

# ACTIVE PRESERVATION – OTHERWISE NO ARCHIVES

*by Erik Norberg*

**T**he national and regional archives in Sweden are repositories for 400 000 shelf-metres of paper documents. Annual growth of state archives amounts to 100 000 shelf-metres before and 20 000 shelf-metres after culling, while annual growth of municipal and county council archives amounts to 50 000 and business archives to 340 000 shelf-metres. The archive stock of the archive-generating authorities is estimated at 1 100 000 shelf-metres. Private archives kept at the Swedish National Archives and regional archives total 50 000 shelf-metres. Of these, 40% are personal and association archives while 60% are company archives. In addition, records are stored both at the well-organized association archives and the less well-kept business archives. Several years into the next century, most archive generation will take place on digital media, but we will still have to make room for new quantities of paper documents for several decades to come.

Together with libraries and museums, it is the archives which store and maintain Sweden's cultural heritage. Primary historical sources are preserved in the archives. Without them, historical research would be impossible to conduct, and this includes both professional scientific research and the kind of genealogical and local historical research pursued for the most part by amateurs. The records kept in the Swedish archives have for centuries been characterized by unbroken continuity and steady growth. The medieval material has large gaps, but from the time of Gustav Vasa's administration and in particular Gustavus Adolphus's and Axel Oxenstierna's administrative reforms, we find a broad stream of documents in uninterrupted growth and densification.

In this way, the growth of the historical sources is commensurate with the emergence of the nation-state, the power and scope of the central bureaucracy, and a peaceful period of history without more serious losses of records than those stemming from the palace fire of 1697, leaking archive barges used for evacuation attempts during the Great Nordic War, several more fires and the successful attempts during the 18th and 19th centuries to convert archival documents to cartridge paper. The unbroken progressions that are so typical of Swedish archives include the Swedish State Church's parish registers, the national tax rolls and the military war discharge records, sources which shed light on the relationship between the state and individual citizens from the late 16th century up to the present. The continuity of our archives is more than just a source of national pride; it is very much a reality.

Large portions of the cultural heritage represented by these archives cannot be set aside for long-term preservation. To some extent this has always been true, but the rapid development of information technology has aggravated the situation. Something must be done to address this problem. Five theses have been formulated in the following, with brief explanations.

1. *Our cultural heritage cannot be preserved intact owing to the fact that some events are never documented, so their records are lost with the memory of those involved.*

The concept of “cultural heritage” does not have to be limited to include information which is preserved for the future in structured form on durable media. It constitutes a “cultural heritage” as long as it is preserved in the simplest and most fleeting type of memory function.

It is often said that this problem of decaying records has become much more acute since telephoning took over from letter-writing. This is certainly true in some respects. But it cannot be denied that telefax, and above all e-mail, has simplified the actual documentation process. Anyone who has participated in discussions on electronic networks is aware of their accessibility, and the chattiness and wide dissemination of information they encourage.

What kind of information is never documented at all, then? The easiest answer would be that such a question can never be answered. Those parts of our record-keeping that are highly formalized in our constitutional law (the Freedom of the Press Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Archives Act, the Accounting Act) work fairly well, in any case. This includes the state and municipal bureaucracy in all its forms, and for this reason we find information density and continuity within the large national information systems.

Where the principle of public access to official records has never been able to gain a foothold in the same way as in the actual software in the decision-making systems – the deliberations, the back rooms, the informal corridors of power. Anyone who wants evidence for this can study the report of the Neutrality Policy Commission. It shows that important information concerning Swedish security policy during the post-war era was more readily found in the archives of the big powers than in our own. This is the reverse side of the principle of public access to official records, the resistance of the decision-maker to document what he knows will eventually be exploited by journalists and researchers. Witness the debate concerning the activities of the most covert organizations, the secret police and the intelligence service.

