

# Manifesto for a Contemporary Diplomats: From Institutional Documents to Organic Information

BRUNO DELMAS

**Abstract:** The author probes the relationship between the traditional categories of diplomatics and the characteristics of modern records. He offers a more abstract view of the notion of what constitutes a document, and probes the importance of archival documents as a source of memory and truth. Diplomats then, the author agrees, becomes a method to understand and recover sources of memory and, at the same time, reduce the uncertainty that the abundance of these same sources engenders. He offers new perspectives on the traditional diplomats categories of form, genesis, tradition, edition, and selection.

*About the author:* Bruno Delmas is Professor of Contemporary Diplomats at the Ecole Nationale des Chartes, Paris.

WHAT DO ARCHIVES OF THE MIDDLE AGES have in common with current records? On the face of it, nothing. Everything differs. The purpose, the text of the document, the uses expected of it, and the methods of handling it share no analogies. This much is true since this is the evidence.

Isn't there, on the one hand, the durability of parchment and older paper, and on the other hand, the fragile nature of modern paper and the instability of electronic hardware; on the one hand, indecipherable handwriting, dead languages and incomprehensible dialects, unfamiliar logic, and antiquated customs, and on the other hand, standardized handwriting, quasi-universal languages, and a modern spirit and laws? As far as physical media are concerned, there is nothing to use as a comparison; but as far as the information itself, isn't there some resemblance?

Moreover, aren't there, on the one hand, historians and medieval erudites, and on the other hand, economists, geographers, demographers, urban studies specialists, statisticians, sociologists, ethnologists, genealogists, journalists, and every other stripe of researcher that instigates needs and curiosities in this information age? In reality, all these professionals who appear to be so different, so distant from one another and even sometimes in opposition, seem to share many of the same needs for a certain type of information in their use of archives.

After all, don't there exist methods which have been developed to address the rarity of archival sources, the scattering of and the difficulty in using them on the one hand, and on the other, an obligation to face up to the over-abundance and redundancy of information and its physical media or support? In reality, isn't the endeavor in both cases to be able to analyze critically in order to select and separate that information which is most reliable from that which is unreliable, and to make it accessible?

Appearances would have one oppose the foolishness of the possibility of and interest in a contemporary diplomatics, but isn't the foolishness the result of a disregard for the nature of archival documents, and an ignorance of the subject, goal, objectives, and methods of diplomatics?

## I. Diplomatics Facing the Metamorphosis of Sources

Do current archival records have the same nature as acts which were the subject of classic diplomatics? With current conditions, do the fundamental concepts of contemporary diplomatics have the same hierarchy, the same importance as apply to the oldest documents?

According to the classic definition, an archival document is a document regardless of its date, form, or physical support, which was created or received by a single individual or organization at a certain moment in the course of, and for the execution of, its habitual activities. The document is made use of according to its original purpose and then, after its initial use, is arranged, classified and saved if there is any sense of ongoing usefulness. This definition of archives by function applies to all documents, both contemporary documents as well as the oldest documents.

This definition applies equally to a paper document, whether handwritten, printed, or drawn; to a photograph, a film, a sound recording, a magnetic disk, a diskette, an optical disk, and even a credit card. The nature of the document is not determined by its form, its physical support, its date, or the method of writing. The multiplication of physical media since the beginning of the industrial age does nothing to alter this particular nature of archival documents. As with traditional documents, archival documents created elec-

tronically can, for example, be the source exhibiting the action of an individual at a certain moment. This is the case as well for objects: drawings and models created in the course of industrial or artisanal production; campaign and advertisement publicity; models for architectural and urban projects; the results of experiments or prospecting. These, too, are the instruments and products of an action, and can be saved as proof and evidence.

Archival documents are also characterized by the fact that they are created within the process of decision making and development of a piece of information. They are, in themselves, both the instrument of an action and the recording of that action. The word "recording" returns us to the inscription in an official register which renders authenticity. Why? To preserve a juridical act, its text and information, and to give it the force of proof of an action, of a procedure, or of a process; the black box of airplanes and the protocol of scientific experiments apply here. One can say that what is at work is a recording or registration, which in itself and in its physical medium has a probative, informative, and preservative value.

