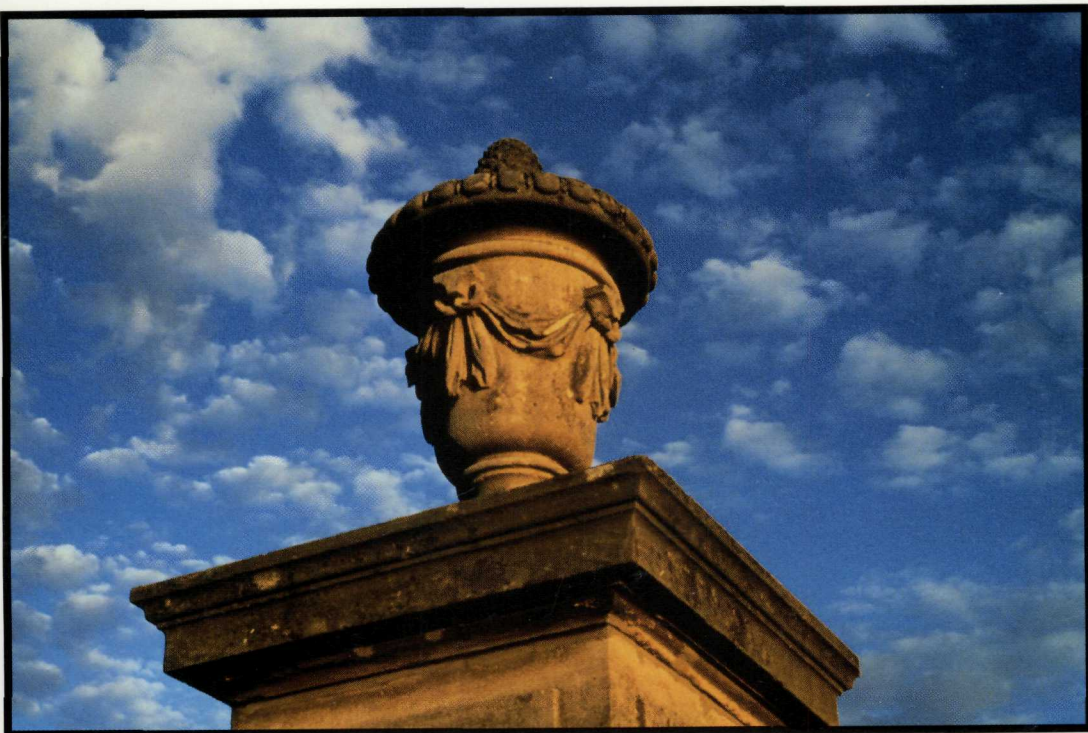


# The American Archivist

Volume 59  
Number 4  
Fall 1996



*featuring*

**DIPLOMATICS AND  
MODERN RECORDS**



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THE SOCIETY of  
AMERICAN ARCHIVISTS

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## The American Archivist

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**About the cover:** *Urn from St. Germaine-en-Laye, France. As a vestige of the Ancien Régime, the chateau and gardens of St. Germaine still evoke the era of diplomacy in its infancy. St. Germaine was the birthplace of Louis XIV, and the chateau served as a primary residence for the royal family before it left for Versailles in 1682. In 1681, Benedictine Dom Jean Mabillon published De Re Diplomatica Libri VI, which launched the study of diplomacy and paleography. (Photograph by Nancy Bartlett, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.)*

# The American Archivist

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Volume 59 / Number 4 / Fall 1996 / Diplomats and Modern Records

---

Forum / 388

---

## Presidential Address

Seeing the Past as a Guidepost to Our Future / 392

Brenda S. Banks

---

## Pease Award

A Critical Analysis of Intrinsic Value / 400

Shauna McRanor

---

## Special Section on Diplomats and Modern Records

Introduction / 412

Francis Blouin and Bruno Delmas

The Expansion of Diplomats as a Discipline / 414

Olivier Guyotjeannin

Diplomats of Modern Official Documents (Sixteenth - Eighteenth Centuries):  
Evaluation and Perspectives / 422

Bernard Barbiche

---

---

**Manifesto for a Contemporary Diplomatics: From Institutional Documents to Organic Information / 438**

Bruno Delmas

**The Way Things Work: Procedures, Processes, and Institutional Records / 454**

Elizabeth Yakel

**A Framework for a Consideration of Diplomatics in the Electronic Environment / 466**

Francis Blouin

**Diplomatics and Institutional Photos / 480**

Elisabeth Parinet

**Diplomatics for Photographic Images: Academic Exoticism? / 486**

Nancy Bartlett

---

**Review Essay****The Archivist and Collecting: A Review Essay / 496**

Richard J. Cox

---

**Society of American Archivists**

SAA Council Meeting Minutes, 2 February 1996 / **514**

SAA Council Meeting Minutes, 14 June 1996 / **521**

---

**Editorial Policy / 525**

---

**Annual Index / 528**

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## Forum

### Archives and Postmodernism

#### To the editor:

We read with great interest and pleasure Carolyn Heald's piece on archives and postmodernism, "Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?" (*American Archivist* 59 [Winter 1996] 88-101). Postmodernism and poststructuralism deserve a hearing from archivists because they cut to the theoretical, methodological, and philosophical foundations of archival discourse. Heald seems to have sensed this, as we have, and felt it necessary to say something about it.

