Excerpt: Archives in the Ancient World

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The keeping of archives constitutes a significant aspect of mankind's experience in organized living; without these archives, in fact, the story of our past could not be told. Since archival material is a primary source for the historian and the social scientist, those engaged in analyzing and reconstructing the story of our civilization should be thoroughly familiar with the genesis and character of the archives of successive ages, their significance as components of the various cultures, and the considerations that help account for their survival. Also, since we are living in an age in which our everyday life is affected by a multiplicity of recorded public and private relationships and in which our wallets are bulging with identification cards evidencing such relationships, we may derive wry satisfaction from the knowledge that to some degree those before us were made as record conscious as we are forced to be. In ancient Egypt, too, everybody was "catalogued and inventoried."

Medieval and modern archives have been the subject of a wide variety of studies, and the story of the archives of these two periods has been thoroughly explored. We still lack, however, a synthesis that makes the development of the archives as an institution fully understandable and that also gives due attention to the growth of archival thought. Except for individual articles on archives-keeping in ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, no effort has been made to provide an integrated picture of the archival institutions and practices of antiquity. As we all know, in the Middle Ages, a period of great experiment in governmental decentralization, record-making and record-keeping became a concern of local authorities, and it was only in the Byzantine Empire and in the Arab lands that

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the governing of great empires still demanded record-keeping on a large scale. In Western Europe, on the other hand, where the direct nexus between the state and the individual had ceased to exist, records were no longer created on a country-wide basis, as had been the case before the downfall of the Roman Empire. But ancient institutions and practices lingered on, and in time would directly and indirectly influence record-making and record-keeping in the cities and nation states that emerged out of feudal Europe.

When compared to the small volume of medieval archives, the archives of the ancient world seem to have much in common with those of our own times. The Greek and demotic records of Ptolemaic Egypt "constitute bodies of archives" and these bodies, "by virtue of their number and their nature, resemble those of the more recent ages."[1] A system of organization and administration that can truly be called bureaucratic, and the cheapness and availability of writing materials—both lacking during the Middle Ages—resulted in a mass production of records on clay and papyrus that created preservation problems similar to those confronting the archivist in the age of paper. These circumstances make the study of ancient archives particularly interesting and rewarding. In fact, in the great river cultures of the Nile and of the Euphrates and Tigris—where the control of material, men, and man-made installations became inevitable—we find already those basic types of records that may be called constants in record creation, whatever the nature of governmental, religious, and economic institutions. These include:

1. The laws of the land.

2. Records consciously created and retained as evidence of past administrative action. These records may be in the form of the "royal skins" of the Persian kings, the *commentarii* or day-books of Roman officials, the registers of the Popes and the Patriarchs of Constantinople, or the chancery rolls of the English kings.

3. Financial and other accounting records originating from the need of a ruler or other authority to administer his domain and its resources, such as the records of the palace and temple economies of the ancient Near East.

4. Records of the ruler or other authority to assure his income from land and persons not belonging to his immediate domain, namely: land surveys, commonly called cadastres; land records that establish legal ownership of areas of the land and make possible their orderly transfer from owner to acquirer; records establishing tax obligations from real property.

5. Records facilitating control over persons for purposes of military service, forced labor, and the payment of a capitation or personal tax.

6. "Notarial" records of state agencies or state-authorized persons that safeguard private business transactions between individuals.

Although in one form or another these constants in record creation are encountered among the records that have survived from antiquity, are we justified in calling these records archives? There are two basically different definitions of the word archives. One of them limits the term to non-current records that, because of their long-range value, have been transferred to an ad hoc agency, called an archives, and it is in this sense that the term is used in German. American usage, as it has developed during the last decades, shows a somewhat similar approach in that it considers as archives only those records that have lasting value, regardless of whether they are still in the hands of their creators or have been turned over to the custody of an archival agency. In the majority of countries, however, and particularly in the Romance countries, the records of any agency or institution are designated as its archives. In other words, the terms records and archives are used interchangeably. In Italian, for instance, *archivio* stands for records in general. If the records have outlived their everyday usefulness but are still under the care of their creator, they are called an *archivio di deposito*. Records of demonstrated or demonstrable value become the concern of a general archives (*archivio generale*), in which archival materials of many origins are assembled.

Except for a few isolated cases, the general archives is a product of the last two hundred years. Although the Tabularium (the archives of Republican Rome) showed a tendency to absorb records of various administrative origins, the idea of concentrating in one place the archives of different creators was alien to ancient and medieval times. The ancient world did not even have the concept of an *archivio di deposito*, for nowhere are there to be found arrangements revealing an intention to differentiate administratively between current records and those no longer regularly needed for the dispatch of business. It was only in the Middle Ages that a discriminating attitude toward the value of records developed. This was expressed in the practice of copying important records in cartularies so as to have them available for frequent use, while the originals were carefully protected in an inner sanctum, as, for instance, the Byzantine *skeuophylakion*. By and large, however, it was the emerging recognition of the research value of records that led to the distinction between records of daily usefulness and others to be preserved because of their long-range importance.

