

A bird's-eye view of organising: further reflections

[Uma vista aérea do organizar:
reflexões adicionais]

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Keywords

Fernando Pessoa, Archival theory, Fragmentary texts, Textual scholarship, Records in Contexts (RiC).

Abstract

This essay offers a broader methodological reflection on João Dionísio's and Maria João Sousa's study of the organisation of the *Duke of Parma* document witnesses within Fernando Pessoa's archive. Adopting a bird's-eye perspective, the article examines organising not merely as a practical archival activity, but as a theoretical and interpretative problem involving materiality, labelling, temporality, and archival relations. The discussion draws on recent archival theory, particularly the *Records in Contexts* (RiC) model, alongside the metaphor of the archive as a "sluice box", in order to explore how fragmentary materials are selected, structured, and interpreted across changing scholarly and institutional contexts. The essay further reflects on the temporal and methodological tensions involved in reading, organising, and reconstructing fragmentary literary materials within contemporary textual scholarship and digital archival research.

Palavras-chave

Fernando Pessoa, Teoria arquivística, Textos fragmentários, Crítica textual, Records in Contexts (RiC).

Resumo

Este ensaio propõe uma reflexão metodológica mais ampla sobre o estudo de João Dionísio e Maria João Sousa relativo à organização dos testemunhos documentais do *Duque de Parma* no arquivo de Fernando Pessoa. Adoptando uma perspectiva panorâmica, o artigo examina a organização não apenas como uma actividade arquivística prática, mas também como um problema teórico e interpretativo envolvendo materialidade, rotulagem, temporalidade e relações arquivísticas. A discussão dialoga com desenvolvimentos recentes da teoria arquivística, em particular com o modelo *Records in Contexts* (RiC), bem como com a metáfora do arquivo como "caixa de lavagem", para explorar os modos como materiais fragmentários são seleccionados, estruturados e interpretados em contextos académicos e institucionais mutáveis. O ensaio reflecte ainda sobre as tensões temporais e metodológicas inerentes à leitura e organização de fragmentos literários.

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Encountering the *Unveiling the Duke of Parma* project, one cannot help wondering why this fascinating material remained on the margins of scholarly attention for so long. At the same time, it seems equally evident that only recent intellectual and methodological developments have created the necessary momentum for addressing the challenges posed by the material.

The contemporary digital environment increasingly enables forms of collaboration capable of integrating expertise from a range of fields. In addition, the project resonates strongly with broader intellectual and cultural developments. The current scholarly and cultural landscape offers especially fertile ground for exploring the complex questions of identity associated with Pessoa's writings. Equally, contemporary scholarly paradigms are increasingly well equipped to address the multilingual dimensions of literature and to engage digitally with the kinds of intricate archival and textual challenges that characterise the *Duke of Parma* material.

In recent years, fragmentary texts have attracted growing interest among students. This tendency is also visible in teaching contexts, where a remarkable enthusiasm for such materials has become increasingly evident. It is perhaps worth noting that only a few years ago, one might have been hard-pressed to imagine that Novalis's fragments might have seemed attractive to young readers. Contemporary literary culture appears progressively receptive to incompleteness, multiplicity, and textual openness.

Reflecting on João Dionísio's and Maria João Sousa's paper "The organisation of the document witnesses of *The Duke of Parma*", published in this issue of *Pessoa Plural*, this essay focuses on a few points of broader relevance for textual scholarship and manuscript studies. The present reflections adopt a bird's-eye perspective, in which their study appears particularly rich and thought-provoking.

Looking from above, Dionísio's and Sousa's study can be seen as divided into three overlapping areas. The first two legs of this tripod structure are (1) organising without text, and (2) organising through labelling. These modes of organisation are often combined, particularly when documents are grouped and preserved in various ways.

