

International standards for archives: a Portuguese perspective

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Introduction

Although archives are at least as old as writing itself and archival management procedures are inherent to them practically since their origins, we can situate the autonomy of Archival Science as a discipline only at the end of the 19th century. It may be said that the publication of the famous “Manual of Dutch Archivists”¹ in 1898 caused Archival Science to be considered more than just an auxiliary area of historical science and it gradually became a subject of a markedly technical character, although still characterised by a historicist matrix.

The increasingly technical component of Archival Science was developed during the 20th century due to a number of factors, which were directly related at various levels with the evolution which followed World War I. On the one hand, the technological developments favoured the appearance of new information supports and new means of communication, which, associated with an increase in documentary production, brought along new problems, such as appraisal, selection and elimination of documents.

The creation of the International Council on Archives, which was ratified in 1950, was an important mark in the affirmation of the discipline’s identity and contributed to bring archivists closer in matters concerning technical issues.

Into a technical and custodial view of Archival Science, corresponding to a period that began with French Revolution and remains until the present days — which we can entitle as *historical-technicist paradigm* — standardization performs a very important role, which sometimes surpasses many other essential questions related to theoretical foundations of the discipline. The appearance of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) is the expression of a significative development of Archival Science, but the

¹ S. MULLER - J. A. FEITH - R. FRUIN, *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van de vereniging van archivarissen*, Groningen, Erven B. van der Kamp., 1898.

extraordinary emphasis put on standards also reveals that the international debate and interests are not focused into the main issues. Standards are needed to make a representation of information after a rigorous and scientific study upon it, but the theoretical basis to improve such study are already inconsistent, empirical and lack scientific consensus.

The standardized representation of information is a final step of the archivist's work and has to be preceded by an analysis and a study in order to reach a deep knowledge of the archival reality he has as an object of study.

These considerations enable us to point out that the difficulties in the application of standards occur not because of standards themselves, but in consequence of theoretical problems that are behind and upstream their application. This point of view is one of the concerns of this paper and is enlightened upon the reality of Portuguese archives.

Technical procedures related to archival description: the experience of Portuguese archives

The question of standardization in order to describe or represent by any form the archival information has always been considered a minor problem in Portugal, as much as we can realize through writings on the subject. Until the first decades of 20th century, more precisely until 1927, we don't know any guidelines directed to the elaboration of archival finding aids. *Inventories, indexes, catalogues and summaries of documents* have been produced since very ancient times and these four categories were the most common at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.

In fact, the first "rules" for archival cataloguing in Portugal were approved by a decree dated of 27th May 1927 and refer explicitly to "catalogues" and "inventories" although they don't define the terms and the scope of their application². This regulation was suspended a few time after its approval, but some of the description models officialized in it continued to be used and remained in practice until our days.

² *Ministério da Instrução Publica: Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior: decreto n° 13.724*, in «Diário do Govêrno. 1ª série», 114 (3.07.1927), p. 881-901.

Another legal disposal appeared in 1931, giving support to a general reformation of state archives and libraries³. One of the consequences of this law was the publication of the *Instruções provisórias para a elaboração dos roteiros ou índices topográficos dos arquivos ou secções de manuscritos das bibliotecas*⁴, written by a civil servant and historian, António Ferrão, under the tutelage of the official organism that superintended on public archives and libraries — the Inspeção das Bibliotecas e Arquivos. Despite of being provisional and quite ignored, these "instructions" can be considered as the first standards in order to produce access tools in Portuguese archives. And, more than that, they constituted the only example of archival standardization for this purpose until 1989, when the Instituto Português de Arquivos (IPA) promoted the implementation of ARQBASE, a standardized and automated tool for archival description⁵. However, and despite of the IPA's intention of imposing this standard — at least in state archives — ARQBASE was never approved by a legal disposal as happened with the "instructions" from 1933.

In face of the situation above referred, we easily conclude that archival description in Portugal has never been object of standardization: the official standards dated from 1933 were provisional and the more recent "rules" for description, aiming to be a standard never obtained such statute.

Side by side with the official developments concerning standardization, a few works on the subject have risen from the archival professional community. The first one came up in 1966 and was undertaken by Avelino de Jesus da Costa, teacher of Archival Science at the University of Coimbra⁶. He aimed to identify the finding aids of Portuguese archives, to examine the terminology and methods of archival description used, to compare such terminology and methods with those used in foreign archives and

³ *Ministério da Instrução Pública: Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior e das Belas Artes: decreto n.º 19.952*, in «Diário do Governo. 1ª série», 147 (27.06.1931) p. 1.253-1.269.

