

# Jacob von Rammingen on the Ordering of Registries and Archives (1571)

## Abstract

Jacob von Rammingen (1510–1582), who worked for several South German princes, is considered the first person to have published a theory of archives. In this excerpt, Rammingen describes the nature of a princely archive, discusses how it should be ordered, and explains that preserving charters, letters, and other documents was beneficial to proper rulership.

## Source

[...]

## Prologue to the Registry

[...]

Anyone who has lived under some regime and governance, and has experienced the country and the people, becomes well aware of the fact that a ruler and authority must have many contacts, not only with his own subjects but also with other people – yes, with other authorities and other rulers, and have many dealings and negotiations with foreign nations. Especially in our times and in the world of today, where people are very turbulent, insolent, vicious and arrogant. In many people there is neither piety nor honour, nor discipline nor shame. So whenever one man covets another's property, whenever one is attacking the other by way of carrying on a lawsuit and takes the liberty of oppressing or expelling him – I say this straight out – then many lords and powerful men seem unable to be satisfied with their own jurisdiction. They also yearn for some way to place the foot of their authority further away, extending their territory; they keep pondering over how this could be done and ache for it. Briefly, they want more splendour and more power. Furthermore: as they dance around with other people's painstakingly acquired goods – this can be done justly as well as unjustly – many of them believe that whatever they are executing and doing should be permitted to them and considered right. And if anyone is not satisfied with letting them do whatever they please, they regard him either as an Anabaptist or as someone who despises the authority or wants to call for rebellion. What, then, are we to say about ordinary people? Almost every one is inclined to make claims upon the property of others, and aspires to foreign goods, to take from others what is theirs. And I am especially linking the higher with the lower since everyone wants to give the others a bad day concerning that which other people have earned through sweat and blood. For the Prince of this world has made people so obsessed, he has ruined and corrupted so many men, both high and low, that scarcely anyone nowadays has a guilty conscience or reacts in front of something unjust. With these godless people and infamous habits and acts, any pious, Christian, God-fearing, honest and peace-loving ruler and authority has and will get many contacts. In one place people try to deprive them of half their power. In another place people are bold enough to take something from them. In a third place people attack not only the rulers themselves, but also their subjects and paupers are being molested, cheated and wronged. In a fourth place these and other poor subjects, otherwise small particles without authority, are incited to rebellion with the claim that they must defend themselves everywhere. Now, an honest person cannot be present at all places, nor defend all places, especially those who have an extensive territory, a large land and people, who must manage and administer many things. In addition, there are many deliberations and negotiations, many legal matters and proceedings, much writing and correspondence, and much expenditure – and these things are essential for the reign and authority, maybe also for the many servants and officials, even for

---

the reigning lord himself and his council, chancellor and clerks, as well as his treasurer, and for those in charge of collecting and paying debts. For a lord cannot administer and supervise everything personally, nor address, negotiate and conduct everything on his own. He must have helpers and servants who are faithful and honest to him, people on which he can rely.

Within the political systems there are territories with people who must be given good governance, discipline and honesty. Within a gentleman's own household there is property and goods. Within an authority and regime – exercised over the toil and work of others – there is plenty of writing and many written records. There are numerous outgoing letters, many written documents and contracts, and also many certificates and muniments. There are also many laws and rules of conduct, many statutes and constitutions, many decrees and resolutions concerning a great number of everyday rules and bans, many commissions and officers, many decisions and conclusions. Furthermore, many diplomatic records. All this needs to be listed in a written document. There is also an extensive jurisdiction, demanding several judicial procedures. There are also many treaties, to which charters are attached. Sometimes compromises, and the reasons for these. Many counsels are held, which then also must be documented in writing. Furthermore, there are many payments, since great amounts of money flow in and out, and there are also numerous debts and expenses. All this, then, is written down, resulting in good accounts for the lords or other authorities. They must do their counting in a well-ordered way. For this purpose, there are written sum-books and registers, including numerous muniments and revis[i]ons. Regarding noblemen's estates there are also several written codes of conduct and decrees to, and about, those who manage and build them. Furthermore, many written records of the estate's annual taxes. Similarly, documentation regarding what is built there, and regarding the officers and servants who are on their care. Similarly, documentation of economic actions taken by the reign or other authorities – particularly concerning land and people, and concerning estates – by means of records and debt recovery and expenses. Toil and labor are present in abundance.

In addition to the things mentioned above, a lord and authority must by necessity have especially large “regiments” [instruments of ruling] and many estates at his disposal, in order to govern his territory and people: his wise council, his skilled chancellor, and his faithful officials of higher and lower ranks. It is also essential that the chancellor has his important and competent secretaries, and officials with the authority of signing documents. But for the recovery of debts and for disbursements and the management of his assets and goods the Chamber is needed, and a treasurer, and also his chamber councillor and chamber secretaries. Furthermore overseers are needed, and accountants, as well as officials of higher and lower ranks.

Power and authority must therefore have a chancellery, and also a counting chamber. Without these two, they will not lead the political government – or the administration of their property and their estates – well, nor elegantly. These same economists can provide advice.

This will not be sufficient to put all government and deliberations into function. A lord and authority must also have a trustee for the safekeeping of his letters and writings. This man should diligently take care of all the letters and writings, preserve them well, and also keep and maintain a good order. And this trustee must, regarding such letters and writings, have such an understanding and such a knowledge that he is able in a good way to produce them for his master or authority, and also give a proper account of their content and for what purpose this content can be used. And then, whenever his master or authority has some legal matter to determine, quickly bring forth the letters and writings on the subject. This then is – after the regiments of the Chancellery and the Chamber – a special regiment (a special administration) that any lord and authority will indeed find essential to keep and possess. This third regiment will be serving and helping the other two, the Chancellery regiment and the Chamber regiment. From them, it derives its essence. The other two regiments will have proper respect for the third

---

regiment. When managing their part of the government, they must collect reports and information from there.

