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International descriptive standards in Spanish archival descriptive systems

Two important projects

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The two projects that we want to present in this article are the Register Guide for Spain and Latin America and the AER project (Spanish Archives on the Net). These two projects are complementary, integrated and share resources and functionalities¹.

The Register Guide is an electronic guide to archives for Spain and Latin America, providing on-line information that answers the following questions:

- When? It provides information about the archive centres responsible for the holding and servicing of documentation. From this point of view, the Register Guide is an archive directory.

- What? It provides the description of the documentation held at each centre at a fond and collection level.
- Who? The Authority File provides information about the documentation's creators. (Ilu. 1)

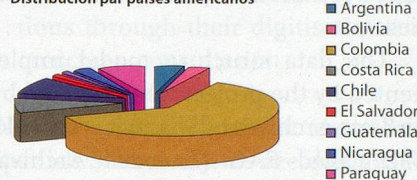
The objectives of this project are:

- To provide an overall view of the fonds and/or collections held in the various archives included in this project
- To supply only higher levels of description
- To provide summarised information regarding creators and archive documents
- Also to provide general information on the archival institutions holding documents and the services they render to the public
- The main objective is to supply on-line information which traditionally has been gathered in the description instruments called guides.

One of the most important features of this Register Guide is that its scope is international and that it derives from cooperation. At the beginning (1979),

the objective was focused on Spanish archives. The project's scope has been expanded to other archives in Latin American countries (Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Venezuela, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Cuba and Mexico). At present more than 42,000 archive centres are registered.

Distribución por países americanos

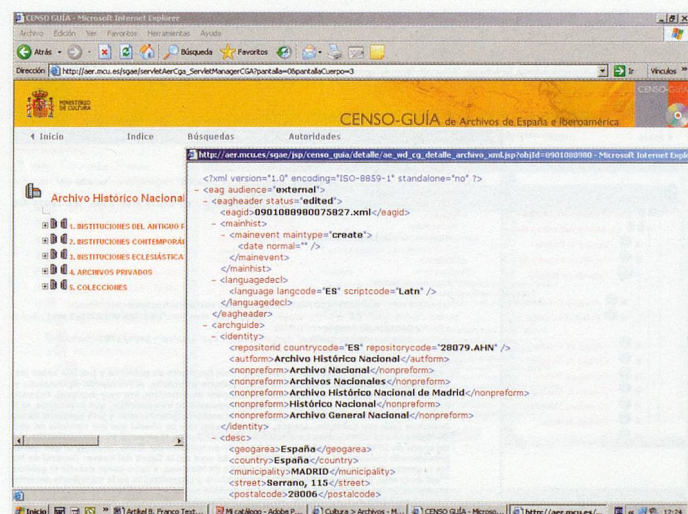


The Register Guide is a project for standardisation. It contributes to the standardisation of archival descriptions and to the consolidation of international guidelines within the community of archive professionals. Standardisation in an instrument like this is important

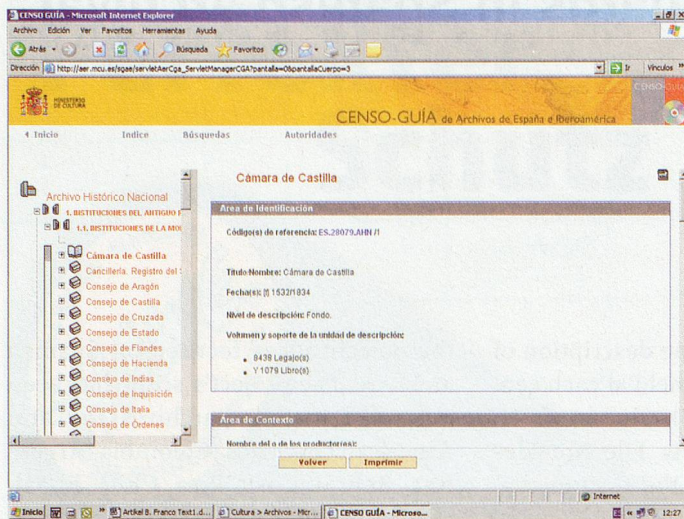
1 Der Artikel beruht auf dem Referat anlässlich der VSA-AAS-Fachtagung vom April 2005.



