

Competition of Principles? – Transparency as the Aim of Archival Description

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The following presentation shall elucidate relationships between the types of arrangement of archival holdings and the methodologies of archival description, especially referring to the situation at the International Tracing Service (ITS).¹

1. Archival Collections and the Principle of Pertinence

Archival Collections and the Principle of Pertinence

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Archival Collections and Principle of Pertinence

1. Destroys all contexts of origination
2. Collections: artificial gathering possibly without regard to provenance
3. „Creator“ one of usual criteria for arranging collections (DAT III)

The Dictionary of Archival Terminology DAT III edited by the International Council on Archives explains the principle of pertinence as follows: “A Principle, now mostly rejected, for the arrangement of archives in terms of their subject content regardless of their provenance and original order.”² The ITS knows this kind of arrangement especially according to names and persons, but also to places and topics.

The “Small Basics of Archival Terminology” on the website of the Austrian State Archives put the problem in a nutshell that results from the use of the principle of pertinence: “In any case it destroys all contexts of origination and robs researchers in this way of important chances of cognition.”³

¹ It is the elaborated text of a presentation held at the ITS workshop on “Usability of the Archives of the International Tracing Service” on 10th October, 2011 at Bad Arolsen.

² http://www.staff.uni-marburg.de/~mennehar/datiii/engterm.html#principle_of_pertinence (2nd Aug, 2011). Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology (SAA): “A principle of arranging records based on content, without regard for their provenance or original order.”

³ „Kleines Archiveinmaleins“: <http://www.oesta.gv.at/site/4936/default.aspx#a8> (2nd Aug, 2011): „Es zerstört jedenfalls alle Entstehungszusammenhänge und raubt der wissenschaftlichen Forschung so wichtige Erkenntnischancen.“

For arranging an archive according to the principle of pertinence, the archivists themselves have to lay emphasis on the documents' content and carry through classification according to a thematic master plan. Pre-archival stations of the documents' life-cycle and pre-archival arranging criteria become secondary or are completely disregarded. Thus the deletion of original contexts happens.

Researchers have to be geared to the criteria the archivists used for assigning the documents to the different archive groups. It is a risky intellectual exercise, but without this a sufficient finding cannot be accomplished. It is not longer possible to search documents according to the creator's actions and intentions that were responsible for the documents' origination. The consequence of using the principle of pertinence is to establish intransparency or opacity of the archives. It is not longer possible to search along criteria being inherent in the documents resulting from the process of the documents' origination and from their history. It becomes necessary to follow the criteria of a subsequent filtering and classifying with regard to the contents that happened at the archives. The disadvantages of this arranging principle can even grow if it is being used by special archives or archives of institutions that have a mandate for a special kind of evaluating its collections. This could cause that using archival holdings might become possible nearly only according to the mandate of such repositories.

The ITS has arranged its collections traditionally by the principle of pertinence. And the ITS also described its collections in the past in a certain manner by this arrangement according to its special needs as a tracing service. The archive groups concerned, are for a large part collections, but for another part also historic documents that have been originated by the ITS or its predecessors themselves.⁴ They are still used for fulfilling the humanitarian mandates of the ITS of tracing victims of Nazi persecution, survivors and their relatives and for documenting victims' fates. The references of the administrative repertories and especially of the Central Name Index, the person-related main finding aid of the ITS, to the existing structures of the holdings exclude and forbid any changes of the present physical order of the documents in the magazines and they postulate the reproduction of this physical order through the software the staff is working with.

According to generally accepted archival agreement it is legitimate to build up collections according to pertinences. If the ITS is an institution that built up actively and following the needs of its work, topic- or person-related collections, then their change from an administrative character to an archival character causes the question whether the existing pertinence structure is appropriate for the requirements an archival description has to fulfill.

Partly the decision about this question is anticipated by the endorsed draft of the new international agreement on the International Tracing Service. In Article 2 you can read: "As custodian of original archives and documents the International Tracing Service shall ensure their integrity and the preservation and continuation of the historical structure of the collection as a whole, unless the International Commission unanimously decides otherwise." This sentence can be understood as a prescription for appraisal. The present structures of the collection as a result of the ITS's historic acting have to be preserved. As a testimony of the ITS's manner of working the structures themselves have archival value. Nevertheless asking for the best and most appropriate system for arranging and describing cannot be ended with this article.