For this third regiment, we have a name: we call it a registry. And that is precisely what we intend to talk about and discuss, as well as providing education and knowledge.

The highest rule or government requires three regiments which are at its service. Namely, the Chancellery, the fiscal regiment, and the keeping of a registry. Without these, not even the highest rule of divine nature can exist.

### **What the registry itself and registration really is, and how this form of government got its name.**

Our registry, then, is (according to our way of thinking) actually a way of ruling. Supremacy and authority keep and maintain their letters and writings in a good and well-arranged order, preserving and storing them thus. In them, one will find information and reports about what those letters reveal and what benefit they bring, what they are good for and how they might be used in a favourable way. The registry, then, is (I repeat) a trustee and container and custodian of all letters and writings which a lord or person in authority might have in his possession, concerning his regal rights, legal rights and his properties, concerning law and justice, and concerning his acts in the form of letters and other writings, his processes, his trade and business. These words concern one of its “bodies”, which constitute a complete and perfect registry. Concerning the latter of its two “bodies”: it is a ruler and a trustee of letters, which preserves them, and also knows and understands the entire content of the letters and writings which it preserves and stores, and furthermore knows what purpose it might serve. The texts can provide reports and information, not only about the meaning and the sum of each individual letter, each individual document, but also about what this category of letters is really documenting, what they are good for, what they provide – and how they can actually be of good use and benefit to men of supremacy and authority. Indeed: the registry can quickly, in each individual case, refer the whole context and meaning of a letter or other text and explain it. Thirdly: its director and manager, when you approach him and ask about something, knows whether or not a written charter or certificate exists – and if so, of what type. Our registry not only preserves, organizes and controls the administration, it also provides information and instruction.

Our registry is an administrator and guardian of evidence, an indicator and index of certificates and other memoranda, of comments and evidence belonging to the officials of an authority.

Such are the two “bodies” of our registry.

Thus, our registry is nothing but a work of art. The letters and writings of a lord or authority must first of all be collected and registered into a superior “main body”; after which, divisions and subdivisions must be created in a diligently ordered and suitable way, and order kept within these. The material is to be preserved and stored properly, protected from dissolution, loss and damage. Simultaneously, diligent attention must be paid to its content. A brief summary must be made and drawn from it. Furthermore, the content of these letters and writings must be listed and inscribed in the registers and books which are intended for them. These will then, whenever necessary, make quick reports of Information possible. And so the registry (as defined according to our subject and our intention) is an art, or a science, and a vocation: the well-arranged collection and preservation from decay of old public certificates and other written memoranda belonging to a lord or an office; to preserve them, to carefully present their content or content description, and in a few short words – faithfully, in the relevant records and books – write down and update the entire content of these certificates and memoranda. The purpose of this is that they should thus be entrusted to these two everlasting memories and be available as permanent information. It is an art and a vocation to collect those letters and muniments and other writings, from a lord or other authority,

---

which have been prepared and issued in a credible way – i.e. sealed in public, or otherwise authenticated; and then to orderly and appropriately, using suitable divisions (distinctly and analytically, with structure and discernment, with skill, with a sense of differences and order) preserve the material from destruction, loss and injury, maintain and store it over a long time period in a permanent unaltered state (saving it from loss, keeping it away from damage). And then, out of those letters and writings, retrieve the content, the general idea, which is summarily and briefly described in a few words. And furthermore list and inscribe this content and purpose into the relevant registers and books, so that one not only keeps this memory forever, but also may have a permanent reporting and information about what the records are about, and for what aim they might be used.

Briefly: our term “registry” refers not only to the regime and activity, but also to all juridical matters belonging to a lord or an office – things connected to certificates and writs, and to the Chamber. Other terms (although somewhat inaccurate) are also sometimes used by us: “Archives”, when referring to the craft[s]manship of the entire work and structure; otherwise we name one of the registry’s two bodies “charthophilatium”, and the other “tabularium”.

“Charthophilatium”, in our special craft, is the name of the house – with its administrative staff – in which the papers with their written matter are stored and preserved. “Tabularium”, on the other hand, comprises the corresponding books containing summaries and overviews, as well as notices and comments drawn from the letters.

Furthermore, our registry is an instrument of ruling, of a type which not only serves other such instruments, but is also the spot towards which these other instruments direct their eyes, by necessity looking in that direction, since they exercise their rule by its side and must coordinate their way of ruling. [...]

Source of English translation: *The earliest predecessors of archival science: Jacob von Rammingen's two manuals of registry and archival management, printed in 1571*. Translated by JBLD Strömberg. Lund: Wallin & Dalholm, 2010, pp. 27–36. Reproduced on this website with permission from JBLD Strömberg.

Source of original German text: Jacob von Rammingen, *Von der Registratur, Vnd Jren Gebäwen vnd Regimenten, deßgleichen von jhren Bawmeistern vnd Verwaltern vnd jrer qualificationen vnd habitibus, Vnd dann was für grosser vilfältiger nutzbarkeit auß einer wol angestellten ... Registratur entspringen vnd eruolgen*. Heidelberg, 1571, pp. 16–25. Original German text is also reprinted in the Wallin & Dalholm volume.

Recommended Citation: Jacob von Rammingen on the Ordering of Registries and Archives (1571), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-12>> [July 04, 2025].