

European Archives in an Era of Change

A Case for Bridging the Gap: The Significance of the Vatican Archives Project for International Archival Information Exchange

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THE YEAR 1992 USHERS in a redefined Europe. With this redefinition, Europeans may indeed discover that their collective interests and needs will call for information from a variety of sources transcending national boundaries. This interdependence will have a direct impact on archival practices which have evolved from many local, provincial, and national traditions. As scholars pursue questions about the history of a more united Europe, they will design their research to straddle the earlier period of separate national identities and the newer period of unity emerging at the end of the twentieth century. In doing so, these historians will require access to comparable information from the archives of several countries.¹

To suit these needs, archivists should realize now that future scholars will approach European collections with a continental

Vatican Archives Project of the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan. I want to express my gratitude to the Getty Grant Program of Santa Monica, California; the National Endowment for the Humanities, a U.S. Federal Agency; the American Friends of the Vatican Library; and the Vice President for Research at the University of Michigan, who have all provided funding for various parts of the project. I also want to express my gratitude to the project staff, including Elizabeth Yakel, Katherine Gill, Leonard Coombs, Thomas Powers, and Claudia Carlen, IHM; the prefect of the Vatican Archives, Josef Metzler, OMI; Msgr. Charles Burns of the archives staff; Reverend Leonard Boyle, O.P., prefect of the Vatican Library; Paul Weston of the Library staff; the faculty and staff of the American Academy in Rome; Elio Lodolini and Carla Lodolini of the University of Rome; Lucio Lume, Maria Pia Rinaldi Mariani, and Maria Pastura Ruggiero of the Archivio di Stato di Roma.

¹This article is based on work undertaken by the

rather than local perspective. This new geographical orientation is emerging at the same time as great transitions occur in automated information systems. Archivists and scholars would do well to coordinate their interests in the technological transformations emerging in this new, international research environment.

The European setting of unification and automation illustrates the critical need for standard or comparable formats for any computer-based description of archival material. Such a standardization should rely in part on collaboration with users as descriptive information is prepared for archival databases. The opportunity to enhance access through automation and collaboration on an international scale has been a motivating force in the University of Michigan's Vatican Archives Project. The project has already raised many questions, but its ultimate influence awaits further work and analysis.² I would argue that the pattern of questions arising from the Vatican Archives Project can contribute to ongoing discussions in many countries about the design and potential of modern archival access systems.³

²For a description of the project at an earlier stage, see Leonard A. Coombs, "A New Access System for the Vatican Archives," *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 538-546.

³Publications resulting from this discussion include Michael Cook, *Manual for Archival Description* (Aldershot, England: Gower, 1989) and Richard P. Smiraglia, ed., *Describing Archival Materials, the Use of the MARC-AMC Format* (New York: Haworth Press, 1990). Two recent issues of the *American Archivist* were devoted to a discussion of standards for archival description. See the *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989) and 53 (Winter 1990). The extensive work of David Bearman and Richard Lytle has contributed to the conceptual design of such systems. See in particular David Bearman and Peter Sigmond, "Explorations of Form of Material Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 249-253. The general context for these issues was explored during the Second European Conference on Archives held in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1989. See *Proceedings of the Second European Conference on Archives*, ed. Judy A. Koucky (Paris: International Council on Archives, 1989).

Origins of the Vatican Archives Project

In 1988, a team of archivists from the University of Michigan began to create a computer-based access system for the archives of the Vatican. The project was undertaken to enhance the value of existing inventories (called indices) and guides. Using the USMARC AMC format, six archivists surveyed the entire holdings of the Vatican Archives to prepare a complete inventory, in computer readable form, of the record series of the archives.