⁴ In a literal translation: *Provisional instructions for the elaboration of guides or topographic indexes from archives or manuscript sections from libraries*. These "instructions" were officially approved and published in: *Ministério da Instrução Pública: Direcção Geral do Ensino Superior e das Belas Artes: portaria n.º 7.588*, in «Diário do Governo. 1ª série», 119 (30.05.1933) p. 922-924.

⁵ The ARQBASE has been progressively revised and the final version was edited in 1991: Ana FRANQUEIRA - Madalena GARCIA, *ARQBASE: metodologia de descrição arquivística para tratamento automatizado de documentação histórica*, [Lisboa], Instituto Português de Arquivos, 1991.

⁶ Avelino de Jesus da COSTA, *Princípios gerais da elaboração de instrumentos de trabalho em Arquivologia: arquivos públicos e arquivos eclesíasticos*, Coimbra, Universidade, 1966.

to suggest means to improve the production of finding aids⁷. In order to reach the objectives the author carried on an inquiry to 39 archives (public and ecclesiastical) whose results led to a general conclusion: "it reigns a great disorientation in the terminology adopted to name the finding aids", but the Portuguese delay in what concerns the production of finding aids is not so great as it is usually said. This work is a significative one also because the author presents some models of finding aids, indicating the data elements needed for description, although without an absence of theoretical principles underlying them.

About ten years later, another work appeared in Portugal concerning the question of finding aids. It was written by an archivist, Maria Fernanda Mouta, and attempted to typify and to define the instruments used to retrieve archival information⁸. One of the most important findings of this work was the necessity in developing an archival theory as an essential basis to postulate technical procedures. We also perceive through Mouta's work an evolution in the terminology: the term "work instrument" is abandoned and criticized and replaced by the term "instrument of information retrieval", nearer of the expression "finding aid" later authorized by ICA's Dictionary of Terminology⁹. Unfortunately, in what concerns description and data elements needed for each type of finding aid there weren't much theoretical considerations in the study mentioned above.

By the same time, arose another work dedicated to the subject of finding aids, which characterized and described the different types destined to provide access to information to users¹⁰. The author, another archivist named Alzira Leite Moreira, didn't discuss, however, from a theoretical point of view, the problems connected with description in the scope of her work.

The three works referred are the only ones published in Portugal (until the publication of international standards) and devoted to the question of finding aids, what means, in a certain way, a relation with description. It's, in fact, an evident sign of the

⁷ The author used the term "work instruments", quite in consonance with the terminology used in the *Elsevier's Lexicon of Archival Terminology*, edited two years before (1964).

⁸ Maria Fernanda MOUTA, *Arquivos: instrumentos de recuperação da informação*, «Cadernos de Biblioteconomia, Arquivística e Documentação», 13 (1977) p. 190-202.

⁹ *Dictionary of archival terminology: english and french with equivalents in dutch, german, italian, russian and spanish*. Compil. by Frank B. Evans, François-J. Himly, Peter Walne, München, [etc.], K. G. Saur, 1984. (2nd rev. ed.: 1988).

¹⁰ Alzira Teixeira Leite MOREIRA, *O Instrumento de busca ao serviço do investigador*, Coimbra : [s. n.], 1978. (Sep. de: *Boletim da Biblioteca da Universidade de Coimbra*. 34).

little importance of the subject and indicates that it has been considered, as we said before, as a minor problem.

From the 80's the question of description has been much influenced by Spanish and British archival practices. On the one hand the writings of Antonia Heredia Herrera¹¹ and the lessons she gave in short courses promoted by the Portuguese Association of Librarians, Archivists and Documentalists (BAD) familiarized Portuguese archivists with concepts related to description and finding aids (*instrumentos de descripción*, in the Spanish terminology) and had repercussions, some years later, in the design of data elements established by ARQBASE. On the other hand, the British influence came also by the writings and courses given by Michael Cook¹². His theorization, expressed in MAD (Manual of Archival Description)¹³, had as well a visible consequence in the structure of ARQBASE, especially in what concerns the multilevel description.

These developments open way to the acceptance of ISAD(G)¹⁴, at least in what refers to concepts and understanding of the new standardization approved by ICA. However, the application of international standards still remains quite reduced, as reported afterwards.

One of the objectives of this paper is to present an overview of the application of international standards - ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) - in the Portuguese archives and to know the constraints of such application. The report is made on the basis of an inquiry by questionnaire sent to 118 public archives (28 from central administration and 90 from local administration).

The questionnaire was quite simple: 6 questions, 3 of them about ISAD(G) and the other 3 about ISAAR(CPF). The main goal was to know if archives already applied the standards and what for and also to identify the main difficulties in such application.

