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Review of Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts

By Dennis Meissner. Archival Fundamentals Series III, Volume 2.
Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019. 224 pp. Softcover.
\$69.00. ISBN: 978-1-945246-07-4

The second volume of the new Archival Fundamentals Series released last year was Dennis Meissner's *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*. The new version replaces the 2005 edition by Kathleen Roe, and illustrates the extensive changes in archival practice that have emerged over the past 15 years. While Roe's text included forms and tools based in a manual environment, the new edition reflects the mature implementation of descriptive standards and the growing acceptance of archival management systems. As one of the co-authors of the "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP) methodology, Meissner integrates its principles into discussions of determining levels of arrangement and description, as well as integrating other recent trends in archival practice.

The book is organized with separate chapters for the principles and practice of both arrangement and description. Prior to examining traditional archival principles, however, Meissner lays out a series of principles that align more closely with recent thinking such as the revised DACS principles released last year. These concepts, such as user-centered description, description as data, and subordinating archival theory to practical considerations, have received greater focus in the professional literature in recent years. At the same time the text relies on traditional authorities such as T.R. Schellenberg and Oliver Wendell Holmes to establish the value of *respect des fonds* or the levels of description.

This tension between traditional and emerging practice is also seen in the recurring references to MPLP concepts. First published by Meissner and Mark Greene in 2005, MPLP has been widely adopted as a way of approaching processing activity as a resource manager, balancing researcher and preservation needs with administrative and financial costs. In his discussion of archival arrangement principles, for example, Meissner's careful review of the concepts of *respect des fonds*, original order, and levels of arrangement conclude with advice to balance the benefits of arrangement and description with practical considerations. As he describes it, "our preeminent goal in arranging archives is to make them available to researchers in a usable form that facilitates their research, but to do so as efficiently as possible" (p. 32).

Similarly, the following chapter on archival description principles begins by restating the idea that descriptive information should be created and managed as data. Meissner then provides an introduction to the various standards used in

descriptive practice for structuring, formatting, and exchanging descriptive information about archival collections. At the end of the chapter, he returns to the practicalities of descriptive practice by discussing the differing uses that archival descriptions aim to meet—both for administrative and research use. Ultimately, Meissner recommends that “effective description should be based on structured data, not on unstructured prose” (p. 65), as it provides the flexibility to meet the needs of multiple user groups.

Having established this framework for arrangement and description, Meissner is then able to demonstrate their application in a step-by-step review of physical processing activities. In the process he reclaims and redefines the idea of archival economy as both a management function and a statement of efficiency method. In his endorsement of accessioning as processing, Meissner makes an economic argument that it provides a way to “make a significant contribution toward keeping processing backlogs manageable and making more holdings available to researchers as expeditiously as possible” (p. 74). A similar focus on efficiency is made in the context of arrangement, encouraging readers to proceed through collections hierarchically from subgroups to series, then proceeding down to file- and item-level arrangement as needed. Meissner encourages archivists to be practical and methodical, and to plan out processing activities before beginning physical arrangement. As elsewhere, he also encourages archivists to take user needs into consideration when developing processing plans to ensure that the level of processing requested fits with MPLP’s “golden minimum.”

Meissner's discussion of archival descriptive standards and tools also takes a practical bent and builds on his earlier stated principles. A large portion of Chapter 5 consists of a summary of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACs), which the author uses to illustrate the benefits of using archival descriptive standards. Meissner also reviews the options for recording and sharing archival descriptive metadata, from traditional print finding aids to spreadsheets to online archival management systems. While not dismissing any of the options presented, the author makes strong arguments for the adoption of archival management solutions as a means of simplifying data entry and finding aid publication.

The volume concludes with a short review of difficult topics and emerging trends impacting archival arrangement and description. These challenges still include practical concerns such as the treatment of born digital records and the adoption of linked data, but Meissner also suggests that archivists be aware of shifting conceptual models, the application of MPLP, and the impacts of critical theory. To some extent the impact of these ongoing changes can be glimpsed throughout the text, though the author predicts significant changes will continue to impact archival arrangement and descriptive practice.

Though it ends with some uncertainty, Meissner’s text provides a practical, detailed introduction to arrangement and description for archivists that surpasses the scope and utility of its predecessor. It is a useful snapshot of current professional practice based on fully developed, shared standards and an increasingly robust digital

infrastructure. At the same time, it captures the emerging principles of archival economy that are driving modern archival practice. Overall, the text provides a strong introduction to the topic of arrangement and description that is useful for new professionals and for long-time practitioners.

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