The project developed out of a sense that existing reference sources were not sufficiently comprehensive to allow researchers to understand the basic organization of the archives of the Vatican and the relationship of the records housed in the archives with the evolving nature of the Vatican administration. Researchers have had to rely upon many guides and indices, each with a different emphasis, covering time period, geographical focus, or agency within the larger Vatican structure. The content of these indices has evolved over centuries. Some indices represent generations of dedicated effort by the staff of the archives. Others are idiosyncratic. Some record series have no indices at all. The newcomer to the Vatican Archives has had to face an impressive but overwhelming set of these guides and indices in the Vatican Archives "index room," where all research begins.

Most of the early indices were created to serve the internal needs of the Vatican. With the opening in 1880 of the Vatican Archives for general research, the use of these indices became more problematic. Vatican archivists have in the last several decades been well aware of the limitations of the traditional reference sources for modern research methods. They have achieved much greater research control over specific series by creating exceptionally fine finding aids. Furthermore, there have been efforts to prepare very extensive guides, but even the major works by Boyle, Pásztor, and Fink

are still selective.⁴ The lack of any standard and comprehensive description for all series has remained an impediment.

An inspection of the stacks of the Vatican Archives confirmed to the University of Michigan team of archivists that a more comprehensive index was in fact possible within a reasonable amount of time. Records are grouped on shelves according to their original agency and then by internal order. By comparison, none of the available guides or indices can illustrate the scope and structure of the archives in the way that an observation of the stacks allows.⁵

The challenge of the Vatican Archives Project has been to attempt to share this sense of the overall scope and structure of the archives with scholars and to direct them to the more detailed indices. In conceptualizing the project, the team decided to use a machine-based approach to the problem. Given the accomplishments and the goals of the Research Libraries Information Network, it seemed that the USMARC AMC format in the Research Library Group's database would be an appropriate model for this effort.⁶

Two Major Descriptive Elements for the Vatican Archives Project

The thrust of the Vatican Archives Project has been to create a comprehensive database for series-level information, including

two basic elements of an access system based on provenance. The first element is a listing, as complete as possible, of all agencies or departments of the Vatican bureaucracy. The history and evolving function of each agency constitute the substance of this first element. The second element is a complete set of record series descriptions for each agency which deposited its records within the archives. These descriptions comply with the USMARC AMC format.⁷

The agency histories serve two purposes in the database. The first purpose, in accordance with the principle of provenance, is to offer an understanding of the agency's history and functions so that researchers can form specific analytical parameters and thereby anticipate the kinds of documentation generated by an agency. The second purpose of the agency histories is to provide a linkage between agencies and extant records. By listing each record group by agency name, it is possible for a researcher to discover the quantity and nature of records which have survived for each particular agency. Conversely, a researcher can also confirm the lack of any available records by locating agency histories for which there are no related descriptions of record series noted in the database.⁸ (see figure 1)

There are two types of exceptions to this proposed linkage of record series and agencies. First, there are record series which could not be linked to any specific agency, even at the time of their creation. These records are among the earliest and most important records in the archives. They include the Vatican Registers and the *Archivum Archis* (records of papal pri-
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⁴See Leonard P. Boyle, O.P., *A Survey of the Vatican Archives and of its Medieval Holdings* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972); Lajos Pásztor, *Guida delle Fonti per la Storia dell'America Latina: Negli Archivi della Santa Sede e Negli Archivi Ecclesiastici d'Italia* (Vatican City: Archivio Segreto Vaticano, 1970); and Karl August Fink, *Das Vatikanische Archiv Einführung in Die Bestände Unde Ihre Erforschung* (Rome: W. Regenber, 1951).

⁵For this project the project staff was granted access to the stacks of the archives.

⁶The Vatican Archives Project relied considerably upon Steve Hensen's *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloguing Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989).

⁷Our procedure for entering records follows two steps. The records were first prepared using a personal computer with Micro-MARC software developed by Fred Honhart at Michigan State University. Once completed, the records will then be transferred via tape into the RLG database, RLIN.

⁸An important source for this work was Nicolo del Re, *La Curia Romana: Lineamente Storico-giuridici* (Rome: Edizioni de Storia e Letteratura, 1970).

