INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES ARCHIVES
EXPERT GROUP ON ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

RECORDS IN CONTEXTS
INTRODUCTION TO ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

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1 Overview of Records in Contexts

Records in Contexts (RiC) addresses the activity of describing records in four complementary parts:

1. Records in Contexts-Introduction to Archival Description (RiC-IAD). (This document).[1]

2. Records in Contexts-Conceptual Model (RiC-CM). RiC-CM is a high-level conceptual model that focuses on intellectually identifying and describing records, the agents that created, used, or are documented in them, and the activities pursued by the agents that the records both facilitate and document.

3. Records in Contexts-Ontology (RiC-O). RiC-O is a specific implementation of RiC-CM formally expressed in the World Wide Web Consortium standard Web Ontology Language, OWL.[2] RiC-O provides the archival community with the ability to make archival description available using the techniques of Linked Open Data (LOD) employing a conceptual vocabulary and structure that is specific to archival description. As a specific implementation, it conforms to the high-level RIC-CM, though includes greater detail required by implementation as an ontology. RiC-O 0.2 was released in February 2021 and is compliant with RiC-CM 0.2.[3]

4. Records in Contexts-Application Guidelines (RiC-AG). RIC-AG, when completed, will provide practitioners and software developers with concrete guidance and examples to assist them in implementing RiC-CM and RiC-O in records management systems. Work on this third publication will begin after the release of stable versions of RiC-CM and RiC-O.

2 The Antiquity of Recordkeeping

The stories and knowledge of many communities around the world have been held in and transmitted through cultural recordkeeping systems over the course of many millennia.[4] Michael Piggott, for example, argues that communities of indigenous Australians have made records and preserved archives over much of the time since their arrival 50,000 years ago, and still do today.[5] The recordkeeping systems employed include memories orally passed from generation to generation, message sticks, rock art, cave and bark paintings, quipu, wampum

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[1] RiC-IAD was first published as part of RiC-CM v0.1. It is here published as a revised independent document.

[2] For further information, see https://www.w3.org/OWL/ <accessed 20/06/2016>

[3] RiC-O 0.2 is available at https://www.ica.org/standards/RiC/ontology <accessed 21/06/18>

[4] Geoffrey Yeo. *Record-making and record-keeping in early societies*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021.

[5] Michael Piggott, "Acknowledging Indigenous recordkeeping", in Michael Piggott, *Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays*, Oxford, Chandos, 2012, pp. 251-270.

belts, and others. Through its 2019 Tandanya Declaration, the International Council on Archives calls on archival practice to recognise that indigenous notions of archives and records transcend and extend narrow Eurocentric concepts of what constitutes the 'written record'.[6]

Though *Records in Contexts* focuses on physical records, it embraces and supports archival description that is hospitable to an inclusive understanding of records and archives.

3   Early Making and Keeping of Physical Records

Some of the earliest evidence of physical record making and keeping methods that share many characteristics with modern methods coincided with the emergence of agriculture and settled communities in Mesopotamia around 8000 BCE, approximately 4000 years before the development of written language. Clay tokens of various shapes were used to represent both *quantities* and *kinds* of agricultural products. Fixing this information in enduring, external forms made it possible to extend the limits of human memory and to make the information reliably recoverable, no longer dependent on human memory, and thus less disputable, less vulnerable to doubt and conflicting interests.

Memory as physical record transcends the vagaries of the memories of individual persons. That this was an intended purpose of the Mesopotamian records is evident in methods that were developed in the fourth century BCE to ensure the authenticity and integrity of the record. Among other methods, sealed clay envelopes were used to contain the tokens, inscribed on the outside with marks representing the contents, and seals identifying those with a direct interest in the recorded memory.