Ilu. 1



Ilu. 2

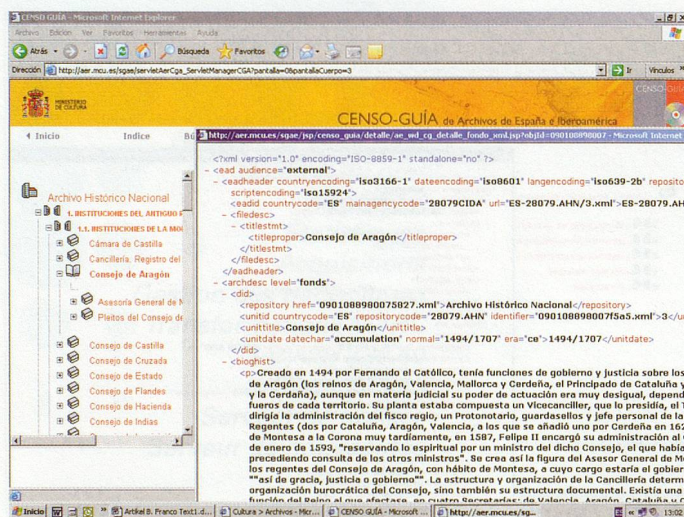


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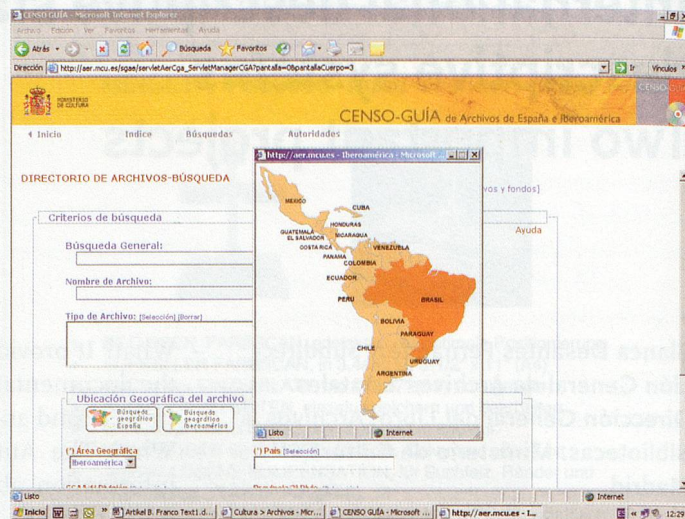
because the archival descriptions come from very diverse centres and countries.

The data structure model implemented by the project was prepared by the State Archives of Spain; it is an XML DTD called EAG (Encoded Archival Guide), currently in version Alfa 0.2; it regulates the market for general information on archive centres, providing an electronic format for the storage, publication and exchange of archive centre presentations. (Ilus. 2)

The descriptions for the fonds and collections managed in archives use a data structure adjusted to ISAD (G) 2nd edition and to the DTD of XML/SGML EAD 2002. (Ilus. 3)



Ilus. 5



Ilus. 4

The system functionalities allow research according to archive centres, to fonds and to authority files.

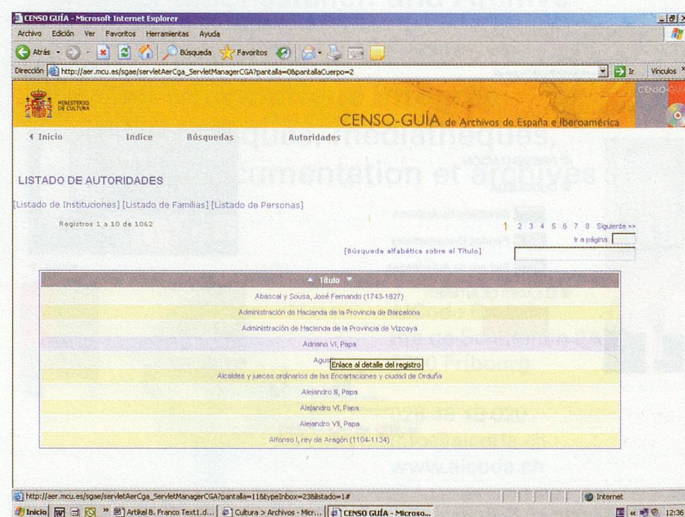
First at all, searches of archive centres. It is possible to make a general search, with free text, for the name of the archive or the type of archive and according to the geographic location of the archive (interactive map). There are pop-up windows to allow users to carry out assisted searches with controlled languages. (Ilus. 4)