Any action in societies where written law prevails is accomplished and accompanied by the production of documents: juridical instruments establishing juridical deeds (contracts, decisions, etc.), administrative documents translating administrative action (letter, report, account, etc.). All archival documents start by being a necessary instrument, whether the weakest or the most decisive, of the activity of an individual or an institution at a given moment before becoming the product and, finally, the remaining traces of the activity. This is why one can also say that archival documents are functional documents, that they have an institutional character.

Produced necessarily for and by the action of a given person, these documents carry information, text, or data, which concern it or which guarantee its date and a specific location, according to certain modalities, and with a precise purpose. The notion of an institutional document should include the concept of organic information which is a part of it, but which today distinguishes itself unequivocally. This is because it is not the medium but the information which corresponds to rules, constructions, languages, procedures, precise validations germane to their action and prior to any reconstruction and historical discourse. It is for this reason, let us recall, that historians have always given privileged status to archival documents as sources of truth. But this trust, based on the document, a fusion of the medium and the organic information, is cast in doubt by the instability of the one and the other.

The notion of organic information is implicit with the notions of files and fonds. Now the notion should be considered apart from any reference to a physical medium or support. It seems evident today that the object of contemporary diplomatics is the organic information rather than the medium. The problem today is not so much that of the authenticity of the document as the value of the information which is associated with it.

As stated by definition, archival documents, or rather organic information, has a particular nature which does not depend on the medium, the form, the style of writing, or age. This nature is of the same substance as the information, apart from any contingency, event, or accident. Any information, already at the moment when it is created or received by an organism or an individual in the course of their activity, by this act alone, is archival and a part of the archival fonds of its author or its recipient, with the same status as the oldest documents. Furthermore, it matters little that modern techniques are multiplying alongside traditional texts, the production of data, images, visual and sound documents, virtual or real, on electronic or optical media. The conditions of their creation make them, *ipso facto*, archival documents, like the others with the same characteristics and the same

presumption of authenticity. Written, or more generally, entered, they serve as reference or proof.

From this perspective, there is no reason why diplomatics—which has, from its origins, studied several types of copies, and through which the existence of what we call “organic information” is implicitly recognized—should today refuse to face photographic or electronic copies, and refuse to take into account organic information, since this study has long been used to distinguish external characteristics (with regard to support), and internal characteristics (with regard to diplomatic information itself) in the oldest documents.

For quite some time, the document has been viewed by diplomatics as a whole, including a physical medium joined with unique information. Since the appearance and development, in the middle of the eighteenth century, of the “file” as a means of administering organic information, we have become largely accustomed to this approach. All the developments of the past twenty years in office management lead us in this direction (electronic administration of documents, workflow, etc.). It even leads us to considering anew the organic ensembles of documents, which are a foundation of *archivistique*, and to introduce into our consideration the organic ensembles of information.

At the same time, the notion of an original is weakened with the contemporary document. Classic diplomatics has with just cause in a certain way sanctified the idea of the original by privileging the medium while the notion of authenticity privileged the content. Origin is weakened as soon as titles and signatures are not the concern, what with the multiplication of duplicate originals, of certified copies, and, above all, of photocopies. It is quite evident that authentic documents (*stricto sensu*), even those of the paper medium, are still subject to very precise rules. But these very constricting conditions apply to a limited number and precise type of document (contracts, notarized acts, etc.) and should be able to be transposed onto a new medium at the time of substitution. The precautions surrounding the fabrication of paper money—a very particular type of institutional document—is evidence of this. Credit cards are an example of this substitution.

These organic documents, produced in the course of an activity which includes legal, regulatory (account books for a business or experiment protocols), or scientific obligations, or practical requirements (correspondence), carry particular validations through a given process and context of their creation. The fact that they are not gratuitous actions confers upon the information that they hold a presumption of authenticity. This is not the case with a press article, for example. Press articles are not spoken of as false, but as opinion, even when they contain misinformation, propaganda, or censorship. But one does speak of false invoices even though it is not an act of authenticity, strictly speaking. The “archival registration” contains solid information, because it is identified as such, apart from the unique medium of the original, whether manual, mechanical, or automatic.

Is this presumption of authenticity transferable to electronic documents? It is not because we do not see the writing that it does not exist; it exists in the electronic medium, and behind the writing is the information which is the real issue. What is at stake, the information or the medium? The information, since we have just seen that it is the organic, structured, and validated information which, even if we cannot directly read the medium, remains the object of diplomatics. This applies just as well to traditional documents transferred to new media as new data, such as meteorological or cartographic data. The presumption of authenticity is attached to organic information, not to the medium, which is neutral.