In the ancient period this distinction was not made; this means that by archives we must understand all kinds of records. In fact, the term archives itself may be slightly inappropriate, for even in its broadest meaning the

word suggests an intention to keep records in usable order and in premises suitable to that purpose. In the Near East, where great quantities of records have been found on excavation sites, only rarely could any part of the site be identified as an archives room. Most of the time we cannot tell whether we are dealing with an archival aggregate or with a collection of trash, the equivalent of a modern waste-paper basket. And yet we cannot exclude such *disjecta membra* from our consideration, because they may still reveal a pattern worth discovering. When Bernard P. Grenfell, Arthur S. Hunt, and J. Gilbart Smyly discovered the mummies of the "papyrus enriched" holy crocodiles in Egyptian Tebtunis, they sensibly decided to include in the first volume of their publication a "classification of papyri according to crocodiles," for papyri in the belly of the same animal might reveal relationships reflecting their administrative provenance and an original arrangement.[2]

Such insight of early papyrologists compares favorably with the attitudes of the Assyriologists toward their clay tablets. Understandably, in the age of the early discoveries about the middle of the nineteenth century, the remains of the palaces and temples, monuments, sculptures, and artifacts captured the enthusiasm and guided the activities of the excavators, while the humble clay tablets ranked low in their scale of values. This attitude changed, of course, when the writing on the tablets could be deciphered and read and when their importance as historical sources was appreciated. Interest was focused, however, on what the individual document (called a text) had to say, on its content, and on its significance as a literary or historical witness. The lowly *Wirtschaftstexte* (economic texts) and administrative documentation in general were slighted. What was worse, the inter-relationships of the tablets were disregarded, and when they were published their character as elements of larger assemblages was neither taken into consideration nor made apparent.

Although it is easy to criticize the earlier Assyriologists for not recognizing the archival nature of much, if not most, of their source material, archivists should refrain from raising their voices in righteous indignation, for a good part of the blame must be laid at their doorsteps. Archivists have never been persuasive salesmen of their cause, nor have they always succeeded in convincing scholars of the contributions they can make to other disciplines. Nevertheless, the extent to which archivists for a century ignored the significance of the great clay tablet discoveries is simply amazing; and since they ignored them they could not and did not object to the dismembering of archival bodies by Assyriologists. It should be borne in mind, however, that archivists during this period were still dedicated to the subject approach to documents, and that they themselves disrupted

bodies of archives in order to rearrange them into subject-oriented collections under headings such as *Biographica*, *Ecclesiastica*, and *Militaria*. True, *respect des fonds* and the principle of provenance began to guide the work of archivists during the second half of the nineteenth century, and should have enabled them to suggest their application to the records of ancient Mesopotamia. But until quite recently, archivists have turned their backs on the first great chapter in the history of their profession.

Besides the clay tablets, the papyri of Egypt are the other large body of original record material that has survived from the ancient world. In dealing with their material, papyrologists were in no better position than the Assyriologists. On the contrary, much of their material came from the refuse heaps of the Fayyûm, that is, from record dumps; and the native diggers sold piecemeal what they found there, so that papyri of the same provenance are now scattered in libraries and collections all over the world. More often than not, therefore, papyrologists had to work with isolated pieces and fragments rather than with bodies of records. And yet, even in the early stages of the discipline, the archival point of view was present in the papyrologists' thinking. In fact, when Josef Karabacek, head of the Imperial-Royal Library of Vienna, took charge of the vast body of papyri that Archduke Rainer of Austria had acquired from the Vienna antiquarian Theodor Graf in the 1880's, he thought that he had before him the holdings of a single large provincial archives.[3] This was, of course, not the case, but it shows that, in spite of the fragmentary nature of the papyrus material, its provenance was always borne in mind. In line with that early readiness to accept an archival approach to the papyri, the great work of Ludwig Mitteis and Ulrich Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomatie der Papyruskunde* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1912), definitely established the archival character of most of the papyrus material. In this great work of historical and legal scholarship, the administrative genesis of the papyri was clearly delineated. Papyri were considered in their relationship to governmental functions and activities, to financial administration, taxation, agriculture, the military, and so on. Throughout much of the literature on the papyri, their "precious quality of constituting dossiers"[4] is realized, and this realization is brought to bear on their publication. In Karl Preisendanz' *Papyrusfunde und Papyrusforschung*, there is constant reference to the archival character of the papyri discovered, and more recently Erwin Seidl has attempted to identify the various kinds of Ptolemaic archives,[5] although most of them have been scattered. In view of the wide dispersion of papyrus archives, the plan of the late Fritz Heichelheim to compile a guide to the Greco-Roman archives of Egypt would have been a great and eminently useful achieve-

ment.[6] Regrettably this guide, which was to be organized by types of archives, has not been published.