2. *Our cultural heritage is disappearing due to the fact that important records are never set aside for long-term preservation.*

Against the background of our western cultural tradition and under the strong influence of the right of public access to official records, the concept of “national cultural heritage” has come to include not only the historical sources in the depth of the archives, but also the kind of material that is generated daily. From an international perspective this is remarkable. It is only considered natural in our Nordic neighbourhood, and particularly of course in Finland. In the international archive community, the idea is being promulgated under the heading “life cycle approach”, but as yet the idea is inconceivable to most people, not least in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

As a result, our archivists have devoted a great deal of work to the information systems that are continuously being built up. This works relatively well within the public sector, and after a successful campaign to promote association and

popular movement archives we have obtained good coverage within other important areas which express the activities and interests of our citizens.

But there is one sector where record-keeping is poorly provided for: the business community. To be sure, there are a number of company archives that serve as the exceptions that prove the rule: Axelson Johnson, Enskilda Banken, STORA, SCA to name a few. These exceptions are often large family enterprises, not seldom with old historical roots. One reason for the interest has been their own awareness of the fact that they represent a culture-historical tradition. In recent years an attempt has been made to build up an organization for company archives, often in association form. This work is going slowly and vigorous measures are called for, if we believe that industry has played a role in our history, or if we believe that the companies' archives contain information of importance for a broad spectrum of historical disciplines.

At present, certain large company archives are being preserved relatively well, but most not at all, with the exception of companies in receivership. And if we are to write the history of industry in a balanced manner, we should not limit ourselves to records kept by public authorities, by labour and employer organizations or by those companies that end up in the liquidator's hands.

3. *Our cultural heritage is disappearing due to the fact that important information is being stored on media that are not suitable for long-term preservation or are preserved under poor climatic conditions.*

Changes in writing materials and methods have always caused trouble for archivists, librarians and researchers. This was true when rag paper began to replace parchment in Sweden in the 14th century; when wood-fibre paper replaced rag paper in the middle of the 19th century; when registration in card catalogues became common and the dossier system made its breakthrough at the turn of the century; when card and loose leaf systems began to replace ledgers and folios just before the First World War; when the typewriter made its breakthrough around 1920; when punched card systems became common and microfilm began to be used for archival documents around 1930; when the folio size was replaced by A4 as the most common paper size in archives in the 1940s; when it became possible to make phonographic recordings at court proceedings in 1948; when ball-point pens became common in the 1950s; when copying machine made their breakthrough and microfilm became a records medium around 1960; when computers made their debut in public administration around 1970 and became the work instruments of the archive authorities fifteen years later.

Sam Hedars, Department Head at the Swedish National Archives, wrote a classical work entitled "Crisis in Archiving" in 1956 dealing in large part with the defeat of the traditionally bound volumes by the loose-leaf system. We are still faced with problems that are difficult to solve. Although paper still dominates our archives, the electronic media are starting to make inroads. We aren't aware of the quantity of information if we only see its physical size. The Swedish National Archives store magnetic tapes and tape cassettes containing three terabytes of information in a small but carefully climate-controlled room in the rock-cavern repository. A paper printout would cover 60 000

shelf-metres, in which case the small room would suddenly grow to two medium-sized regional archives.

A national research and development project started in 1987 in cooperation between the National Archives, the Royal Library, the Central Board of National Antiquities, the Central Office of the National Land Survey and a number of other cultural institutions. The goal was to accumulate knowledge on the preservation of paper, to evaluate mass preservation methods and to initiate the production of durable paper. Surveys were made of how the degradation of the paperbound archives was proceeding at a number of archive and library institutions. Even though physical wear caused by use of the material is the biggest source of damage, numerous studies have indicated the value of good storage conditions, and particularly suitable environmental conditions. The negative influence of sulphur has long been known, but this work has also revealed the serious effects of nitrogen dioxide.