These perspectives may, at first glance, seem trivial or self-evident, but they prove to be theoretically rich and highly stimulating. The *Duke of Parma* archival material demonstrates that organising is not merely a practical issue but also a theoretical challenge, as the order of documents and the labels attached to them can be approached from multiple perspectives, ranging from writing processes and archival conditions to transcription practices and digital archival management. As Dionísio's and Sousa's study demonstrates, even apparently practical acts of organising and labelling become theoretically consequential in the context of fragmentary material.

The third leg of the tripod consists of (3) multiple angles from which organisation can be observed, together with the reference points that help make sense of it. Most of these angles have a dual character. On the one hand, they concern the factual

and material aspects of the documents, such as the type and size of the paper or the material qualities of the writing. These analytical observations are facilitated by the Document Info pages of the *Duke of Parma* digital archive. On the other hand, such material qualities also invite broader interpretative questions concerning Fernando Pessoa's writing processes, archival practices, and the place of the *Duke of Parma* material within his wider oeuvre.

The version of Dionísio's and Sousa's study available to me offered careful observations, substantial analysis, and well-grounded results addressing their challenging research objectives. However, it had not yet reached broader theoretical conclusions. It is, therefore, a pleasure to build on these observations, to enjoy the empirical buffet they have prepared, and to reflect freely, without having to undertake all the heavy groundwork myself or to worry about the project's practical boundaries.

From a broader methodological perspective, the organisation of documents and texts extends from the earliest stages of the material itself to the research practices and scholarly outcomes built upon it. Despite this fundamental relevance, questions of organisation have received surprisingly limited theoretical attention. Archival theory forms a notable exception, although discussions there have often taken place at a relatively high level of abstraction and frequently in connection with administrative records, their management, institutional archival practices, and metadata standards.

Organising may appear in different ways, depending on the point of orientation from which the phenomenon is examined. Such scholarly perspectives may include, for example, the author's life stages and biographical research, the chronology of texts, and the genetic aspects of writing. Organising fragmentary material may likewise be approached through transcription practices and editorial work, alongside broader literary-critical frameworks. At the same time, it also opens onto archival policies and digital archiving.

These perspectives could easily be extended in multiple directions, from geography to cognition. Taken together, they indicate that Dionísio's and Sousa's research engages centrally with a wide range of scholarly questions and methodological approaches. The paper thus offers a more multifaceted account of organising, materiality, and labelling.

RiC – Records in Contexts

While textual scholarship is strongly engaged with archival materials, and personal archives often provide important contexts for research, it has tended to remain at some distance from archival theory and general discussions of record management. The *Duke of Parma* material and the questions of its organisation, however, appear to resonate strongly with recent developments in archival praxis and archival theory.

In this context, RiC – Records in Contexts—the latest conceptual model and standard for the description of records, is of particular relevance. Maintained by the International Council on Archives, its first version was released in 2023. Although the model is designed for archival practice and may appear primarily technical in scope, it emerges from substantial theoretical debates within archival studies and, in turn, continues to stimulate further methodological reflection. In this sense, RiC offers a framework that extends across disciplinary boundaries.

What is particularly striking is the fundamentally relational approach of the RiC model, which departs from traditional top-down hierarchical models. It is fully decentralised, situating records within a network of dynamic relations. Traditional hierarchies can still be represented, but they are treated as only one element among many in describing a record's broader configuration.

More specifically, the 2023 RiC documents—*Conceptual Model* and the *Foundations of Archival Description* (RiC 2023a; RiC 2023b)—explore the concept of provenance and highlight aspects that encourage a reconsideration of archival contexts, not least in relation to fragmentary documents.

From a historical perspective, the RiC documents describe how the Principle of Provenance emerged in the nineteenth century and gradually became established as a foundation of archival theory and practice in the modern West. They distinguish two key principles within this tradition. The first is *respect des fonds*, according to which records created, accumulated, and used by a person or group in the course of life and work should be kept together and not intermixed with records from other sources. The second is *respect for original order*, which emphasises that the intellectual grouping and sequencing of records in their context of accumulation and use is essential both for understanding their interrelations and for documenting their use (RiC 2023a: 5–7; RiC 2023b: 4–5).

