Prolegomena to a Social History of Dutch Archives

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On several occasions Jaap Kloosterman has shown his interest in and mastery of the history of collections. In his historical overview of the labour history libraries before World War I he demonstrates that contemporary problems associated with industrialization provided an incentive to collecting. The history of a collection provides a biography of the scholarly discipline served by that particular collection.1 Because that history needs to be placed in a broader social and cultural context, the history of the iish written by Kloosterman and Jan Lucassen begins with a sketch of the political, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds: the “dynamic world filled with new ideas about social planning, emerging political parties, and trade unions.”2 The

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later vicissitudes of the IISH are treated against the backdrop of the lead-up to WW II, the reconstruction of Europe after the war, the Cold War, and the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union.

It is only natural for an institute such as the IISH to have such a social history of the collection. And this history is also an aspect of the social history of Dutch archives as well, and that is the subject of my current work of which I present here a few prolegomena as introductory reflections.

**Historicizing Archives**

Historicizing is desirable for collections and parts of collections: the separate archives. The usual practice is for Dutch archival inventories to provide in the introduction a “history of the archives” with a view to their proper use. An inventory aims to provide access, and this determines the limited scope of the introduction. The introduction does not present the archive as an object of historical study. Neither does it mention how the archival system functioned in the past, although the essence of such a system is disclosed in its functioning. Peter Horsman calls this the behaviour of the archival system (in the interaction with its environment). He supplied a model for the explanation of this behaviour and applied it to the archival history of the city of Dordrecht (1200-1920). Archivists as scholars of record keeping are the very people to fathom “the mechanisms of the old administration”, as the Dutch Manual for the arrangement and description of archives (1898) already stated. This forms an essential part of “historical archivistics” as advocated by Charles Jeurgens, professor of archivistics at Leiden University. He wants to “look behind the formation of the records to find out in what way the information laid down in the record, has come into being”.

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7 K.J.P.F.M. Jeurgens, Een brug tussen twee werelden. Rede uitgesproken bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar op het gebeid van de archivistiek aan de Universiteit van Leiden
Records and Archives

An archive (archival fonds) is an entire body of archival documents. The latter term – the equivalent of the Dutch archiefbescheiden – encompasses records and archives. As Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward explain,

the archival document can best be conceptualised as recorded information arising out of transactions – it is created naturally in the course of transacting business of any kind, whether by governments, businesses, community organisations or private individuals. [...] An understanding of the archival document which encompasses both current and historical documents directs attention to the continuum of processes involved in managing the record of a transaction from systems design to destruction or select preservation. [...] Within this approach, documentation of a transaction is archival from the time the record is created and the archival document retains evidential value for as long as it is in existence.8

The continuum of record formation encompasses every creation and recreation, from the first capture of documents in a record-keeping system, to their management, use, disposal, and transfer to another record-keeping system (which may be an archive). Record formation happens through interactions, interventions, interrogations, and interpretations by creator, users, archivists; these are activations which co-determine the archive’s meaning.9 This implies that the archive is not static, but is a dynamic process. That process is managed by individuals, businesses, churches, private, and public agencies in their social and cultural contexts. Through time these contexts are ever changing and always being constructed

shaping the action of the people and institutions who made and maintained the records, the functions the records perform, the capacities of information technologies to capture and preserve information at a given time, and the custodial history of the records.10

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Archiving as a Social Practice

As Ernst Posner stated in his *Archives in the ancient world* (1972)

Archives administration is so intimately connected with the governance of secular and religious affairs and with the individual’s conduct of business that it must be viewed within the context of the cultures in which the archives originated and which now they help to bring back to life.11

Yet, in the introduction to an archival finding aid we hardly ever read what the relations were between the archive (the archival system) and society, even though the formation and use of archives happen in a social context. And this context is wider than is shown in the archival context models, which are limited to the factors that directly determine the origin, structuring, and questioning of the archive.12 Archiving is a social practice that, while it is useful or obligatory for the record creator, is just as important for society as a whole. This wider view is in keeping with the idea of the records continuum described earlier. In this view records are never “complete”, but are continually formed while moving through recurrent phases.13

This means that the context of the record has to be found both in the archive and in its societal context. “Research into the context of origin”, writes Theo Thomassen, professor of archivistics at the University of Amsterdam, “does indeed bring to light societal factors that have influenced the formation, management and use of the archives”.14 Those factors play a role in what I called archivalization, meaning the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving.15

Thus, for example, in the New World, the colonizing powers had different cultural definitions of basic economic interests: taxing land (the English), or

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taxing people (the Spanish), or trading goods (the Dutch). These archivialization factors caused the creation of different types of records: the English kept survey maps, the Spanish censuses, the Dutch commercial data. These different record types reinforce the limited colonial gaze which focuses on land, people, or goods. For, as James Scott writes in Seeing like a state, “there are virtually no other facts for the state than those that are contained in documents”.

