

Special Section on Diplomats and Modern Records

Introduction

THE SEVEN ARTICLES ON DIPLOMATICS in this issue of the *American Archivist* resulted from a joint seminar held by the archivists from the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan and by the members of the faculty of the Ecole Nationale des Chartes in Paris. Its purpose was to explore the possibilities for the application of traditional methods of diplomacy to the digital environment which increasingly characterizes the milieu for the creation of documents. The articles which resulted from those discussions are presented in English in this issue; they were presented in French in *La Gazette des Archives* (1, 1996).

The point of departure for the discussions herein was the following question: now in the twentieth century with rapidly evolving information technology, are the principles of diplomacy as outlined by Jean Mabillon in his publication *De re diplomatica* in 1681 of any continuing relevance? While Mabillon was interested primarily in distinguishing true documents of the Middle Ages from false ones, his methods were based on the study and definition of specific characteristics of documents. For the participants in the seminar these characteristics appeared remarkably similar to modern metadata. Mabillon used the following method. He accumulated various examples of documents, looking for a variety of documents from the same source (person or institution). He was particularly conscious about finding documents which came from the same sources and were a result of the same process or procedure. Having assembled his examples, he examined the documents for particular form characteristics (internal and external form, support, writing, language and style, etc.). From this he was able to establish certain protocols for specific kinds of documentation that was generated by specific kinds of actions by certain particular individuals and institutions.

Having established a set of categories for the analysis of documents, Mabillon also pursued the question of historical validity. He conducted significant research into the individuals and institutions which produced these early documents. As a result he defined a whole field of historical study. From this research has emerged similar studies of documents generated in the era of the French Revolution and even of documents of twentieth century origin. In the 1970s Bruno Delmas pursued these questions within the context of the archives of Senegal. Six articles by Luciana Duranti in *Archivaria*, published over three years (1988-1991), systematically outlined the possibilities for the application of the principles of diplomacy for modern records. Then, in 1992, David Bearman used a mod-

ern interpretation of traditional diplomatics in his article "Diplomatics, Weberian Bureaucracy, and the Management of Electronic Records in Europe and America" (*American Archivist* 55 [Winter 1992]: 168–81).

But now, with the near universal applications of modern technology to the creation of information, is there a place for the study of this discipline based on the examination of medieval documents? The essays put forth in this volume collectively argue that there is, indeed, a place. While some of the categories outlined by Mabillon remain valid today, many need to be revisited and expanded. Newer formats for the recording of information need to be taken into account. Diplomatics in essence offers a disciplined framework for the study of the structure of individual documents.

We have never doubted the importance of the fundamental questions which form the basis for this special issue of the *American Archivist*. We first conferred on the possibility of such a discussion in 1989, in Milan, during the second international colloquium organized by the Committee on Education of the International Council on Archives. Because of the long tradition at the Ecole Nationale des Chartes in the study of diplomatics, it seemed natural to hold a meeting of the seminar in the halls of the school. At the same time, the University of Michigan was exploring new ways to study information technology, so it seemed equally appropriate to hold a session in Ann Arbor. The participants for the Ecole Nationale des Chartes represented medieval, early modern, and modern approaches. The participants from the Bentley Library represented a variety of formats and perspectives: the reference archivist, the records manager, and the general user. The first session was held in Paris in July 1992 and the second held in Ann Arbor in July 1993. We are grateful to all the participants, to the University of Michigan Horace Rackham Fund for helping to seek funds to move this project along. We are also grateful to Philippe Barbat of the Ecole Nationale du Patrimoine, who assisted in the translation into English of the articles that were originally in French.

FRANCIS BLOUIN
University of Michigan

BRUNO DELMAS
Ecole Nationale des Chartes