly the fonds of distinguished administrations, and described them in separate inventories. Van Dalen's *pièce de résistance* is the Inventory of the Town Administration from 1200-1572, printed with an additional Calendar. He tried hard to follow the rules of the *Manual* as precisely as he could. In line with Muller's ideas he found the original logistical (or physical) order useless. He arranged all charters, registers, and other records according to what he thought were the business functions of the Town Administration. The great Muller would have been proud of Dordrecht's little former schoolmaster.

Van Dalen put together the two charter collections, the Iron Cupboard and the Room of the Orphan Masters, because - as he justifies himself - there was no system in their arrangement. Possibly he was right; it is difficult if not impossible to understand the original physical order. But, in this case, the medicine is worse than the disease. His Inventory brings together two or three charters with the same contents, one from the Iron Cupboard, one from the Orphans Masters Room, and one from the one place or the other, a *vidimus* - a special kind of authentic copy. However, while the contents

of the records might be the same, their function is not. The town administration certainly had a reason for maintaining a duplicate of a charter. It was costly enough to have them made. Van Dalen, though frugal himself, did not apparently appreciate this point. Even greater difficulty arose when a document referred to various subjects and, hence, could not be placed in one discrete class. However obedient to the *Manual* it may be, Van Dalen's inventory does not suit the records as they exist.

What, then, was the original order created by the secretaries, treasurers and clerks? There was no filing plan such as our gloved archivist found. Usually such plans did not start to appear before the end of the 18th century. According to an 18th century scholar and student of the towns charters, P.H. van der Wall, documents were to be found all over the town hall. Philosophically, of course, even that apparent disorder is in itself an order. In any case, it obeys the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that any system inclines to disintegration, to *entropie*.

Van der Wall's complaints were not true for all records. The Iron Cupboard was still intact - as it would be a century later. Ultimately, it was a "professional" archivist, not the administration, who took the charters out and disrupted their original arrangement. The cupboard was safely closed with twelve heavy locks, and only the deans of the guilds had the keys! The cupboard was opened rarely, once in a century or so. Even in 1770, when most of its contents did not have much legal or political value, it took Van der Wall - a well-respected member of the city's patriciate - quite some effort and beer to get access to it. Indeed, the town administration possessed the charters, kept them, but never used them. To know their contents they had made copies in registers of the charters in the Iron Cupboard. One of those privilege books, the so-called Wooden Book, was even considered to have an equal authenticity as the original privileges. When, in 1649, it turned out that the book had disappeared, the guilds criticised the town council heavily, and each of them had to swear that they neither had it, nor knew what had happened to it.

Even if needed as evidence in court, the charters stayed in the Iron Cupboard. On such occasions the town administration used the duplicates, or had an authenticated copy made. That was the very function of the collection of charters and other documents preserved in the Room of the Orphans Masters. Van der Wall had ordered in 1770 a filing cabinet for them. Even today one can easily see the difference between the charters in the two collections, even when they were created at the same time and by the

same chancery. The charters of the Iron Cupboard are mostly completely intact, with all the seals undamaged, whereas the charters in the Orphans Masters Room show traces of use, such as broken or even missing seals.

It should be obvious that mixing up these collections and rearranging them according to an 'ideal' order is not a highly workable solution, and does not give due weight to their original legal and administrative functions.

This is equally true for other parts of the fonds: the storage betrays their usage. If, for example, the Resolutions of the Town Council according to an old administrative inventory were stored in the Burgomasters Room, it is unlikely that a subaltern clerk could ever look in them.

This old 1727 inventory effectively takes us on a guided tour through the whole town hall, and tells us room by room what records are stored in what place. It shows clearly the possible function of the records in that time. Another 18th century administrative inventory, a list of the Documents in the Big Cupboard, tells us exactly what documents were in it, and from what part of the administration they originated. Van Dalen, however, with his acquired disgust of secretarial arrangements, did not look at it, and arranged the documents of this series in alphabetical order, and related them to the wrong administrative body.

Much more could be said about these original orders. The fact is that, with some imagination, the local political battlefields are mirrored in the physical order of records. It appears that in a period of major tension between town council and the guilds, 90 percent of the charters that probably should have been stored in the Iron Cupboard were in fact not stored there because the town council did not have the keys.