The second option is the search of the documentation held at each centre. The classification scheme of the archives appears on line. All the information follows the standard ISAD (G): Identity Statement Area, Context Area, Conditions of Access and Use Area, Allied materials Area and Notes Area. All this

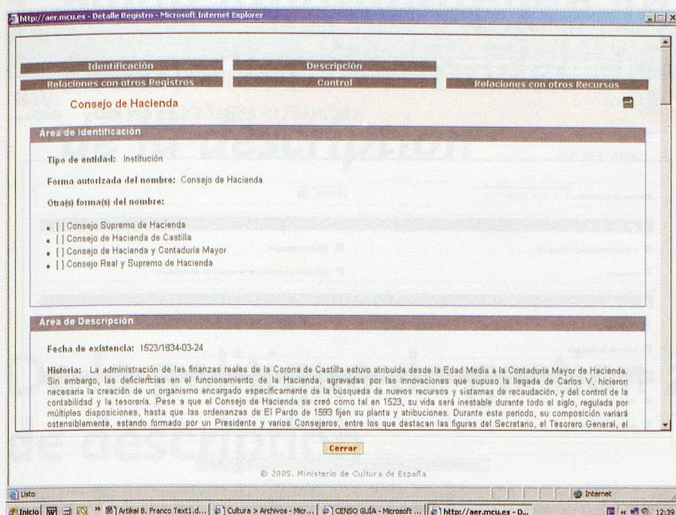
information is in XML format, too. This format was chosen because it has become the universal standard for electronic data exchange and has achieved broad acceptance; also, it is important to make sure that it can manage the sharing and exchange of information with other organisations. (Ilus. 5)

The third option is to search by Authority File. The description of creators follows the ISAAR (CPF) 2nd edition data structure. This Authority File is shared with the AER project. There are a complete list with all the results and three lists of persons, families and corporate bodies. (Ilus. 6)

Also, it is possible to search by free text. The elements of description are organized into four information areas: Iden-



