The Byzantine and Christian Museum: Planning and infrastructure steps for the administration and documentation of the archaeological collections.

The example of the storage administration system

E. Papadopoulou[1], D. Ballas[2]

Conservator of Antiquities and works of Art

Scientist, Documentation dept B.C.M.

The Byzantine and Christian Museum is a large organization with many archaeological collections and a substantial number of artifacts. This creates the need for the efficient management of information and the documentation of material, as well as a large variety of functions.

Many factors contribute to the need for a unified administration and documentation system within the museum. These include the importance and size of the collections, the information, function and mobility of the objects, the recent move towards new technologies, and the development of new museological conceptions.

These necessities have driven us to action.

BCM is by no means the first organization with such needs. For this reason, the initial step in creation of this documentation system was to search for patterns that have developed in other organizations within Greece and internationally, and then to adapt them to the particular needs of the museum.

The main problems that are encountered in each attempt of such scope and magnitude lie in the conceptual changes, in revising disparate partial approaches, and in creating a unified perspective.

The various specialists involved in this project (archaeologists, conservators, etc.), in collaboration with the Documentation Office, worked towards the formation of a unified approach to the administration and documentation of the collections, as well as an understanding of the many peculiarities in each specialty. Projects of this magnitude require interdisciplinary collaboration on an equal basis.

This unified perspective has enabled us to progress to the planning phase. This includes target-setting, expected benefits, delegation of responsibilities, the documentation of the specific needs of the museum and, very importantly, the agreement on the structure, the type and depth of the information that will be documented.

Automatically, the demand for the codification of the information is raised. This information must be transferred in a compact, comprehensive, and precise way, if possible in a single term. This presupposes the formation and acceptance of a common terminology.

Within this process the specifications of the administration and the determination of the documentary fields matured via the attentive study of the needs of the museum and the collections, inter-disciplinary collaboration between the museum's personnel, and close collaboration with experts from other organizations.

The documentation procedure in the museum is developing by adapting international and Greek models to the particular needs of the museum. To change the model of the archaeological documentation system, it has been deemed necessary to record all the identity elements of the objects in a database and to simultaneously give them a new unified record number. This number is composed of five characters along with the prefix BCM (BCM00000). In this way errors are avoided.

At the same time the new conservation cards are being tested and evaluated by the various laboratories in the museum. This will compose another partial database of the system in the future. In addition, the precious conservation documents in the museum archives continue to be studied. The goal of this is to index the information of the older conservations attempts per object, per conservator or per year, with emphasis on the pathology, methodology and materials used.

While we are working on this new documentation system we are also faced with the task of transporting the objects from the old storage facilities to the new. Consequently, the need for studying, planning, and materializing an administrative system for the museum's storage has been absolute priority.

The administrative system of the storage facility forms one of the subsets of the featured integrated information system of the museum. Its role is to manage the objects that are located in different storage facilities.

This system is planned to completely cover the needs of the modern museum. There is also the possibility of a connection with specific applications in order to serve specific, present and future needs.

The system is composed of the following units:

1. Object identification elements

2. Object movement

3. Object storage

4. Object conservation condition

Such a system will facilitate faster decisions and will work to improve the processes of the general administration while exploiting the storage space and providing complete information about all of the objects.

The time required to research an object will decrease drastically and the entire process will no longer be dependant on individuals. The handwritten registration of the museum's records and the typing of them in a central system will be halted while the probability of human error in the process is reduced (in the new system there will be little room for mistakes such as forgotten or non-registered objects or wrong transcriptions).

The application was designed to perform queries on:

1. The contents of every storage department and the exact position of every object.

2. The movement of the objects and their archival history.

3. The condition of the object's conservation and the grade of necessity for intervention.

It is also necessary to carry out the following:

1. Automatic inventory of the objects in every storeroom to provide a complete image of the storage facility. The system helps us monitor the exact number of objects contained in every storage department down to the very drawer or shelf on which a given object is located. In this way any new additions to the collection or movement of objects is precisely recorded.

2. The determination of codes according to the place of storage.

3. The automatic assignment of a protocol number.

4. The conduction of simple and well-composed search based upon a number of criteria.

In order to ensure that there will be no errors during the registration and recall of data, a common terminology is required. The fields will be defined by already selected values from which the user has to choose.

To secure the data, which is determined by the permission of access, users will be classified. The categories of access include, no access, reading only, and partial or total access.

The Documentation Office of the museum is responsible for the coordination and organization of the whole enterprise and for the continued maintenance of the system including its future changes and modifications.

The person responsible for the storage facility will be in charge of updating the movements of the objects to and from their stored positions.

This application has been entrusted to and realized by N. Tziortzio, and developed in Visual Studio 2003, which works on an SQL server.