

International Scene

The Archivist as Historical Researcher: Research and Archivistics at the Danish State Archives

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Abstract: Archivists in the Danish state archives have addressed the issue of professional identity by emphasizing the archivist's standing as a member of the historical research community. Traditionally, historical research has been seen as a part of the archivist's duties, and a portion of the work week is designated for that purpose. The author describes the way that the policy has been implemented and assesses its effects.

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LIKE ALL OTHER PROFESSIONALS, present-day archivists are experiencing the mixed blessings of increasing specialization and growing professional requirements. In many countries, this challenge has been met by developing already existing facilities for archival training at the university level.¹ This has led to the increasing distinctiveness of an archival professional identity.

The traditions of the Danish state archives have led to the adoption of a different solution, emphasizing the archivist's identity as a member of the historical research community.² As far as we know, the adopted formula is well-nigh unique: every archivist is entitled to devote two-sevenths of his or her weekly hours to independent historical research on freely chosen topics, subject to submitting an annual report to the director of the national archives.³ This arrangement is closely connected with the fact that with very few exceptions, Danish archivists are university-trained historians. This is, again, a consequence of the small size of the country. The number of archivists—around fifty posts in the public archives altogether—is simply not sufficient to support an independent archives school. But the emphasis upon historical research in the Danish archives should not be seen as the mere product of external constraints. It is first and foremost the expression of a deliberate choice.

The Historical Background

Free access to the older holdings of the Danish royal archives was granted when the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1848 in favor of a constitutional regime—even



Figure 1: Symbol of the Danish National Archives, the coat of arms of King Frederick II (1559-88) alludes to the year 1582, when the medieval royal archives were brought from the castles of Kalundborg and Vordingborg to Copenhagen castle. This is usually regarded as the founding year of the Danish national archives. The coat of arms has figured on all publications from the archives since the 1880s.

though until 1889 the archives retained, somewhat incongruously, the venerable name of Secret Archives (*Geheimearkivet* in Danish). The choice of the prominent national liberal historian C. F. Wegener (1802-93) as director of the Secret Archives was indicative of the concern of the then dominant National Liberals for the role of the archives as a repository for Denmark's national historical tradition. It was also entirely in keeping with the later absolute monarchy's conception of its archives, which had been headed by noted historians since the mid-eighteenth century, and where access had been granted fairly liberally to serious scholars since the early nineteenth century.

In 1889 the Danish state archives were given their present structure. A number of central archives were merged with the Secret Archives to form the Danish National Archives (*Rigsarkivet*), and three provincial archives (*provinsarkiver*, later called *landsarkiver*) were created.⁴ Even though

¹See e.g. the articles in the *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 224-362.

²For a general introduction to Danish archives, see Vagn Dybdahl and Michael H. Gelting, eds., *Danmarks arkiver. Historie, funktioner, fremtid*. (Copenhagen: Rigsarkivet/G.E.C. Gad, 1982).

³The same arrangement applies to the Danish Business Archives (*Erhvervsarkivet*), which is an independent entity.

⁴A fourth provincial archives was created in the 1930s following the return of North Schleswig to Denmark in 1920.

this restructuring was done under a Conservative cabinet, it bore the strong imprint of the Liberal opposition. The creation of the provincial archives was in line with the Liberals' concern for the people's identity as expressed through the history of the local community, which was seen as the necessary complement to the national history emphasized by the Conservatives. The first director of the National Archives was the extremely productive and imaginative historical writer A. D. Jørgensen (1840-97), whose views were equally acceptable to Conservatives and Liberals. The provincial archives were expected to be the focus of historical research on the local level, just as the National Archives was to continue the same function on the national level.

This bit of historical background is necessary in order to show the strong emphasis given from the outset to the state archives as centers of active historical research. And in fact, until the mid-twentieth century the majority of scientific historical employment in Denmark was to be found in the archives. Not until the spectacular growth of the universities after the Second World War did the number of university teachers in history outgrow the number of archivists.