There is compelling evidence that the earliest written language, Cuneiform, developed from the inscriptions on the clay envelopes, in the period from 3400 to 3100 BCE. No longer constrained by the semantic limits of the repertoire of tokens, the kinds, complexity and quantity of information recorded vastly expanded.[7]

Developments in making and keeping records took on new and different characteristics with the spread of large, complex social structures such as city-states, and monumental collective undertakings. These characteristics included, for example, hierarchies of authority and power, and highly differentiated labour tied to one's position in the social hierarchy, including individuals specializing in the making and keeping of records. Large caches of diverse kinds of surviving records that served the interests and needs of the rulers of the city-states demonstrate the valuable, essential role that records played in the emergence of these new social systems.

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[6] International Council on Archives Expert Group on Indigenous Matters, *The Tandanya Declaration.* https://www.naa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/Tandanya-Adelaide-Declaration.pdf <accessed 20211201>
[7] Denise Schmandt-Besserat. *How writing came about*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.

4 Enduring Characteristics of Records and Recordkeeping

Modern records and recordkeeping continue to have the same essential characteristics as the ancient Mesopotamian records and recordkeeping. Among these characteristics are the following.

- Records are social phenomena, that is, records emerge and are used in specific social contexts, serving shared interests.
- Records are physical phenomena, that is, records emerge in specific material contexts that provide the means for representing information.
- Records represent information in persistent, recoverable, sharable and verifiable forms.
- Records reflect and thus are evidence of specific human activities.
- Special care must be taken to ensure the integrity and authenticity of the records.

The primary function of records and record keeping, extending and making persistent human memory, has remained more or less constant over history. The bond between records and the ongoing development of social and material human existence represents a continuous and increasingly complex history from antiquity to the present day. The fundamentally social nature of records and the activities with which they are related, has produced, over time, a vast global social and documentary network.

5 Emergence of the Principle of Provenance

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries archives were considered primarily "arsenal de l' autorité" and were kept and used almost exclusively by political and administrative authorities. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, due to the increasing number of records, in the interest of optimizing retrieval, various methods of arranging records were developed, primarily focused on classifications according to topics and subjects.

With the emergence of antiquarian and historical interest in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, records became valuable for more than their immediate utility, as after their practical usefulness was exhausted, they become useful as historical evidence. The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of nation-states, national archives, modern history and historical methods that emphasized narratives based on reliable evidence. It was at this time that it was recognized that arrangement based on pertinence, while it may benefit certain types of practical and even antiquarian interests, diminished if not destroyed the inherent interrelations and interdependence of records, and thereby diminished their evidentiary value and undermined understanding and interpreting them. Such practices de-contextualized records. The establishment of the Principle of Provenance was intended to correct these practices.[8]

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[8] Robert-Henri Bautier. "La phase cruciale de l'histoire des archives: la constitution des dépôts d'archives et la naissance de l'archivistique (XVI- début du XIX siècle)" Archivum XVIII, 1968, pp. 139-149; Archivi e storia nell'Europa del XIX secolo: alle radici dell'identità culturale europea, Irene Cotta and Rosalia Manno Tolu eds., Roma: Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2006; Luciana Duranti. "The Odyssey of Records Managers" Records Management Quarterly 23, 3 and 4 (1989): 3-11 and 3-11; and Stefan

The Principle of Provenance emerged in the nineteenth century, and over the course of the century became established as the foundation of archival theory and practice in the modern West. The principle is understood to have two major facets. The first is expressed in the French *Respect des fonds*: the records created, accumulated, and used by a person or group in the course of life and work are to be kept together and not intermixed with records from other sources. The rule of *Respect des fonds* recognizes that the records that one person or group accumulates over the course of his, her, their, or its existence reflect and document that existence, and that together they constitute an interrelated whole, a coherent body of evidence. The principle is intended to ensure the integrity of the accumulation. The second facet, *Respect for original order*, recognizes that the intellectual grouping of and sequencing imposed on the records in the context of accumulation and use is essential to understanding the interrelations among them as well as being evidence of how they were used. Applying each facet of the principle involves both the manner in which the records are stored (kept together and order imposed and maintained) and the intellectual description (description of the whole and of the parts). While management of the storage and the intellectual description are commonly closely related, the two activities are distinct, and the relation between them is not essential.[9]