In her book on the ceremonies of possession in Europe’s conquest of the New World, Patricia Seed also argues that for the Dutch, discovering and taking possession of new territories meant description: tracing coastlines, noting their exact latitudes, drawing locations, describing places, and inscribing names. These predominantly written forms of claiming conflicted with those of the English, who were convinced that only clear acts or physical objects created possession of new territories. Archivalization led the Dutch and the English to different types of recording and archiving.

**Social and Cultural Archivistics**

As early as 1980 American archival educator (and future Archivist of the United States) Frank Burke called for research into questions such as

> What is it within the nature of society that makes it create the records that it does? Is the impulse a purely practical one, or is there something in the human psyche that dictates the keeping of a record, and what is the motivation for that act?

In the opinion of Burke, the merit of asking and answering these questions was not only the enhancement of the theoretical basis of the archival endeavour, but also the possible practical outcome. He suggested that by determining the motivation for record formation and researching its sociological aspects, it might be possible to “devise practices that will satisfy a basic human need”. This is the mission of what I have named social and cultural archivistics: studying the characteristics of records in their social and cultural contexts and how they are created, used, selected, and transferred through time. Social and cultural archivistics focuses on socially and culturally situ-

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18 Seed, Ceremonies of Possession, pp. 151-170.
ated archival practices. These practices experience and sustain changes in society, causing changes as well as continuity in archiving. This means that Burke’s questions should be addressed to the present as well as to the past:

over the course of history, what kinds of purposes have animated individuals and societies to keep and preserve documentation in its many forms, and what kinds of social consequences have induced them to continue to do so, to stop doing so, or to change how they do so?

The relation between social-cultural context and archives has yet another dimension. In the hands of people archival systems have power, “a kind of communicative power that can effect change in our lives”, according to Brien Brothman. But he also sounds a warning in saying that archives not only function as agents of political continuity and social solidarity, but also as powers of political denial, upheaval, and discontinuity. These aspects now begin to be researched in archival history. Examples are the studies of archives of totalitarian regimes, their secret services and police (the Stasi, for example) and not to forget the archivists and the archival institutions under these regimes. But also under “normal” conditions, record formation is subject to power and exerts power. What is recorded/archived and what is left out, is determined not only by archivalization by powerful actors but also by seemingly innocent practices of classification, filing, registering, etc.

In the past few decades many anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of cultural studies, and historians made the “archival turn”, considering not only the archives as places of research or a theoretical concept, but also and foremost as a fascinating object of study in itself. Their archival histories

show the numerous ways with which “archival practice and archival knowledge shape subjects in history and subjects of history”. The archival profession followed the archival turn from a distance, although even in 1982, Tom Nesmith had argued for an “archival scholarship grounded in the study of the nature and purposes of archival records and institutions”, taking as a starting point the history of society. His plea was repeated in 1992 by Barbara Craig who warned archivists that if they left archival history to others, their future would be at stake. She was of the opinion that archival history is essential for the professional identity of the archivist in the modern age, because it is an aid in understanding “the contextual place of records in the world of affairs, of thought, and of information. In short we would benefit greatly from a historical sociology of the record and a diplomatic of the document”. At her invitation the first International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (i-chorA) met in 2003. According to the hosts of the first i-chorA, archival history is important because it “holds the promise of providing a better understanding of human experience and human needs.”

**Social Context**

A social history of archives has to reach out beyond record formation as such to its social and cultural contexts. Thus, the Australian Michael Piggott expects to find an answer to questions like “how Australian society and its constituent groupings and strata have been ordered and governed by recordkeeping”. Recently he proposed searching for the “conditioning fac-
tors” shaping the patterns of record creation, demise, preservation, management, and multiple uses in Australia. Following his approach, I have been looking for these conditioning factors in Dutch society. It might be useful to take as a starting point what struck visitors to the Dutch Republic:

the prodigious extent of Dutch shipping and commerce, the technical sophistication of industry and finance, the beauty and orderliness, as well as cleanliness of the cities, the degree of religious and intellectual toleration to be found there, the excellence of the orphanages and hospitals, the limited character of ecclesiastical power, the subordination of military to civilian au-