The Application

A nice story, you may be thinking, but what do we do with it? I still have a big backlog in arrangement and description! You might even ask whether this story fits into the new archival paradigm. As a consequence of the functional analysis of the original order, new finding aids, including inventories, may look different, or at least simpler, than the old ones. It is a useful exercise to apply ISAD and multilevel descriptions in conjunction with a functional analysis. My students did so for the period of French administration of the city of Dordrecht. The results were promising. You may ask whether we should remake the inventories of our predecessors. No, we have better things to do. You may question to what extent my

comments apply to nineteenth and twentieth century fonds, originally arranged according to a pre-defined and often artificial filing system. I think, to a large extent, they are still valid for the modern era. Even a question like 'When were the files put into the boxes and into a semi-current archives?' should be answered by description.

Let us look at the interface between the user and the database that holds the descriptions. Even with current emerging hyper-link interface technologies, such as HTML, XML or SGML, it is probably impossible to show the rich variety of time-dependent changing relationships between records themselves within complex records systems, and between the records and the originating business transactions. Using Dordrecht as a model, I fantasize about a kind of virtual reality, in which the computer screen brings you into the townhall, in which you can even choose a role to play: an elder of the guilds in the seventeenth century, a member of the council, a clerk, a secretary, or an early nineteenth century scholar. At the entrance a guard may ask you what you are looking for, and show you the way to the right floor and room. You walk through the building, from room to room, looking at the series. At each door you might be obliged to ask permission, or you will be told that in the past the room would not have been accessible to you. At the bars of the room of the Iron Cupboard you would consult the guilds (and buy a couple of boxes of beer). By a mouse click the drawers might be opened, and the charters taken out and unfolded. By means of old inventories, original access can even be simulated—modern description is mainly transparent as the underlying database. Upon clicking on a volume which lacks a proper description, you will be informed of the lack, and may decide to just look at the binding or to not ask for it. Actually, making a photograph of the volumes would be the first step in description, because often it says a lot about the contents.

Fantasy? Why? Would it not be a reconstruction of the original order closest to the original order itself? Similar simulations could be made for current records series. Is it not the same procedure that current archival thinkers are proposing for electronic record systems - simulation of original behaviour?

In a future archivology, a cumbersome reconstruction of what has happened in the past with a closed fonds is less central than the concept of preservation of existing structures in an open fonds. Archival description should focus on the design and development of recordkeeping systems, rather than encoding existing Ptolemaic finding aids. New methods for archival description should aim at the implementation of a future-oriented

historical awareness in recordkeeping systems. That does not mean being rigid and sticking to an existing filing system, because a recordkeeping system will move with the organisation it serves. A recordkeeping system must not only preserve the form and contents of the information (documents), does not only take care of the structure (classification), but also documents the context, the whole context: organisation, functions, and recordkeeping itself. The recordkeeping systems of our predecessors did not do that. At least until the end of the nineteenth century, there was no real need for them to do so. Starting with the *Manual*, recordkeeping systems should have known better, even if Muller had a one-sided opinion about the context. But Muller & Company were not interested in recordkeeping systems; their scope was the past and its relics. New recordkeeping systems to be designed must not only capture the creation of documents, but also their use and management - their context. Record-keeping systems look after the authenticity and reliability of the documents trusted to them. Therefore they have to be reliable by themselves, and have the capability to render accountability on their own activities. It should be possible for future customers to understand the records in their full original context. This is an issue of preservation of quality - the quality of the records (for which the administration initially is responsible for), the quality of the recordkeeping, and the quality of the documentation about the records and recordkeeping (sometimes referred to as metadata). We now have the technology to improve recordkeeping, to save labour for our successors, and to have them not using the *Manual* anymore.

Records are, after all, too precious to touch without gloves.

Endnotes

1. Edited version of a paper presented at a Symposium organised by the Royal Society of Archivists of the Netherlands to honour the centenary of the publication of the Dutch Archives Manual of Muller, Feith and Fruin, Amsterdam, 23 October 1998.
2. The cesura is arbitrarily based on a political event, the first independent gathering of the States of the county of Holland. It is not the place here to get into the complex history of a small country. Although indeed in 1572 the towns became more independent, the cesura does not reflect too much the administrative changes. With the French occupation of the Netherlands in 1795 the towns lost much of their independency; the central state was to be born.
3. A charter is a parchment document, sealed, granting specific rights, authorising special privileges, etc. In the Dordrecht case, many of the charters contain town rights etc. See Peter Walne (ed.), *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, Munchen, Saur, 1988, p. 70.

4. The 'Iron Cupboard', Yzeren Kast, was a big wooden filing cabinet, with drawers, safely closed with 12 locks; each of the major guilds kept a key. Many medieval European towns kept their most precious records in such cabinets. The Dordrecht situation, however, is peculiar: the town administration did not have access to these records without consent of the guilds. An early example of democratic influences.