6   Expanding the Understanding of Provenance

Respect des fonds has been intellectually and ethically criticized by both archival theorists and practitioners. The rule focuses on the person or group that has accumulated a body of records and maintains that the accumulated body of records is to be kept together. As applied to descriptive practice, the fonds has been the focus of the description embodied in archival finding aids. The focus on the person or group that accumulated the records, it is argued, often does not reflect the social and material complexity of the origins of the records. Individuals interact with one another and with groups, and groups with other groups. Records by one individual or group are often found in the records of another individual or group. The intellectual content of a record may be related to the content of one or more other records. A single record or single accumulation of records may be jointly created by more than one individual or group, both simultaneously and/or successively. More than one person or group may play different roles in relation to one record or one set of records. People create and use records but also are frequently the subject of records. The emergence of collaborative editing in the networked digital environment has led to other complexities in determining the origination and ownership of records, as many digital records have complex multiparty authorship, and the use of remote storage services that are not fully controlled by the users raise issues of ownership and custody.

Berger. "The role of national archives in constructing national master narratives in Europe" Archival Science 13, 1 (2013): 1-22.

[9] The dimensions of both analogue and digital records and the physical facilities in or on which the records are stored determine the boundaries of the storage unit, and storage boundaries are not the same as the intellectual boundaries of a record or set of records. The relation between the intellectual and storage collocation and arrangement, when there is one, primarily serves management purposes. Whether there is or is not a relation, it is a facet of the context of the records.

All these observations and more lead to the conclusion that origination of records is much more complex than the long-established understanding of fonds. The records in a fonds do not exist only in relation to the fonds, nor does the fonds exist in isolation. Both the fonds and the records contained in it exist in layers of interconnected contexts, past, present, and future.

Respect for original order also has given rise to criticism. The meaning of *Respect for original order* has been a matter of contention and, some would say, confusion. What does "original" in the rule mean? It can only be understood as the state of the records at a given moment, the moment when the records are transferred from the originating context of creation and use to the context of the archives. But when a body of records is accumulating, the order of the records is dynamic, changing, fluid. Records may, in fact, be reordered, and more than once. What does "order" mean? Does it mean the physical arrangement of the records, or their intellectual relation to one another? Increasingly "order" is understood as, first and foremost, the intellectual relations among the records, and secondarily, if at all, the physical arrangement of the records. But this view does not represent a consensus. Further, an ongoing challenge has been that fonds or other accumulation of records may arrive in an archive with no discernible order, intellectual or physical. In such cases, the archivist is tasked with reconstructing the order, as well as is possible, based on evidence embodied in the records themselves.

Both the *Respect des fonds* and the *Respect for original order* are archival principles, not records management principles. Both are retrospective, whereas, in the originating context of creation and use, the perspective of a person managing his or her own records or the perspective of a designated records manager is focused on the immediate needs of the person or the group. The fonds and its internal order are in a state of coming into existence, of being formed.

7   The Role of the Archivist

Many archivists have become increasingly self-conscious and self-critical about the role that archivists play in *what* records (and by extension *whose* records) are remembered and *how* the records are remembered. What is remembered is largely dependent on mandated or elective archival acquisition policies, and on the appraisal policies and practices of both records creators and archival programs. How the kept records are described, though, also has an important impact on what is remembered, as emphasizing in description the person or group responsible for accumulating a fonds, for reasons stated above, often fails to reveal the active and passive social complexities of records. *Memory is selective*: what records archivists choose to keep and how they choose to describe them directly determines who and what is remembered and who and what is not. These determinations have profound epistemological and ethical implications.

What is remembered is also affected by factors outside the control of archivists. Among these are accidental loss of records, dispersal of sets of records, and malicious destruction or alterations of records.

Describing the role of archives and archivists in selecting what records are kept and in describing the records is important context for understanding and interpreting records.