Archival consciousness expressed: Cornelis van der Voort, Regents of the Old People’s Home (Oude Mannen- en Vrouwengasthuis) in Amsterdam, 1618. The pictured registers and documents were not randomly chosen, but expressly shown to the painter with the instruction to portray these records because they were important to the home. Amsterdam Museum, SA 7436.
thority, and the remarkable achievements of Dutch art, philosophy, and science.\textsuperscript{35}

Indeed, most if not all of these had an effect on (and to a large extent: were facilitated by) practices of record formation. The same is true for many aspects of the Dutch “moral geography” of the “embarrassment of riches”,\textsuperscript{36} of Dutch economy,\textsuperscript{37} etc.

But for the factors determining archivalization (and consequently archiving) it is important to look further, seeking “archival consciousness” that precedes the appearance of formal archives.\textsuperscript{38} Such archival consciousness manifests itself in oral tradition, rituals, monuments, and art,\textsuperscript{39} embedded in a socio-cultural mind set. Archival theory, as Tom Nesmith argued, should broaden its purview, from a focus on what constitutes the nature of an archive and a record according to the classical doctrine, to the study of “how human perception, communication, and behaviour shape the archives”.\textsuperscript{40}

As the main “conditioning factor” in Dutch society – past and present – I propose its particular mode of consensual governance, the \textit{polder model}. The \textit{polder model} (an expression coined in the 1990s) is described in a recent book by historians Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden as a manner of living together in which different societal groups always join forces and political decision-making leaves room for mutual concessions and modifications resulting from negotiations among these groups.\textsuperscript{41} On Wikipedia it is called consensus decision-making in the Dutch fashion and described with phrases like “a pragmatic recognition of pluriformity” and “cooperation despite differences”. Prak and Van Zanden label Dutch society as one that through structured conversation – through discussions, eventually followed by a vote – endeavours to find answers to societal challenges.\textsuperscript{42} In different shapes this has always been a characteristic of Dutch society since the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{43} It has made the Netherlands into a \textit{vergaderland}:\textsuperscript{44} a country of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Simon Schama, \textit{The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age} (London, 1987).
\item Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, \textit{The First Modern Economy. Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815} (Cambridge, 1997).
\item Brothman, “Perfect Present, Perfect Gift”, p. 155.
\item Prak and Van Zanden, \textit{Nederland en het poldermodel}, p. 9.
\item Dennis Bos, Maurits Ebben, and Henk te Velde (eds), \textit{Harmonie in Holland. Het poldermodel van 1500 tot nu} (Amsterdam, 2008).
\item Wilbert van Vree, \textit{Nederland als vergaderland. Opkomst en verbreiding van een vergaderre-
vertigaderen (gathering) where people come together in meetings of councils, boards, and committees, either in public or behind the scenes, reaching a compromise, governing through more or less ritualized meetings, minutes of which are carefully drawn up and reported to the body’s constituents. Even when a certain power is due to a person, this is embedded in a form of meeting: the investiture of the count, the lord of the manor, and the king (since 1814) took (take) place in a ceremonial gathering of the people.

Boards of regenten governed the Dutch republic (1581-1804) at national, regional, and local levels, they also controlled the Dutch East and West Indies Companies, the universities, charitable institutions, etc. Commanders of the army and the navy had to comply with the deputies of the States General and the provincial States who accompanied each war campaign. The Reformed Church was governed by a synod, and each parish had a church council. Many of these councils, boards, and committees continued even in the reign of King Louis Napoleon (1804-1810), during the occupation by the French (1810-1813), and after the establishment of the Kingdom of The Netherlands in 1814/1815.

Of course, the unitary state of 1796 entailed a centralized national government, but that did not make an end to the “meeting regime” or habitus of discussing, deliberating, and decision-making. In 1848 a new constitution granted more power to parliament and more autonomy to provincial and local assemblies and executive committees. From the 1870s trade unions, political parties, social movements, and religious organizations became more and more important. Until the 1960s the Netherlands were divided up in a Catholic, a Protestant, a socialist and a neutral segment, the zuilen (pillars). Each zuil had its own trade unions, schools, mass media, hospitals, sports, and consumers’ associations. They all gathered in their own circle, deliberating, controlling, and making extensive minutes of their council and board meetings.