The Swedish National Archives is the largest digital archives in Europe. 95 percent of the Swedish National Archives' electronic archives can be read today, whereas a lower percentage is readable in many other archives today. Herein lies the problem. The digital media require special maintenance. We talk about physical, technical and logical ageing. *Physical ageing* is aggravated by the fact that the material in the memories is not durable. *Technical ageing* is caused by changes in the reading equipment. *Logical ageing* has to do with the contents and the ongoing development of the software, the programs. For these three reasons we must constantly maintain the electronic memories and transfer their contents to new media and formats every few years.

This is being done satisfactorily in three countries: the United States, Canada and Sweden. Nevertheless, large quantities of important information have been lost in recent decades. This is not so much true of the large central and fiscal information systems, which are an outgrowth of the old parish registers, the military war discharge records and the national tax rolls, but in particular the operational information, decision-making systems, communication systems. The fact that the situation is even worse in many of the large European nations with ancient cultural traditions is of interest, but hardly of any consolation.

4. *Our cultural heritage is disappearing because the information cannot be accessed due to inadequate search aids or practical tools.*

No matter how much we talk about the importance of regulations and the influence of developments in information technology on the storage media, accessibility is limited by the availability of research rooms with vacant tables or lending options, and the rapid production of records and suitable search aids.

Record books were created to manage the smaller archives, for the large ones card catalogues and registers were added. But the listing systems couldn't keep up with the growth of the archives. That fact that we are now faced with the risk that researchers may replace the primary material, the sources, with summaries, aggregated data and print has to do with accessibility. Naturally,

the archives must keep up with the world's demands on rationality and speed, if we don't want to exclude qualified researchers.

For a number of years now we have been working to build up the national archives database. A CD-ROM is now available containing information on 150 000 archive creators in the country. The information is general: storage site, scope in time and space, terms of utilization, general about the contents. Under the programme "Archives and culture a thousandfold", a thousand ALU employees (ALU = working life and training) have, over the past two years, been making digital lists of the material, which will be added to the next edition of the database. In this way we have created two levels in the search system. Then follows a more complicated phase, the third level, accounting at the document level. The trials are based primarily on registration of medieval manuscripts. The fourth phase will be the free provision of the sources on other media. Here we have experience above all from the parish register material, which is duplicated on microcards, but this phase is essentially in front of us.

Through a combination of technology and available labour, the latter a consequence of the high level of unemployment, we have thus been able to improve accessibility radically. But the most resource-demanding and complicated work remains to be done. One result of these efforts has been interesting and fruitful collaboration between archives, libraries and museums. What we can take from each is the archives' feeling for provenance and structure, the libraries' expertise on cataloguing by subject, and the museums' experience with object description. We can also regard the work as one step in a long-term movement towards a common body of information, where the borderlines between the archives' documents, the libraries' books and the museums' objects are gradually being erased, and the borderlines that must be preserved for constitutional reasons have to be defined on the basis of other criteria than appearance, material and informational content.

##### 5. *Our cultural heritage is disappearing as a result of appraisal in archives.*

One of the problems of archives is the difficulty of providing posterity with as comprehensive and accurate information as possible, without people drowning in it. To be sure, compact storage on other data carriers is slowing down the volume growth, but we will always have to be selective and accept the fact that a portion of the information is destroyed.

Appraisal is a controversial issue. The future availability of information is restricted by deliberate and selective destruction. In the public sector, most of the appraisal is governed by decisions made by the National Archives. In the private sector there are generally no rules for either preservation or appraisal. In the appraisal strategy recently published by the National Archives after a long period of deliberation, a number of important criteria for evaluating the research value of documents are mentioned. These include:

- uniqueness of the data;
- continuity of the informational content;
- data quality and opportunities for source criticism;
- aggregation level, where unprocessed primary data has priority over compilations;

- options for identifying data, tying them to specific individuals or other units;
- linkability, the ability to relate the data to other information;
- functional relationships of documents with other documents;
- accessibility and surveyability.