Figure 1

Structure of the Database

- I. Master Record (gives an overview of the government and organization of the Vatican and explains the database, discussing inclusions, exclusions, and caveats).
- II. General groupings of the agencies.
 - A. Catholic Church. Apostolic Nunciatures. (Agency history record: ID 00221)
 - B. Catholic Church. Cappella Pontificia. (Agency history record: ID 00218)
 - C. Catholic Church. Collegio dei cardinali. (Agency history record: ID 00216)
 - D. Catholic Church. Commissioni permanenti. (Agency history record: ID 00217)
 - E. Catholic Church. Consistorium. (Agency history record: ID 00215)
 - F. Catholic Church. Curia Romana. (Agency history record: ID 00214)
 - G. Catholic Church. Famiglia della santità di Nostra Signore. (Agency history record: ID 00219)
 - H. Catholic Church. Uffici e amministrazioni palatine. (Agency history record: ID 00220)
 - I. Papal States. (Agency history record: ID 00879)
 - J. Papal States. Local Administrations. (Agency history record: ID 00880)
 - K. Papal States (Territory under French occupation, 1809-1814) (Agency history record: ID 00884)
 - L. Vatican City. (Agency history record: ID 00881)
 - M. Records not part of a larger group or creating agency undetermined.
- III. Specific agency histories for agencies within each grouping. These total over 500. In cases where the agency falls in two categories there is cross listing. Where the provenance is not clear as in the case of the early material and the family fonds there is cross indexing to appropriate agencies. For agencies such as some suppressed monasteries, fraternal or religious orders not directly part of the Vatican, researchers are directed to a separate listing.
- IV. Individual description of record series pertaining to each agency. These number over 1,250 entries. Not all agencies have record groups in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano. Some agencies, particularly those of the Curia Romana, have many entries.

leges ca. 567-1823), which were generated in large part before the Vatican became a formally organized bureaucracy in 1588. Thus these records represent an early blend of functions such as financial relations with bishops, diplomatic relations, etc. before these functions became associated with specific agencies or departments of the Vatican bureaucracy. In these cases, the database makes functional links between the early general record series (as modern archivists would perceive them) and the later functionally specific series.

The second variation in the process of linking record series and agencies is used for the many collections of family papers deposited at the Vatican Archives. These include the papers of cardinals and others who held office in one or another agency.⁹ These papers are now also linked by agency in the database. For example, Fondo Pio contains the papers of Cardinal Pio Carlo de Savoia and has documentation regarding diplomatic activity of the Holy See in the regions of Italy and Germany, ca. 1575-1624. This collection of "private papers" can now be linked with the principal record series of the Secretary of State which pertain to these regions.

Through the use of the resulting database, a user can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the archives than through existing guides or indices. The project staff prepared and entered brief histories for over 500 Vatican agencies, which had functioned at some time during the past 1,000 years. To assemble this information would certainly have been an ambitious project in itself. In addition, the project staff prepared USMARC AMC records for the over 800 record series held by the Vatican Archives.

⁹For many centuries Vatican officials considered their papers personal and took them upon leaving office. These papers usually fell into the possession of their families, some of whom at a later date donated the papers to the Vatican Archives. These are now collectively known as the family fonds.

Complexities in Intellectual Integration of Separated Archives

Two complicating factors emerged to challenge the project even further. The first was a realization that the Vatican Archives contain only a part of the archival holdings of the papacy. The Vatican Archives Project team had to ask itself whether the database could be used to assemble and integrate those archival series of Vatican origin that are held in repositories other than the Vatican Archives itself. Archivists familiar with the USMARC AMC format will know that the technical problem of describing separated records can be solved quite easily. Vatican record series located elsewhere can be described with their location noted in the location field (851), and thus be linked to the agency of origin in the Vatican.

