

International Scene

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Collective Management in Dutch Regional Archives

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Abstract: The Dutch province of North Brabant has pioneered in the development and practical execution of collective archives management by small and medium-sized municipalities. Since 1955, municipal authorities and archivists have worked together to establish a network of municipal and regional archives for the professional management of all inactive local government records and many private archives. As of 1990 the archives network is complete in North Brabant. By affiliating with regional archives, municipalities which would normally not be able to afford archives facilities now can. The author discusses the advantages and disadvantages of a centralized versus a decentralized regional archives and the factors that must be considered in developing joint archives.

About the author: Peter Jan Margry studied medieval history at the University of Amsterdam and completed archival training at the State Archives School in The Hague. Since 1987, he has been the provincial archives inspector for the Province of North Brabant and is responsible for inspection of the archives of the province, municipalities, water boards, and other governmental institutions in that province. This article is based primarily on the author's chapter entitled "Establishment of a Regional Archive" in the standard Dutch reference book on archives management, *Archiefbeheer in de Praktijk [Archives Management in Practice]*, ed. A. van Giessel et al., part 2 (Alphen aan den Rijn: Samsom Press, 1990): Section 6565, 1-30.

IN PRINCIPLE, EACH GOVERNMENTAL authority bears the responsibility for its own records. Most institutions which produce historically important records, including the state, provinces, and municipalities, create an archives headed by an archivist. In The Netherlands, archives function at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. In addition, The Netherlands has a special, relatively new type of archival management for local government records, in the form of collectively managed regional municipal archives.¹ This system of archives management is particularly well developed in the province of North Brabant.

As early as the nineteenth century, the older and larger municipalities of The Netherlands had functioning professional archival services.² After World War II, larger municipalities were willing and able to maintain their archives. Medium-sized and smaller municipalities, however, found it extremely difficult or impossible to bear the financial burden of appointing an archivist, setting up a reading room, and the like. As a result the archives were often neglected. Researchers usually found it extremely difficult to gain access to these neglected records. The development of the *streekarchief*, or regional archives, has proven to be a solution for the management of smaller municipal archives.

Other countries have adopted similar forms of archives management on an ad hoc basis, but in North Brabant the system has been implemented for the entire province. All of the municipalities in the province of North Brabant participate in a collective archives management system, which can be viewed as a protective net-

work, or safety net, of professional archival management.

The Origin of the Regional Archives System

In 1948, C. Th. Lohmann, a records officer in the municipality of Oosterhout in the southern Dutch province of North Brabant, took on additional responsibilities for the archives of neighboring municipalities. This was a necessary measure, for there were limited resources to repair war damage and operate local facilities in many municipalities. This collective management between municipalities proved to be an efficient working method. In the following year, the Collective Programs Act gave municipalities a legal basis for establishing collective management for specific purposes (such as refuse collection, ambulance services, or archives service.) The act created the legal foundation for inter-municipal archives management. Based on the work of Records Officer Lohmann of Oosterhout, who was already providing archival services to neighboring municipalities, the mayor of Oosterhout proposed his appointment as archivist of these municipalities. It was assumed that this was a temporary measure and that he would complete his collective archival activities within a few years.

In the meantime, the provincial authority of North Brabant, aware of the legal possibilities of joint archival management through the newly created position of provincial archives inspector, decided to promote the establishment of collective archives management systems throughout the entire province. The municipalities retained their autonomy in that they were not obliged to cooperate in this system. The archives inspector could only attempt to stimulate cooperation. The campaign for voluntary participation was successful nonetheless. Plans for the establishment of the first regional archives, drawn up under the au-

¹Municipalities in Europe are managerial and administrative bodies with a great deal of authority, therefore enabling them to influence the local society to a significant degree.

²The first municipal archivists in The Netherlands were appointed in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, including the archivist of 's-Hertogenbosch, the capital of North Brabant (1841).



The central offices and depot of the Regional Archive "Nassau-Brabant," housed in a restored building now a historical monument in Zevenbergen. "Nassau-Brabant" is a collective archives service for seventeen municipalities with a total of 128,000 inhabitants.

thority of a provincial archives inspector, were implemented in 1955 and 1956, establishing the "In de Kring Oosterhout" and "Nassau-Brabant" regional archives.