A Time of Uncertainty

In the years after the Second World War, the archives were beginning to feel the full impact of the accelerating growth in public administration. With the constant increase in size and number of public administrative services came an increasing pressure on the archives to relieve the offices of their older papers, as well as the increasing risk of uncontrolled disposal of government papers. Preliminary attempts to keep the situation from getting out of hand had been made in the 1930s by the director of the National Archives, Axel Linvald (1886-1965), but they were thwarted by the outbreak of war and the German occupation.

It was therefore left to director Johan Hvidtfeldt (1908-79) to pick up the thread and introduce a systematic policy of records management for local and central government offices.

This was done during the 1960s and early 1970s. But, successful as it was, this policy was not without its drawbacks. Even though the number of archivists was substantially augmented, it was inevitable that the growing involvement of the staff in administrative duties risked sapping the strength of its research commitment. Traditionally, historical research had been seen as an integral part of the archivists' duties. It was customary for archivists to devote two hours of the seven-hour work day to research, but no fixed hours had been formally allotted for that purpose. Now, with ever more pressing obligations towards the preservation of present-day records, the time left over for historical research was being whittled down relentlessly. One by one the great publications series of the archives came to a standstill. At the same time, the favorable research facilities (and the higher salaries) of the historians at universities created a certain sense of inferiority especially among younger archivists, leading to the departure of many of them to the universities.

Fortunately the leadership of the National Archives as well as the Ministry of Culture was aware of the necessity of preserving the archives' commitment to historical research. This, combined with pressure from the archivist's professional organization, led to the codification in 1963 of rules for the research component of archivists' work. Since then, every archivist has been formally entitled to use two-sevenths of the week for historical research. This privilege and obligation is explicitly specified in each archivist's contract.⁵

⁵The choice of a division into sevenths was determined by the length of the work day in 1963, but the proportion has remained unchanged through later revisions. The present rules date from 1976.

Research and Records Management

The research arrangement of the Danish state archives is thus the outgrowth of a long tradition. Is it, then, just an obsolete product of hoary custom, impeding the archives from facing the full challenge of fast-changing information techniques? We are convinced that it is not. On the contrary, our research commitment is a major asset in our struggle to keep up with the task.

First, it keeps the ultimate finality of archives work constantly present in our minds. The close cooperation with the administration involved in records management makes it very easy for the records manager to get so familiar with administrative concerns that they come to overshadow other aspects of the documentation. (I use the expression records manager interchangeably with archivist, since in Denmark the two functions are united in one person). But the main purpose of records management is not to create administratively useful archival systems. It is a rational organization of archival systems to ensure the preservation of those parts of the documentation which are of lasting historical value and the discarding of the rest. It is our contention that in order to do this, the records manager has to be an active historian. It is not sufficient to be concerned about documenting the internal processes of an institution and its main areas of activity. More often than not, future historians will want to use the records as witnesses to society at large, not as remnants of administrative processes. This means that a good working knowledge of the diversity of possible historical approaches is essential to the records manager. This knowledge can, of course, never be perfect; we cannot foresee what concerns historians will have in fifty or a hundred years. But, imperfect as it must be, it can only be gained through constant experience as an active member of the historical research community.

What is more, an identity as a historian



Figure 2: The close connection between archives and the historical community at large is common to the Nordic countries. This is most visibly expressed in the coordination in time and place between the Nordic archival and historical congresses that are held every third year. This photograph from the library hall of the Danish Business Archives in Aarhus shows participants in the Nordic archives congress of 1984, when Denmark hosted the event. While Denmark is the only Nordic country to include individual research among the archivist's regular duties, Norway has since the mid-1980s begun developing a similar arrangement, but so far only as an option and on a more limited scale than in Denmark. Photo by Hans Sode-Madsen.

keeps the archivist from being gobbled up by the administration. This is a very real danger inherent in records management. By putting too much emphasis on the utilitarian aspects of records management, the archives may easily be seen by the administration chiefly as technical auxiliaries. Especially in times of budgetary cuts, this may become positively threatening to the other face of the archival Janus, the services offered to the archives' users in and outside the reading room. As far as we can judge, this is a threat that has come

close to materializing for Swedish archivists, who were very keen on advocating their administrative utility during the 1970s.