Ilus. 6

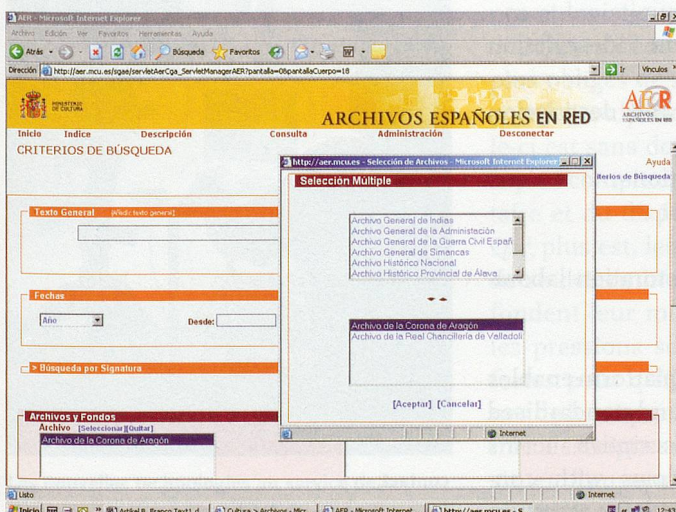


Il. 7

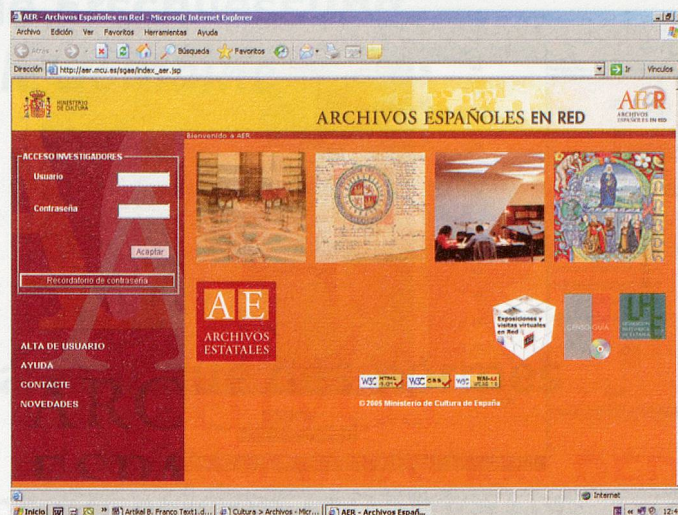
tity Area, Description Area, Relationships Area (here divided in two: Relationships with other Authority Files and Relationships with other Resources) and a Control Area. (Il. 7)

The Register Guide is also capable of operating with other formats (access, pdf...) and html tables can be copied in word, excel ... formats. And the most important functionality is the on-line updating of information from anywhere in Spain or Latin America.

The AER project (Spanish Archives on the Net) is a project developed by the Spanish Ministry of Culture for the diffusion of the cultural content of Spanish archives through the Internet. (Il. 8)



Il. 9



Il. 8

The basic aim of the AER project is to make pre-existing standardised State Archive databases available via the Internet and to link the archival descriptions to the reproduction of the documents so they can be viewed on the Net. The AER project provides instant, free access to over 15 million pictures of documents and descriptions from anywhere in the world.

The objectives are:

- To provide instant free access to Spanish archives for the international research community and members of the general public
- To facilitate and promote research work
- To disseminate its high-quality cultural contents via the Internet in the Spanish language

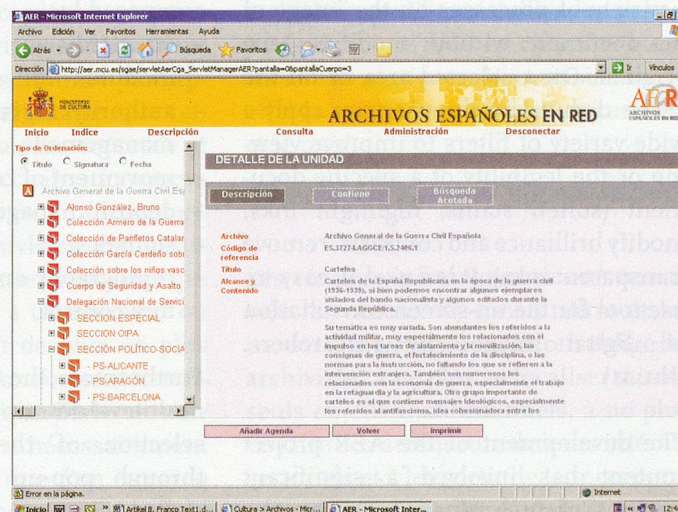
- To ensure better preservation and dissemination of the archive collections through their digitisation and on-screen consultation

Obviously, not all the documents of the Spanish State Archives are digitalised, but the number is increasing. There are criteria for the digitisation like

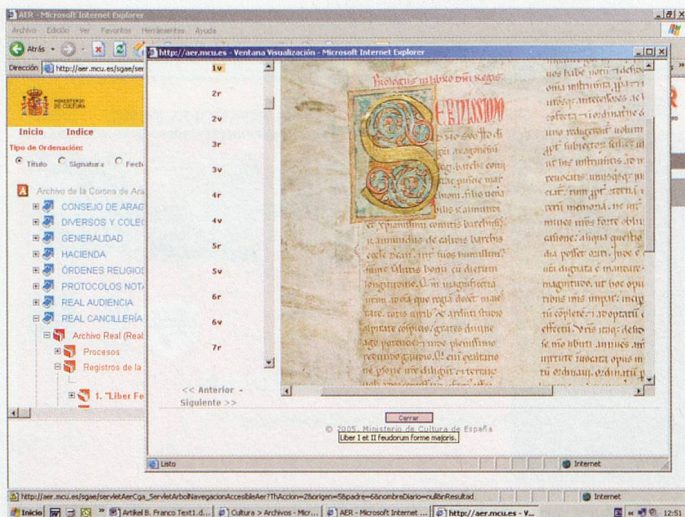
- the state of conservation of the documents,
- the demand for researchers and the general public,
- that the documents are described and arranged,
- the records that form part of common history ...

