

Preface

by Karel Velle

National Archivist
host of the Conference

Mister Chair,

Dear Colleagues,

It is my honour to welcome you at the National Archives in Brussels to the colloquium on digital edition of sources in Europe.

The Belgian State Archives is – just as the Royal Library and the federal museums – a federal scientific institution under the aegis of the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office. Our institution is responsible for the proper administration of the archives created by the public authorities. We preserve about 250 kilometres of archives and collections and we aim at putting this tremendous amount of historical information at the disposal of national and international researchers and citizens interested in history, via different distribution channels, but predominantly by electronic means. Compared to other European or national archive services, we are a rather small institution. Yet, last year, our expenses amounted to 15.1 million Euros of which 11.1 million Euros were personnel costs. Our archives grew by 12 kilometres in 2007 and last year, growth attained almost 9 kilometres of archive material. At the end of last year, the descriptions of more than 20,000 archive blocks and 6 million archival descriptions could be searched in our online database ABS Archeion. Thanks to a series of digitisation projects, our stock of digital images increased by 2.6 million units that had been requested by research groups, partners, and within the framework of different projects. These digitisations mainly concern genealogical sources, but also other sources were converted into a digital format and made accessible. Our main task for the years to come is to make qualitative and historical archive material, together with the corresponding context, accessible in digital format and thereby significantly increasing our online service offer. This implies investments in hard- and software, scanning infrastructure, storage capacity and training of employees. Via our publications – 129 in 2008 –, website and newsletter, our clients are systematically informed about the works currently being carried out, about our achievements and potential perspectives for future research.

The State Archives wants to offer a service of highest quality in all of its archives services. As a follow-up of the desires of the archives visitors – as expressed in the customer satisfaction study ‘Quality monitor of services at the archives’ carried out in 2005 and in 2007 in all State Archives – a ‘Quality Charta’ was drafted in 2008. Since 2009, this Quality Charta is being distributed among the State Archives in the Provinces.

Your presence today is important to us for different reasons.

First, our institution has more than amicable ties with the Royal Historical Commission, whose work we would like to ease and support in every possible manner.

Second, we would like to stress that our institution undertakes great efforts in order to best support national and foreign researchers and research groups active in document publishing, by meeting their demands for making parts of our collections accessible in digital format. The collections of the State Archives comprise, for instance, tens of thousands of diplomatic sources that the institution wants to make accessible in a digital format because of these charters’ intrinsic scientific value and in order to preserve them in the best possible way. The State Archives intends, as depositary and administrator of the most important collection of charters in Belgium, to carry out a large-scale digitisation project, in which the charters will be digitised. The documents will be linked to the descriptions that are already accessible online via the digitised inventories of the related funds. This structure will enable everyone to analyse the individual charters within their institutional context.

The digitisation of medieval and early modern seals also started last year. The images will be made accessible online together with their respective descriptions. For the moment, about 8,000 seals have been described and digitised. By 2012, all 38,000 seal casts will be available for consultation in digital format.

Projects bearing on other periods of history – 18th and 19th century – are also being planned.

Parts of our digitisation activities are related to foreign text edition projects, such as the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, for which the Berliner Arbeitsstelle under the direction of Dr. Michael Lindner, recently requested our collaboration for the digitisation of the charters of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1316-1378).

To finish, I would like to thank a number of persons in particular: First of all I express my gratitude respectively to the chairman and the secretary of the Royal Historical Commission, Prof. Duvoisquel and Jean-Luc Depaepe, to the Belgian colleagues of *Porta Historica*, and to the professors Thérèse de Hemptinne and Claude Bruneel for their remarkable collaboration during the past weeks and months. Finally, I would also like to thank the personnel of the National Archives, under the supervision of my colleague Michel Van der Eycken, Head of Department, who were involved in setting up the logistic framework for this colloquium.

I wish you a pleasant and fruitful day.