

Business Archives in Sicily. A Resource for Knowledge and Development of the Territory

Review by Antonella Bilotto

In July 2005, the University of Catania, through its degree course in *Scienze dei Beni Culturali* in the Faculty of *Lettere e Filosofia*, organized a conference in Siracusa entitled “*Business Archives in Sicily. A Resource for Knowledge and Development of the Territory*”. This three-day conference, from the 16th to the 18th of July, was divided into different working sessions.

In the *Introduction*, following a cordial welcome to the participants, Prof. Gaetano Calabrese explained the reasons for the conference: firstly, to provide an analysis of the current state of business archives in the Sicilian territory; and secondly, a proposal for the creation of an Economic territorial archives.

During the first day's sessions, the speakers presented a cross-section of the issues that affect today's archival world: from the organization of business archives in relation to new technologies (M. Guercio), to the historical research carried out on these archival typologies. (Giarrizzo).

In contrast, the second day's presentations focused on the “concentration” of the memory in specific archival repositories. The cases of Piaggio Foundation, Ansaldo Foundation, Dalmine Foundation and the Center for Business Culture demonstrated the actual experience of what Antonio Romiti had previously hypothesized as “theory and practice”. The factual account of these experiences led to an important debate that highlighted the different approaches between those who see these archives through the eyes of public institutions and universities, and those who work closely with business. A lively debate ensued, focusing especially on the problems related to record selection. What is preserved in these business archives and what kind of business archives fit in the Economic Business Archives? Unfortunately, this important question could not be fully developed due to the variety and complexity of topics in the program, and therefore, further discussion was deferred to future meetings.

Finally, the third day' session centered on a broad look at census operations applied to business archives. Cases of particular relevance included the Census of Business Archives in Sardinia, as well as that of editorial companies carried out by the Department of Cultural Assets and by the Mondadori Foundation.

A further perspective was contributed by the region of Campania (De Divitiis), as well as pertinent comments concerning historical enterprises in Lombardia (Bilotto). However, it was pointed out that the situation regarding censuses appears to be rather fragmentary and subject to contrasting interpretations of methodological terms. This is unfortunate, since the census may be the most important document for knowing and monitoring this type of archives, which frequently slip past every type of study. Censuses are created by private companies declared of high historical interest, apart from a few examples too famous to even be declared.

Several specific examples of business archives were presented concerning, banks and insurance companies. This is often the case since these institutions are usually more formally evolved in their creation of “memory-collecting” systems, which tend to resemble public archives. In addition to these experiences of conservation, attention was also drawn to their valorization (Bonfiglio Dosio), with ideas that appeared to be very nonconformist and original as in the case of the agro-industrial field (Gonizzi).

The state of archives in Sicily was discussed during the last part of the conference, with talks that, on one hand focused on the archives themselves and, on the other, analyzed various businesses with respect to their surroundings and the territory in which they have been conceived.

In general, the conference provided an opportunity to exchange knowledge with regard to a particular project. On the other hand, too little time was dedicated to the discussion of concrete themes and, in particular, no effort was made to understand what type of archives should be preserved in an Territorial Economic Archives, nor which juridical form this kind of institution should have. However, the greatest

weakness of the Siracusa conference was the fact that only the strongest institutions (e.g. public institutions and large companies) had the opportunity to speak. We should observe the small-medium company or, even more so, the micro-enterprise in order to have an accurate picture of Italy's economic reality.