We have become more and more accustomed to working with copies of documents or electronic files. We do not worry about the medium and do not doubt the authenticity of the organic information found in it. If the medium is centuries younger than the text associated with it, we integrate into our critique of the medieval text the fact that it has been recopied repeatedly. These types of copies no longer allow for the type of external critique that can be made of the original, but do not disqualify any internal critique. Why could we not have the same attitude towards computer files which have for some time, and more than once, changed media?

Documents of electronic archives should benefit from the same presumption of authenticity as other institutional documents as soon as they are created and saved with the same care and precautions as other documents: access to the media, hardware, by authorized individuals who are responsible for the documents and who possess, for example, a password or electronic keys can furnish security far superior to armoires and filing cabinets. There is, therefore, no reason to refuse an electronic archival document, even one produced entirely by machine, the confidence that we give to archival documents on paper.

Nonetheless, the possibility of easily modifying electronic writings seems to trouble many people. Any technique of a medium's writing production contains, in itself, possibilities of falsification, be it paper or photograph, magnetic or optical. Inks fade, and the altering of an electronic file can leave no more traces than the laundering of a check.

New technologies have brought prominence to another question: that of falsification, or, more simply, the manipulation of text, data, or images which would facilitate the trivialization of the use of machines. Manipulation is a term which catches our attention because one thinks of the manipulation of information in audio-visual media (for example, the Gulf War coverage) or faked photos (the Pompidou affair). But this does not concern archival documents. Because these documents are easily produced by machines, we have the feeling that they can be more easily modified and falsified than manuscript documents. This is theoretically true. But this is forgetting the institutional context for using these machines, which in reality means that it is always a person who enters information either by hand or by keyboard. The falsification all depends on his will and his skill. This can also be demonstrated in an opinion poll where manipulation also can reside in the choice of sample, the formulation of the question, the gathering of data, its analysis, and the commentary on collected data.

It is just as important to avoid confusing different problems under the term *manipulation*. There is the type which occurs in the course of normal handling of information, in its transformation in making it into a usable material, just as one must transform a metal to make it into a usable object without its remaining a crude mineral. And there is the falsification of information with the intention to deceive. Any text is the result of a "manipulation" of texts and of data. If there exists an administrative style which standardizes the presentation of information, there are ways of presenting things which require reading between the lines. Choice, order, style, layout and design do not fundamentally differ from the framing, contrast, etc. of a photo; or of the choice and presentation of data in a table or in graphs. There are press photos which are altered but sincere: they are presented to tell what they tell and not something else, but there is falsification with the legend which leads astray (another location, time period, etc.). This does not hold for organic information which is formed and handled in a context which is clearly identified and verifiable.

Organic information and its medium, the institutional contemporary document, do not pose fundamentally different questions of diplomatics than those already established within its tradition.



## II. Contemporary Diplomatics Facing the Exigency of Memory and Truth

The second question concerns the goal of diplomatics today. Diplomatics is the discipline which, emanating from existing documents and media, aims to constitute a corpus of irrefutable information which historians can use in writing history based on facts, as much as can be assured. The objective of classic diplomatics is to facilitate medievalists' access to documents by using critique, analysis, authentication, transcription, annotation, editing, and even translation of acts and other texts. In the exacting idea of positivist history developed at the end of the nineteenth century, the ambition of diplomatics has been to reunite the conditions for establishing true history. Not a particular truth that one or the other of us might commit to our memories or essays, not a *connaissance*, but the truth. In our era, the need to know, for which the duty of memory is only one consequence, is universal. Everyone seeks the part of the truth needed to give his life meaning.

What use is an archival document? In modern societies, the use and functions of institutional documents are enumerated by the four infinitives of Dominique Perrin (1981): to prove, to remember, to understand, and to communicate. The first two prolong the fundamental initial use of documents, the following two introduce a more vast notion of information, which expands the immediate sense of the role of the document.

Memory is the primordial function of the preserved document, linked to the existence of the writing itself; the consignment of facts or acts in order to remember them (report cards, files, etc.). This enables us to remember what has been done, why it was done, how it was done, and what happened, in order to be able, as a consequence, to continue or begin again without errors or loss of time. This is the necessity of continuity in the action and perpetuation of institutions.

