“At Your Majesty’s Service!” – Management tools at the Imperial Court

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Historians are now able to reveal detailed information that shows the Imperial Court in Vienna “managed” its sizeable staff of up to 3,000 with the efficiency of a modern-day company. They are currently researching “instruction manuals” that provided the court staff with precise details of the manner in which specific tasks were to be completed and by whom. By examining these volumes as part of an Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project, the organisational structures of the Viennese Court are being uncovered and made available to the public.

In a way, the Viennese Court was one of the first major corporations. References to the “greatness” of the Imperial Court by no means relate to its significance as one of the most important political centres in Europe, but rather to its actual physical size. In the 17th century the Court employed 1,000 staff, a figure on a par with the population of a small town. By the 19th century, that figure had grown to as many as 3,000. These people were responsible for ensuring that the Emperor had food on the table, clothes were washed and the horses cared for.

But how was it possible to organise such an expansive and diverse range of tasks? How exactly did the Viennese Court operate? For the first time, researchers from the Institute for Austrian Historical Research (Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung) at the University of Vienna are now able to provide detailed answers to these questions. The project “At Your Majesty’s Service!” aims to reconstruct and bring to life the organisational procedures that existed at the court.

Strict regime

The task of coordinating the fleet of staff that fulfilled a truly diverse range of functions at the Viennese Court demanded major organisational outlay and clear decision-making structures – just like a modern company today. In order to keep on top of everything and prevent any idle time, the Imperial Court relied on a very special “management tool” in the shape of the instruction manuals now being analysed as part of the project.

“These manuals record instructions for 80 different offices held by staff at the Viennese Court. They instructed staff in how to carry out their duties properly and in accordance with the customs and conventions of the Court. They also detailed how the servants were to be supervised, the hierarchy of command and the overall organisational structure in place at the Court,” explains project leader Prof. Martin Scheutz. What’s more, the books also reveal a form of “corporate identity” with repeated calls for order, efficiency and frugality, an emphasis on the importance of rank and title, and, in terms of religion, a clear fear of Protestantism.

Bringing the Imperial Court to life

The instruction manuals were in use for a period of over 200 years and were kept up-to-date by the staff of the Obersthofmeister, who held the highest administrative office at Court. This produced four volumes with a total of 1,400 handwritten pages. An edition of these manuscripts is currently being prepared as part of the project before being analysed in order to provide a detailed and accurate picture of the way the Viennese Court was organised. “We aim to do more than produce just a static description of the organisational structures – we want to create a living, breathing representation of practical operations within the Viennese Court. We plan to take a detailed look at the organisational hierarchies, procedures, interactions and interdependencies and describe them in depth in order to represent organisation at the Viennese Court as a dynamic process,” emphasises Prof. Scheutz.

Until now, the instruction manuals have been available only in handwritten form. Their publication is primarily intended to benefit the national and international research community by enabling comparisons with other courts, for example. However, interested members of the public will also be able to share in this experience as, following on from the publication of the instruction manuals, a history of the organisational structures of the Viennese Court is also to be compiled as part of the FWF project.

Further information about the project is available in German at: www.univie.ac.at/hoforganisation

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Scientific contact:
Prof. Martin Scheutz & MMag. Jakob Wührer
University of Vienna
Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung
Dr.-Karl-Lueger-Ring 1
1010 Vienna
Austria
T +43 / 1 / 4277 - 27 251
E martin.scheutz@univie.ac.at
E jakob.wuehrer@univie.ac.at

Austrian Science Fund FWF:
Mag. Stefan Bernhardt
Haus der Forschung
Sensengasse 1
1090 Vienna
Austria
T +43 / 1 / 505 67 40 - 8111
E stefan.bernhardt@fwf.ac.at

Copy Editing & Distribution:
PR&D - Public Relations for Research & Education
Campus Vienna Biocenter 2
1030 Vienna
Austria
T +43 / 1 / 505 70 44
E contact@prd.at

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