¹¹ Antónia HEREDIA HERRERA, *Manual de instrumentos de descripción documental*, Sevilla, Diputación Provincial, 1982; Antónia HEREDIA HERRERA, *Archivística general, teoría y práctica*, 4ª ed., Sevilla, Diputación Provincial, 1989.

¹² Michael COOK, *The Manual of Archival Description: recent research in archival description in the United Kingdom*, in *A Informação em tempo de mudança: actas do 1º congresso nacional de bibliotecários, arquivistas e documentalistas*, Porto, 19 - 21 Junho 1985, Porto, BAD, 1985, vol. 1, p. 409-415.

¹³ Michael COOK - Margaret PROCTER, *Manual of archival description*, 2nd ed., Aldershot, Gower, cop. 1989.

¹⁴ Portuguese translation in: «Cadernos de Biblioteconomia, Arquivística e Documentação», 2 (1995) p. 87-116.

The questionnaire got 57 answers (equal to 48,3 %), 21 of them from archives of central administration and 36 from municipal archives. Among the archives of central administration the questionnaire obtained 75 % of answers against only 40 % among the local archives. The non-respondent were above all municipalities, what doesn't seem amazing, if we consider that the majority of local archives still have user services little developed.

In what concerns ISAD(G), the answers point out to a rate of 42,1 % (24 archives) using the standards and 57,9 % (33 archives) not using it. In the set of 24 archives using ISAD(G), 15 of them are from central administration and only 9 from local administration.

Concerning ISAAR(CPF), the number of archives that apply the standards are quite small. Only 6 archives (10,5 %) gave an affirmative answer, being 4 from central administration and 2 from municipalities.

Besides the rate of application of the international standards, the inquiry also enables to reach some other conclusions, which can be summarized as follows:

a) The majority of the archives using international standards is administratively dependent on National Archives¹⁵;

b) The ISAD(G) is relatively known and used in contrast with ISAAR(CPF) which is almost unused;

c) The ISAD(G) is specially applied for descriptions at *fonds* and series level and, in consequence, to the production of guides and inventories;

d) The difficulties in the application of ISAD(G) referred by some archives are always related with description at lower levels (below series level) and mention the lack of enough data elements to provide a suitable and detailed description.

The findings of this simple inquiry are, of course, merely indicative and don't allow general conclusions. Anyway, we can say that the poor dissemination of ISAD(G) is still a consequence of several decades during which the interest in what concerns archival description has been practically absent. Besides that, the lack of knowledge and interest about ISAAR(CPF) has also a meaning: the delay in automation and specially in

¹⁵ Recently, National Archives started the publication of its general guide - a finding aid claimed by users since the beginning of 20th century - and the descriptions are based on ISAD(G). This guide is the major expression, until the moment, of the application of the international standards in the country.

the development of networks didn't stimulate yet the implementation of authority control in order to make the access to information more effective; but, even in traditional sceneries, we had the opportunity of verifying that Portuguese archivists have never paid much attention to indexing and to the use of controlled languages, whatever they could be used for¹⁶.

A new context for archival description: a scientific point of view

At the present conjuncture, the historical-technicist paradigm, still dominant, is put in confrontation with a new and emergent paradigm, designated as *scientific-informational*, and in such context the role of standardization has to be discussed by the light of a new perspective¹⁷.

In the new paradigm, Archival Science is conceived as a scientific field, with a specific **object** — the archives — which has obviously to be defined and thought in new frameworks: the archives are postulated as (semi-)closed systems of social information and formed by three factors — *structure* (of organic nature), *function* (service/use) and *memory*¹⁸.

As a scientific discipline, Archival Science has also to develop its own **method**. According to the topological model proposed by Paul de Bruyne and others¹⁹ for research in social sciences, the archival method tends to find consolidation through quadripolar research dynamics, which is operated and continuously repeated within the

¹⁶ The author devoted her PhD dissertation to access to information from archives (Fernanda RIBEIRO, *O Acesso à informação nos arquivos*, Porto, 1998, 2 vol.). In the scope of this academic study, were collected all finding aids published in Portugal since ever (a total of 523 units) and analysed them in their internal structure and access points. In order to identify the provenance of records described in such finding aids, were created several tables with authority control for the names of creators of information. This task has been quite slow and difficult, because of the absolute absence of authorized forms for names and, obviously, a coexistence of a variety of designations for the same entity (corporate body, family or person).

¹⁷ The author and some other colleagues had recently published a book entitled *Arquivística: teoria e prática de uma ciência da informação*, in which Archival Science is presented in a new framework, considering in special a scientific approach for this field of knowledge (see: Armando Malheiro da SILVA [et al.], *Arquivística: teoria e prática de uma ciência da informação*, Porto, Edições Afrontamento, cop. 1998).