The function of evidence is one aspect of the first and longest-associated reason for the retention of archives. This is the function of authenticating documents, of charters and collections of charters, the function which leads to the creation of cartularies. These decisions of administrative and political authorities make up the arsenals of chancelleries and administrative offices. For individuals, this is the functional attachment to civil law, to notarial acts and contracts, to judicial decisions, etc. This value has, for a long time, been the basis for preserving many archives, and these types of documents have, over time, formed the essential consistency of many fonds. Today, authentic documents represent just a small part of archival fonds, with the exception of notarial records, for example.

Understanding and communication are actions of a recent and different nature. The use of archival documents in examining the past for oneself is an academic discipline within the domain of the historian. It is a relatively recent acquired knowledge, elaborated upon since the Renaissance. It met a kind of apogee at the end of the last century with the formation of nation states and the development of positivist history. Today, there is further expansion well beyond historical research and its political objectives of this function of comprehension which, in the European context of the last century, had guided, in this perspective, national and local histories, institutional histories, and biographies.

Today, the function of comprehension is not only political but also economic and social. The problems which are raised during the post-industrial era are new and relevant to all levels of society, certainly to varying degrees and with differing intensities according to the country, but the phenomenon is nevertheless general.

The structures of conservation and transmission of an oral tradition are disappearing, leaving the individual without those roots which are necessary for self-awareness, person-

ality, and identity. And for the past twenty years in countries where this process is farthest along, growing battalions of genealogists have emerged who come to the archives not simply to pass the time, but to satisfy a need for a spiritual order. It is actually a vital need which leads them to search within what is written in an attempt to rediscover that which the memory of people (rendered useless by the actual disappearance of family contacts and communication between generations) is no longer able to transmit.

This phenomenon is not limited to individuals. Even corporate and administrative history, which is flourishing now, does not escape this preoccupation with a history of community, culture, and identity. At the national level, histories of daily life, of either rural or urban life of social groups, are also following this development. In a world which seems to be dehumanized, the revived biographical genre is the opportunity to explain an era and society through a person who serves as a beacon. Since the middle of this century, numerous archivists have had regular columns in the press or on radio programs regarding the history of the country or region within their area of responsibility. One can even cite a famous Senegalese storyteller who went to the National Archives to find the elements of broadcast recollections which he later presented as though they were his own. More and more, archives are becoming a relay station for an oral tradition which would otherwise be lost.

The function of communication, when it is not in the noble form of publicity, also ensures a function of giving an identity. The use of documents by those responsible for developing a community's sense of belonging in order to put forward the merits of the administration in charge, either to communicate with the community or with individuals outside the community, is a relatively recent approach. Traditionally, religious festivals, processions, ceremonial arrivals, and official trips were the means for this political communication, as were grand monuments and urban works in a more permanent way. More recently, the celebrations of illustrious men or the appreciation of historic and archaeological monuments have enriched the palette of communication. Towards the middle of the last century, archives were called upon precisely for this developing social and political role of history.

The publishing of documents on the history of a country, a region, or a town (including those of the Benedictines and other early caretakers of documents, such as *feudistes*) is the oldest way that documents have been used to convey information. These were implemented at the initiative of the subject institutions (countries, regions, towns, religious institutions) either by organizations often established for this purpose (Académie des Inscriptions et belles lettres or Cabinet des chartes) or by private individuals. With the organization of archives during the middle of the last century, this was delegated more and more to the archives themselves (e.g., the publications of the national archives of France). Although these publications were at first erudite and aimed at a limited elite, they have evolved into a genre with much broader appeal (as at the National Archives of Canada).

Even during the last century, this public had exposure to the exhibition of documents. The most significant example of this was the museum of the history of France, which was created at the National Archives in 1867, under the Second Empire, to promote the nation as well as the imperial regime. More recently, shortly after the independence of Ghana, the national archives of that country installed in its new building a permanent exhibit which retraced the constitutional history of the country and its march towards independence. In 1972, an exhibit entitled *Assinie et sa région dans l'histoire*, organized by the National Archives of the Ivory Coast upon the occasion of its modernization, showed the

same objective. Since the Second World War, the participation of archives in the activities of educational establishments and in civics with a bias towards what one would call educational services, is one particular means of integrating children into the community in which they live. This is a means of entering into a heritage and a family, as when by marriage a man and woman enter into the community, history, and culture of their respective in-laws. The celebration and commemoration of anniversaries, centennials, or bicentennials are special occasions which legitimize the presentation of archival documents.

