

Reflections on Reconstructing Private and Official Archives

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The three papers in this session have covered very diverging aspects of archives and archive keeping, from found to reconstructed, from private to official, from original (in the sense of the archive document itself) to copy (in the widest sense of the word, including 'publication').

Ingo Kottsieper has presented us some examples of private archives, which, as he has convincingly demonstrated, deal with very specific private matters. Rather than just 'general papers' they turn out to be collections of documents relevant for a legal problem of their owner. This problem often concerns money and property, of course.

Thus we have seen the documents selected by Jedanja to prove that everything he inherited from his parents really belonged to him; or the couple Anani and Jehoišhma, for whom documents proving the legal status of the woman were an essential part of the archive, again because they could prove her right to possess property. The two cases illustrate nicely that it is essential for the study of a private archive to reconstruct the last owner, i.e. the person for whom the documents have meaning and legal value. It is in fact only when the last owner is identified by the historian (or philologist) that everything suddenly 'fits': one could compare it with a detective story which features a great multitude of clues. These clues do not actually make sense until the proverbial Hercule Poirot (a Belgian!) gathers everyone at the end of the book and in a lengthy exposé informs

everyone who is the killer and why. As a matter of fact, there are more similarities between the detective and the scholar in this case: they also face similar problems in identifying what is evidence and what is not. It is clear from Kottsieper's survey that identifying which documents are part of the archive and which are not is often problematic. In fact, this question runs parallel with the identification of the owner and purpose of the archive, just like the metamorphosis of a fact into a clue is essential when a detective determines who did it and why.

This brings us to the longstanding discussion of the definition of an archive,¹ which was briefly touched upon by Lucia Criscuolo: 'What is an archive? What is a dossier? Should we study one or the other?'. Here I think – and I hope to please everyone by saying this – that everyone is right. Of course a historian should use all available evidence when reconstructing a historical fact, and thus dossiers are essential. But on the other hand Kottsieper's and Criscuolo's papers have illustrated once more that reconstructing an archive – with its (last) owner and its 'raison d'être' – can give us a much deeper insight. In this case the archive suddenly becomes 'alive', and a 'tranche de vie' appears before us.

Reconstructing such a collection of documents is often difficult. In the ideal situation the set is found during official excavations, nicely wrapped and otherwise protected, with perfectly preserved texts. This seems like an archival scholar's wet dream, but once in a while it does in fact occur. Thus the Demotic archive of Totoes was found in Deir el-Medina as the content of two sealed jars.²

Second best is the case of the archive now kept in Brussels, purchased in the early 70ies, with papyri still wrapped in linen.³ A package with three large contracts concerning the sale of a specific house by a woman called Setjairtbinet alias Taba, and two packages with smaller documents, some of which concern the same sale transaction. Yet other of the smaller documents deal with very different matters by a necropolis worker called Djedher. In fact, it is only because we know from other sources that these two people were married and had children that we know this must be their private archive. The collection of papers only then makes sense.

But even in this case, where we have ample background information, questions remain: thus the business papers of the husband do not form a coherent whole: they seem entirely unrelated to each other and to his wife's papers recording the sale transaction. If we did not have the physical evidence that they belong together, scholars no doubt would have refrained from reconstructing them into a single archive. In this case, even with the physical evidence little 'sense' can apparently be made of this part of the archive. Why would a busy businessman

1 For a recent survey of the discussion and the terminology used, see VANDORPE 2009, esp. pp. 217-219.

2 BOTTI 1967, vol. 1, p. IX. See also VANDORPE 2009, p. 223.

3 DEPAUW 2000, pl. 1-5.

keep only a few receipts for different taxes and a letter apparently unrelated to it? It illustrates the inherent danger in reconstructing private archives which deal with a specific purpose, i.e. that scholars throw out other items because they do not fit in. In a way the scholar has to do this, because like the detective he needs a motive to solve the murder, and unrelated facts are useless to this purpose. But still the person who turned out to be guilty also had a life outside his crime. The writer of detective stories will not focus on that and perhaps even make abstraction of it entirely. But it was still there and may have left its traces. Even something that does not fit in can still be part of an archive.

The Brussels archive is also interesting in precisely the opposite respect: i.e. the danger that documents which were physically not part of the archive but fitted in nicely are reconstructed as being part of the archive. Compare it to the detective who at the end finds the solution to the puzzle and identifies the killer, but suddenly sees clues everywhere, many of which may actually be facts totally unrelated to the crime. Paradoxically some of the facts which are not related to the crime – and are thus in a sense ‘false clues’ – can even help to solve the puzzle.⁴ To come back to the concrete: the Brussels archive has been claimed by some to be incomplete in the sense that another document thought to be part of it was already known seventy years earlier, in casu the marriage contract of Setjairt-bint and Djedher, known since 1900.⁵ At first sight it seems inevitable that this item belongs to the archive, thus ruining its closed character and making the scholar wonder what other items may belong to it. But in fact a logical principle (reconstructed by Pestman on the basis of other archives) saves the integrity: a wife tends to keep her marriage contract, which contains commitments from her spouse, in a safe place where malignant husbands have no control over it, e.g. in the house of her parents or of other family members such as brothers.⁶ This always reminds me of the novel *The Quincunx* by Charles Palliser, where the search for documents (the last will and a codicil modifying it) illustrates how important ownership of a document is in a system where claims were not centrally registered. Whoever owned a document could destroy it, thus effectively annihilating the claims and rights it contained. So in fact it is rather unlikely or actually very improbable that the marriage document was preserved in the Brussels archive after all. This again illustrates the importance of reconstructing an archive for the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the documents – and vice versa.