A special issue is type selection, the preservation of individual documents as examples typical of a larger body of material. Extensive surveys have dealt with intensive data areas, where more would be saved than in other parts of the country, or different kinds of individual selection from the whole population or large populations, all in the interest of managing the information in population statistics and social welfare service records in particular. At the end of the 1980s, the discussion led to a decision regarding individual selection based on the selective preservation of records on individuals born on the 5th, 15th and 25th of each month. But now compressed storage has rendered the entire discussion irrelevant. It is no longer the huge volumes of data that cause problems, but their technically demanding maintenance. The National Archives has now taken upon itself to come up with arguments against individual selection.

Another issue has arisen in the integrity debate. We believe that not only research, but also fundamental democratic values benefit from comprehensive preservation of records. If the state has ever taken action against a person, it is in his or her interests that the information be preserved. Otherwise there will be no opportunity at all in the future for re-examination, review or rectification. The discussion of the East German Stasi files and the former Soviet Union's KGB files have brought new arguments to light. Here as well, it is the role of the archives, both in Sweden and in the European Union, to argue in favour of the most extensive possible preservation of records, even at the price of long periods of secrecy.

## 6. *An action plan.*

Our cultural heritage and valuable research material continue to decay. The rapid changeover to untested media is hastening the process. Many fear that the next few decades will be a black hole to future historians. But the trend can be stopped if we make the effort:

- The technology must be adapted so that it is suitable not only for storage and retrieval, but also for simple routines for preservation. Legislation must be adapted and applied so that it does not counteract its purpose to preserve.
- We must encourage historical awareness and an understanding of the benefits of record preservation. We ought to accept that programs for preserving oral traditions, oral history, are not just something for ethnologists or historians in the Third World.
- We must develop storage methods, media and materials, promote standardization of quality and routines.

Naturally, we cannot preserve all original material forever. The perspectives are extremely long one. During a period of several years in the early 1990s the Swedish National Archives participated in a project with SKB and the Swedish Radiation Protection Institute. The purpose was to document repositories of

radioactive waste for periods of thousands or tens of thousands of years. This brought attention to the long-term preservation, in the concrete sense, of material that can if anything be said to be of existential importance. But we must also have an opportunity to preserve in original form for the foreseeable future that which ought to be saved in the original due to its symbolic value or other research interest. For all the other material, the large body of records, no or restoration efforts will suffice. Here we must work with other methods for media conversion, microfilming or digitization, which permits the largest possible number of generation copyings in the future.

- We must take advantage of the combination of technology and available labour, pursue joint programmes both within the archival sector and in cooperation with libraries and museums, and accept the idea that the field of culture is one of the employment-promoting sectors in society.
- We must employ compact storage on electronic media, but do it against the background of an established research ethic and a scientific point of view. Close collaboration between record-keeping institutions and the research community is necessary. In a balanced appraisal, the value of the source material and the interests of research must be given greater weight than the interests of efficiency and savings in administration. Amateur researchers (genealogical and local historical researchers) are always quick to safeguard their interests, which has led to considerable efforts being made on their behalf. Academic researchers must learn better how to articulate their needs as far as the research material is concerned.

And finally: The national archives have, in recent years, gained a number of international cooperation partners, in particular the Council of Europe and UNESCO. For the Council of Europe, the greatest value of the archives lies in their role in safeguarding democracy. UNESCO is primarily interested in traditional cultural values. In Sweden, we have, for a long time and with considerable success, dealt with all archival issues in an overall perspective. In recent years, concrete cooperation between archives, libraries and museums has broadened the base of, and lent greater force to, this work. Cooperation with a qualified research company in the industrial sector, Astra, has brought to light common interests as regards verification of the authenticity of the records. The contacts with SKB have led to a development of the idea of long-term storage. Obviously, cooperation with industry in particular must be deepened if our decaying heritage is to be saved.

**NEXT PAGE(S)  
left BLANK**