

**Renaissance and Reformation**  
**Renaissance et Réforme**



**Mayer, Thomas F. The Roman Inquisition: A Papal Bureaucracy  
and its Laws in the Age of Galileo**

Thomas B. Deutscher

Volume 36, Number 3, Summer 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091047ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v36i3.20565>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Deutscher, T. (2013). Review of [Mayer, Thomas F. The Roman Inquisition: A Papal Bureaucracy and its Laws in the Age of Galileo]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 36(3), 190–192.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v36i3.20565>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2013

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

involved, and often shows diversity where many reformers argued for unity implemented by a central authority. Rather than suggesting chaos in the past, this volume revises and strengthens our perspective by more clearly delineating how those visions coexist in the historical record.

JENNIFER MARA DESILVA, *Ball State University*

**Mayer, Thomas F.**

*The Roman Inquisition: A Papal Bureaucracy and its Laws in the Age of Galileo.*

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 385. ISBN 978-0-8122-4473-1 (hardcover) \$79.95.

Recent decades have witnessed an increase in studies dealing with the Roman Inquisition, spurred on by the opening of the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1998, with contributions by John Tedeschi, Paul Grendler, Andrea Del Col, Adriano Prospero, Christopher Black, and many others. Thomas F. Mayer, one of the first English-speaking scholars to mine the files of the Congregation, has made a valuable addition to this endeavour. His book is not about the specific cases of the Inquisition or its targets, but rather about the cardinals and professional staff who conducted its business and the rules of procedure they followed. Chronologically, his focus is not on the relatively well-studied decades following the reorganization of the Inquisition at Rome by Pope Paul III (1534–49) in 1542, but on the lesser-known period from the last decade of the sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth—the pontificates of Clement VIII (1592–1605), Paul V (1605–21), and Urban VIII (1623–44). Because the majority of trial dossiers and sentences have been lost, Mayer concentrates on the registers of the decrees of the Inquisition. Beginning about 1573, the Inquisition kept regular records of its decrees and the decisions made in its proceedings. These were supposed to be entered into carefully kept, comprehensive volumes; however, not everything discussed got recorded, and gaps frequently appeared in the documentation. Be that as it may, the decree registers enable Mayer to track the personnel of the Congregation over time

and to examine the procedural and jurisprudential precedents followed by the body as it matured as an instrument of the papal bureaucracy.

Mayer begins with a chapter on the operations of the Congregation of the Holy Office. It was a body directly under the influence of the pope, its procedures and jurisprudence evolving in ways that reflected the background and personality of the incumbents. By the seventeenth century, the popes appointed roughly a dozen cardinals to oversee its business, headed by a cardinal-secretary. This does not mean the popes were completely free to impose their will on the Inquisition. Consultation and compromise were often required, especially in the naming of local inquisitors in areas like Tuscany and the regions under the Republic of Venice. Working under the cardinals was a professional staff of five members whose roles were fluid and often overlapped. The two most important were the commissary and the assessor who controlled most of the work of the Congregation. They were assisted by a fiscal who served as a prosecuting attorney, and a group of consulters, some of them canon lawyers and some theologians, who provided expert advice. Finally, there was the *summista* who helped prepare summaries of the cases before sentence was passed. All were assisted by a bevy of notaries who helped maintain the decree and trial records.

Chapters 2 to 4 constitute the heart of Mayer's book. Here he gives biographical accounts of the cardinals and members of the professional staff of the Congregation, with special attention to their years of service and attendance records, with summaries given in an appendix. His major sources are the decree registers, supplemented by biographies, newsletters, reports of ambassadors from Venice and other states, and the written works left by the staff of the Congregation. Mayer brings many of the cardinals and officials of the Congregation to life, detailing their backgrounds, offices, possessions, ambitions, and rivalries with a tone that is often entertaining and even gossipy, reflecting the sources available to him. Mayer draws a number of conclusions about the personnel of the Congregation, arguing that in most cases the popes did not demand much previous experience as a qualification for an inquisitor, with some notable exceptions such as Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino, the Jesuit theologian and controversialist. Mayer argues that the pontificate of Urban VIII Barberini led to a decline of sorts in the Congregation. Autocratic in temperament and neglectful of established procedures, Urban favoured his family and supporters over more qualified men as a way to dominate the Holy Office more completely.

In the fifth chapter, Mayer examines the procedures followed by the Inquisition as it moved through the stages of the process known as *inquisitio*, including denunciation, preliminary investigation, citation, interrogation, repetition, defence, and sentence. He bases this analysis on over twenty sources left by medieval and early modern inquisitors and canonists, most notably Francisco Peña, Pietro Follerio, and Prospero Farinacci. His discussion is intricate and at times technical, with point and counterpoint provided from the wide number of commentators.

Mayer's book, detailed and balanced in its arguments and buttressed by an incredible number of endnotes, will appeal more to the specialist in studies of the Italian courts than to the generalist, but is nevertheless a worthy addition to the scholarship on the Inquisition. It will serve as a handbook of information on previously little-known members of the Inquisition and on the inner workings of the secretive and much maligned institution. A number of his points require further research, such as his claim that the Congregation of the Holy Office became the single most important instrument of the papal bureaucracy, used by the popes "in just about any way that pleased them" (11). Mayer promises to follow this book with a study of the relations of the Roman Inquisition with Venice, Florence, and Naples, and a new analysis of the trial of Galileo. To judge from the expertise demonstrated in this book, they too will be welcome additions to our knowledge of the personnel and procedures of the Holy Office.

THOMAS B. DEUTSCHER, *St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan*

**Pertici, Petra.**

***Siena Quattrocentesca: Gli anni del Pellegrinaio nell'Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala.* Preface by Riccardo Fubini, with an essay by Maria Antonietta Rovida.**

Piccola Biblioteca di Ricerca Storica 16. Siena: Protagon Editori, 2012. Pp. 398. ISBN 978-88-8024-323-6 (paperback) € 30.

With her new book on Siena, Petra Pertici examines the history and society of that city during the first Renaissance. Her analysis of the frescoes painted in the Pilgrims' Hall (Pellegrinaio) of the Hospital of Santa Maria della Scala offers