Heald's essay raises several questions that invite extended discussion, but we shall confine ourselves to brief comments on a few of her points. First, her initial question concerning whether there is room for archives in a postmodern world poses in an admirably succinct manner a problem we have been thinking about for the last few years. We wonder, however, whether a more pertinent formulation of the question for archivists is whether archival principles and practice can accommodate postmodernism—whether there is room for postmodernism in the archival world, which is what Heald's discussion seems to have been about, in any case. Her attempt to find place for "postmodernism" (whatever this term may signify historically or sociologically) in archival practice is intriguing, but it seems to us to reduce this highly diverse group of ideas, running from architecture to law to literature to philosophy, to an unproblematical set of tenets all-too-readily amenable to archives' business of "preservation," one of several core archives-related concepts which come in for intense critical examination, for example, in Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction and Michel Foucault's history of systems of knowledge. Moreover, in light of Foucault's notion of "epistemological breaks" (derived from Gaston Bachelard) and Derrida's particular perspective on the ethical, ontological and political implications of such crucial archival precepts as "archives," "writing," and "recording," and perhaps because of the brevity of her discussion, the suggestion that archivists have been practicing deconstruction, though perhaps plausible, is puzzling as it stands.

Second, Heald's comparison of [Richard] Brown's and [Luciana] Duranti's work ignores some different perspectives and preoccupations that separate them. Apart from its now-relinquished claim to establish documentary truthfulness, diplomacy has long been primarily concerned to develop a credible document authentication methodology, an endeavor that has attracted considerable interest among North American archivists thanks largely to Duranti's publicizing efforts, which have come to be especially appreciated as archivists face the challenge from electronic records. In some of its more recently updated



versions, it is true, diplomatics also begins to incorporate elements that appear to overlap with archival appraisal methodology. Nevertheless, these methodological modifications still seem dedicated to a primary preoccupation with documentary authentication. Brown's work has involved attempts to introduce an explicitly hermeneutic dimension as well as discourse analysis into appraisal methods. It is open to question, however, whether Duranti's diplomatics framework permits the assignment of any prominent role to appraisal in the delineation of archival methods, or whether she recognizes much need for specially developed appraisal methods in her understanding and description of archival practice. Would it be unfair to suggest that by her understanding of archives, appraisal is, at best, subsumed by diplomatics' primordial and still primary task of authentication, of identity verification? For Brown (as well as [Brien] Brothman), the continuing relevance of the traditional work of documentary authentication in modern archives has been a given all along. But the task of *identification* is preliminary to efforts to develop increasingly sophisticated methodologies of *justification* for the preservation or destruction of records. And identification and justification should not be confused. When understood as consisting of methods of authentication or verification, then, diplomatics, though obviously necessary, is by no means necessarily sufficient for addressing contemporary archival problems of justification. It is simply one component of appraisal.

Ultimately, such differences of articulation may well be partly attributable to the particular description of the place and purposes of archivists, archival programs, and archival institutions under which each one of us is laboring. For Duranti, a particular reading of the institutional history of diplomatics and archives provides her with exemplars for delineating a perdurable essence of (contemporary) archives and for conferring a privileged, transcendent status on these aspects of archival practice and conceptions of archives. The monophyletic reduction of historical accounts of professional aims, methods and practices, however, invites, or should invite, close scrutiny. Such moves amount simultaneously to the scientific forgetting of time and the invocation of history, that is, to a peculiar—some would say incompatible—appeal to historically contextualized accounts of professional practice for the purposes of affirming transcendent professional aims and roles and elaborating appropriate scientific concepts and methods.

Third, and last, Heald asks rhetorically about Brothman's apparent doubts on the matter of the principles of archival order. Among what might loosely be characterized as "postmodern" questions relating to archives' master frame, provenance, archival theorists might ask the following: Is it possible to deviate from or cast doubt upon the traditional concept of provenance without undermining archives' core mission? Does the concept of provenance remain robust enough to integrate archives' current and changing requirements? Do and should archivists mean the same thing by "provenance" and "context"? Or do the connotations of "context" imply the de-centering of the principle of provenance, which, in archives, has usually been associated with an administrative site or juridically-enabled personality, and its placement within more complex and polyvalent notions encompassing, say, a textual or discursive field, an active but informal community or virtual organization, an interinstitutional process, or an information system. Should provenance be retained, but subsumed under some new master concept? It is not simply a matter, therefore, of whether provenance should be "abandoned." As Hugh Taylor might ask, do reconceptualizations of provenance—"virtual provenance," "conceptual provenance"—signal a mere "technological adjustment"? Or is such a conceptual revision retroactively applicable to records of the pre-electronic age as well, a "paradigm shift" which weakens or limits the referential power of the term provenance? Finally, in the pluralistic spirit of

postmodernism, is it even realistic to continue to cling to the conventional professional assumption that one sovereign paradigm—one set of theoretical propositions, one set of principles, one methodological program—should govern all the different kinds of venues of archival practice? Might it not be worthwhile for archivists to set their sights on the development of something like what philosopher of science Mary Hesse once called “local domain” theories?

In confronting the implications of postmodernism for archives, Heald has aired a number of the issues that have provoked at least a few of us. Her call for the radical historicization of archives, charged as it is with irony and paradox, certainly carries the ring of postmodernism. Whether the world of archives can accommodate postmodernism, or whether archives forms one of the staunchest bastions of resistance against postmodernism, remains an open question. Indeed, are there not grounds for claiming that the notion of “postmodern archives” is an oxymoron?

We thank Heald for her ideas and discussion and hope that other archivists will see fit to follow her example by turning to some of the sources of postmodernism as a means of sharpening their thinking about some of the deep-seated, naturalized assumptions that ground archives today.

BRIEN BROTHMAN  
RICHARD BROWN

*With the exception of editing for conformity of capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.*