

International Scene

Diplomatics and Archives

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Abstract: Diplomatics is an auxiliary science of history created by the French monk Dom Jean Mabillon in 1681 to establish the authenticity of medieval charters. It played a major role in legitimizing archival documentation for historical research and in the education and work of European archivists, many of whom in the twentieth century have come to recognize its potential value for the study of modern and contemporary records. Special diplomatics could be developed to assist American archivists in understanding and working with legal documents, accounting records, and other distinctive forms of record-keeping; the same could be done to aid in the identification of forgeries and the authentication of electronic records.

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AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS ARE THE unknowing beneficiaries of *diplomatics* or *diplomatic*, recently defined as “the science dealing with the types and elements of documents.”¹ The auxiliary science of diplomatics was introduced in 1681 by the French Benedictine monk Dom Jean Mabillon (1632-1707) in his masterwork *De re diplomatica libri VI* and was focused originally on establishing the authenticity of charters or diplomas (hence the name) and other early medieval legal documents in archives by the study of their form.² Historiography manuals never fail to honor Mabillon’s signal contribution to the development of modern historical methodology by the critical evaluation and study of documents.³ But archivists (including Americans) should also recognize their debt to Mabillon and his method to the extent that it legitimized scholarly and administrative use of original records and has provided useful techniques for European archivists since the seventeenth century. The purpose of this article is to show why the

European auxiliary science of diplomatics arose, how it has influenced the subsequent history of the archival profession, and what relevance it has for American archivists.

Drawing on the pioneering efforts at textual criticism by Renaissance humanists, men of learning in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe came to emphasize the critical reading of primary sources determined to be authentic as a more reliable path to historical knowledge than the uncritical use of other types of documentation, in particular literary evidence favored by earlier writers. French, German, and Italian antiquarians collected, published, and used a wide variety of medieval charters or diplomas from the archives and treasuries of Europe to chronicle kingdoms, principalities, and religious orders. Original documents were also sought by lawyers and public officials for purposes more public and less scholarly, such as establishing royal rights, ancient titles, noble lineage, monastic privileges, constitutional franchises, and property rights.⁴

The users of public archives in early modern Europe felt free to pursue their research without an inordinate fear of encountering spurious documents. Arguments to this effect were made in Baldassare Bonifacio’s 1632 treatise *De archivis* and in Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* more than a century later.⁵ But the reputed wealth of

¹Peter Walne, ed., *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, comp. Frank B. Evans, François-J. Himly, and Peter Walne, ICA Handbooks Series, vol. 3 (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1984), 60. It is called *diplomatie* in French and *Diplomatik* or *Urkundenlehre* in German.

²Dom Jean Mabillon, *De re diplomatica libri VI, in quibus quidquid ad veterum instrumentorum antiquitatem, materiam, scripturam et stilum; quidquid ad signila, monogrammata, subscriptiones ne notas chronologicas; quidquid inde ad antiquariam, historicam forensemque disciplinas pertinet, explicatur et illustratur. Accedunt commentarius de antiquis regum Francorum palatiis; veterum scripturarum varia specimen, tabulis et comprehense; nova ducentorum, et amplius, monumentorum collectio, opera et studio domni Johannis Mabillon...* (Paris: L. Billaine, 1681).

³For example, Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1949), 36. “Cette année—là—dans l’histoire de l’esprit humain—la critique des documents d’archives fut définitivement fondée.” Robert-Henri Bautier, “Les Archives,” in Charles Samaran, ed., *L’histoire et ses méthodes* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1961), 1132. “L’apparition de la diplomatie, de la critique méthodique des documents avec Mabillon et les bénédictins, Muratori et Maffei, donne à l’archiviste la base scientifique qui permet son essor.”

⁴Arthur Giry, “Études de critique historique: Histoire de la diplomatie,” *Revue historique* 48 (1892): 232-35; Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1959), 37; Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” in *Studies in Historiography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 10-15; Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 192-93.

