Introduction—Encoded Archival Description: Context and Theory

ENCODED ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION (EAD) first sprang onto the archival scene at the 1993 SAA annual meeting in New Orleans, where Daniel Pitti presented a paper on the Berkeley Finding Aid Project, a fledgling research and development project (and precursor to EAD) which was barely under way at the time. The project gained immediate momentum the following month, when Berkeley was awarded a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop both an SGML-based encoding scheme for archival finding aids and a database of finding aids encoded using the new scheme. In the ensuing five years, the momentum that began in 1993 has not abated for a moment, and it can be argued that the development of EAD has generated more interest in both the U.S. and international archival communities than any other technological development in the thirty or so years since the automation revolution began to change the way in which cultural repositories of all kinds conduct their business.

Why has the development of EAD captured the attention and enthusiasm of so many archivists, librarians, software designers, and other information professionals throughout the world? Within the U.S. archival community, surely this can be attributed to the inherent appeal of a *standard* for structuring and automating finding aids. Despite a somewhat traditional penchant within the profession for the development of unique solutions to common problems (and a concomitant resistance to various types of standardization), many archivists instinctively are attracted to a technique that promises to reduce the need to reinvent the finding aid wheel in every repository, or to rekey or edit data every time a software upgrade is necessary, and which also demonstrates clear potential to radically improve access to archival materials by facilitating structured access via the Internet.

But why the strong interest in EAD beyond the American archival community? Two reasons come immediately to mind. First, in selecting Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML) as the metalanguage environment within which the EAD data structure (or Document Type Definition (DTD), in SGML parlance) would be developed, Pitti made a deliberate decision to position his finding aid encoding scheme somewhat "ahead of the curve" in terms of existing library and archival software applications. As a result, software to facilitate use of SGML in the World Wide Web environment is coming of age at virtually the same moment that EAD is approaching its first official version 1.0 "release." Second, within the context of the revolution in access to all types of information that has been enabled by proliferation of the Web, librarians and other information professionals have sensed the potential of hierarchically structured finding aids for providing access to many such resources. Thus, they are watching EAD closely either as a tool for direct use or as a potential model for development of similar DTDs.

The purpose of this issue of the *American Archivist* is to reveal through a sequence of six papers the context within which EAD was developed, the essentials of its structured approach to encoding finding aid data, and the role that EAD is meant to play in individual repositories and for the profession as a whole.

The first two papers, authored by the principal architect of EAD and by the preeminent spokesperson for American descriptive standards, respectively, lay the conceptual foundation for EAD as a logical outgrowth of earlier work both in archival theory and in library and information science. First, Daniel Pitti outlines important characteristics of the broader in-

formation storage and retrieval environment within which EAD resides, describing how his understanding of that environment contributed to his vision of an encoding scheme for archival finding aids. Pitti felt strongly that such a scheme could enable archival description *to play an effective role within today's rapidly evolving and increasingly integrated information* universe. In a related paper, Steven Hensen refers back to the work of the National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF) and the development of the USMARC Archival and Manuscripts Control format (MARC AMC) in his description of the evolution of archival descriptive standards and practice and of the important role that he sees EAD playing in the future.

These background papers are followed by two lucid analyses of structured encoding schemes. Steven DeRose, an internationally recognized SGML expert and software developer who contributed his expertise to the development of EAD, outlines the characteristics of structured information that enable powerful navigation, retrieval, and control of textual data. DeRose's straightforward analysis serves as a prelude to Janice Ruth's paper, in which she presents an overview of the most important structural characteristics of EAD itself. From her article, archivists who have not yet been introduced to the specifics of EAD will obtain a clear picture of how numerous elements of traditional finding aid structure have been incorporated into this new encoding scheme, as well as of the potential that EAD presents for utilizing that information in powerful new ways. Even those archivists with no plans to implement EAD will find value in her overview of the elements of an effective finding aid. Ruth's writing is informed by the expertise gained during many years as a finding aid author and editor in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress.

The final two papers, written by the two descriptive experts who have team-taught twenty-two two-day EAD workshops in four countries over the past two years, serve to assist archivists in thinking about the roles that EAD can play as a tool both for individual repositories and the international archival profession at large. Michael Fox, a distinguished archival administrator and technical expert, offers guidance regarding the types of questions managers should ask in deciding whether and/or how to incorporate EAD into their local arsenals of technical tools for enhancing the efficiency of finding aid preparation and the effectiveness of archival access systems. In the second half of his paper, Fox describes four general scenarios for choosing encoding software and outlines some of the workflow implications of each. In the final article, Kris Kiesling describes the important role that EAD can play as a shared international standard for archival description. As the current chair of both SAA's Committee on Archival Information Exchange and the EAD Working Group, she is well qualified to bring perspective to the importance of standards development and maintenance for any mature profession.

It is my hope that these six papers provide an effective overview of the thinking behind the development of EAD and of its intended place in an integrated system of archival description and access. After absorbing them, archivists will be well prepared for an informed reading of the fall 1997 issue of the *American Archivist*, which will present six institutional case studies of EAD implementation.

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