

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, 2022). 257 p. ISBN 9782503595405.

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At present, the need for historians to rely on traditional source publications has declined. Scholars can increasingly benefit from innovations such as digitization of sources and computer-generated transcriptions. These developments, however, do not mean that carefully edited source publications are no longer useful, as Stuart Jenks and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz clearly demonstrate with the volume at hand. *Message in a Bottle* contains an exceptionally interesting collection of previously unopened English and Dutch merchants' letters that were written in late July 1533, and sent from Antwerp to London. It also contains administrative sources related to the conflict surrounding these letters. In three introductions, context is provided and various aspects of the sources are discussed and highlighted. As a whole, this volume can be relevant for historians with a variety of interests, including trade, conflict management, women, networks, family, everyday life, and much more.

In the first introduction, Jenks explains how he encountered a bag of unopened merchants' letters in the Lübeck civic archives in 1994. He stresses the importance of this essentially unbiased sample of merchants' letters, which are already rare in their own right. While unable to explain why the letters remained unopened in Lübeck for nearly 500 years, Jenks was able to reconstruct the thus far barely studied story that led to the letters ending up in Lübeck. In August 1533, the letters were on board one of six ships that were taken by Lübeck privateers along the coast of England. The incident was part of an ongoing conflict between Lübeck and Holland (1533-1534) and saw five of the six ships being hauled to Hamburg and Lübeck. It was quickly discovered, however, that the goods on the ships did not exclusively belong to merchants from Holland: goods belonging to neutral merchants of England, Spain, Venice, Brabant, and the Hanseatic League were taken as well. Fearing the consequences of this mistake, Lübeck quickly organized redress of the damage. Jenks shows in great detail how this was organized, who was involved, what goods were taken, how they were reassigned to their original owners, and how

much they were worth. This introduction thus provides the reader with a great example of sixteenth-century conflict management.

In turn, Wubs-Mrozewicz describes the general economic context in which these merchants' letters were created in the second introduction, providing an up-to-date overview of relevant studies related to the sixteenth century flourishing of Antwerp and London. Focusing on the letters in Dutch, Wubs-Mrozewicz stresses, like Jenks, the importance of the once very common but seldom preserved merchants' letters. These letters contain various, very interesting details, not just on business but also on everyday life. Wubs-Mrozewicz highlights in particular how the letters demonstrate that women were not only literate in this period, but also very much part of the social communities of merchants. Finally, she points out some of the aspects of conflict management that can be observed in the 1533-1534 incident. Noteworthy, for example, is how swift Lübeck, worried about its relations with the English, was to position itself as neutral, aiming for de-escalation. Furthermore, the merchants' letters contain glimpses of conflict management and prevention without the involvement of officials, something that is assumed to have been common but is rare to encounter in primary sources.

In the third and final intro, Wubs-Mrozewicz discusses the phenomenon of merchants' marks which can be readily found in the sources in this edition. These graphic emblems were used extensively by merchants for self-identification and to identify property. Placed on packaging units, these marks made it possible to link goods to owners, as the sources in this edition show. While historians generally are aware of their existence, relatively little research has been done on merchants' marks. Trying to encourage and aid further research, Wubs-Mrozewicz created a pilot database of merchant marks with search functions based, interestingly, on the tactics used to find kanji (the Chinese characters in Japanese).<sup>2</sup>

After these comprehensive introductions, the readers will find the source edition. The volume contains 82 different entries and starts with the merchants' letters, followed by documents related to the incident. Every entry lists the sender and recipient (if applicable), the date and location, the archival reference, the type of document, and (if applicable) how the document was sealed. Various footnotes clarify details in the sources and pictures have been included of merchants'

<sup>2</sup> They currently can be found at [premodernconflictmanagement.org](http://premodernconflictmanagement.org)

marks when encountered. The quality of the transcriptions is excellent, using various transcription conventions depending on the documents' language and origin. While the authors do call for more awareness about conventions and their unhistorical relation to modern borders (leading to arbitrary choices), the authors themselves have not yet attempted to resolve this issue, instead calling for a broader discussion among historians.

Somewhat unfortunate is the fact that the merchants' letters have not been summarized, which feels a bit strange as the other sources do feature summaries of varying levels of detail. While the omission of summaries is not much of a hindrance for the shorter letters, a consistent inclusion of summaries would certainly have been welcome. Another, minor, downside is how the volume uses square brackets both for different entries and paragraphs, possibly causing some confusion when navigating the volume. What makes up for these downsides, though, is the excellent index of subjects, thereby hugely improving the navigability of the volume for researchers. Moreover, the extensive bibliography is useful for those wanting to know more about the context of the merchants' letters and marks. All in all, *Message in a Bottle* will be valuable for a diverse audience of historians. It can serve not just as a source edition, but also as an introduction on conflict management, merchants' letters and marks, and even transcription conventions.

Jurriaan Wink, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Vrije Universiteit  
Amsterdam