The recognition of this redefinition of the uses of archives today is essential to the definition of the politics of conservation. If one knows why an archival document is created, it is necessary to know why, once this reason has disappeared, the document is still kept. The four infinitives of Perrin are one of the essential tests to which possible deaccessions should be submitted.

What we have just considered underscores the considerable expansion of the finality of diplomatics beyond the concerns of historians for whom the field has diversified prodigiously, and for whom time as a framework has also been extended considerably (since contemporary history includes the present and the immediate past). The social demand for organic information as with information itself has become immense in only a matter of decades.

Who needs organic information to know the present age? Those who need information or those who are searching for reliable knowledge? Put in these terms, the public that is concerned with the essence and progression of diplomatics is infinitely greater today than a century ago. One can identify, *grosso modo*, three groups of people who have different concerns within diplomatics: first, there is the group which uses archival documents and who has a need for truth and identified information, which is itself verifiable. Second, there are those who create the documents and produce organic information. They have a need for methods and knowledge. When faced with the instabilities of supports, machines, rules, and people, they need to know what devices and elements are indispensable for the retrieval of data they create. Third, there are those who retain and manage organic information. In order to disseminate it, they must know how to evaluate this information, how to preserve it in order to constitute that memory which it is their task to save for others.

It has been said that today there are more living researchers than at any other time since the origins of the humanities. Historians, along with other researchers in the humanities (social sciences, law and economics, the hard sciences and natural sciences, as well as expert engineers and technicians in applied research, production, and the earth sciences) resort to reliable sources. What characterizes people in their approach to archives is that they are not looking strictly for information per se, but rather an answer to a question with a certain vital meaning. They have a strong need for the truth and it is this need which leads them to institutional documents and organic information.

Traditionally, diplomatics has seen itself as a science removed from any relationship to office functionaries or any practical considerations (cf. Olivier Guyotjeannin). This attitude is never contested by anyone, even when *diplomatistes* carefully study the lowliest practices and the most concrete uses of old chancelleries; but it is true that their concern is primarily history. Today, the temporal distance or chronological space which separates the source from its research use is becoming smaller with contemporary history; it is even disappearing with history of the immediate past. Are *diplomatistes* and archivists of contemporary history able to have the same attitude, what with creators and researchers side-



by-side? Yes, except if they do not authorize themselves for the sake of history any aspect of diplomatics and if they consider diplomatics for the contemporary period to be impossible. This unusual confrontation integrates diplomatics and *archivistique* in the field of the experimental sciences, and there is a path to explore, without a doubt. Office personnel apply procedures, laboratory researchers follow protocols, and elements of information define the structures of electronic documents (SGML, ODA, etc.)

The reflections, studies, and procedures of practitioners (data security and structures of documents) ought not be neglected by *diplomatistes* and contemporary archivists, since these practices enable them to deal with the documents and sometimes refresh or modify their questions. A diplomatics culture would not be unprofitable for administrators, either. But it is at this point that the convergences of both chronology and interests stop: the logic of the office is to create documents and information according to its needs, rules, and use criteria. Diplomats comes afterwards, situated downstream, as the foundation for research by criteria of evaluation of the information. Is it necessary to teach contemporary diplomatics to office functionaries? There is, without a doubt, a synthesis to be reached between North American records management with its practical aims, and erudite European diplomatics with its purely scholarly aims. The convergence would result in a contemporary diplomatics with more of a research orientation and general appeal. This type of diplomatics is, in any case, indispensable to archivists.

Contemporary diplomatics is indispensable for archivists to the extent that it is the science of the institutional document, of the functional document, and of organic information. How are archivists to manage in the face of the superabundance of documents, the redundancy of information, and their variation? The figures published by the media—for example on phenomena, events, and catastrophes which are most public and easily recognizable—often present such divergences that they force the question of the truth, judgment, and research of the source.

Who will make known the good sources? Who will reduce the uncertainty which derives from so many documents or complementary sources of information, which are repetitive and contradictory? Who will furnish the most precisely identified information (who, what, where, when, how, how much, to whom, why?) that one can verify and critique? Should information which comes accompanied by the weakest validations be preserved? It is up to the archivist to respond to these questions. But all the steps taken so far, which remain despite everything largely empirical, can no longer suffice. This is because the conditions of production, transmission, and administration of information have changed radically. It is also because the needs of users go beyond those practices which had been defined to respond to the needs of historians. Contemporary diplomatics alone can help archivists undertake this scientific critique. But because it is contemporary, it needs to reach a degree of science.