The significance of the Vatican records in absentia and the relative ease of including them in the database convinced the Vatican Archives Project team to begin at least to integrate USMARC AMC records of Vatican Archives material with USMARC records of other Vatican material in Rome. The capability of the database system to link records has proven to be particularly useful in describing two major Vatican separations. The Vatican Archives Project team first applied this linking capability to the records separated from the Vatican during the unification of Italy in 1870.¹⁰ Relying upon already published series descriptions

¹⁰With the unification, the papacy lost the right to all its remaining lands except a few properties in Rome and the Vatican itself. As a result, the records of the administration of those lands were considered state records by the new national government. They were thereby deposited in the Archivio di Stato di Roma. The process of determining which of these records were of the church and which were of the state was accomplished hastily amid the rush of change in 1870. It was not possible to establish any precise distinction between church and state records since the two institutions had shared one identity for so much of Italian history.

of papal materials in the Archivio di Stato di Roma, the Vatican Archives Project team adapted the information to the USMARC AMC format and entered it into the database.¹¹ The complementarity of the holdings of the two archives has at least begun to be realized in a single source for the first time.

In a second but similar instance of the intellectual integration of separated archives, the Vatican Archives Project brought together information on Vatican holdings located in two repositories in Paris. Although the Vatican had been able to regain in 1815 most of what Napoleon had removed in 1809, several series remained in Paris. They are held by the French Archives nationales and the Bibliothèque nationale, and their contents are described in various printed guides and finding aids. These sources and on-site inspections enabled the Vatican Archives Project to include the Paris series in the Vatican Archives database.

The integrative quality of the Vatican Archives Project is obviously due to the computer. A less immediately apparent value is the ability of the database to accommodate additional information in the future. For example, there are important and complementary series of Vatican holdings in the many small archives of congregations of the Holy See in and around Rome. There is also important material in other archives including the College Library of Trinity College in Dublin. The database allows a gradual program of information integration and exchange with a goal of incorporating

complete information on all papal records, regardless of their physical location.

Future Prospects for Integration of European Descriptive Standards

The Vatican Archives Project illustrates the possibilities for information exchange among related archives. This project underscores the obvious advantages of a uniform format for information exchange on a large scale. Admittedly, the Vatican Archives, in all of their various locations and identities, lend themselves to such a uniformity since they have all been generated by an institution characterized by a stable and consistent structure for its governance.

Uniformity or compatibility in a descriptive system will be very important for the records of major European entities, such as France, Spain, and Great Britain. These modern nations' archives have evolved through several identities. Their colonial documents form essential records, both for themselves and for their former colonies. Records of once-contested territories, such as Alsace, are also found in the archives of two or more nations.

The need to strive for compatibility in archival descriptive standards is especially compelling for countries currently undergoing rapid and significant transformation. The former Soviet Union is a current example of a large and uniform political system fragmenting as national identities are redefined. Archival systems will need to mirror as well as accommodate these profound changes. Standardization in a computer-based format permits the exchange of archival information regardless of the location and corporate definition of specific records groups.

The essential factor in the realization of these comprehensive databases is the identification of standard categories in the format design. An analogy can be found in the very early days of the railroad when each company or system was able to estab-

¹¹This facet of the project is based on the description of the holdings of the Archivio di Stato di Roma prepared by Edvige Aleandri Barletta and Carla Lodolini for their section of the volumes edited by Piero d'Angiolini and Claudio Pavone and entitled *Guida Generale degli Archivi dei Stati Italiani* (Rome: Ministero per i Beni Culturali Ambientali, 1986). Also very useful is Maria Grazia Pastura Ruggiero, *La Reverenda Camera Apostolica e i Suoi Archivi* (Rome: Archivio di Stato di Roma, 1987).

lish its own gauge. No company or government could begin to think about national and international systems of rail travel and shipping until there was an agreed upon standard to permit the flow of equipment. Any traveller who has had to squeeze through a crowded corridor on a train might wish for a wider gauge. However, any inconvenience today is offset by the extraordinary efficiencies of European rail travel. Similarly, a standard format will enhance the possibilities for information exchange among archives.

