

# The Four Paradigms of Archival History

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## ABSTRACT

*With an information-centered approach, four successive paradigms can be distinguished in the multi-millennial history of archives. Alongside enduring elements of continuity, new key features, functions and impacts appear, which fundamentally change the role and ideology of archives. In the archival systems designated as entitlement-attestation, national, public, and global, their primary and new objectives, key institutions, specialists and target audience as well as applied information technologies and characteristic problems show significant differences. This study includes the most important characteristics of these respective archival paradigms in one coherent system, with brief reference to the evolution of two major memory-preserving institutions: the library and the museum.*

*Keywords:* Access, Archival Systems, Archives, Information Operations, Paradigm Shift

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## INTRODUCTION

Archives, besides libraries and museums, represent one of the three prominent types of institution dedicated to the preservation of the past. Obviously, other important *techniques* and *genres* of ensuring the survival of the past also exist, but what these three types of organizations have in common is that they have evolved into *institutions* (and in the era of their modern development, typically into public institutions), creating in the process their characteristic functions, branches of science, professions and even specific languages. In most parts of the civilized world, these three institutions have happily coexisted side by side, each taking its place in the public conscience and carrying out its

specific tasks in the accumulation of information, knowledge and scholarship: in general, in the preservation of important segments of our cultural heritage.

According to the superficial distinction of the lay (and, precisely for *this* reason, valuable) public, museums collect objects, libraries hold books, and archives store documents. Nevertheless, this distinction fails to work in a variety of cases. The fragments of Mesopotamian clay tablets or the Rosette Stone are held in museums, rather than in archives or libraries; and several libraries have extensive collections of manuscripts. On the same token, archives often complement their holdings with publications or even physical objects, while some of the museums hold hand-written letters or manorial inventories. To top it all, documents also have valuable physical features (material, texture, technique and aesthetic value of their

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production), just as objects have documentary value (their manufacture and use are proof that certain events did take place and certain practices did exist), irrespective of the type of institution that stores them. As for the more recent developments, the new information and communication technologies (most notably digitization and Internet access) go way beyond the already existing phenomena of convergence and tend to confuse the picture even further by concealing from the Internet user the institutions and functions behind the objects to be digitized.

Still, today's lay public usually have some notion of when and why to visit a library, an archive or a museum. While touring some cultural attractions, they might even discover that the previous owners also had no problem separating the three functions: in Forchtenstein (Fraknó) Castle under the Esterházy's, for example, the three functions coexisted side by side (and two of them can still be studied in the original milieu and context, thanks to the good fortunes of history): the museum, which combined the functions of a treasury, an art collection and a natural science museum, served to demonstrate the family's wealth, discerning taste and network of connections, while also presenting interesting and exotic pieces of information; the library was meant to accumulate knowledge handed down through history in printed form (its later removal from its original setting and its transportation to the family's subsequent place of residence was decided only for reasons of convenience); and its archives served the purpose of keeping track, as well as providing evidence, of the changes in the proprietary rights and economic circumstances of the estate.

In this regard, it is perhaps the archives that are the worst off: their function is the least understood by the public in most countries. But as soon as the need arises to use them, a layperson, even without being able to express it in expert terms, will easily understand the main difference between the holdings of an archive and the collections of the more familiar environment of a library: archives hold *primary sources* (i.e. documents that exist either

in the original only or in no more than a few copies – such as documents about the visitor's own property), while libraries keep *secondary sources* (typically copies of works based on primary sources – such as a monograph about the visitor's hometown, for example). And anyone who has already searched the catalogue of both a library and an archive will confirm that in a library every single book is treated as a separate entity (regardless of the existence of serial publications and shared elements of classification), while the same is far from being true in the case of documents held in an archive: certain background knowledge and some familiarity with the context is necessary, as we need to know who produced or used the document, in what context, in what organization and in the course of what activity. Without this context the individual document cannot be interpreted, even though that context might exist in the mind of the researcher or even in the public conscience.

Of course, nothing can stop a person from using a document outside its original context, or even from placing it deliberately in a different context, whether as a mere illustration, or as part of an intellectual montage. In other words, one could use any document in a different way, for purposes fundamentally different from the originally intended one. To cap that, “using differently, for a different purpose” – irritating as it may be to the value system of the expert professionals and their communities – is not something that is fundamentally new to the nature of the institutions of memory-preservation. What all these three institutions have in common is that none of the materials they respectively store were originally conceived for the purpose that the visitors of these three institutions use them, or will be using them in the future. This is especially true in the case of the archives, which have basically been set up for storing documents related to everyday life, rather than for keeping intellectual products originally intended either for the preservation of the nation's past, or for the dispensation of knowledge. Not even the paintings were origi-

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