In Denmark, the archives' well-marked identity as historical institutions ensures that we possess an independent authority that may be used to balance purely utilitarian views of what should be preserved. That authority stems from the long-term representation of the interests of national history. Needless to say, it is an authority that must be used with much tact; its weight is often slight, and its essential advantage is the independence of judgment it confers on the archivist.

The Archivists' Historical Research: Scope and Organization

It has always been a fundamental tenet of the archives that in historical research the free choice of a subject is an essential precondition for a good outcome. The archivists' research projects have therefore never been subject to prior approval by the administrative head of the archives. There are, however, limits to the kind of subjects that may be studied. Essentially, the subject has to be related to Danish history or to the holdings of the Danish state archives. This is a rule that is being liberally interpreted; there is no ban on research on the history of other countries, as long as this research can be related to Danish history by a comparative approach. Thus, only subjects that are definitely far-fetched (from an archival point of view!), such as ancient Greek poetry, have been ostracized.

Control of the adequate use of each archivist's research time is exercised on the basis of an annual report written by the archivist according to a standard form, specifying publications and manuscripts finished during the year, and giving a short status report on ongoing or new projects. In addition to this, the current form specifies various cultural activities more or less closely related to the archivist's scientific research,

such as lectures, active participation in scientific conferences, membership on editorial boards and on committees of historical societies, general educational work, and the like. A revision of the form is now being considered in order to eliminate the reporting of marginal activities that are not actually related to the individual archivist's research.

The annual research reports are delivered to a standing committee of three members chosen by and among the archivists at the Danish national and provincial archives. Members of the committee serve for a three-year term, with one of its members renewed each year. Committee members are eligible for one re-election. The committee submits the reports together with its comments, if any, to the director of the national archives for approval. In the rare case where an individual archivist's research report is of a nature that might motivate interference, this procedure gives the committee the occasion to intervene in an informal way, thereby avoiding formal sanctions on the director's part.

Obviously, this procedure is dependent for its effectiveness on the existence of a broad consensus on what is adequate use of research time. From time to time, such matters of principle have to be broached between the director and the committee, but no strict guiding rules have been laid down. In the last resort, the too-famous adage "publish or perish" will probably be the rule; but since research is extremely difficult to quantify, the application of this adage will be tempered by considerations of quality and circumstances, including the archivist's other research-related activities. If all efforts to reach acceptable results in an amicable way should fail, this would not automatically lead to dismissal; an alternative solution would be to rescind the archivist's research time and delegate him or her to full-time administrative work. Fortunately, it has never been necessary to apply these ultimate sanctions.

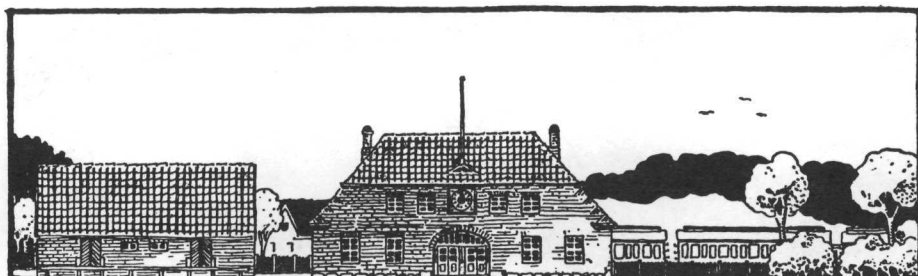


Figure 3: Another archives-based research project was started in 1980 on the subject of the many new towns that developed in the Danish countryside from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and which were usually dubbed “railway station towns” from a prominent feature in their topography. The project’s symbol is appropriately this drawing by Charles I. Schou of an ideal small town railway station, from an exhibition catalogue of 1909. In this case, the majority of the project’s collaborators were taken from outside the state archives; but, significantly as an indication of the importance of research in the archives’ public image, most of these collaborators have afterwards found employment as archivists in local historical collections.