⁵Lester K. Born, “Baldassare Bonifacio and His Essay *De archivis*,” *American Archivist* 4 (October 1941): 236-37. “So great is the respect for archives that credence is obviously to be given to instruments produced from a public archives, and they make, as the jurists say, full faith.” “Diplomatique” in Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 4 (Paris:

forged medieval charters in religious archives tended to undermine the value of archival documentation generally for researchers in the second half of the seventeenth century, particularly for those influenced by the fashionable skepticism of René Descartes, Pierre Bayle, and other contemporary philosophers. A European movement that came to be known as historical Pyrrhonism cast doubt on traditional historical and religious beliefs, including both the literary and documentary evidence upon which they were predicated. In 1675 the Jesuit Bollandist scholar Daniel van Papenbroek (or Papebroche), an editor of the *Acta sanctorum* or *Lives of the Saints*, tried in vain to determine rules to distinguish genuine documents from false ones. As a result of his labors, Papenbroek was able to prepare a treatise (*Propyleum antiquarium circa veri ac falsi discrimen in vetustis membranis*) in a volume of *Acta sanctorum*, in which he contested the authenticity of ancient documents in monastic archives, including some forty Frankish (Merovingian and Carolingian) charters preserved in the archives of the French Abbey of Saint-Denis, to the grave consternation of its Benedictine monks.⁶

The Benedictine order's response came from the learned pen of Dom Jean Mabillon. As a member of the scholarly and reformist Congregation of Saint-Maur, he had for some time been guardian of the ancient objects and documents in the treasury of Saint-Denis before being called to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris to

survey the contents of its monastic archives in preparation for writing a history of the Benedictine order. To answer Papenbroek's charges, Mabillon devoted six years to the study of the early medieval charters at Saint-Denis as well as masses of pre-thirteenth-century documents in Benedictine archives and libraries across France until he had compared enough documents to complete *De re diplomatica libri VI* in 1681. The stated purpose of his treatise was to facilitate the unhesitating scholarly and administrative use of medieval charters found in archives. "Not only ecclesiastical and civil history," argued Mabillon, "but particularly the circumstances and positions of private individuals and churches depend on documents of this sort." Mabillon saw himself performing an important public service by establishing rules to distinguish authentic charters from forgeries or suspect documents.⁷ Mabillon was able to do this by careful analysis of external and internal evidence—that is, handwriting styles, language and punctuation, formulaic expressions, signatures and monograms, materials (parchment, ink, and seals), and chronology. Special attention was paid to variations in record-keeping practices over time and by place and to the historical and cultural context in which the documents were prepared. After Mabillon's treatise was published, Papenbroek was convinced and openly praised the work.⁸ But the Jesuits

Le Breton, 1754), 1023-24. "Le même inconvenient ne se rencontre pas dans les archives des princes, des cours supérieures & des villes: outre le soin scrupuleux que l'on a de n'y laisser rien entrer qui ne soit dans l'exacte vérité, à peine se trouveroit-il dans le royaume un homme assez hardi pour hasarder en faveur du prince, ce qu'il hasarderoit pour une communauté religieuse, quoique peu reconnaissante."

⁶Giry, "Études," 236-42; Wilhelm Wattenbach, *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1958), 11-20.

⁷Mabillon, *De re diplomatica*, 1. "Quanta sit istius artis utilitas ac necessitas, nemo non videt: cum non solum ecclesiastica & civilis historia, sed maxime privatorum hominum, ecclesiarumque fortunae plurimum pendeant ex ejusmodi monumentis. Quam ob rem magnopere interest ad antiquariam forensemque disciplinam haec tractatio: magnamque a re publica gratiam inierit, quisquis certas & accuratas tradiderit conditiones ac regulas, quibus instrumenta legitima a spuriis, certa & genuina ab incertis ac suspectis secernantur. Verum ad id argumentum pro dignitate tractandum opus esset in primis eruditione non vulgari, tum multo veterum chartarum atque archivorum usu, quibus summa etiam moderatio & aequitas accedat."