European archivists and their colleagues elsewhere have had many opportunities to discuss and debate the most appropriate format to use when describing archival material. There is an obvious pride in the formulation of a specific format which fits a specific descriptive need. However, the real power in a machine-readable format for archival information can be measured by the extent to which that format facilitates information exchange on a larger scale. With the coming consolidation of European governmental functions, there will be a need for archival linkages between those records documenting a function within a specific national context and the records documenting that same function within the context of a unified Europe. The design of any system to fill this need will require a standard format.

The USMARC AMC format with all its various fields has already achieved considerable success as a vehicle for the description of archives in the United States and abroad. It offers great potential as a means to accomplish an international exchange of archival information. It is not without limitations or complexities, but it has the capacity for enhancements within its established structure. Frequently, criticism of the MARC AMC format is in fact criticism of current convention in the utilization of the format. In the case of the Vatican project, the format proved remarkably adaptable to nearly all situations. Funda-

mentally, the fields reflect basic archival attributes of record series which seem universal among modern bureaucracies. To dismiss the format because of disagreement over current conventions on the use of the format would be to miss a unique opportunity to form an infrastructure for efficient exchange of archival information on an international scale. In any case, further developments in format design must take the presence of USMARC AMC into account.

Scholarly Use of the Vatican Archives Database

The ultimate use of the Vatican Archives database has been an important issue throughout the development of the project. Therefore the project team has attempted to learn from the critical review of databases that have overlooked the importance of accessibility in their design. Marilyn Schmitt, of the Getty Art Information Program, expressed the concern that the design and implementation of sophisticated databases may ultimately disenfranchise scholarly researchers. These end-users might be forced to rely upon intermediaries in their attempt to gain access to information embedded within complex systems. Schmitt fears that scholars twice removed from databases will become alienated, with the result that the "two communities, so tightly linked by a common pool of information, revert to a mutual disregard that belies their interdependence."¹²

The interests of the wide variety of scholars who consult the Vatican Archives were certainly influential in the design of the Vatican Archives project. Some of these interests are rather remote from the history of the church itself, for example questions of liturgical form, patronage of artists, and social patterns and relationships over past

¹²Marilyn Schmitt, "Coming to Terms with Technology," *J. Paul Getty Trust Bulletin* 6 (Winter 1991): 7.

centuries. It was therefore important to infuse the database with a component which would address the many scholarly potentials of the record series. To this end, the Vatican Archives Project is using two MARC AMC fields in a broader way than they were originally conceived.

In the Scope and Content area (field number 520), the Vatican Archives Project tries not only to describe the series according to traditional archival categories, but also to infuse these descriptions with perspectives drawn from the scholarly use of the series when that use addresses its archival nature.

A good example of the added value of these scholarly perspectives is the resulting description of the Congregation for Bishops and Regulars. This series has not received much attention by scholars, despite the fascinating variety of roles of the Congregation. The official competence or function of this Congregation, which existed from 1573 to 1917, was its jurisdiction over matters relating to bishops and clergy, particularly those who were members of religious orders. The agency history in the database goes beyond noting the founding date of the Congregation and various predecessor agencies. It also outlines the specific functions of the agency as stated in various Papal bulls. The documents in this series are important not only for the history of the administration of the Catholic Church, but also for the history of music, art, and other cultural and social phenomena. Through extensive use of the scope and content field, the Vatican Archives Project will have enhanced the research value of the database for these particular records. In the case of the Bishops and Regulars Series, the database will include citations to

works on musicology and art history which have made use of the series. In addition, the database will include descriptions of sample documents to suggest potential research possibilities for social historians, art historians, and others.

This approach to enhancing the database by no means covers all possibilities for future research. It does however accomplish two objectives. It encourages the researcher to think beyond ecclesiastical concerns to some of the larger issues apparent in the papers. It also points the user to relevant bibliographical works for further information on the record series.