**Resolutions**

Governance according to this polder model was reflected in the archiving systems. For centuries their backbone were the resoluties, decisions taken in a meeting. All incoming and outgoing letters were arranged as annexes to the resoluties, made accessible through indexes on these resoluties.45 In the course

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45 Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, section 20; Thomassen, *Instrumenten van de macht*, pp. 283-286. Decision making by councils and boards and minuting their proceedings are not typically Dutch. However the
of time there have been different variants and innovations, but up to the present day the emphasis in archiving has generally been on collegiate decision-making, reflected in the *acta* or proceedings.46

*Some examples*

In the Dutch Reformed Church, decisive factors to start recording the *acta* of the local church council, consisting of ministers and elders, were both the need to maintain unity and discipline within the church and the need to account for its management. Sinners were summoned by the church

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46 My letter of appointment and the notice of my resignation are formally extracts from the register of proceedings of the board of the University of Amsterdam, although such a register is no longer used.

council to answer accusations of unorthodoxy, or of drunkenness, gossip, quarrels, fights, and the like. The sinner could be reconciled with the congregation after a public admission of guilt. All this was written down in the acta. Thereby the acta formally established that people were qualified to take Holy Communion and were in good standing with the congregation. That, in turn, was a condition for receiving a certificate in case of transfer to another town. In such a letter of security or indemnity the church council declared to maintain the departed member in case he was unexpectedly reduced to poverty or unable to earn his living.

At the national level, maintaining the unity of the Reformed Church was the task of the States General (the gathering of deputies of the seven sovereign provinces). In 1625 the States General had the acta of the general synods of the church taken to The Hague. There they were kept in a chest with eight locks in the Trèves Room (adjacent to the meeting room of the States General). The Clerk and the provinces each had a key to the chest. In 1628, 1641, and thereafter every three years until 1800, a special committee had to verify whether the acta were still in good order. 47

In 1602 the United East India Company (voc) was founded. 48 What, as Peter Burke states, was “most remarkable in the information system of the voc was the importance to the company of regular written reports.” 49 Even more remarkable is that it was in meetings that these reports were made, read, and used as a basis for decision-making.

The voc consisted of six chambers (Amsterdam, Middelburg, Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn, and Enkhuizen), each governed by a board of directors (20 in Amsterdam, 12 in Middelburg, and 7 in each of the other chambers). The general board was formed of the 17 representatives of the chambers: the Lords xvii. The Amsterdam chamber had its headquarters in the East India House. There the directors met two or three times a week. In their board room, the Lords xvii also met for several weeks in autumn when the fleet arrived, in spring, and often again in summer before the departure of the ships to the East Indies. The Lords xvii decided on the sale of the goods from Asia, the number of ships and men to be sent, the nature and quantity of the cargo, the appointment of the governors-general, governors, and

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47 Thomassen, Instrumenten van de macht, p. 163.
the composition of the council in Batavia. The accounts had to be examined and approved. The *Generale Missive*, a survey of the economic and political situation in Asia, made up in Batavia from the reports from offices in the different regions, had to be discussed, and an answer for the Governor General in Batavia had to be drafted. Before these meetings, all the papers necessary had to be prepared, and after the meeting the clerks had to write the resolutions (one set for each chamber and for Batavia) and summaries for each specialized department (equipage, commerce, etc.). In between, a smaller number of directors (10) met in The Hague (the *Haags Besogne*) to prepare the meetings of the Lords xvii. Separate committees existed for drawing up the balance sheet and checking the books. As Prak and Van Zanden write: with some exaggeration it can be said that the VOC was one big meeting circus.50

**A Social History of Dutch Archives**

Against the background of the *polder model* and its governance by meetings, a social history of Dutch archives should study modes of record formation and archiving. Basic types of records “that may be called constants in record creation” were, according to Posner,51 records facilitating control over persons; records with regard to real property; financial and other accounting records; “notarial” records safeguarding private business transactions; the laws of the land; records created and retained as evidence of past administrative action. These can be translated in broad categories of archiving respectively people, property, places, trade, litigation, monies, and governance, each category having its own practices of record formation and archiving. Each of these practices was executed by different agents (creators, users, archivists, and record subjects) interacting with institutions and technologies. Record subjects are the people named in registers and other records. They did not merely, as Foucault argues, leave traces in their interaction with power: they were also co-creators, providing input in and interacting with the archiving systems of institutions.52 Although archiving is important for the record subjects, their relatives, and society at large, the certificates, licenses, letters, and other documents people received from institutions have only rarely been preserved, mainly because the owners did not think them worth preserving. The decision to throw a document away is as much part of the archival consciousness as the decision to keep it. What