The province agreed to subsidize 10 percent of the initial costs during the first five years for municipalities participating in a regional archives. Following the example of the first two regional archives, and with the provincial financial support as an incentive, many other municipalities established joint archives in the realization that such collective archives management represented a relatively inexpensive solution. During the 1970s and 1980s, the provincial archives and the regional archives underwent a period of expansion and consolidation, until there remained only one stubborn municipality which had neither an archivist of its own nor any part in the collective system. Negotiations convinced this municipality to participate in a collective archives management system, which it joined on 1 January 1990. This completed

the comprehensive archives network consisting of eleven individual municipal archives and nine regional archives in which 120 municipalities participate.

Central or Decentralized Regional Archives?

A collective archives management system can be organized in one of two ways. On the one hand, a central regional archives can be established, physically bringing together the records of the participating municipalities in one location with offices, a reading room, and storage facilities. Or a decentralized system can be established in which the records remain in storage facilities in the municipalities in which they were generated and a traveling archivist can manage the records and staff the reading room in accordance with a predetermined schedule. Both models, as can be expected, offer advantages and disadvantages, but after some thirty years of experience the advan-

tages of the centralized regional archives system seem to outweigh the advantages of a decentralized system. However, Dutch archivists recognize the role that decentralized archives played as the model for the first regional archives. By first participating in a decentralized archival network, municipalities could avoid the expense of building a new central storage facility and records could remain in existing municipal storage facilities. The work of the regional archivist could begin without waiting for a new building and, in addition, the newly appointed traveling archivist could become well-acquainted with the municipalities and their records in situ.

Almost all of the regional archives in North Brabant were established as decentralized organizations, but most have gradually turned to the centralized model for the regional archives office. This model is more efficient and offers advantages for management and technical control. It is also preferred by researchers. The advantages and disadvantages of the centralized and the decentralized models can be categorized as follows.

Centralized regional archives. The advantages of the centralized regional archives include:

- better and permanent supervision of the archives;
- improved efficiency in accessioning, arranging, describing, and access to the archives;
- cost efficiency in the construction, expansion, or remodeling of municipal storage facilities;
- no travel expenses or travel time needed for the archivist;
- no need for the archivist to become reacquainted with each municipality at each visit;
- permanent availability and opening hours for the administrative staff and the public;
- the presence of a qualified archivist always on site;

- broader possibilities for regional historical research because all of the region's records are at one location;
- availability of more comprehensive reference materials and support equipment such as a photocopier, topographical atlas, computer, microfilm readers, video and tape recorders; and
- better coordination and supervision of personnel and volunteers.³

The disadvantages of a centralized regional archives are:

- the archivist has less contact with persons creating and managing the records in their semiactive state;
- it is more difficult for municipal authorities to consult original documents kept in regional archives;
- researchers whose subject of interest is strictly local must travel to the regional storage facility; and
- the participating municipalities must bear the depreciation on the investment in the centralized offices and depot.

A facility should meet several criteria to be suitable for use as a centralized archives. It should be situated in the center of the region and be easily accessible. Existing buildings should have sufficient space for public areas, offices, storage facilities, a darkroom, quarantine section, and an area for restoration work. The building must have space suitable for developing climatically controlled storage facilities. The space must be able to accommodate the normal growth of the archives for a sufficient number of years. The building must be accessible to the handicapped.

Decentralized regional archives. The most important advantage of a decentralized system may be the regular contact between the archivist and the municipal administration that generates the records.

³A topographical atlas is a collection of historical maps, prints, drawings, designs, and pictures on a specific municipality or region.

This offers the opportunity for the archivist to supervise the records as they pass from their active to their semiactive status.⁴ Decentralized management might also make it easier to acquire records from local clubs and private citizens. In a decentralized regional archives system, regional archives activities can commence immediately, since the records remain in the storage facilities of the individual participating municipalities; there is no need to wait until the records are transferred to a storage facility. Yet, inherent in a regional archives system is the fact that each of the municipalities is required to take a number of measures to support the work of the regional archivist. At each municipality, the regional archivist must have an adequate work area and often needs overnight accommodations. Inactive records and semiactive records must be physically separated from each other if the regional archivist is to work effectively. A portable personal computer is indispensable for work in the decentralized archives system. Researchers also must have access to a reasonably well-equipped working area.

Some Dutch archivists favor beginning with a decentralized regional archives with a later transition to a centralized system. It is then possible to profit from the advantages offered by both systems.