Increasingly, archivists also observe that the archival perspective is only one among many possible perspectives that may be employed in the understanding of records, that they themselves are performing their jobs in a particular historical (cultural, social, material) context, that their judgements and acts are shaped and informed by the contexts within which they live and work.

At the same time, archivists increasingly observe that the contexts in which records emerge and in which they exist over time are irreducibly dynamic and complex.

When taken together, the two observations lead to the conclusion that archival description is not and never will be perfect, but they also foreground the challenge of making it better, of improving it, of making it possible to more fully express the complexity of context and contexts, of making explicit the different roles of the records managers and archivists in selecting and forming memory, and of being accommodating to the perspectives and values of others.

Hence, when RiC-CM talks about "context," it is the layered, dynamic, and often interconnected nature of these factors that capture this spirit.

8   Role of Record Description

The description of records serves three essential purposes:
- Management of records
- Preservation of records
- Ongoing use and reuse of records

8.1   Management of Records

While recorded information created in the context of people's lives and work serves many purposes, one of its essential functions is to serve to extend the limits of human memory, to be an enduring witness of events and activities. As records proliferate, keeping track of them and locating them when needed becomes itself a challenge to human memory. Management of records involves an interrelated combination of physical and intellectual techniques.[10] For analogue records, the records are typically stored in a systematic hierarchical manner that reflects the functions, activities or transactions they facilitate and document, combined with the use of labels and other metadata to facilitate the storing, retrieving, and ongoing use of the records. For digital records, file systems mediate the storage of digital files, most commonly using a hierarchical directory structure that is an analogue of the hierarchical storage of physical files, including the use of directory and folder labels and other metadata.

In order to establish intellectual control over records and facilitate, locate, identify, retrieve, and use them, however, it is necessary to augment the rudimentary metadata associated with the physical or digital management of records with additional description of contexts.

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[10] Cook, T. (1992). *The Concept of Archival Fonds: Theory, Description and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era.* In The Archival fonds: from theory to practice (pp. 31-86).

8.2   Preservation of Records

Preservation of records has multiple facets. For analogue records, this involves storing the records in environments that mitigate physical risks, and ongoing maintenance of records that have suffered damage or are at risk. The challenge becomes much more complex for digital records, as the carrier, encoding format, mediation device and method must be carefully and persistently managed in order to preserve the records. For both analogue and digital records, the authenticity and integrity of the records must be safeguarded. Such safeguarding, in addition to physically managing the records as such, also involves preserving the context within which the records were created, accumulated, maintained, and used by describing it based on available evidence.

Records emerge not in isolation, but within a context, and within that context, in relation to one another and in relation to the people creating, using, and keeping them. Thus, records cannot be understood in isolation from the social-documentary context within which they emerge. Documenting the context by describing it is essential to the preservation of records. This points to a fundamental tension in archival practice. On the one hand, records are evidence, and maintaining and ensuring the integrity and authenticity of the record as evidence leads to a necessary focus on fixity and maintaining the fixity of the information. On the other hand, records originate and exist over time in dynamic environments, and documenting as fully as possible both the complex origins and ongoing history is essential for both evaluating the evidentiary quality of records, and for understanding them.

8.3   Ongoing Use and Reuse of Records

The description created to facilitate management and preservation also serves those interested in records as witnesses to life and work activities, to people, to human-made and natural events, to things made, things studied, things done, and more. Anything and everything may be the subject of records. For people who want to use records as evidence for scholarly, business, personal, or other purposes, description facilitates discovering, locating, identifying, retrieving, evaluating, and understanding them. Such ongoing use and reuse of the records becomes part of the history of the records; it re-contextualizes them.[11] The use and reuse generate other records, thereby extending the social-document network.

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[11] McKemmish, S. (1994). *Are Records Ever Actual?* In S. McKemmish, & M. Piggott, *Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years*. https://doi.org/10.4225/03/57D77D8E72B71<accessed 20211016>