User accessibility has been the ultimate goal of the Vatican Archives Project. This has involved two steps: first, to build the database upon fundamental archival principles which are essential for consistency and completeness; and second, to enhance the database to promote its use by various disciplines. This second step is less systematic but no less important.

The Vatican Archives Project represents the first attempt to apply the USMARC AMC format to a major European archive. The success of this effort will be measured by its usefulness to the many people who consult the Vatican Archives each day. No system will ever be perfect for all needs, but this format has already proven its use and effectiveness in accomplishing the basic descriptive requirements of the Vatican Archives. What is important at this point is that it illustrates a potential for a format which is North American in origin to describe effectively an archive in the center of the European tradition, with an applicability that will be a central issue in any discussion regarding information exchange.

A Case for Bridging the Gap: The Significance of the Vatican Archives Project for International Archival Information

Abstract: The author is director of the University of Michigan Vatican Archives Project. This project, which created a computer-based access system for the Vatican Archives, represents the first attempt to apply the USMARC AMC format to a major European archive. User accessibility was the ultimate goal of the project. The database, which was built upon fundamental archival principles, includes two elements: a complete listing of all Vatican agencies over time with a historical description of the agency emphasizing its functions; and a complete set of record series descriptions. The project raised several larger issues regarding the application of new technology and the possibilities of scholarly collaboration in the design of archival access systems.

Le développement d'une base de données pour les archives du Vatican

Résumé: L'auteur est directeur du projet d'archives du Vatican à l'Université du Michigan. Ce projet, qui créa un système d'accès informatisé pour les Archives du Vatican, représente la première tentative d'appliquer le format MARC AMC à une institution d'archives européenne majeure. L'accessibilité pour les chercheurs était le but ultime de la création de cette base de données. Cette base de données, qui a été créée selon les principes archivistiques fondamentaux, comprend deux éléments qui fournissent une liste complète de toutes les agences du Vatican depuis les débuts incluant une description historique reflétant les fonctions de chacune d'elles; et l'ensemble des descriptions des documents au niveau de la série. Ce projet soulève quelques perspectives majeures concernant l'utilisation de la nouvelle technologie dans le cadre d'échange international d'information ou d'archives.

Die Entwicklung einer beschreibenden Datenbank für die Vatikan-Archiv

Abstrakt: Der Autor ist Direktor des Vatikan-Archivprojekts an der Universität Michigan. Dieses Projekt, entwickelte ein elektronisches Programm für die Vatikan-Archiv. Es ist der erste Versuch eines grossen europäischen Archivs, das MARC AMC Format anzuwenden. Das Endziel ist eine Datenbank, die leicht zu benutzen ist. Die Datenbank verwendet fundamentale Prinzipien der Archivkunde und enthält zwei Elemente: ein vollständiges Verzeichnis der Vatikan-Büros aller Zeiten mit einer geschichtlichen Beschreibung jedes Büros und mit Betonung seiner Funktion und zweitens eine komplette Beschreibung aller Archivalienserien. Die Entwicklung des Projekts brachte einige grössere Probleme zur Diskussion bezüglich des Einflusses neuer Technologie auf den internationalen Austausch von Informationen oder Archivalien.

El desarrollo de un banco de datos descriptivo para los Archivos Vaticanos

Resumen: El autor es el director del Proyecto de los Archivos Vaticanos de la Universidad de Michigan. Este proyecto, que creó un sistema de acceso computadorizado para los archivos del Vaticano, representa el primer intento para aplicar el formato MARC AMC a uno de los principales archivos europeos. El acceso para el usuario fue la meta final del banco de datos. El banco de datos, que fue creado sobre los principios fundamentales archivológicos, incluye dos elementos: una lista completa de todas las agencias vaticanas de todos los tiempos con una descripción histórica de la agencia, enfatizando su función; y una completa descripción de todas las series de sus documentos. El proyecto dió lugar a varios extensos temas relacionados con el uso de la nueva tecnología para el intercambio internacional de información o archivos.