Instituting a Regional Archives

Authorities considering setting up a regional archives must address the following two questions: (1) what are the reasonable and logical boundaries of the regional archives? and (2) which municipalities are willing to participate? The boundaries will often evolve as the regional archives ex-

pands and as a reflection of the changing relationships of neighboring municipalities. Modern administrative ties between municipalities have taken precedence over historical boundaries or ties in forming regional archives.

A municipality's willingness to participate in regional archives is often dependent on the size and age of the municipality. In general, the larger and older a municipality, the stronger the tendency is to continue to operate an independent archives service. In terms of size, the threshold in The Netherlands now lies somewhere in the vicinity of fifty thousand inhabitants. However, in recent years, larger municipalities have also been willing to participate in regional programs.

Another major factor to consider when organizing a regional archives is the amount of records and the level of archival control for each participating municipality. Some potential participants will already have retired records while others may have done absolutely nothing. It would not be realistic to expect the more "active" archives to share in the costs for retrospective appraisal and processing of records from the less active municipalities. In such cases, a transitional period can be proposed—three years, for example—in which appraisal and processing are completed for the records from less active archives with the work charged to the municipalities which created those records. During this period the municipalities whose records had been processed and for which inventories existed would share only in the managerial expenses and costs for equipment. This would bring all the participating archives to a similar level of archival readiness; after this transitional period all costs can be passed on to the participating municipalities proportionately.

The legal status of the program must be determined. All regional archives programs must be in accordance with existing law. It is possible for municipalities to establish a

⁴According to the Dutch Public Records Act, Section 25, the municipal or regional archivist is authorized to ensure that management of the municipal administration is carried out properly, so that when the records are made public after a period of fifty years, the material is in good condition and properly ordered.

regional archives system based on mutual service agreements. Although seemingly uncomplicated, this arrangement has a number of significant drawbacks. In the first place, the municipality offering the services is the most powerful. It "hires out" the archivist, and the influence and decision-making authority of the municipality "purchasing" the services is considerably more limited. A mutual service agreement is sometimes entered into as a transitional stage before participating in a full-fledged collective regional program.

Staffing priorities must also be set and a work plan agreed upon between the participating municipalities. In the regional archives in North Brabant, two to four archivists are usually employed.

The total cost of the regional program and a method of assessing proportional costs must be set. The existence and availability of provincial subsidy programs help to determine the viability of regional programs. The availability of subsidies may be a de-

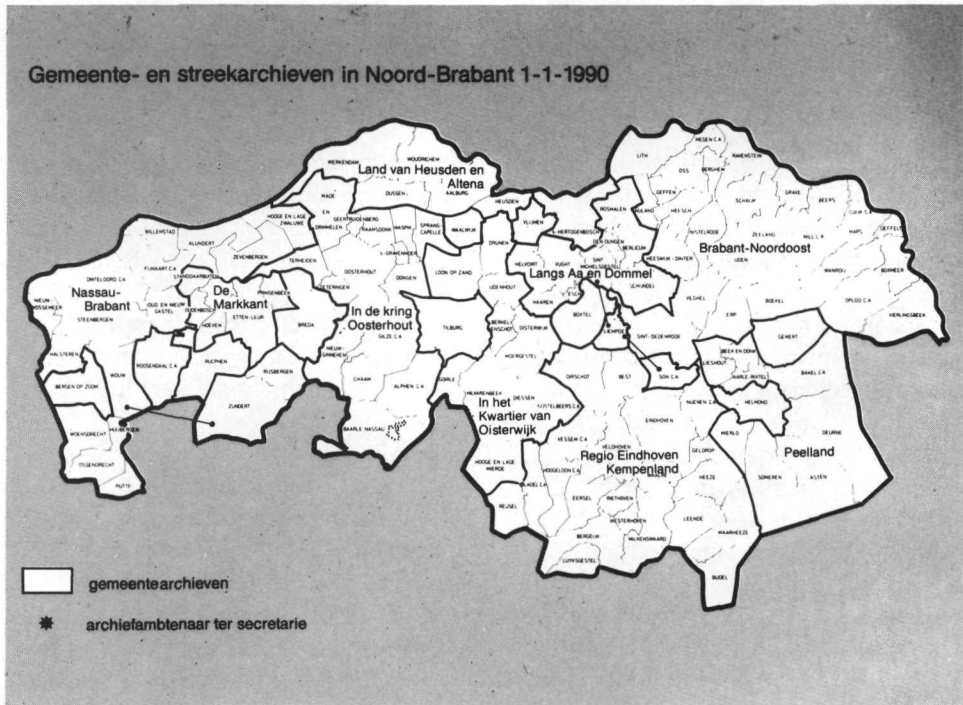
cisive factor in some municipalities' decision to join a regional archives. The records situation will never be identical in all participating municipalities; yet local authorities will want a division of costs which is related to their specific records. This diversity of records situations will complicate the administration of regional archives.