### III. Renewed Knowledge and Methods

With this, we are led to the last question: what methods should contemporary diplomatics develop to evaluate, preserve, and diffuse the sources of memory of our times, and to reduce the uncertainty that the abundance of these same sources engenders?

In the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, the archivist in Europe was a *diplomatiste* who classified, preserved, and conveyed the information of archives, but the essence of his scientific work consisted of analytical inventories and the edition of rare and impenetrable texts. Today the approach is the same. What takes pre-

cedence is still the text and the data, even if special attention is given to current supports (because of their novelty) and electronic writings (because of their invisibility). Any other new problems, born from the growth in volume, those of accessioning, of appraisal, and of the inventory are problems of *archivistique*, not of diplomatics. Diplomatics can help the archivist determine the criteria for selecting information. Diplomatics permits the archivist to evaluate the information (typology, value of evidence, value of information) in a scientific manner.

It is necessary, it seems to me, to reformulate scientifically the fundamental objectives held in common by the *diplomatiste* and the archivist, which is to say to make a survey of all of the forms that text and data can assume; to draw from this a systematic typology; to identify or define these forms according to their institutional nature and their organic function, to note their first appearance, their characteristics, their evolution, their transformation, and their disappearance; and to classify them in relation to documents of the same nature in the chain of genesis and tradition. These first steps are necessary in order for the next step, which is to discover within those preserved documents how far we can push identification, to examine the position that they occupy within what is extant, and, according to these criteria, to eliminate the least identified documents (those most difficult to critique, in the process of validation). This would help to reduce the uncertainty of sources, according to the demand for truth. The selection ought to reduce the uncertainty of research in terms of time, economy of means, and results.

Thus we have responded positively to our first questions: there remains a field of institutional documents, of organic information, which is relevant to the diplomatics method by the nature of the documents as well as by the nature of the information that they contain. The notion of archival fonds according to *respect des fonds*, is more than ever a conceptual necessity. Diplomatics is an indispensable and complementary science for archivists. The set of questions shaped by classic diplomatics could be used as the point of departure in registering the necessary knowledge base which is concerning documents and contemporary information. The elements of the inquiry would concern the form, the genesis, the lineage, and the edition of the corpus of documents and information (see the contributions of Olivier Guyotjeannin and Bernard Barbiche).

### a) The Form

The study of the form of documents is a research domain of diplomatics. The form is the ensemble of external and internal elements, relative to the content and structure of a document which gives it the aspect which responds to its diplomatic and juridical nature, or function, according to the rules and uses of the parent institution. The internal characteristics of the text are the elements of form which pertain to the text of documents: language, style, arrangement, and formulation of the diplomatic discourse (the prefatory protocol, the terms of the document and clauses, the concluding protocol with its validating signs, etc.); these are the elements of the structure of the text, its data, and its information are all the complementary references; headings and stamps, registry information, marginal notes, certifications, etc. All this "information of service" (which can be more or less assimilated as meta information and which defines the context of the data or the text) is characteristic of the physical or technical nature of the support.

With the development of office equipment and utilities, office managers have created a practical diplomatics to industrialize the electronic production and exchange of documents. The tendency towards a standardization was pushed, as for example with the pre-

sentation of the date. This was the outcome of efforts to standardize office practice and, more recently, to standardize the work of information managers whose work is stimulated by the constraints of technology for administering information.

The exchange of technical or business documents represents a heavy burden in the general expenses of businesses. If one examines closely the norms refined to assure the exchange of electronic documents: EDI (Electronic Data Exchange), EDIFACT (Electronic Data Interchange for Administration Commerce and Trade), ODA (Open Document Architecture), or especially SGML (Standard Generalized Markup Language), one can observe that the constraints of informatics have, in part, led information specialists to reinvent the study of the form of documents with which diplomatics scholars have had experience for a long time. If certain norms identify the cells and sequences of data which constitute the document as handled by the machine, in a purely mechanical fashion, others (SGML) develop techniques in a spirit approaching that of diplomatics. They acknowledge the function and the importance of the content of each of the elements of a document, and give these elements an identity using terms for what they are rather than by how they appear. The objectives of the information technology specialists and the *diplomate* are not the same: for the former, they are applied, for the latter, they are scientific.

