The Medieval Librarian: Information Management in the Southwest German Empire at the Close of the Middle Ages

Albert Winkler

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub

Part of the Medieval History Commons

Original Publication Citation
THE MEDIEVAL LIBRARIAN: INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN THE SOUTHWEST GERMAN EMPIRE AT THE CLOSE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

BY

Albert Winkler
Archives Manuscript Cataloger
Harold B. Lee Library
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

ABSTRACT

The direct precursor of the modern librarian or archivist was the medieval scribe or notary. This person was responsible for the production or identification, storage, and retrieval of information and was the first information manager since antiquity to use vernacular languages in documents and books. The medieval information manager was highly educated and was often a prestigious and powerful official in whom important information and state secrets were entrusted. The civic secular scribes borrowed much from Church practices but also worked out their own methods of source composition, verification, arrangement, and preservation. These procedures developed into many of the practices still in use today. This paper traces the development of some of these practices during the late Middle Ages in the area which roughly corresponds to modern Switzerland, southern Germany, and eastern France.
The information specialist in the late Middle Ages was a direct precursor of the modern librarian. This individual performed the important tasks of storing and retrieving needed information relating to numerous political, social, and religious matters. The medieval librarian was an important, prestigious, and well-trained individual who developed techniques and methods of information and record management that have matured into many modern library and archival practices. These include methods of document production and content verification; preservation of items; and marking books and manuscripts with call numbers, letters, signs, and other points of reference for retrieval and storage.

A convenient point of reference for studying the development of information management practices during the late Middle Ages is to examine the area which roughly corresponds to modern Switzerland, southern Germany, and eastern France. This region has been referred to as the Upper Rhine, Swabian, or Allemanisch territories of the old German Empire. At the close of the medieval era, these areas had some similarities in political, cultural, and social development. As such, the region provides a convenient focal point for
examining the nature of official record keeping and the management of documents. This essay will concentrate on the archives of the cities and towns of the area because they provide the most convenient examples of secular source production and preservation.

The problems faced by the late medieval record keeper are exemplified by the mandate given to Niclaus Zurkhinden of Bern in 1536. Bern had recently seized areas of the Waadt or Vaud, and Zurkhinden was ordered to go into that region and examine the documents in various official repositories. He was to find all available items and decide what was worth keeping and to tear up or discard worthless items. The problems before Zurkhinden were the issues facing information managers for centuries before that time and ever since.¹

The question of what to keep and how to preserve it first became important for secular civic authorities when the towns gained power and independence. At that time, the municipalities found it necessary to produce and care for records. Among the oldest secular repositories established in the cities of the Empire were Aachen in 1018, Worms in 1073, Speyer in 1111, and Cologne and Augsburg each in the 12th century. But most of the records do not date from the founding of the repositories because the earliest sources in these archives have been lost. Generally, the oldest available items date only to the 13th century as is the case with
Frankfurt and Wetzlar, and these materials are often very fragmentary.²

The ravages of time, misfortune, and sometimes neglect have been tragic in many instances. In the 19th century, when documents were being avidly sought for the "Monumenta Germaniae Historica" and other compilations, some materials were found in a very poor state of preservation and storage. J. A. Galiffe described items in Geneva as "being thrown together without order on the floor. In dark and damp areas there lay a mass of sources, correspondence, administrative decisions, and notes of all kinds that were abandoned to moths and the violence of weather in all its forms due to a lack of window pains." Further examination revealed that official items had been used as wadding for ships' cannons on Lake Geneva.³

Many areas also suffered from other natural and man-made disasters. Then as now, fire was the bane of all record storage. The town of Chur burned in both 1464 and 1574, each time destroying all existing items that had been created to that ⁴ and the majority of Swiss chancellery documents were lost to fire in 1555.⁵ Numerous wars were fought in the areas of the southwest Empire. The Napoleonic armies of France and the emperial forces of Russia fought through central Switzerland destroying many document repositories. It is estimated that when Nicolaus Tschudi wrote a monumental
history of the Swiss Confederation in the 16th century he referred to at least 700 sources that no longer exist.