⁴ The term of an „archive group“ is used in this contribution as generic term for collections and fonds.

The collections of the ITS are collections not only in the classic archival sense, but for instance also administrative records of the ITS and its predecessors and parts of the deliveries of agencies and organisations. For the most of these creators anywhere over the world a responsible archival institution exists where a supplementary or – mostly – the main part of the creator’s archives is being stored. The Bonn Agreements from 1955 defined the juridical responsibility of the ITS as archival institution and of the signatory governments for building up a collection of documents the ITS needed for fulfilling its special tracing and documenting mandates. For understanding or even for preserving the authenticity and authority of the concerned kind of documents it is necessary to know their contexts of origination. Arranging according to pertinences includes the danger of destroying such context information. Fortunately, the Dictionary of Archival Terminology (DAT III) edited by the ICA itself opens the possibility for avoiding this principle also at collections in order to replace it by a provenance structure. DAT III defines a collection as follows: “An artificial gathering of documents brought together on the basis of some common characteristic (e.g. means of acquisition, creator, subject, language, medium, form, name of collector) without regard to the provenance of the documents”. The “creator”, there called a usual criterium for arranging collections, corresponds with the provenance and means that also collections may be arranged after the provenances of their units.

We state that for an archival description of collections the use of the principle of pertinence can be a possible but not the only possible and not an optimal principle of arrangement.

2. The Principle of Provenance and its usability at the ITS

• The Principle of Provenance and its Usability at the ITS 1

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The Principle of Provenance and its Usability at the ITS

„Archivists should appraise, select and maintain archival material in its historical, legal and administrative context, thus retaining the principle of provenance, preserving and making evident the original relationships of documents.“ (Code of Ethics for Archivists, International Council on Archives, Beijing 1996)

On the International Congress of Archivists in Brussels in 1910 the principle of provenance for arranging and describing archives and archival material has been accepted as the international standard principle for archival description. This has been confirmed again in 1996 and stated in Art. 2 of the Code of Ethics adopted by the General Assembly of the International Council on Archives in its XIIIth session in Beijing.

Archival description according to the principle of provenance means to arrange fonds according to their creators or creating agencies, means, to their provenances. The German archivist Eckhart Franz writes: “The key advantage of arranging fonds on the basis of the theory of provenance is to receive relatively well-defined units, closed in themselves. The records and documentary material contained in these units preserving the original organisational and registry contexts can be described according to the competence of the creating body.”⁵ In its consequence the author coevally says that material so arranged and described has been made searchable according to the competence of the creating body and has been preserved in its original contexts. Homogeneous criteria for arranging archive groups along their prearchival inherent characteristics enable to use homogeneous approaches and to get homogeneous answers to the questions to the holdings. As soon as this can happen on a level that includes each fonds of an archive transparency through the complete holdings has been reached. Researchers are enabled to ask the ever same two questions to an archival fonds:

1. What was the competence of the body that produced the documents of this fonds?
2. Could documents be produced by performing this competence that could be relevant for my research project?

• The Principle of Provenance and its Usability at the ITS 2

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The Principle of Provenance and its Usability at the ITS

- Competences as objects of description
- Competences as searching criteria
- ISAAR-CPF: Standardised description of bodies and competences

Standardized questions can be opposed standardized answers. The “International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families” (ISAAR-CPF)⁶ or the XML-based standard “Encoded Archival Context – Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families” (EAC-CPF)⁷ are appropriate instruments for preparing such answers. They shall be

⁵ Eckhart G. Franz: Einführung in die Archivkunde, 4th Edition., Darmstadt, 1993; p. 46: „Der entscheidende Vorteil der Bestandsbildung auf der Grundlage des Provenienzgedankens ist die Gewinnung relativ klar abgegrenzter, in sich abgeschlossener Einheiten, in denen das ins Archiv gelangte Schrift- und Dokumentationsgut unter weitgehender Wahrung des ursprünglichen Organisations- und Registraturzusammenhangs von der Kompetenz der jeweiligen Stelle her erschlossen werden kann.“

⁶ Text of ISAAR-CPF: <http://www.ica.org/7114/public-resources/isaar-cpf-international-standard-archival-authority-record-for-corporate-bodies-persons-and-families-2nd-edition.html> (26th Oct, 2011).