The Fields and Structuring of the Archivists’ Research

Although the Danish state archives have traditionally included a couple of prominent medievalists, the early modern period has been the main focus of research for archivists. In recent years, however, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been coming strongly to the fore, no doubt stimulated by the growing emphasis in the archives’ administrative work on the treatment of recent records.

This development might be thought to create a dilemma for the archivist. Most of the records that are transferred from the administration to the archives are still subject to access restrictions, often for a considerable number of years after being deposited. Obviously, the staff of the archives has access to the restricted files for professional archival treatment. But what if the archivist treating such files would want to use them for personal historical research? Will this situation not create a constant risk of abuse of privileged access to restricted documents?

In this respect, two facts must be borne in mind. First, like all other civil servants, archivists are bound to observe profes-

sional confidentiality. Any breach thereof would be of the gravest consequence for the offender. Second—and this is the essential point—while being severe on paper, Danish rules of access to restricted documents are in actual practice very liberal. Administrative files are, as a rule, restricted for fifty years; but if they contain information concerning the security of the state, the privacy of individual citizens, or private business matters, files are restricted for a longer span of time, usually eighty, sometimes one hundred years.

Such draconian rules cannot be maintained without providing a procedure for derogations. Access to restricted files will usually be granted as long as a research project is designed so that the respect of individual and corporate rights of privacy can be guaranteed (reasons of state are rarely invoked). The Danish National Archives and the appropriate administrative services handle between three and four hundred applications a year, and only half a dozen of these are refused. Thus, a serious application for access from an archivist will have every chance of succeeding; which means that there is no reason to risk sanctions by attempting to circumvent the regulations.

The archivists’ research subjects span the



Figure 4: Danish university graduates have long suffered some inconvenience with respect to international contacts in that Danish university degrees have not been readily comparable to the degrees of non-Scandinavian countries. This situation has recently been remedied by a partial re-designing of the Danish university system, notably introducing a new Ph.D. degree exactly equivalent to its Anglo-American namesake. The photograph shows the doctoral lecture on 4 October 1989, of archivist Tyge Krogh, the first archivist in the Danish National Archives to obtain the new degree; the lecture was given in the National Archives' library hall. Photo by Tage Ludvigsen.

whole width of the historical spectrum, closely reflecting the changing trends in historical research at large. Thus, archivists as well as historians at universities have followed the changes in emphasis characteristic of historical research in the twentieth century, from political through economic to social history, including such recent topics as the history of mentalities and of sexuality. Even the now prevalent disaffection towards traditional source editing has been perceptible among archivists, although for obvious reasons this field has traditionally been a strong point in archivists' research. On a par with other historians, archivists have contributed to most of the general historical works and standard manuals that have appeared in Denmark for the last one hundred years, from the grand history of the Danish kingdom (*Danmarks Riges Historie*) at the turn of the century to the agricultural history of Denmark (*Det*

danske landbrugs historie) appearing since 1988.

In this way, archivists have never ceased to be an active and perfectly integrated part of the historical community. This is reflected in the fact that Danish archivists have always been prominent participants in the collective structures of the research community. There has always been an archivist on the board of the Danish National Research Council for the Humanities (*Statens Humanistiske Forskningsråd*), and archivists are found in the administration of many of Denmark's historical societies, such as the Historical Society of Jutland (*Jysk Selskab for Historie*), the Society for Rural History (*Landbohistorisk Selskab*), the Union of Historical Institutions and Societies in Denmark (*Dansk Historisk Fællesforening*) as well as the numerous local historical societies that are constituent members of the latter body.

While this shows the archivists' position as full-fledged members of the historical community, there is one field that has always been their particular hunt: the history of Danish administration and bureaucracy. The mainspring of this research has, of course, been its fundamental necessity for the proper treatment of the records and for providing adequate guidance for users in the reading rooms. In the mid-1970s a significant part of the archives' research potential was harnessed to a collective project, aimed at creating a comprehensive history of Danish public administration at the local level from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. This project had the double purpose of providing a readily accessible introduction to the workings of the most important institutions and administrative procedures, and on a more general level, contributing to the overall analysis of the Danish polity from the introduction of an absolute monarchy in 1660 to the constitutional monarchy created in 1848/49. Although the full intentions of this ambitious project were never fulfilled, it has rendered a great service to Danish historical research, and the publication series that it initiated, *Studies in Administrative History* (*Administrationshistoriske Studier*, 1978-, thirteen volumes to date) is being continued as a framework for archivists' future contributions to the field.