Despite these unfortunate occurrences, we can be pleased that many valuable items were carefully preserved and copied and are still available today. These items were conserved by dedication and at considerable effort and expense. Some materials were so prized and valuable that they were subject to theft or seizure by force. In 1394 servants of a lord broke into a house in the town of Aubonne and took documents, and in 1477 the town of Disentis forced the local monastery to give its materials to the city. Items had been taken so often in Geneva that there was an appeal in 1428 for people to return any state-owned documents to the proper authorities.6

There were numerous terms used in the latter Middle Ages that can be translated to mean repositories related to where, and in what objects, items were stored. These words related to trunks, chests, troughs, and sections of rooms.7 In Latin the terms Archiva, Archa, Cista, and Armatrium were used. In French we read of Archives, Arche, Coffre, Frotte(s), and Chartres. The term in Italian was Archivio, and in Romansch it was Ladana. German was even richer in terminology and included terms such as: Archiv, Kiste (box), Kasten (chest), Koffer (trunk), Lade (box, case), Laden, Trog (trough), Truhe, Trunck, Sigenthal, Schlossfestung, and Gewoelb (gewelb).8

The varied terms used for record depositories probably indicate that archival practices were not uniform from place
The forms of record keeping were certainly influenced by the operation of Church repositories that had been in existence for centuries. Latin writing styles and Church notation devices were frequently used in the secular manuscripts of the various cities and Latin terms were frequently used in these vernacular texts.

When secular municipalities achieved political viability, they needed to control the sources of information related to the legal justification for their existence and to their operations and functions. Since the city authorities were often poorly-schooled individuals from the guilds and crafts, the use of Latin in official documents became increasingly rare. Some of the early work done by the state record keepers was the translation of important Latin materials into the vernacular. Depending upon the political connections of the towns and the number of tongues common to the area, copies of diplomatic and other sources were sometimes kept in two or more languages and the transition to the use of a true vernacular was not completed during this era.

The background of a scribe can often be determined by examining variations in spelling and in word usage. Orthography differed from area to area and scribe to scribe even though it would be a mistake to say that spelling was an individual matter because there were far more similarities in orthographies than differences. Regional distinctions are noticeable in comparing items written by individuals trained
in various areas. For example, a scribe trained in Bavaria or Austria used different words than those used in the German-speaking Swiss areas. A German-speaking Swiss would use the term *soent* for "should" while a Bavarian employed the term *sullen* for the same word. A Swiss would also apply the preposition *uf* for "on" while a Bavarian used *auf*.¹⁰

But these local or regional differences in writing frequently did not accurately represent local speech patterns. In Bern, for example, the documents produced by the scribes and chroniclers of that city in the fifteenth century had the three diphthongs that are represented in modern German. But modern Bernese has a vowel system that roughly contains forty-eight diphthongs and triphthongs.¹¹ While the number of such vowels in Bernese in the Middle Ages is unknown, the dialect certainly had more than those represented in the texts.

There was a connection between Strassburg and the Bernese scribes that influenced the use of language and the practices of the chancellery of Bern and other areas. Jacob Twinger von Koenigshofen was a priest and a notary in Strassburg who wrote an important and trend-setting chronicle of the world and of Strassburg late in the fourteenth century.¹² This famous scholar also trained numerous young scribes from Bern, Zurich, and various parts of the Empire in the practices of producing manuscripts and in writing histories. Conrad Justinger and his brother Werner were young Bernese notaries who were probably trained in Strassburg in 1380. They brought back skills and
knowledge that aided them in reorganizing the archives of Bern and in establishing archival practices. Conrad wrote the first vernacular chronicle of Bern in 1420 which was clearly influenced by the work of Koenigshofen in language and format.¹³

These scribes had to have a broad education for precise record keeping. This meant far more than just being able to create and store materials. They had to be able to accurately calculate the calendar and perform computations. To reckon the days correctly, it was necessary to learn about the movements of the sun, moon, planets and constellations. In addition, a knowledge of counting, addition, subtraction, halving, doubling, and the more advanced studies of multiplication, division, and finding the exact roots of numbers was required.¹⁴

The Alsacian connection was also important in the production of illuminated manuscripts in the cities. Among the first important illustrated chronicles in the upper Rhine area was a work of Ulrich Richental of Constance who produced a history of the Council of Constance in the 1420s. It was the work of Diebold Lauber in Hagenau in the Alsace from 1425 to 1467, however, that proved to be the most influential of the illustrated secular manuscripts in the southwest Empire during the fifteenth century.¹⁵