¹⁸ About the systemic theory and thinking it is very useful the reading of: Piero MELLA, *Dai Sistemi al pensiero sistemico: per capire i sistemi e pensare con i sistemi*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1997.

¹⁹ Paul DE BRUYNE [et al.], *Dynamique de la recherche en sciences sociales de pôles de la pratique méthodologique*, Paris, PUF, 1974. The methodological proposes of these authors were further developed: Michelle LESSARD-HÉBERT [et al.], *Investigação qualitativa: fundamentos e práticas*, Lisboa, Instituto Piaget, 1994.

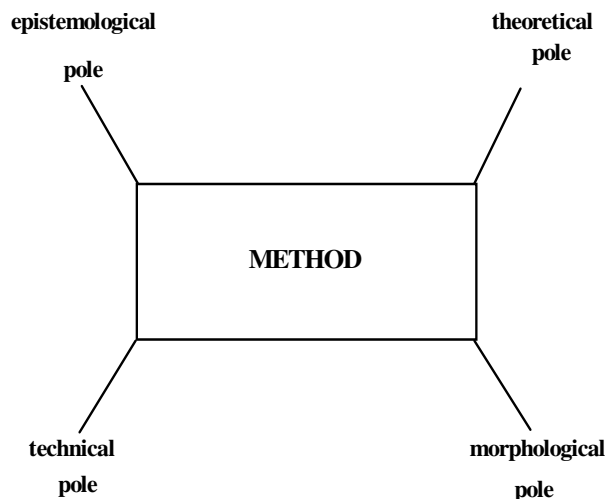
field of knowledge itself. This action conjugates quantitative approaches (there are aspects of the object which can be observed, experimented and measured) and qualitative approaches, in which the subject's interpretative/explanatory ability necessarily has modelling implications. The research dynamics referred thus implies a permanent interaction on four poles, to wit, epistemological, theoretical, technical and morphological (see fig. below).

On the *epistemological pole*, one can note the permanent construction of the scientific object and the definition of the boundaries of the problematics of research. The discursive parameters are constantly reformulated, as are the paradigms and scientific criteria which guide the whole research process.

On the *theoretical pole* we can find the rationality of the subject who knows and approaches the object, as well as the postulation of laws, the formulation of hypotheses, theories and operational concepts and the consequent validation or refutation of the "theoretical context" elaborated.

On the *technical pole* a contact with objectified reality is operated through instrumental application, thus verifying the validation capacity of the methodological mechanism. It is here that crucial operations are developed, such as the study of cases and variables and retrospective and prospective evaluation, always keeping in mind the confirmation or refutation of the postulated laws, the theories elaborated and the operational concepts formulated.

On the *morphological pole* the results of the research carried out are formalised, through the representation of the object of study and the exposition of the whole research process, which enabled the scientific construction around it. It is at this pole that standardization acquires all its importance and emerges as a natural procedure in the sequence of a complete analysis that gives the archivist's work a real statute of scientific research.



Dynamics of research inspired on the topological model
of methodological practice proposed by Paul DE BRUYNE [et al.]

Based on the theorization and method briefly referred we developed an academic study in order to PhD dissertation whose main objectives were to study and reflect on access to information, taking a perspective stretching over time and considering the context of the different kind of archives, and also to design a theoretical model to serve as a basis for the design of access tools.

The study has been divided into two distinct but complementary parts: the first provides an historical view of access to information in the context of Portuguese archives; the second deals with theoretical questions inherent in the production of access tools, and applies the defined model to the analysis of those tools produced and published in Portugal.

The study involved an extensive compilation of access tools and its analysis in order to make it possible to set out their main characteristics, which may serve as the first step towards compiling an authority list of Portuguese archives.

Besides the lack of a standardized description — what is comprehensible once the access tools were produced through times — one of the conclusions was that only 7,2% of the 510 access tools analysed provided an accurate representation of archival reality, making clear the context of information production. This inadequate

representation is not only a question of standardization of the description, but a result of a poor knowledge about the archives due to an incipient theorization and an absence of methodological analysis. Nobody can represent adequately anything unless (s)he knows well the object of such representation. That's why we consider that standards for description only make sense at the bottom of the archival work (the morphological pole of the method) and as a result of a deep study and a scientific knowledge. Without such knowledge any description risks to be insufficient and a deviated representation of the reality.

The super valorisation of the standards, as if they are the most important tool in the archivist's work, is, in our opinion, a reflex of the technicism that still dominates Archival Science. In a scientific perspective, standardization doesn't play a central role in the archival work, but it is integrated as a tool in its adequate place, side by side with many other procedures, needed to improve a true archival knowledge.