⁸The most recent studies of Jean Mabillon and the

remained critical, forcing Mabillon to respond definitively in 1704 to the new arguments they adduced.⁹

Generations of scholars embraced the critical method and could venture into the archives of Europe for historical research or documentary publication with a confidence not previously possible. In the two centuries following Mabillon's death, diplomatics was expanded geographically and chronologically to include documents of private and urban origin as well as the customary imperial, royal, and papal charters. Most important, it became an important pedagogical tool in the training of European historians and archivists. The Historisches Institut created at the University of Göttingen by Johann Christoph Gatterer in 1762 gave impetus to the development of "scientific history" by emphasizing the auxiliary sciences and non-literary evidence. The traditions of Mabillon and the Benedictines have lived on most vigorously in Paris at the École des Chartes, founded in 1821 and attached to the Sorbonne in 1897 to teach historical methods with reference to French medieval history and to train both archivists and librarians. Students studied diplomatics and other auxiliary sciences, public and private law,

archival history and administration, and Romance philology, and they learned how to exploit both the formulaic and original parts of archival documents to write history and prepare documentary editions. Called archivist-paleographers, the graduates of the École des Chartes received a legal monopoly on posts in national and provincial archives by the middle of the nineteenth century and came to exert a major influence on European and indirectly American historiography.

Influenced by the École des Chartes' emphasis on the auxiliary sciences and medieval history, schools for historians and archivists were founded across Europe, beginning in Germany in 1842.¹⁰ In Great Britain the study of diplomatics developed slowly but continues to have a role in archival education.¹¹ Most significant, training in diplomatics and related disciplines has long allowed professional archivists to understand and interpret the documents in their repositories in a way not possible for mere records custodians, unlearned in its principles.

While the study of diplomatics remains part of the education of European archivists today, one could question its relevance to the needs of North American archivists, hard-pressed to cope with the ever-increasing volume of contemporary records. The serious study of a discipline designed orig-

early development of diplomatics are Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *Jean Mabillon, Les historiens et la monarchie*, 1 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), 299 pp.; and Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *La défaite de l'érudition, Les historiens et la monarchie*, 2 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), 177-217. Older overviews include James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, 2 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1942), 2: 11-32; and Georges Tessier, "Diplomatique," in Samaran, *L'histoire et ses méthodes*, 639-42; Antoine Claude Pasquin Valéry, ed., *Correspondance inédite de Mabillon et de Montfaucon avec l'Italie...*, 3 vols. (Paris: Jules Labitte, 1846), 1: xiii-xv, 4, 8, 26. In 1680-81 Mabillon occasionally corresponded with Antonio Magliabechi (1633-1714) about his trips to archives and libraries.

⁹Dom Jean Mabillon, *Librorum de re diplomatica supplementum in quo archetypa in his libris pro regulis proposita, ipsaeque regulae denuo confirmantur, novisque specimenibus & argumentis afferuntur & illustrantur* (Paris: Charles Robustel, 1704).

¹⁰Giry, "Études," 242-56; Thompson, *Historical Writing*, 2: 406-7; Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der Historischen Methode und der Geschichtsphilosophie...* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), 300-304; Ernst Posner, "European Experiences in Training Archivists," in *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner*, ed. Ken Munden (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), 45-57; Maurice Prou, "L'École des Chartes," *Revue des deux mondes* 37 (January-February 1927): 372-96; Dorothy M. Quynn, "The École des Chartes," *American Archivist* 13 (July 1950): 271-83.

¹¹Hubert Hall, *Studies in English Official Historical Documents* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1969), 158-61; Michael Roper, "Archival Education in Britain," *American Archivist* 50 (Fall 1987): 587.

inally to establish the authenticity of pre-1500 legal records may seem at best an academic indulgence in an age of abundant records. Not surprisingly, American archival literature acknowledges diplomatics in passing as a European auxiliary science of little relevance to the modern archivist. "If an archivist is dealing with a medieval document," wrote Theodore R. Schellenberg with a clearly limited understanding of this archival tool, "he may discover its source by analyzing its style, which may require a knowledge of medieval modes of writing (paleography and diplomatics) and seals (spragistics or sigillography), or by analyzing its content, which may require a knowledge of medieval languages (linguistics), place names (toponymics), dates (chronology), etc." Schellenberg later added that though diplomatics and other auxiliary sciences continued to be studied in Europe in order for archivists to be able to interpret ancient and medieval documents, "the training given in continental Europe has little applicability to the work of an American archivist."¹²

For almost a century, however, diplomatics has been seen by European archivists as having wider utility than simply as a technique for interpreting medieval documents. In the landmark 1898 manual by the Dutch archivists Muller, Feith, and Fruin, diplomatics is treated as having value for pre-1800 formal documents (*oorkonden* in Dutch), including charters and other