Scribes and other information managers not only had to know how to produce and compose a record but also how to
verify, preserve, and arrange the various manuscripts. A
document or Aktenstueck was binding and official only when it
had been properly notarized by the appropriate authority. The
proof of this legality was the presence of the proper
signatures and seals to authenticate the item. Signatures were
used at the top or the bottom, or at both the top and bottom
to verify that the contents of the document were binding. The
use of seals was also important in authentication. The
practice of affixing seals was apparently borrowed from the
French-speaking areas bordering the Empire to the west. In the
twelfth century the use of seals moved through the southern
Empire from west to east. Their employment became so popular
that seals were in use on important documents virtually
everywhere in the second half of the thirteenth century. 16

As the numbers of items multiplied over the years, it
became increasingly necessary to provide some logical order
for the storage of items so they could be retrieved when
necessary. This meant the beginning of many recognizable
information storage and retrieval practices. As would be
expected, materials relating to each other were frequently
stored together. This was a practice long used by the
repositories of churchmen and nobles and was copied by the
municipalities as well. In the thirteenth century it became
common to place notes on the reverse or dorsal side of
documents. This can be demonstrated by referring to the
notation used by the Babenbergers in Austria. In the twelfth

-101-
century, roughly 5% of the items produced by the Babenberger had dorsal notes on them. In the thirteenth century the percentage increased to 20% and, in the following years, such notations were used abundantly.\textsuperscript{17}

These notes were probably placed on the reverse side of the items so the item would not be defaced by the markings. It is also possible that materials were stored face down as a preservation measure. Documents placed on their faces suffered less from deterioration due to light, spills, and other mishaps.

The dorsal notes gave a brief description of the contents of the record on the textual side, making it unnecessary to turn the item over to see what it contained. The nature of dorsal markings varied considerably in different locations. Some repositories sewed the markings on the materials, but most used ink to write the notations. Items were often numbered with Roman numerals or lettered with consecutive capital letters of the alphabet. When there were more than twenty-six documents in a repository, the lettering system was simply repeated. The method of repeating the alphabet could be confusing when several hundred records were stored together. By the end of the fourteenth century, for example, it was necessary for the city archives of Zurich to use twenty-one alphabets to mark its documents. The problem of repeating letters was addressed by the city archives of Nuernberg which used alphabets in seven different colors of ink.\textsuperscript{18} The
archives in Fribourg used one alphabet of A to Z, then used
double letters of AA to ZZ, and finally used a triple letter
system of AAA to 000. The system was not only used on
individual items but on document categories as well. By 1415
the scribes at the Habsburg bastian at Baden used the letter
A for materials relating to the Swiss Confederation, B for
items on Kiburg, C for Nidau, O for Rapperswil, and X for duke
Leopold.

When items were arranged they were also frequently copied
to assure that the information on deteriorating records was
properly preserved. While this practice was indispensable, it
naturally led to questions concerning forgeries and altered
documents. This was an important consideration because many of
the early compilations were laws, privileges, and basic rights
relating to the municipalities and their inhabitants.

Items were sometimes bound into books. One mandate for
binding documents stated: "the city's laws should be set into
a book, so they could be found next to each other." Many of
these works of finding, copying, and binding were lengthy and
comprehensive efforts which took much expertise. For nearly a
year from 1430 to 1431, Conrad Justinger compiled the
Freiheitenbuch (book of freedoms) for the city of Bern. The
completed work included 269 sources from the years 1218 to
1430 which were copied onto 460 folio pages.

In various cities, bound books of manuscripts were
referred to by the color of their bindings, such as the red
book, the silver book, the black book, the white book, and so forth. For example, the earliest record of the legend of William Tell was recorded in a bound group of sources known as "the white book of Saarnen." Books also had various devices or signs placed on their covers and spines. These served as early forms of call numbers or book references. Symbols such as crossbows, stars, and crosses were used as well as the coats of arms of important families. These devices were presented in a decorative fashion to enhance the beauty of the object. In some instances, letters of the alphabet were placed on the volumes in a similar fashion as that used earlier on the individual documents.

Because the practices of using dorsal notes and of binding related documents together often proved to be insufficient aids in locating sources, indexes were prepared as finding aids. These lists of items represented the sources in the order in which they were bound or stored. One introduction to an index simply states: "This is the table that you [may use to find] each letter by the number of the pages."