Finally, since the beginning of the industrial period, the supports and the methods of writing, producing, transmitting, and preserving documents have continued to evolve. It is essential to establish a precise and complete history of this evolution. The history is an element of source criticism, as well as of preservation. Beyond diplomatics, innovations as mutations have, each time, occurred as a response to administrative systems that are in crisis.

## **b) Genesis and Tradition**

The study of the genesis and elaboration of documents is also dominated by growing diversification and specialization of tasks and professions of the tertiary sector. These studies are accompanied by the production of working tools (procedural manuals, formularies, treatises, dictionaries, codes, or specialized encyclopedias) which are more numerous than in the past and more and more automated. The Ecole des Chartes is creating a database of manuals and formularies used by records creators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are already more than twelve hundred entries derived from sources obtained at the major Parisian libraries. These concern nearly forty different professions or administrative functions.

The growth of administrative activities, the elongation of hierarchies, the complication of administrative procedures, and the expansion of dissemination give a new finality to the study of diplomatics' tradition. It is concerned less with determining the basic text than with evaluating the circuits and the means of elaboration for decisions and their applications. The new methods of organization in the network of the post-industrial society generate new modalities which are equally important to study.

At the junction of the study of genesis and tradition, one can find processes of decision making. These processes can bring a significant contribution to the history of institutions and society and, all the more, to the science of diplomatics and consideration of *archivistique*.

One document, often unique, is no longer the single vestige of an act or a text. Versions and exemplars are multiple, just as intermediary supports and substitutions are. Rules and traditional practices of validation and authentication are often found to be at

least diluted if not decaying (registering, signatures, etc.). In this context, the file becomes the tool par excellence of the daily work of offices. It forms itself progressively, perfects itself, and rationalizes itself according to the rhythm of administrative evolution in order to become truly functional. (See the case study by Bernard Barbiche.) It ought to be an object of particular research.

The genesis, treatment, and tradition of data are new aspects, largely technical, which cannot be neglected, given their importance as a documentary accumulation necessitating archival care. This accumulation includes registrations of spatial probes, meteorological or geographical satellites, seismic phenomena, and immense collections of scientific and technical data recorded by the devices which conduct surveillance over the world, its people, and their actions.

### c) The Necessity of New Methodological Tools

It is imperative to consider the extraordinary number, variety, and diversity of contemporary archival documents. While we are used to scores of edited documents which are sold commercially and which are listed in bibliographies (such as for novels or essays, journals or reviews, sound recordings or videos, software, or CD-ROMs), this number is limited for the very reason of necessarily offering to those who use them, the general public, a typology and amount which is accessible and usable. But institutional documents present an infinite variety of types because of the array of administrative functions involved: personnel, educational, financial, stocks, health, etc., and the diversity of possible actions and procedures: decision, control, aid, and regulation of which they are the instruments, each one being produced and used by specialists (notary, judge, accountant, etc.). It has been possible to identify thousands of these documents. There has flowed forth a richness and originality of exceptional types of information which will undoubtedly increase with the advent of new machines and new supports, but especially with new activities created by modern society.

The multiplication and diversification of documents with all their forms impose, more than in the past, a systematic inventory and identification of documents, according to diplomatics, which is to say, their functionality according to a scientific typology. The constitution of this corpus will lead to a precision and renewal of the categories of description for internal and external characteristics of documents, or the content and value of information in an organic state.

It is along these lines that a first inventory and typology were published in 1987, entitled *Vocabulaire des archives, archivistique et diplomatique contemporaines*. The pursuit of these studies at the Ecole des Chartes has resulted in a second inventory and the outline of a scientific classification published in 1991 in *Dictionnaire des archives, de l'archivage aux systèmes d'information*, which was endorsed by the French organization for standards.

The questions of general diplomatics relative to documents produced by information technologies pose new problems. For some years, documents or their "offspring" have passed from paper form to electronic form without any alteration in their nature according to diplomatics. This has led to the inventory and the typology of documents being centered around the functional character of the organic information, thereby leaving out its support.