Three basic financial models can be applied.

- Costs can be calculated on a per capita basis. This simple method is preferable when the archives are kept in a centralized system.
- All costs can be calculated on the amount of time the archivist works for each municipality. This is a workable method when approximately four municipalities participate in a collective system. If the number of participants increases, a distinction is usually made between general costs (for a fixed contribution per inhabitant) and specific costs for activities carried out for each munic-



The central reading room in the Regional Archive "Nassau-Brabant" in Zevenbergen.



Map of the province of North Brabant, showing all 131 municipalities. The thick lines show the boundaries of the territories of the various municipal and regional archives. The names of the regional archives are printed in bold type.

ipal archives based on the hours worked and the costs incurred.

- The costs can be proportionately divided according to the number of meters of archives managed for each municipality. A municipality with an extensive inactive archives bears a proportionately larger financial load.

Subsequent models can be derived from combinations of the three models described above. But politics will often dictate a completely “honest” division of the costs among the participating municipalities, which means that the costs will be specified in increasing detail. In practice, this type of “refinement” is usually extremely burdensome.

The number of municipalities participating in the programs varies from five to twenty-seven per regional archives, and the number of inhabitants in the participating

municipalities varies between sixty thousand and four hundred thousand. Costs for the nine regional archives in the province of North Brabant equal an average contribution per inhabitant of between approximately two to five Dutch guilders (\$1.00 to \$2.50). The eleven municipal archives, on the other hand, are considerably more expensive, costing between eight and fifteen guilders (\$4.00-\$7.50) per inhabitant.

It is important to decide a number of points related to the division of authority when developing a collective program. The authority which the participating municipalities delegate to the management of the regional archives must be described in detail. For most of the regional archives, the team managing the archives only has authority over the practical management of the inactive archives and supervision of the management of active or semiactive rec-

ords that have not yet been transferred; the city council retains responsibility for the municipality's records.⁵ But it is more efficient for the city council to delegate their legal responsibility for the static (inactive) archives to the managing team of the regional program. In both cases, the archivist is responsible for practical execution of the management tasks. A description of precisely what these tasks are should be included in the program.

The content of the tasks of the archivist or the archives service has changed and been expanded through the years. Sole emphasis is no longer placed on taking inventory of inactive records and making them accessible. Actual management of the files also plays an important role, more so for centralized regional depots. The archivist is faced not only with the restoration of damaged documents, but also with all aspects of conservation and preservation. The archivist must make the records accessible to researchers and will thus be required to offer a variety of services. Carrying out historical or archive-related research may also be included in the archivist's tasks.

According to Dutch law, an institution established by means of a collective pro-

gram must have its own managing board. Members of the managing board are usually the mayors or city councils of the participating municipalities. They choose a chairperson from their members, preferably a person with some understanding of history and archives. The archivist of the regional archives could be appointed as secretary or possibly treasurer of the managing board. The provincial archives inspector is usually also requested to fulfill the task of independent advisor.

Conclusion

In The Netherlands, the joint management of municipal records by regional archives is extremely successful in ensuring that the records of smaller municipalities are preserved, processed, and made available to the public. In the span of only a few decades, all of the municipalities in the province of North Brabant have opted for this relatively inexpensive and efficient archives management system by employing either a regional keeper of the records who travels between municipal storage facilities or a central regional archives office and storage facility. A unique network of archives services has been developed in North Brabant using this practical organizational model and supported by provincial policy and funding. As a result, the number of visitors to archives has multiplied and local historical research has been stimulated, achieving one of the major cultural objectives set by the province of North Brabant.

⁵Dutch law pertaining to public records distinguishes, albeit not always in a manner which is practical or clear, between responsibility for and management of archives. "Responsibility" is described as the managerial responsibility for the archives; "management" is the practical execution of archive tasks by the archivist.