"authenticated" legal instruments found individually or in series in archival repositories.¹³ Hilary Jenkinson, the distinguished British archivist and scholar, argued in 1947 that diplomatics "in the hands of its best-known professors has been too rigidly confined to one category of forms—those of the Medieval letter, whose peculiarities it first investigated." Jenkinson saw the potential value of developing special diplomatics for accounting records, private conveyances, later royal letters, and other types of documents regardless of their type or date. Jenkinson felt that this expanded science of diplomatics, supplemented by the study of administrative history, would be a valuable archival tool offering many opportunities for research and publication by the professional archivist.¹⁴

Similar arguments have been made in France and Italy. In 1942 Jacques de Dampierre suggested that the *École des Chartes* deal with modern, printed government documents (*publications officielles*) with the same critical principles and careful attention to form, integrity, and administrative context it reserved for medieval documents.¹⁵ In the 1960s Georges Tessier emphasized the value of diplomatics to demonstrate the mechanism of the creation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century doc-

¹²Theodore R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 86; T. R. Schellenberg, "Archival Training in Library Schools," *American Archivist* 31 (1968): 155. The German-American archivist Ernst Posner emphasized the value of diplomatics for all sorts of ancient documents (*Archives in the Ancient World* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972], 10, 15-16), but he minimized its value for modern records, saying that the "study of and instruction in the history of recordmaking and record administration are as necessary for the archivist of our times as was diplomatics for our predecessors" ("European Experiences," in *Archives and the Public Interest*, 56).

¹³Samuel Muller, Johan Adriaan Feith, and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. of 2d ed. by Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1969), 35, 116-17, 163-76, 178-80, 206-13.

¹⁴Hilary Jenkinson, "The English Archivist: A New Profession," in *Selected Writings of Hilary Jenkinson* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1980), 249. He presented some of the same arguments in his 1957 study "Archives and the Science and Study of Diplomatic" (*ibid.*, 43-48) and the 1960 address "Roots" (*ibid.*, 368-80). See also Hilary Jenkinson, "Archives," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (New York: Macmillan, 1937), 1: 176-77; and *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., 1965), 204.

¹⁵Jacques de Dampierre, *Les publications officielles des pouvoirs publics: étude critique et administrative* (Paris: Editions A. Picard et fils, 1942), 8-9, 25-36, 378-84.

uments of all sorts and to develop a more critical understanding of the forms of modern documentation.¹⁶ Recently, Paola Carucci and other Italian archivists have worked to develop special diplomatics dealing with contemporary documents. Luciana Duranti, in particular, has studied diplomatics at the Special School for Archivists and Librarians of the University of Rome and taught the diplomatic criticism of archival materials at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies of the University of British Columbia; she argues that the establishment of records management and forms control in the mid-twentieth century has made diplomatics useful for the identification and description of contemporary records, including the Canadian public records that she and her students are studying.¹⁷

Clearly, the literature advocating the value of diplomatics for modern and contemporary records is chiefly European in origin and focuses on formal documents. But would an appreciation of form not be as much a boon to the study of American documents as it is for European documents? Scant attention has been paid in American archival literature to formal documents or to the historical evolution of record-keeping. This gap has been recognized by American documentary editors, who, in their need to evaluate and transcribe original source texts, have had ample reason to recognize the value of diplomatics as a key to understanding record-keeping methods.¹⁸ In his 1987

presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, William L. Joyce underscored the value of traditional historical methodology in archival education, noting how rare courses in paleography and diplomatics have become. "Perhaps by reemphasizing the theoretical importance of the attributes of the record in its fullest historical context," Joyce suggested, "we might redirect interest toward understanding the sources themselves."¹⁹

American archivists could benefit in the study of legal documents, accounting records, and other distinctive forms of record-keeping. A special diplomatics is needed to explain how the form and function of particular types of American documents have evolved over time. Such documents, extant in enormous volume in archives and historical repositories and remarkably underutilized, would, if analyzed as thoroughly as the records of science and technology have been in recent years, benefit the archival profession not only by better-informed appraisal decisions but by more effective understanding, promotion, and use of collections.²⁰ If archivists are to be the agents of "cultural transfer," as Maynard Brichford has argued, they must be able to understand critically and interpret accurately all forms of documentation in their custody.²¹

¹⁶Georges Tessier, *La diplomatique*, 3d ed. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1966), 14-15; "Diplomatique" in Samaran, *L'histoire et ses méthodes*, 667-68.

