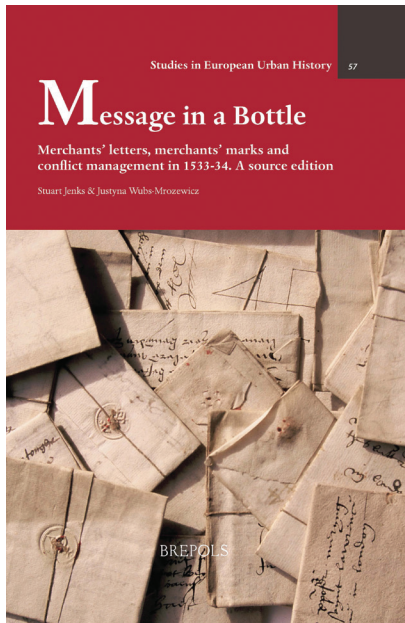


## Review

Stuart Jenks and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz, *Message in a Bottle. Merchants' letters, merchants' marks and conflict management in 1533-34. A source edition*, Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2022, 257 pp. ISBN 9782503595405, doi.org/10.1484/M.SEUH-EB.5.128937.



Secret treasures hidden in public archives and private property around the world, only to be rediscovered after centuries, will always captivate our imagination. The most notable examples are the Cairo Geniza papers, found in the storeroom of a synagogue and spanning the period between the sixth and nineteenth centuries; the fourteenth-century Datini letters, found in a stairwell of the Datini Palace in Prato; the Brienne collection, a seventeenth-century forgotten postmaster's chest found in the storeroom of a museum; and the Prize Papers collection, found at the National Archives of the United Kingdom.

In this book, Stuart Jenks and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz present one of the latest exciting finds from the Lübeck civic archives, where they discovered a collection of war loot documents dating back to a raid of Lübeck privateers at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In August 1533, Lübecker privateers captured six

neutral ships in the English Channel on their way from Antwerp to London, which led to a major court case that resulted in extensive documentation and evidence which is still kept in Lübeck today (6). Alongside these legal and administrative documents, the most fascinating part of this collection are the twenty-nine merchant letters written in English and Dutch from one of the captured ships, which had been preserved in their original condition: closed and sealed. In contrast to the later periods, merchant letters from the beginning of the sixteenth century are rarely uncovered in archives, which is why this cache of unopened letters represents an important discovery. As the authors point out (in line with Jeroen Puttevils's observation), the find is also fortunate because 'early sixteenth-century Antwerp is "poorly endowed" when it comes to documentation – including

letters – of merchants’ (51).<sup>1</sup> Last but not least, compared to family or love letters, merchant letters have attracted less attention in earlier research, and this edition helps to remedy this gap. From my own research on the Prize Papers Project, I know that merchant letters often face the prejudice of allegedly being repetitive, boring, and formulaic, when in fact they are a ‘highly interesting type of source, disclosing not only commercial information, but also political news or the social aspects of life, or of true affection of merchants to their wives and children’ (49). It is a stroke of good fortune, therefore, that the authors came across these sources after such a long time.

One of the reasons why these documents have never been found impressively demonstrates how memory, archival politics, and historiography are always interrelated. Concerning the Hanseatic League, past historians have been interested almost exclusively in the positive aspects of this trade alliance, and this positive image of trade persists to this day. Yet this new collection does not fit well into this picture, because it proves that the ships of Hanseatic cities like Lübeck also took an active part in warlike actions, even capturing neutral ships. Quoting Diarmaid MacCulloch, the authors observe that this capture was ‘blatant piracy by Lübecker shipping against Habsburg vessels’ (16).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps preserving the brighter vision is the reason why no one deliberately took a closer look at this collection in the past?

In return, the recent finding offers new insights into the Hanseatic cities and other merchant communities, including English, Dutch, Spanish, and Venetian merchants alongside the Hanseatic traders from Lübeck or Cologne. The source edition offers insights into international relations, court practices, trade practices, letter-writing, conflict management, and private affairs. Last but not least, it publicises exciting material witnesses of the past postal system, representing letterfolding and letterlocking techniques that have sparked interest beyond the publication of the book (56). Regarding research on early modern letters, this edition closes an important gap, especially regarding merchant letters written in Middle Dutch (49). Particularly noteworthy are also the edited women’s letters. As the authors note, ‘the fact that no secular correspondence of “ordinary” women has been preserved from this period (up to the early sixteenth century), for Antwerp or the Low Countries in general, makes the letters edited here unique and important’ (52-53). As a historian who works closely with archivists and postal historians, I especially appreciate the database of merchant marks in the book but also in the online documentation (61, 65, 148). The inclusion of material features in the analysis of historical networks, practices, and economic relations adds a new level of analysis to research while at the same time providing new impetus and standards for archival and editorial practice, putting more emphasis on the materiality of the past.

The two editors stem from different editorial traditions, Germany and the Low Countries, the challenges of which are made transparent in the foreword, which also explains the unusual structure of this edition. The book has three introductions, followed by diplomatic notes on the form of the edition, the actual source edition, as well as helpful indexes of people, places, and subjects covered in the book. What is initially irritating, however, is

1 Jeroen Puttevils, *Merchants ad Trading in the Sixteenth Century. The Golden Age of Antwerp* (London 2016) 171.

2 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell. A life* (London, 2018) 263.

actually an asset, because even source editions are never purely objective, but are also subject to scholarly traditions. The fact that a separate introduction to the sources is offered against the backdrop of these different traditions thus offers the reader perspective-rich and informative background knowledge. I would have been further interested in what the authors learned from one another and, given how unique it is that the letters have been preserved in their original state, I would have liked to see more information on preservation practices relating to the process of opening the letters (11). The information on letterlocking techniques is only briefly touched upon in the book. Apart from these minor criticisms, this open-access source edition is especially useful for teaching purposes and offers an important new contribution to the study of merchants, the Hanseatic cities, letter practices, and the economic, postal, and legal history of the sixteenth century.

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