What is particularly innovative in the RiC framework is its critical reflection on these principles. The RiC documents emphasise that records within a fonds do not exist solely in relation to that fonds, nor can the fonds itself be understood as an isolated entity. Instead, both the fonds and the records are embedded in “layers of interconnected contexts, past, present, and future”. This formulation already signals a shift away from a strictly bounded understanding of archival structure (RiC 2023b: 5).

The RiC documents further develop this perspective by explicitly problematising the notion of *order*, asking what is meant by it: “What does ‘order’ mean? Does it mean the physical arrangement of the records, or their intellectual relation to one another?” The model further shifts the emphasis, noting that “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.” Records may also be reordered, and even reordered more than once, which further destabilises the idea of order as a fixed structural condition. (RiC 2023b: 5). This reconceptualisation of *order* has direct implications for the *Duke of Parma* material, where the organisation

of documents cannot be reduced to a single, stable arrangement. Instead, multiple material and intellectual relations call for a plurality of coexisting starting points for ordering.

Another important point made in the RiC documents is that both *respect des fonds* and *respect for original order* are archival principles rather than records management principles. They are retrospective in nature, whereas, in the context of creation and use, the perspective of a person managing their own records or that of a designated records manager is oriented towards immediate practical needs (RiC 2023b: 5).

Finally, the RiC documents offer a broader definition of provenance that resonates particularly well with the present case study. The RiC framework emphasises that a fuller understanding of provenance must take into account its complexity. As the *Conceptual Model* notes,

[...] the origins and history of records include not only the person or group that accumulated a body of records, but also other persons and groups directly related to the records, and the activities that were and are being performed in relation to the records.

(RiC 2023a: 7)

This formulation shifts provenance from a single origin to a network of relations involving multiple actors and ongoing practices.

In Dionísio's and Sousa's study, there is no need to engage in a detailed dialogue with the Records in Contexts model. The recently developed and widely adopted standard nonetheless draws attention to the continuing relevance of organisational questions in contemporary archival theory.

The archive as a sluice box

Another aspect relevant to Dionísio's and Sousa's study concerns the broader archival contexts of the *Duke of Parma* corpus. These contexts are touched upon in various ways throughout the paper, yet the surroundings of the fragments themselves deserve further reflection, since both their earlier historical settings and their present archival environments form important backgrounds for the organisation of the tragedy corpus.

Similar questions have emerged in my own research project *Traces of Translation in the Archives* (Finnish Literature Society – SKS; funded by the Kone Foundation), which examines translation-related archival materials in Finnish archival institutions. From the outset, it became clear that many central research questions extend beyond the archival documents themselves, and even beyond individual personal archives, to the wider contexts in which they are situated and from which they emerge. This also encompasses the vast amount of material and activity that never enters any archival repository.

In reflecting on these conditions, I have employed a metaphor drawn from gold mining (KATAJAMÄKI, 2022). The archival condition of translation-related material may be compared to a so-called “sluice box”, a device used to separate heavier gold particles from the surrounding soil and water flowing through it. Metaphorically speaking, the archive functions in a similar way. Much of the surrounding material is never shovelled into the sluice box in the first place, and even when it is, considerable portions are filtered out during processes of selection, preservation, and organisation. What remains is the material considered sufficiently valuable, meaningful, or manageable to be retained within the archive. Even then, only a fraction of what is preserved ultimately becomes the object of scholarly attention.

The sluice box metaphor can also be understood as comprising three interconnected zones. The left-hand side refers to the broader cultural field surrounding the archive, including varying degrees of cultural appreciation and visibility that shape which materials are considered worth preserving. The central section corresponds to the archive itself, where selected materials are accumulated, organised, and preserved through cultural expectations as well as institutional archival practices and decision-making. The right-hand side refers to the mechanisms through which archival materials become accessible to users, including catalogues, databases, and other search interfaces that mediate between the archive and its users. Taken together, these three zones suggest that archival presence is not a single condition, but a process distributed across cultural valuation, institutional selection, and mediated accessibility.