It should be emphasized that this research project did not imply a departure from the above-mentioned principle of free choice of subject. It was a project initiated by a number of archivists and proposed to, and freely accepted by, a number of colleagues. Certain subjects were allotted to specially engaged "outside" historians. The same voluntary principle was partly responsible for the suspending of the Danish National Archives' great series of source publications from the 1960s until recently, when new editors were found. The great calendar of the letter-books of the Danish

chancellery from 1551 to 1660 (*Kancelliets Brevbøger*) that had been appearing at regular intervals since 1885, had reached the year 1645 when the last volume was published in 1968. Not until 1987 was it possible to publish the following volume, covering 1646. A similar fate befell the calendar of title deeds concerning the royal demesne, which has been suspended at the year 1765 since 1955. It is hoped that publication may be resumed soon.

Apart from such prestigious projects of the Danish National Archives, the research profile of the archives is dominated by individual work. Since 1985 the Danish National Archives has been publishing a series called *Studies and Texts* (*Studier og Kilder*; six volumes to date) to accommodate such individual contributions to general history. In many instances, this research has enabled archivists to obtain the Danish doctoral degree (dr. phil.), roughly equivalent to the old, "learned" Ph.D. degree, which requires a thesis demanding several years of work and is usually passed many years after the normal Ph.D.

Problems for the Future

This very individualistic structure of the archivists' research is no doubt a great advantage to the archives. It enables archivists to engage in a wide range of research on different subjects, and it enables them swiftly to contribute new, relevant information to research subjects on the basis of their thorough knowledge of the archives. Yet this structure is not without problems of its own in an age when historical research, like so many other branches of learning, is being increasingly dominated by large-scale team projects. Of course this does not in the least impair the quality of the individual archivist's research, but it may lead to considering archivists' research as less prestigious than project-oriented university research.

This risk is aggravated by the double danger inherent in the archivist's research situation. The daily contact with the incredible profusion of historical information in the archives tempts the archivist to scatter his or her efforts among a large number of subjects. This temptation is perhaps reinforced by the fact that the archivist's research is not tied to teaching. While the inspiration stemming from contact with reading-room users should certainly not be underestimated, it is true that the absence of teaching from the weekly schedule makes it easier for the archivist to become engrossed in points of detail. Again, this does not in itself impair the quality of the work, but in an age when historians are almost obsessed with synthesis, this too may lead to diminished prestige for the archivist's research.

As far as is possible by means of administrative measures, these dangers have been countered by the adoption effective 1 January 1989, of a new status for the Danish state archives. This status—as a so-called sectorial research institution—which the archives share with the Danish National Museum, the scientific libraries, and a number of other institutions, ensures the scientific status of the archives by demanding a more rigorous definition of the required research qualifications for appointment as

archivist.⁶ Moreover, an old grievance of the archives has been satisfied by giving archivists the same salary as historians at universities.

Theoretically, the new status also enables the director of the Danish national archives to exert a more detailed direction over archivists' research. However, at present there are no intentions of changing the research policies of the archives, since the results of the present situation are very satisfactory on the whole. The archivists are holding their own as members of the Danish historical community and such problems as may arise, e.g. from the above-mentioned danger of getting stuck in details, are better taken care of by encouragement than by strict direction. It is essential to maintain a corporate feeling for the vital importance of research as part of the archivist's duties and a lively research ambience. This has been a continuous concern of the Danish national archives through the years when records management might have totally absorbed the archives' research potential. The successful results show that this policy has been justified.

⁶The appointment procedures have thus been brought in line with procedures at the universities. However, in actual practice, the same criteria have always been applied at the archives as at the universities.