

Stuart Jenks and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz (eds.), *Message in a Bottle. Merchants' letters, merchants' marks and conflict management in 1533-34. A source edition*. Studies in European Urban History 57 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022, 257 pp., ISBN 9782503595412).

Even though premodern merchants spent a large part of their time writing letters to their colleagues, letters surviving from this time until today are 'rarer than hens' teeth', as the editors of this small but precious edition put it in one of their introductions. Even rarer to find are selections of letters that survived completely randomly, like the 29 letters presented here. They were part of the cargo of a ship that travelled from Antwerp to London and was seized in the Channel by Lübeck privateers during the conflict between Lübeck and Holland in 1533-1534. The letters thus came to Lübeck, where they slept unopened in the archive until a few years ago.

The edition presents these letters along with documents that highlight the story of conflict management that started with the capture of this ship. The Lübeck privateers at the same time raided ships from Zeeland and Spain carrying goods of merchants who stemmed from England, Spain, Venice, Brabant and various Hanseatic towns. Since Lübeck was interested in containing the conflict, the goods were restored to their rightful owners in the course of just a year. To organise the restitution, lists of the seized goods were drawn up, and these lists also form part of the edition.

The volume hence allows an insight into everyday merchant correspondence and offers detailed descriptions of the goods traded between Antwerp and London, the two main metropolises of sixteenth-century trade. The specifications in the goods lists were noted much more meticulously than in the custom accounts that typically serve as sources for our knowledge of flows of goods. Additionally, the letters and lists also serve as a starting point to study merchants' marks, the graphic symbols merchants used to identify themselves and their property, as they contain 108 different marks that are helpfully represented as photos in the edition.

The book comprises of three introductions and one diplomatic note. They serve to bring together the different (German and Dutch) traditions of the two editors, as they explain in a foreword, and to make sure that the text is both presented correctly and embedded in its historical context. This works perfectly well if one reads all the introductions but is a bit confusing if one searches for a specific topic, especially since the indexes are extremely helpful to decipher the vocabulary for various goods, but do not consistently refer to the introductions (for example, 'fair' only references the letters, even though the fairs of Antwerp are also discussed in introduction (II)).

Introduction (I) by Stuart Jenks first gives a short overview of the sources edited here, first the letters and second the administrative sources connected with the capture of the ships. He then highlights interesting insights that can be gained from the English letters and from the cargo lists. The letters show, for example, how connections between merchants were built and sustained in the sixteenth century. The skipper often served as the middleman introducing merchants to one another, thereby creating new ties in merchants' networks. Connections were strengthened by greetings that take up considerable room in the letters. The merchants used their letters to spread current market information, especially regarding prices and expected price movements. Many of the letters were addressed to the wives of merchants who were instructed what to do with the goods when they arrived. The wives appear to have been equal partners in the business of their husbands, as Jenks points out. The cargo lists give detailed information about, for instance, English cloth on the Spanish ships, enumerated with its exact measures and colors. Introduction (I) closes with a meticulous reconstruction of the incident in the channel that led to the capture of the ship and of the process of restitution of the various goods.

Introduction (II) by Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz sketches the current state of research about the trade between Antwerp and London and gives a short introduction into premodern merchants' letters in general. She then analyses the Dutch letters and highlights similar points as Jenks mentioned for the English letters: they contain information about business affairs, but also about current political events. Three of the letters were written by women, one was addressed to a woman, the innkeeper of a merchant who instructed her what to do with his stored goods. Both introductions thus confirm the assumption that has been made based on the prominent letter collection of Hildebrand Veckinchusen and Francesco Datini, namely, that the wives of merchants and other women played an important part in premodern trade that still remains under-researched. Wubs-Mrozewicz then discusses the conflict management that was set in motion by the capture of the ship and led to a quick restitution of the goods.

Introduction (III), also by Wubs-Mrozewicz, gives special focus to the merchants' marks. These marks form an important part of the organisation of premodern trade but are hard to study because their complex set-up is difficult to describe, compare and contrast. Wubs-Mrozewicz has set up a database to tackle this problem and invites other scholars to participate in her endeavor.

In the diplomatic note, the editors explain how they both transcribed the documents according to their own national traditions (for instance, German editors transcribe the letter y as 'y', whereas Dutch editors change the letter y to 'ij' if a corresponding modern word exists that is written with 'ij', such as 'wij' for the medieval 'wy') and point to the absurdity that no shared norms exist. They call for greater harmonisation in the future, but I

must say that this reviewer, interested in economic and Hanseatic history, was so fascinated by the sources and their possibilities for future research that she didn't even notice that different traditions were followed. Maybe digital editions with the possibility to consult a digital reproduction of the document might save us from the need for too much harmonisation.

However, since digital editions are usually even more work and thus take longer to be published than printed editions, it is highly appreciated that the editors opted for a traditional book edition. The letters they printed might not constitute a very large collection, and the instance of conflict management might not be the most complex case there ever was in premodern trade, but this makes the sources all the more precious: they give us an opportunity to study merchants, traded goods and conflict managing procedures not in a special, but in their typical circumstances.

Ulla Kypta, Universität Hamburg