Applied to the *Duke of Parma* material kept in two envelopes, the sluice box metaphor encourages further reflection on the practical and historical conditions that preceded the formation of the archive. At the same time, it raises broader questions concerning the relationship of the two envelopes to Pessoa's wider personal archive and its history. Pessoa's own practices of self-archiving are likewise of particular interest in this regard.

Such questions inevitably become more speculative when fragmentary material is involved, but for that very reason they may also become all the more stimulating. The archive, in this sense, is never merely a repository of surviving material, but also a trace of selection, omission, and prior acts of organisation.

Temporalities of organisation

One key issue in studying fragmentary material such as the *Duke of Parma* corpus is the temporal perspective from which the material is organised and labelled. This is particularly significant in relation to fragmentary texts, where questions of order, sequence, and interpretation are inherently complex. The issue involves both the organisation of the material and its labelling, as well as the interpretative standpoint from which it is approached. More precisely, it entails a retrospective gaze on the

material, alongside a future-oriented perspective regarding its potential uses and scholarly interpretations.

The interplay between retrospective and prospective orientations suggests that archival organisation is temporally layered rather than neutral, operating through shifting relations in which materials are continuously reinterpreted and recontextualised over time. In Dionísio's and Sousa's study, both temporal dimensions are present, yet they remain largely implicit, particularly in relation to the retrospective gaze through which the material is approached.

The temporal dimension shapes not only the organisation of the material, but also its interpretation in relation to Fernando Pessoa's other writings. Similarly, the use of the *Ática edition* in archival practice reflects a retrospective orientation towards the material. This is a more general issue that appears highly relevant to the study, particularly in relation to the ways in which different temporal frames structure archival and editorial decisions.

Across the Records in Contexts model, the sluice box metaphor, and the temporal perspective, a shared concern emerges on how archival materials are constituted through relations that are at once structural, processual, and time-bound. RiC foregrounds the relational organisation of records, where order, provenance, and context are not fixed properties but dynamically produced configurations. The sluice box model extends this logic beyond the archive itself, showing how archival presence is shaped across cultural valuation, institutional selection, and mediated accessibility. Temporality cuts across both frameworks by revealing that these relations are never static, but continually reconfigured through retrospective interpretation and prospective anticipation.

Reading notes towards closure

Reading, too, is a process involving various forms of ordering. Especially when engaging with fragments related to an unfinished and unpublished work—fragments marked by uncertain origins, multiple potential purposes, and open or ambiguous forms of labelling—the interpretative imagination begins to work with the puzzle.

While reading Dionísio's and Sousa's paper, I found myself noting different interpretative forces at work and became aware of ordering impulses in my own reading. Such moments of tension are productive, as they show how reading itself is structured by competing methodological orientations. They also help clarify how different approaches are activated in the encounter with fragmentary material.

For instance, I found myself strongly oriented towards a text-centred perspective in my reading. The paper, by foregrounding documents rather than textual reconstruction—one of its methodological strengths—encourages attention to material archival evidence and the practices through which it is organised. At the

same time, I repeatedly leaned towards questions of transcription and textual reconstruction.

This shift reveals a tension between genetic and text-critical orientations. While the genetic perspective aligns more closely with the concerns of the article, the text-critical approach foregrounds editorial practice and the construction of a reading text. In this sense, the notion of “organising” varies depending on whether attention is directed towards material documents, their genesis, their archival and provenancial conditions, or their editorial outcomes. When working with fragmentary material, the act of reading becomes even more distributed. The puzzle takes shape in the reading mind, comprising not only surviving, often mismatched pieces, but also those that may once have existed.

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