51 Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World*, p. 3.
was kept and ended up in the archives, was only the tiny flotsam of the great, slow-moving river of Everything, to use Carolyn Steedman’s words.53

Archives and archives

So far the discussion of a social history of archives has paid no special attention to the history of Archives. Archives with a capital A refers to either (1) “The division within an organization responsible for maintaining the organization’s records of enduring value” or (2) an organization that “collects materials from individuals, families, and organizations other than the parent organization”.54 The difference is, in records continuum thinking, that the former focuses on organizing the organizational memory, whereas the latter aims at the constitution of collective memory in a way that crosses organizational and jurisdictional boundaries.55

Collecting archives were established in the Netherlands from the beginning of the 19th century. Hendrik van Wijn, the first national archivist (appointed in 1802) was only tasked with inspecting and describing state papers.56 In 1814 the new king created the Rijksarchief (State Archives), where Van Wijn was to collect and manage all state archives before 1794. Some provinces and cities appointed an archivist, who in most cases served the records creating organization, and continued the archival work of his predecessors of the 18th century. Although archivists at state, provincial, and local levels were legally authorized to allow access to researchers in 1829, it took a long time to develop in-house archives of provincial and city governments into collecting Archives, as institutions managing archival documents for research by people other than the staff of the records creating agency. The main actors stimulating this development were not governments, but – befitting the “meeting regime” of the Netherlands as vergaderland – national,

regional, and local societies of historians and antiquaries. These associations were mushrooming from the 1820s to the 1860s, evidence of the emancipation of the historical discipline and a concurring scholarly interest in archives as historical sources.57 Members of these societies were frequently also active in provincial and local assemblies, which, as mentioned before, under the constitution of 1848 had been granted more autonomy. In the 1840s city archives were established in Leeuwarden (1838), 's-Hertogenbosch (1841), Kampen (1842), and Amsterdam (1848). By 1910 there were 31 such archives. Together with the 11 state archives in the provincial capitals (the last was created in 1890), they formed a network of public Archives.

In the private sector, the first collecting archives was founded in 1914: the Vereeniging Nederlandsch Economisch-Historisch Archief.58 This association (196 members joined in the first year, in 1930 there were 850 members) provided a home for endangered archives of businesses and trade unions, and it collected (and published) important sources for economic history. Governance by the NEHA annual members’ meeting, its executive and advisory board had many characteristics of the polder model, specifically in the use of its network of members as links with science, business (industry, trade, transport, and banking), and the archival world.59 N.W. Posthumus not only founded NEHA, but also the second private collecting archive, the IIHS, in 1935. Posthumus wanted the IIHS to be a part of NEHA, but De Lieme (whose insurance firm De Centrale provided the funding) did not want the Institute to be governed by the “supreme power” of the NEHA heterogeneous members’ meeting. The IIHS became a foundation governed by a board whose members were appointed by (and from) the boards of De Centrale and NEHA, by the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Faculty of Letters of the University of Amsterdam.60 Posthumus was very much involved in the foundation, in 1935, of the third collecting archive, the Internationaal Archief voor de Vrouwenbeweging (International Archives for the Women’s Movement) (Posthumus’ wife was one of the three IAV founders). In 1943 Posthumus took the initiative for what was to become, in 1945, the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (State Institute for War Documentation). That institute, another collecting archive – not in private hands but a state agency – was led by a directorate of three members representing the Catholic, Protestant, and socialist zuilen. The composition of the directorate and its early history made this collecting archive the epitome of the polder model.

Conclusion

A social history of Dutch archives should treat societal archivalization influencing practices of record formation and archiving, and vice versa: record formation and archiving that conditioned or facilitated societal practices. Such a social history of archives is important for the user of archives, the archivist, and the archival policy maker. We must understand the societies and the people who created and used the documents before we can really understand their value for research and other purposes.  

Archives have “narratives of their own that need to be carefully ‘read’ before their materials can be fully appreciated and most effectively used”. According to Francis Blouin and Bill Rosenberg, historians and other users of the archive must “comprehend the conceptual and cultural milieu in which their archival sources are created, structured, processed, appraised, discarded, and preserved”. Research in this field may bridge the divide between archivists and historians, they argue.

This divide is strange to Jaap Kloosterman and the IISG. The strength of this Institute, as Jaap once said, is in the “collaboration of research and collection management under one roof, in one organization, thus bridging conceptual borders, leading to synergy and enrichment”. May a future social history of Dutch archives be written in this spirit!

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