⁷ About EAC-CPF: <http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/> (26th Oct, 2011).

the basis for the archival guide of the ITS archives being under construction. This is the way the ITS reaches transparency through its archives, step by step, level by level. This way doesn't need any change of physical location. The arrangement according to the principle of provenance has to be done virtually. Archival description becomes a process of building up, arranging and defining not only fonds or archive groups, but also a complete second tectonic of the archives and collections.

• The Principle of Provenance and its Usability at the ITS 3



Premises for Archival Description at the ITS

- Existing pertinence tectonics are of archival value as mirror of the ITS's history
- Transparency can be reached by using the principle of provenance
- Provenance-oriented arranging shall be done virtually only
- Archival description has to be a mirror of interdependences and relationships

The fundament of the strategy for archival description at the ITS are the following four premises:

1. The existing pertinence-related tectonics are of archival value as a mirror of the historic development of the ITS.
2. Transparency through the complete holdings is the first aim of archival description and can be reached only by using the principle of provenance for arranging archive groups, resp. fonds.
3. Archive groups and the arrangement by the principle of provenance shall be visualized virtually. Changes of the physical order in the magazines do not happen.
4. The archival description shall include different chronological levels and relationships between the different archive groups.

An essential consequence of these premises is that the defining of and the assigning to the separate archive groups is being done in and through the process of archival description. Sorting documents according to their provenance is the daily work and part of archival description.

3. Virtual provenances or the loss of unique relation

Peter Horsman reminds in his contribution “The Last Dance of Phoenix, or The De-discovery of the Archival Fonds” that already on the congress in 1910 the German archivist Gustav Wolf had mentioned that a reorganisation of former archival structures doesn't need to be

combined with a change of the archival units' locations.⁸ Thus already Wolf assigned fonds defining tasks to the process of archival description. In the practice of the we cannot consider only *one* former or only *one* later structure and arrangement of the archival fonds and the archival units. You can find for instance documents created by the administration of a prison under the Nazi Regime. Observing the prescriptions of the Allies groups of person-related documents from this material could be sent to the regional police headquarters where a collection of such documents coming from a couple of prisons was put together. This new collection could be sent as attachment of a record to the regionally responsible Tracing Bureau and then to the Central Tracing Bureau in Arolsen. Here it became part of a larger collection of a lot of different material that all contains any information about former prisoners in Nazi incarceration sites outside of concentration camps. What is the relevant former and what the relevant later structure for archiving? Peter Horsman adds: "Respecting original order is not just freezing or restoring one particular past arrangement as 'the' original order."⁹

• Virtual Provenances or the Loss of Unique Relation



Virtual Provenances or the Loss of Unique Relation

- Archival fonds as complex set of relationships between documents, records, creators, businesses
- Archival fonds not longer physical units
- ITS starting by zooming in on lighting two structural relationships
- Basis for implementing additional kinds of relationships

The lot of different strata, the lot of different relationships we find in the records, and the different provenances like pre and final provenances we find for one archival unit guide us to a change of our view on archivists' guardianship "from a product-focused to a process-focused activity". We are looking at Terry Cook's theory of changing the view on provenance from "the static identification of records with a structure to a dynamic relationship with a creating or authoring activity". Possibly this could be the theoretical basis of our ongoing concept of archival description of two or even a couple of structures, arrangements or "relationships" of creators, functions and business processes on different descriptive levels.