¹⁷Paola Carucci, *Il documento contemporaneo: diplomatia et criteri di edizione* (Rome: La Nuova Italia Scientifica, 1987); Luciana Duranti, Letters to the author, 2 May, 16 September 1988. She conducted a diplomatics workshop at the 1988 SAA Annual Meeting in Atlanta and is writing a series of articles on the subject for *Archivaria*.

¹⁸Mary-Jo Kline, *A Guide to Documentary Editing* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987),

89. "Unfortunately, there are few secondary sources to which an editor can refer. In European medieval studies, there is the recognized academic discipline of *diplomatic*, which offers systematic studies of record-keeping of important groups of clerks or administrators. There are no such formal courses from which to learn how the secretary of the American Continental Congress maintained his records in 1785 or how elementary students were taught to standardize the forms of personal correspondence in 1830."

¹⁹William L. Joyce, "Archival Education: Two Fables," *American Archivist* 51 (Winter/Spring 1988), 21.

²⁰Joan K. Haas, Helen Willa Samuels, and Barbara Trippel Simmons, *Appraising the Records of Modern Science and Technology: A Guide* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985).

²¹Maynard Brichford, "Academic Archives: Über-

We must not forget, finally, that in its attention to form and record-keeping, diplomatics is ultimately concerned with the authenticity of documents. The zealous medieval monks who fabricated charters to protect the "ancient" rights and privileges of their orders have on more than one occasion been replaced by modern records manipulators who for monetary gain or political advantage do not hesitate to erase tapes, alter automated records, and hide textual alterations in new formats (microfilm or photocopy). The forged Hitler diaries and Mark Hofman/Mormon historical manuscripts, along with other, perhaps less notorious examples, serve as vivid reminders of this fact. There have been occasional articles on the authentication and certification of documents, the admissibility of documents as evidence, document identification and dating, and forgeries of historical documents.²² These have, however, generally been written without reference to diplomatics, for in the present age of abundant records, the authenticity of archival materials and manuscripts is tacitly assumed and very rarely questioned. But office automation has facilitated equally the legal and illegal manipulation of the records of contemporary society. For every unauthorized records manipulator discov-

ered, others can succeed with impunity under cover of paper glut and advanced record-keeping technology. The current interest of lawyers, regulators, and others in the admissibility of optically stored records as evidence underscores the persistence of an age-old problem. A special diplomatics to deal with automated records should not be beyond the realm of possibility.

Diplomatics has had an immense influence on the history of archives over the past three centuries and on the honored place of original records and manuscripts in historical research. Archivists today universally accept the historicist imperative, made possible by diplomatics, that historical writing must be documented with authentic archival evidence. In all aspects of archives administration there is the tacit assumption that without archives there would be no history, even that archivists can control the past. But this was not always the case, and without the legitimization of archival documentation in the seventeenth century, modern archival repositories would have a markedly different character. It is surprising then that diplomatics is barely known in North America outside the confines of history departments. Beyond appreciating its historical role, American archivists could develop varieties of special diplomatics for eighteenth-century legal records, nineteenth-century business records, or contemporary automated records, to cite a few examples. The result would be a valuable method in archival education and a useful curatorial tool for the keepers of modern archives, focusing the attention of archivists on forms of documentation old and new as comprehensible sources and usable evidence rather than as the sometimes amorphous, always bulky contents of records shelving and storage boxes.

lieferungsbildung," *American Archivist* 43 (Fall 1980): 449-60.

²²Frank B. Evans, *Modern Archives and Manuscripts: A Select Bibliography* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975), 63-64. See, for example, Herman Kahn, "A Note on the Authentication of Documents," *American Archivist* 12 (October 1949): 361-65; Cyrus B. King, "The Archivist and 'Ancient Documents' as Evidence," *American Archivist* 26 (October 1963): 487-91; and Gary M. Peterson and Trudy Huskamp Peterson, *Archives and Manuscripts: Law, Basic Manual Series* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985), 89-90.