What I have said so far relates mostly to private archives. But what about public archives? Are they similar? Or completely different? Well, first of all we must probably problematize the distinction private – public/official itself, at least to a

4 As William of Baskerville is led to the perpetrator by a false hypothesis in U. Eco, *The Name of the Rose*.

5 See e.g. MUHS 1996, p. 15 and n. 40, corrected in MUHS 2008, esp. pp. 38-39 n. 22 & 33.

6 See PESTMAN 1961, pp. 83-86; MUHS 2008, p. 38 n. 22; and DEPAUW 2000, p. 11.

certain extent. It is true that everyone in antiquity – and each of us today – has a private side to his life and a public, ‘official’ one. We work as scholars for a university and everything which relates to our office is ‘official’. Yet we are also humans and our professional interaction is only one aspect of our social life. Often the two cannot be distinguished neatly in our lives, and we should probably not expect the ancients to be more ‘politically correct’ in this respect than we are. Perhaps letters in particular illustrate the problematic distinction between private and official: within a single letter people switch from business to official to private. So much so, that when my colleague Willy Clarysse urged me to make this distinction in my book on Demotic letters,⁷ I tried but in the end decided against it. It is often almost impossible to draw the line (although it is good to try to draw it!).⁸

For us, conflicts of the private and the official are often problematic and painful: imagine a hopeless student who turns out to be the son of a friend, or a judge who presides the trial of someone he knows very well. It is an interesting question whether in antiquity people were less strict in this. Probably hierarchy and ‘knowing someone’ were even more important than today – and caused less problems. A nice example of this mix of official and private, other than the Menches archive already mentioned by Criscuolo or the Nakhthor archive mentioned by Kottsieper, is the Zenon archive. Like the Aramaic Nakhthor archive, the Zenon archive includes the archive of Panakestor, his ‘official’ predecessor (as private manager!). But it also contains evidence for Zenon’s private business dealings ‘on the side’, which were probably not ‘illegal’ – and the term is very anachronistic here. Whether this lends the Ptolemaic administration something ‘approximative’ or even ‘amateuristic’ (in Criscuolo’s words) is an interesting question.

An extra problem when dealing with official and public archives is that these apparently are far less likely to survive the tooth of time than their private counterparts. This is probably inherent to their nature: since they had to be public, they had to be in some way at least occasionally accessible to people who wanted to consult them, and thus could less easily be preserved in a safe place far away from every disturbance, surviving thousands of years.⁹ In fact, with the exception of inscribed copies to which I will return later, in Egypt these more official archives indeed particularly seem to be preserved when they – paradoxically – were thrown away or recycled into mummy cartonnage.¹⁰ One can imagine the problems this gives for the scholar who wants to reconstruct their original *Sitz-im-Leben*, as Criscuolo convincingly demonstrates: there are a lot of clues here,

7 DEPAUW 2006, pp. 106-109.

8 For a typology, see VANDORPE 2009, pp. 231-237.

9 It is instructive that most of the Demotic family archives preserved are those of undertakers and other necropolis workers, who have access to tombs to safeguard their papers! See MUHS 2008, esp. pp. 33-35.

10 See e.g. CUVIGNY 2009, pp. 45-47.

but also a lot of suspects and no clear motive! One could even say that the scholar here is like a detective walking around in a battlefield, with bodies scattered everywhere: no wonder people get confused as to which crime they should investigate first. As a result people tend to group documents on the basis of similar names just as if they try to group bodies with similar wounds ...

Criscuolo's paper is somewhat of an antidote to this exclusively prosopographic approach. She presents documents which have long been considered drafts originally preserved in a private archive, but which are in her view 'quick' secondary copies for official purposes. In fact, she reconstructs not the archive of an official (Pankrates) or even a group of officials (such as the *basilikoi grammateis* of Areos Kome), but rather an official archive for all government officials in a particular locality. A similar study of the diplomatics of the documents involved, also shows the archive of Philo to be official rather than private, and again part of the village archive. That such archives did in fact exist, is also suggested by a set of documents which formed the subject of a paper at the congress of Demotic studies in Oxford in 2011. Cary Martin presented an impressive collection of rather large papyri with early Demotic letters which only recently appeared on the market. Although the texts are clearly letters starting with the appropriate epistolary formulae, there is something strange about them: they are written on large sheets, which is atypical for Demotic letters, something I had already noticed when I first saw the photographs.¹¹ But also, it turns out that on some sheets more than one letter is present, sent by different people but apparently written (or should I say copied) in the same hand. Here again it is an attractive hypothesis to suppose that these documents are copies which were part of an official archive, perhaps that of a village or town.

