

Editorial

Safe archives—how can we protect documents?

In recent years, with the emergence of new technologies and the information society, archivists have dedicated more time to learning about and undergoing training in subjects related to electronic administration, the digital society and new formats and standards, all of which link our profession to these new trends and new forms of working on archives in formats other than the traditional formats.

However, some months ago, news appeared in the media of a robbery of documentary heritage that obtained extensive media coverage. This case precipitated reflection concerning the old and unfortunately common situation of theft from centres in which archives are stored.

The safety of documents in archival centres, it should be remembered, is one of the main responsibilities of our profession. This statement and the reflection resulting from it have led us to ask ourselves whether our archives are safe and what preventive measures we have in place in terms of external and internal users who consult and work with the documents we look after. What security measures are currently implemented, or should be implemented, in consulting rooms? Are we using the appropriate buildings? Does current legislation protect the responsibility of the archivist? How are crimes dealt with? Is the theft or misuse of documents penalised? These are some of the questions that emerge and to which we would like to find answers.

Nobody is unaware of the difficulty of installing security measures, particularly if they are obvious, if we are to avoid the negative and suspicious interpretation of these measures as a lack of transparency in access to documentation. A good set of consulting room regulations is required that develops the rules based on which users are allowed or refused access to the room and correct access to the documentation. In addition, the institution should establish the most effective and resolute theft prevention systems and technical measures. Often the visibility of security measures is enough of a deterrent to prevent criminal activities.

Another aspect to be taken into account is the identification of the reasons why documents are stolen from archives, whether the document has commercial value due to its nature as an antique or whether it is of value to individuals due to the information it contains concerning membership of a political group, for example, and the reason behind the theft is to destroy the document or to publicise it. A document may also be stolen because of its unique nature and this can provide added value when it is stolen. Can the identification of the *essential documents* of most of an archive collection serve as a preventive measure against theft? Would it help to look after these documents particularly carefully and implement certain special measures or treatments?

In addition, and in relation to this subject, another common situation is the discovery of documents for sale at antiques markets and book fairs for which it is easy to identify the archive to which they belong. In these cases, we do not know how to react: should we call in the Civil Guard? The Catalan police? Should we tell the archivist or institution responsible for the documentation? How do we get it back? Do we buy it? Do we ask the seller where they got it from or who sold it to them?

In the Jornada d'Estudi i Debat (Symposium of Study and Debate) to be held on 28 May, a group of professionals have been invited to participate who will present papers

on the subject of the security measures that should be established in archival centres against the threat of theft, from different perspectives and disciplines based on their own experience and knowledge. They will outline the profile of the people who commit these crimes, the reasons they do it and their relations with illegal trade.

We will also examine the role of the institutions responsible for the prosecution of those who commit crimes against our documentary heritage and the cooperation between these institutions and the media, and the steps to be taken in case of making a report will be explained.

In addition, in order to take up the thread of the digital world with which we began this editorial again, information will be provided on the technical and practical ideas surrounding the control of access to electronic information and documentation within the framework of archive protection and the security of information.

The presentation of this Symposium invites archiving professionals to participate by contributing their experience and to debate the subjects mentioned above, in order to learn about the different situations and views of professionals in the field.

The Archivists Association of Catalonia would like to use the conclusions of this Symposium as the starting point for drawing up a protocol, the foundation for a white paper on the optimum security measures which should be established in archival centres and the actions to be taken when faced with a criminal incident, which will serve as a tool of reference for archiving professionals.