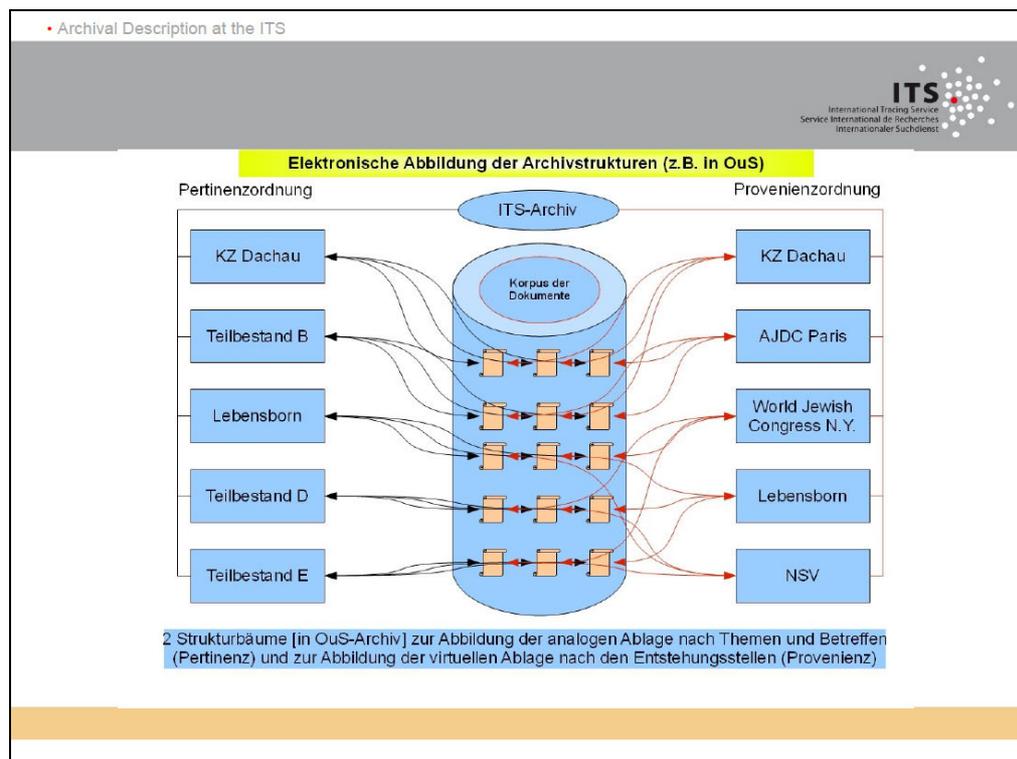
⁸ Cf. Peter Horsman: The Last Dance of Phoenix, or the De-discovery of the Archival Fonds. In: Archivaria 54, p. 1-23; here: p. 17. (= Horsman, Phoenix): <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12853/14076> (26th Oct, 2011).

⁹ Horsman, Phoenix, p. 19.

The “functional context behind the record” should be and even already is the focus of archival description at the ITS.¹⁰

Terry Cook says that an archival fonds doesn’t need to be a physical thing, but a complex set of relationships between documents, records, creators and businesses, also but not only on different chronological levels. Consequently the elements of those relationships are regularly elements of a couple of archival fonds. Unique assignability of archival units does not longer exist.

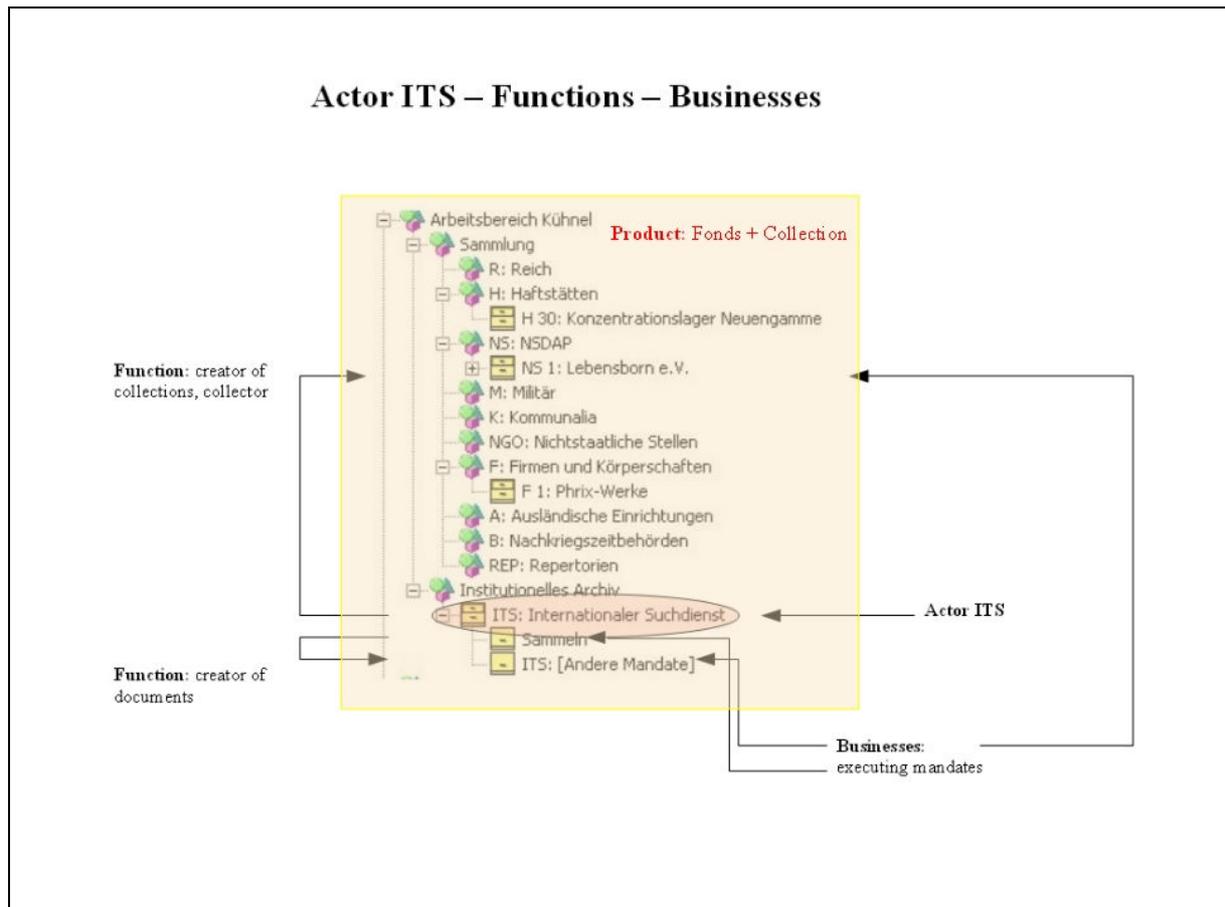
The belief that archival units can clearly be defined and can be assigned each to one certain archival fonds today is unmasked as an anachronistic practice. Even the separate pieces of files or items can be parts of a couple of such relationships and so of a couple of fonds.