Books were not always created by binding items together. Sometimes blank pages were bound together and then written upon. When Diebold Schilling of Bern wrote an illustrated chronicle in the late fifteenth century, he included a drawing depicting himself at work. In the illustration, Schilling was working at a table writing on some bound leaves. He had a
compass, scissors, magnifying glasses, and pens nearby. He also had three different colors of ink for illuminating.\textsuperscript{26}

The concept of having an open repository in which the public could do research was in its infancy at this time. Generally, only public officials and individuals with mandates to write chronicles or to do legal research were allowed free access to these records. Often the information in the materials was too sensitive or the items themselves were too rare and expensive to allow large numbers of people to see them. Such sensitive and highly-prized items were closely protected. In the case of Zurich, only three important officials had keys to certain document containers.\textsuperscript{27} There were some instances when only the mayor had a key and if he was not present, no one could see the materials. Sometimes this system worked too well as was the case with the 1351 document showing the agreement of Zurich to join the Swiss Confederation. It was so well protected that it was lost until the nineteenth century.

Many scribes spent all or most of their careers working in a single repository. The larger repositories had many scribes assigned to them. The handwriting of at least nineteen different individuals was identified on the materials prepared prior to 1415 in the Habsburg bastian at Badenbefore.\textsuperscript{28} There were various ranks of scribes based upon training and skill. Copyists with greater responsibilities were known as notaries. While scribes were primarily expected to copy
items, notaries cared for seals and were involved in the verification of documents. They were considered important state functionaries and had more power and prestige than copyists.\textsuperscript{29} These individuals were given special commissions and swore special oaths to support the state and to perform the work as correctly and as accurately as possible.\textsuperscript{30} The head notaries of Fribourg swore in 1429 not to put the city seal on any document without the permission of the mayor. They also swore to keep all state secrets and to oversee the work of lesser notaries and scribes. The position of the head notary was so respected that this person was given the prestigious position next to the city banner carrier in the civic militia.\textsuperscript{31} In the early years of the city repositories, it was necessary to hire notaries from outside the municipalities to assure properly skilled individuals to perform the functions. Eventually, the office was handed down from generation to generation as the skills were taught within families, and dynasties of notaries existed in many cities.\textsuperscript{32}

Medieval librarians were an integral part of information management by the advent of printing and the subsequent proliferation of documents. They worked out numerous problems related to storage, arrangement, and retrieval of the new items made available by the print medium and set the stage for further developments in information management. These developments led to modern practice.
Many of the information management practices in use today have medieval precursors. For example, modern librarians frequently use a system of letters of the alphabet in book classification in which single, double, and triple letters are used as was the case in the Middle Ages. The most obvious example of this in the United States is the Library of Congress classification system. Although the Library of Congress system is not used in Europe, libraries there frequently arrange books by assigning letters to them.

While libraries no longer arrange books by tincture, many individuals find it convenient to refer to volumes by the color of their binding. This tendency has been noted by publishers who give book covers distinctive tints to make them more easily recognized. Such an example is the "Golden Book" series for children. Publishers also print recognizable logos on their books. Additionally, in a manner similar to medieval repositories, modern libraries stamp or otherwise mark their books to designate the ownership of the item. Even the modern cataloging system of referencing items according to their content, title, and author has a medieval precursor in the finding aids, indexes, and dorsal notations that were used to locate the desired books and manuscripts five hundred years ago.

Medieval librarians used efficient storage techniques based upon their understanding that the valued items entrusted to them should be kept in safe places away from vandels,
theives, heat, moisture, and light. Perhaps the most obvious similarity between the medieval librarian and the modern twentieth century librarian is the extensive skill, knowledge, and dedication required by the profession.
NOTES


9. For documents that demonstrate this shift in Bern, see Fontes Rerum Bernensium. Bern's Geschichtsquellen, 10 vols. (Bern: Staempflische Buckdruckerei, 1883-1904), vols. 4-10.


12. Jocob von Koenigshoven, Die Alteste Telutsche so wol Allgemeine als insonderheit Elsassische und Strassburgische Chronicke, (Strassburg: Josias Staedel, 1698). BYU call no.: Rare DD 801 .A35 T85 1698


19. Peter Rueck, Das Staatsarchiv Freiburg, p. 256.