Viewing the history of ancient archives as a whole, it is clear that our knowledge rests on uneven and incomplete foundations. In Section 20 of their well-known *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1968), S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin say this about the archivist's task: "The archivist deals with a body of archives just as the paleontologist deals with the bones of a prehistoric animal; he tries from these bones to put the skeleton of the animal together again." Similar but far more difficult is the task of the historian of ancient archives who—to retain the metaphor—sets out to bring to life a creature of the past with only the footprints and a few bones to go by. Although for some periods there is a wealth of pertinent data supporting a reconstruction, for others this is lacking. Where neither archival sites nor their contents are known, the archival historian, rather than giving an account of the archives that existed, must be satisfied with telling what archives should have existed. As a result, the history of the ancient archives must remain uneven and partly contestable. In the case of the countries of the Near East and the Aegean, it stems from our having unearthed numerous archival installations of one kind or another with their contents; and in the case of Egypt, where archival depositories have not been discovered, we have at least great quantities of records and excellent information about their genesis and the way they were kept. A totally different situation confronts us in ancient Greece and in Rome. True, the foundations of the Athenian Metroon have been laid bare, and Rome's Tabularium still looks down on the Forum Romanum, but unless reproduced on stone or bronze or referred to in the literature, we do not know the records themselves nor the conditions under which they were kept.

Other difficulties, too, stand in the way of a great design embracing all the archives of the ancient world. Records written on wood tablets or on leather have almost completely vanished. In addition, there are vast areas and peoples for which, in the absence of systematic efforts, information about archives is largely lacking, as for instance Urartu, north of Assyria. Information is also lacking for Carthage and Etruria, two lamentable gaps in our knowledge. Finally, we cannot tell what excavations now in progress in Mesopotamia and Asia Minor or undertaken in the future will add to our store of knowledge.

Although these considerations largely determine the degree of completeness of a history of ancient archives, there are certain phenomena that indicate important interconnections and, in fact, continuity in matters of archives-creation and archives-keeping. One of these interconnections, for

instance, throws revealing light on the endurance of administrative and record-keeping practices in an area that saw a succession of regimes. When the Greeks under Alexander the Great conquered Persia and seized its archives, they called them the "royal skins" (*diphtherai basilikai*), for leather, in addition to the clay tablet taken over trom Elam, served the Persians as a writing medium. The term *diphtherai* was inherited by the Arabs and the Turks, and in the form *deftar* it designates a key series in Turkish archival terminology. With the Arabs the term went to Sicily, where *defetarii*, the Italianized version of it, indicate the financial records of the Norman *doana regia*. To close the circle, the term returned from Turkish into modern Greek as *tefteri*, which means notebook.

Other instances of interconnection and possible transfer or exchange of administrative and archival experience seem plausible but are not yet confirmed. Did the beginning of a "royal notariat" in Syrian Ugarit influence developments in the Greek cities of Asia Minor and on the Greek mainland, where the notarial function became an integral part of the duties of the city archives? Was it Greek precedent that led to the establishment of the *kibotoi* (record chests) in Ptolemaic Egypt, and later to the institution of the property record office, or must we rather look for a connection between these institutions and those of Pharaonic Egypt? Was Greek practice with regard to the official recording of private transactions responsible for the institution of the *gesta municipalia* toward the end of the Roman Empire? Generally speaking, do these constitute instances of cultural transfer rather than cases of parallel development? And are we aware of similar instances of interconnection in the matter of record-making rather than record-keeping? The field seems to be wide open. . . .

In its great design, the contours of Western archival development can already be discerned. There is good reason to believe that "the princely courts of the Occident owe their archival organization as well as their register techniques to a twofold inheritance: the ancient Roman institutions as continued in the tradition of the Roman curia and the chancery practices of the ancient Orient that reached [these courts] through the administration of the Fatimid Arabs of Egypt and Sicily, which, [in turn], had absorbed Persian influence."[7] In the East, on the other hand, Persian experience, and with it the art of record-keeping, determined the character of financial administration of all of the Near East down to the eighteenth century.[8]

1. Claire Préaux, *L'économie royale des Lagides* (Brussels, 1939), p. 10.
2. *The Tebtunis Papyri*, I (London, 1902), xvi–xvii.
3. Karl Preisendanz, *Papyrusfunde und Papyrusforschung* (Leipzig, 1933), p. 112.
4. Préaux, *L'économie royale*, p. 12.
5. Erwin Seidl, *Ptolemäische Rechtsgeschichte*, 2d rev. ed. (Glückstadt, Hamburg, and New York, 1962).
6. Fritz Heichelheim, "Bericht über ein Papyrusverzeichnis nach Gauen, Archiven und Jahrhunderten geordnet," *Chronique d'Egypte*, VII (1932), 137–150.
7. Walther Hinz, "Das Rechnungswesen orientalischer Reichsfinanzämter im Mittelalter," *Islam*, XXIX (1949–1950), 119.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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