The descriptive practice at the ITS started zooming in on lighting especially two relationships in its research software by using hierarchical tree models. These are on the one hand the pertinence-related structure that grew up under the ITS’s work over the last six decades and mirrors exactly how the units are standing in the magazines. And on the other hand is shown a provenance-related virtual structure of archival units that is being built up during the process of archival description. The model is open for the implication of further kinds of relationships. The next step in our describing practice would be to give up the view of unique assignability of documents and files each to exactly one archival fonds only. An adequate metadata model should refer much more on functions and businesses of actors and the interdependences of the resulting products.

¹⁰ Terry Cook: What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift. – In: Archivaria 43 (1997): <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12175/13184> (26th Oct, 2011).

Actor ITS – Functions – Businesses



The high level of digitization at the ITS and the concentration of usability on the digital forms of presentation enable a virtual archival description on the basis of provenances and relationships combined with multiple possibilities of digital visualisation. So transparency through the complete holdings can be drawn up without changing or destroying anything of the present situation of the documents' physical arrangement.

The representatives of the International Commission saw the impending competition between the different main principles for archival description and arranging and opened the way by a consensus to the basis points of our strategy prescribing as follows: “Any efforts to make possible the categorization of records by provenance, or any other principle commonly applied in archives that do not have the historical specificity of the International Tracing Service, shall be undertaken in the digital records only based on the ability to electronically tag and retrieve sets of documentation in the digital archive, and not through an actual reorganization of the original paper holdings.”¹¹

4. Recommendation

I recommend the ITS not to use the term of an archival fonds, a collection, an archive group or a record group in any legal context like prescriptions of fees etc. The term should be deleted and not replaced there. Caused by its strategy of archival description on the basis of modern archival science the ITS will never get unique assignments of its documents each to one certain archival fonds or collection. Every piece will always belong to ad minimum two archive groups owing to the parallel structures of pertinence and provenance.

¹¹ Draft on an agreement about partnership between the ITS and the Federal Archives, Art. III No. 6.

Some additional literature on the presentation's topics:

- Bodo Uhl: Die Bedeutung des Provenienzprinzips für Archivwissenschaft und Geschichtsforschung. In: Zeitschrift für bayerische Landesgeschichte (ZBLG) 61 (1998), p. 97-122: http://periodika.digitale-sammlungen.de/zblg/kapitel/zblg61_kap11 (26th Oct, 2011).
- Masha Zolotarevsky: The information retrieval needs of archival users: a case study from the Jabotinsky Institute, Israel. In: Archives, access and development – Kuala Lumpur 2008 Congress, Paris, 2010 (= Comma – international journal on archives, ed. by the International Council on Archives (ICA), 2008/2), p. 47-53.