Government and Information-Management in Early Modern Europe. The Case of the Society of Jesus (1540-1773)*

Markus Friedrich
Boston College, Goethe-University, Frankfurt

Abstract
This paper uses the Society of Jesus as a case study to examine important developments in the early modern history of administration. It starts by analyzing the conceptual framework of Jesuit government, especially its centralized government. From here, the article moves on to examine the routines of administrative information-management, including the different forms of letter writing and the use of printed questionnaires. Special attention is then paid to every-day decision-making and the information acquired through it. The order’s central archive is treated in a separate section. The archive is regarded as a key element of Jesuit administration, both in theory and daily routines. To balance the ‘central’ perspective of the first sections, the paper finally focuses on several critical voices that were part of a larger Jesuit administrative counter-discourse.

Keywords
Jesuits, Society of Jesus, history of administration, bureaucracy, history of archives, information management, center/periphery, decision-making, state building

Introduction
Philipp II, King of Spain earned the nickname of “paper king,” because he exercised his powers largely through an ever intensifying stream of

* Research for this paper was funded by the German Research Council (DFG, FR 2535/1). Helpful comments were provided by Luke Clossey (Simon Fraser University/Vancouver) and John W. O’Malley (Georgetown University). Jake Soll (Rutgers University/New Jersey) not only encouraged me to write this paper but also undertook the painful job of correcting my English. The Jesuit Institute at Boston College provided a superb environment for writing the final draft. I use the following abbreviations: ARSI (Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu), clm (codex latinus monaciensis), ASV (Archivo Segreto Vaticano), ÖNB (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Wien).
paperwork. His decisions were based more often than not on written reports that he studied at his desk. Even with his closest aides he conducted his business through paperwork. At the time, conducting a government almost exclusively using written reports was unusual enough that it led to Philipp’s famous nickname.1 Yet, the Spanish Habsburgs were neither the first nor the only rulers to reinvent politics along the lines of paper-based decision-making. This process had already started during the Late Middle Ages. The Italian city states were among the first to expand the administrative usage of writ.2 Closer to Philipp’s lifetime, the government of the Republic of Venice also began using paper-based routines.3 Moreover, the church was also developing new forms of governance and bureaucratic technologies.4 This paper concerns itself with one actor that should figure prominently in any history of administration, the Society of Jesus.5 By taking the Jesuit Order as a case study, this paper will illustrate that the rise of modern bureaucracies was intimately connected to the building of a

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