#### d) The Edition

The edition of documents of the contemporary era is easier than the edition of those of the less immediate modern era, and infinitely easier than for the medieval period. The arrival of the common use of printing (1840), the typewriter (1890), and reprographic techniques (1950), might not suppress the interest in critical editions, but do reduce its necessary use to exceptional documents or the constitution of a particular corpus. The rule for documents of the high Middle Ages (cf., the *Monumenta Germaniae historica*) becomes the exception for those of the contemporary era, with the mass and multiplicity of exemplars. The objective is no longer one of comprehensiveness, which is neither feasible because of the volume of information nor justifiable by any sort of difficulty of access. The characteristics of contemporary documents are such that a simple facsimile is sufficient. Furthermore, there exists a considerable amount of published sources that are, by origin, official or administrative.

This study of edition lends itself more to documents of a private nature which are often less accessible, which remain as unpublished manuscripts longer than administrative documents, and which require identification (e.g., correspondence).

On the other hand, figurative documents, even those of an institutional origin such as stamps, signs, photographs, or titles (saved separately because of their support, their method of dissemination, their market value, and/or the interest of collectors), lend themselves to a multitude of facsimile publications for the general public. This generally occurs without concern for their character as archival documents and without any scientific presentation, even though the need is greater with these documents than with textual documents which are self-identifying (cf. the work of Parinet). Sound and audio-visual documents also lend themselves to editions with a commercial character. In this domain, that which is produced hardly responds to the needs of science and renders these sources, no matter how indispensable, scarcely integrated into scientific research. Their use is inhibited by the absence or insufficiency of a diplomatics commentary.

#### e) Selection

Classic diplomatics can be defined as the erudite discipline which establishes, through the critique of archival documents, a set of scientific sources for medieval research. In the same spirit, one can conclude that contemporary diplomatics is the erudite discipline which studies and enables the designation, by a critique emanating from archives, of sources to constitute the memory of all scientific research. If the perspective is one of furnishing scientific sources, then the objective is no longer limited to the benefit of history and historians alone, but, rather, expands to all scientific research.

The difference between the two definitions does not translate as a difference in approach, but in the recognition, for the contemporary era, of the evolution of conditions under which one may elaborate upon history on the one hand and of the generalization of the historical perspective for all scientific disciplines and all techniques. The response to this diversification of use must take into account the changes in the production of sources: the increase in volume, the multiplication of information, the variety of documents, and their support.

In this context, if the outcome of classic, erudite diplomatics is the critique and edition of medieval texts, then contemporary, erudite diplomatics emerges principally as the evaluation for preservation of documents for research and selection.



With an increase in documents, begun a century-and-a-half ago and accelerated in the last fifty years, the problem in selection is increasing for archives. One could say that appraisal is edition in reverse, pointing to contributions from the methods of diplomatics in the selection and archival accessioning of contemporary documents.

Tradition within the discipline of diplomatics is the study of the transmission function from one document to another. The study of the tradition of texts teaches us to distinguish the different stages in the course of their elaboration: draft, dispatch, varying types of copies, certified copy, extract, publication, etc., and, through the notion of original and copy, to distinguish the value of documents by function of their place in the process of the elaboration of the text, or information, notably their juridical and institutional validations.

Methodological rules have been established to evaluate and select different versions of a text to establish a diplomatic edition. These rules can guide us in establishing a more scientific method than current practices contain. A focus would be more on the information than the documents. The selection of contemporary information for definitive preservation is possible, since we encounter documents which are linked in a process of collecting, arrangement, and description of information, which they stake out in their sequence.

#### f) The Creation of New Sources?

But can one go further? If diplomatics focuses upon an organic information with its scientific edition, can one attach to diplomatics and to archivists the elaboration of rules, in order to give to organic information (which lacks such rules) the supports which would enable its retention and access for historical research? It seems that the response is already largely given.

In the introduction to his memoirs, former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger notes that he knew that the most confidential reports of the State Department were rapidly published by the press and that, therefore, one only wrote what one would want to accept in print, and that it was necessary to tell this truth in his memoirs. The abundance of what is written is not a gauge of exhaustivity. Many texts cannot be understood without a commentary by the actors related to the text. The preservation of memory, which is incumbent upon archivists, includes oral testimonies. But for these testimonies to benefit from a presumption of authenticity they should be collected according to certain rules, which the archivist cannot formulate without the help of the *diplomatiste*.

One can see that a reflection on contemporary diplomatics leads to a reflection on the scientific evolution of the metier of the archivist, resulting in a redefinition of the profile of the archivist. New ethical problems present themselves. Doctors have, for a long time, had their Hippocratic oath. When will archivists have our oath of Mabillon?

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