There are two search processes within the AER application:

- Simple search: aimed at the normal



Il. 10



Il. 11

- Internet user who is more interested in general searches
- Advanced and specialised searches: more complex queries, combining different criteria aimed, at the researcher and archivist. (Il. 9)

A specific research-help tool, the Researcher's Agenda for personal creation of a record or list of favourites, enables the control of consulted documents and the preparation of personal databases with comments. Also there is a Forum where researchers and the general public can exchange knowledge.

Obviously, the results of all searches do not present resources in an isolated way, they are contextualised at description level and in logical archive structure. (Il. 10)

The system allows the user to perform a variety of processes on the image of the document without modifying the original. On a selected area or on the entire document, the user can apply a wide variety of filters to improve viewing or the legibility of a specific document (soften stains, highlight inks, modify brilliance and contrasts, remove transparent inks). It is a useful, easy-to-use tool for the on-screen consultation of digital images by researchers. (Il. 11)

The development of the AER project content has involved a significant amount of preliminary work on the standardisation of archival descriptions

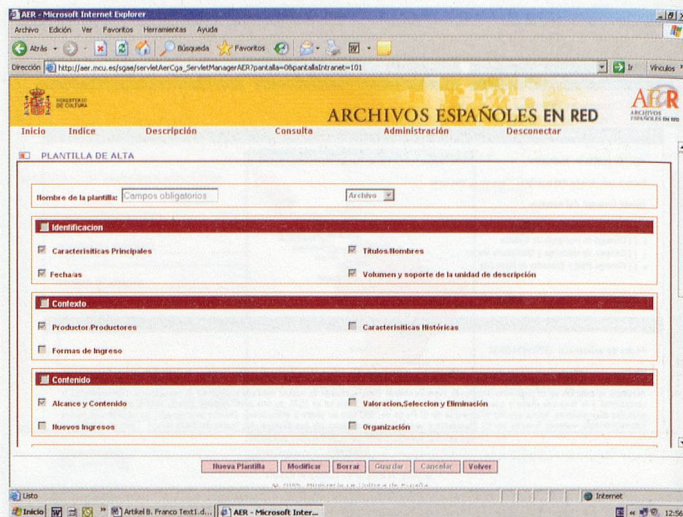
of the documents in compliance with international standards. The main challenge is to adapt old, but valid descriptions to the new information structures of the International Standard Archival Description ISAD (G) and the ISAAR (CPF).

Consequently, AER has developed an Intranet for the interconnection of State Archives. In particular, it has developed standardisation criteria and the application of these standards to the entry form and data modification (controlled languages, obligatory entry of data in specific fields, enables the customisation of data entry screens adapted to the descriptive requirements of a specific description unit, special descriptive files for special documents like photographs, maps or plans). (Il. 12)

The internal archive management is composed by:

- standardised on-line description module,
- authority registers and description management,
- movement of collections,
- deposit management,
- statistics,
- reprography and restoration laboratory control.

Furthermore, the AER platform enables multilevel description and standardised selection of the descriptive terms through pop-up windows with controlled languages and with the structure of ISAD (G). It automatically includes



Il. 12

the principle of non-repetition of information already provided at higher descriptive levels and promotes the development of all creator-related information through an Authority File made with Archival Authority Records (ISAAR CPF/EAC). AER uses XML technology to enable the exchange of information and integration with other applications. AER has been developed in compliance with the J2EE standard, and the source code is the property of the Spanish Ministry of Culture.

The most important aspect of this project is the fact that its platform enables multilevel description and the standardisation and coordination of the main Spanish archives. This standardisation allows us to exchange and share information with other countries and archives and, consequently, to create and promote mechanisms for cooperation.

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