As Criscuolo shows, examining the evidence very carefully can help to reconstruct the *Sitz-im-Leben*. It is not because a document is written in a rather careless hand and with spelling mistakes, that it has to be a preliminary draft written by the author. She shows how these drafts in some – and perhaps many – cases turn out to be rather the opposite: post-factum copies written by a third party for bureaucratic or archival purposes. Indeed this conclusion may warrant the re-examination of further archives to see whether the so-called drafts could not in fact be rather careless copies, e.g. for Demotic the archive of Hor or the archive of Medinet Madi, with the very long set of ostraca which has been identified by the editor Menchetti as a draft for a petition.¹² Of course we should be very careful to abuse this new interpretation and let it become a panacea: no doubt we will find archives with drafts (all private?), just as others may turn out to be copies.

11 A photograph appeared in *Pierre Bergé et associés. Vente aux enchères publiques Paris. Vente: Archéologie, Miniatures Orientales, Art de la Chine. Samedi 15 et Dimanche 16 octobre 2005*, Paris 2005, pp. 92-93 no. 374. See www.trismegistos.org/text/105770 or *Enchoria* 29 (2004/2005), p. 156 no. 285 [DL 29.285].

12 RAY 1976; MENCHETTI 2005.

This raises the interesting question of standards of care (or quality control) in an archive. Indeed visual impact seems to be important in legal documents, at least in the original. Formal issues such as large format or careful layout enhance the appeal and thus probably also legal value of an agreement. A single mistake could apparently sometimes lead to the production of an entirely new copy (in the other English sense of the word this time).¹³ It may not be a coincidence that these formal aspects tend to become somewhat less important as the centralisation of evidence proceeds. Perhaps systematic registration and archive keeping by the authorities made it less important what the document looked like or indeed made ownership of documents less important.¹⁴ On the other hand we should probably not underestimate the archive keeping of older societies. In the corridors of the Demotic congress I talked to Kim Ryholt about some recent research of his, and he pointed to archaeological evidence for large to very large official archives of documents, already in the Old Kingdom.¹⁵ It only makes us wonder how much there once used to be, but is now lost.

The questions relating to standards of care and the no doubt immense amount of evidence which has disappeared in the course of time brings me to the third paper in this session, of Laura Boffo. She deals with what one could call 'very' official or 'real public' archives, which unfortunately are only known to us through extracts and copies (carefully executed this time) on stone. Her situation is not enviable. To continue my whodunnit-simile: she is a detective walking around on a battlefield where the bodies have long disappeared, and the only clue to the murder is a commemorative inscription at the entrance. Little hope of finding who is guilty of which crime here, but fascinating to see how big the battle must have been and why it took place ...

To an Egyptologist it comes as no surprise that the king is present in these archives: in Egypt the pharaoh, like God, is everywhere (and probably knows everything), to such an extent that questioning his presence almost seems blasphemous. This of course is very different in Greece, where kings are what one could call with an oxymoron something of an atavistic novelty. Kings brought with them new types of documents which the archival administration in the poleis had to cope with.

Here again money is important: fiscal obligations to the polis and to the king must have caused administrative problems. This is not very different in hellenistic Egypt, where similar distinctions between sacerdotal and royal taxes and perhaps military and royal taxes were made: it must have made life of officials

13 An example is P. Dem. Memphis 7 A-B (published in MARTIN et al 2009, pp. 145-152. See www.trismegistos.org/text/43705).

14 Compare DEPAUW 2012.

15 K. Ryholt, oral communication.

dealing with taxes in all these categories far from easy.¹⁶ Here also you see transfers from one category to the other and temporary exceptions, with all the discussions, conflicts and paperwork this entails. Expansions of the territory of the poleis may have caused similar problems, which may be compared to changes in borders of nomes in Egypt (e.g. because of the founding of a new city such as Antinoupolis), about which relatively little is known. But fiscality (taxes) was not the only area in which dealings with the king left their traces. Honours to the king and other expenses had to be paid, from a special account or not, and feasts for the royals could be registered officially, in 'the holy book' of each polis; royal priesthoods were created and corresponding lists were made; new tribes were created; etc..

Royal epistolography and royal diagraphmata regarding all these matters entered the polis archives and changed legal life. Officials were now obliged to take both royal and polis legislation into account, and this may in many cases have been somewhat of a puzzle. Anglo-Saxon common law with its precedents spontaneously comes to mind.

To make things even worse, royal dates were installed next to the local ones, probably another thing to keep track of. The administration probably stuck to the local calendar, but for correspondence with the king needed to keep track of the royal system. The debate about using BCE and CE instead of BC and AD illustrates how sensitive such symbols are, so no mistakes could be made here. On top of that long term commitments were demanded by king, and he could also ask for documents to be removed because privileges were revoked.

Of course epigraphy is selective in what it preserves for eternity (or at least for long): favourable decisions are more likely to be inscribed than unfavourable ones, but they must also have been present in the archives. Although they only offer a glimpse, and not even an impartial one, these Greek inscriptions show us what there must once have been. So many crimes that scholars would never have had the time to solve them ...

16 For an introduction, see FALIVENE 2009, pp. 530-532.

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