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On Similarities and Difference between Cultural and Natural Archives

An archive is a place in which remnants of past events are stored. Cultural archives are intentionally prepared for the preservation of the residues of a person or organization. As an archive is used in order to get a true image of historical events and formations its material is especially revealing if it was not intentionally prepared for later perception; this is especially true for unpublished documents, like diaries or notebooks. Cultural archives, therefore, are in their best parts intentionally arranged collections of (with respect to later reception) unintentionally produced artifacts, i.e. of artifacts not produced with the historical memory of later times in view.

Natural archives comprise, in contrast to this, material that was not only non-intentionally produced with the historical record in view, but are in themselves unintentionally existing deposits. In natural archives there is a first order non-intentionality at the level of its objects (as in many objects in cultural archives) and a second order non-intentionality at the level of the whole arrangement of the archive.

In order to be conserved the material in archives must be isolated from disturbing external events. In the case of natural archives two effective means of conservation are high pressure (in sediments) and low temperature (in ice). In the case of the conservation of living beings, these isolating mechanisms result in transforming the living system that was produced and maintained in a living state by processes into the pure structure of its morphology. In a similar way as human thinking and human interactions are preserved in cultural archives by texts, living processes are preserved in natural archives as buried spatial configurations ("fossils").

Despite their difference with respect to their intentional production, there are profound similarities between cultural and natural archives. For example, (1) the archives of nature have consistent criteria of inclusion and exclusion of objects according to natural laws; (2) their central mechanism of conservation consists in arresting processes that would alter the material; (3) they therefore represent past events not as events but as pure structures, relations or concentrations that resulted from past events; (4) as natural archives normally preserve many items of one type (e.g. biological species) and as the items are deposited in well documented temporal layers it is not only individual events that can be analyzed on the basis of natural archives, but regular patterns of past activities and transformations; and (5) in ontological terms, natural archives document the starting points (*archeîa*) of natural developments (in the fossil record), and at the same time they provide, in methodological terms, the raw data and primary sources for the reconstruction of the past.

Because of these similarities between cultural and natural archives, the material in the archives of nature can serve as evidence for past events in the same way as documents in cultural archives do.