

period. While always stimulating, it is not always a straightforward read. This is perhaps an inevitable outcome of such a wide-ranging discussion, which brings together so many ideas in one volume. However, what does hold the book together is the judicious use of case-studies (29 of them), which present and discuss settlements as far back as the palaeolithic and from around the globe. These box features are not decorative but play a key role in explicitly fulfilling the comparative element of the book, each one ending with a section of ‘comparative insights’. Smith is explicit in his methods and follows a quantitative approach which enables comparisons even between ancient and modern cities.

**Guy D. Middleton**   
 Newcastle University  
[gdmiddletonphd@gmail.com](mailto:gdmiddletonphd@gmail.com)

**Stuart Jenks and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz (eds.)**, *Message in a Bottle. Merchants’ Letters, Merchants’ Marks and Conflict Management in 1533–34. A Source Edition*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 257pp. €86.00 hbk.  
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This volume prints for the first time a consignment of merchants’ letters whose contents are as remarkable as the circumstances surrounding their fate and rediscovery. Written in Antwerp and Brussels in late spring and early summer 1533 and destined for addressees in England, this batch of roughly 30 letters was entrusted to a certain Adrian Johnson of Antwerp for delivery, but fell victim to an act of privateering (or piracy, depending on your perspective) that sent shockwaves throughout the region. Lübeck privateers seized Adrian Johnson’s ship on 19 August along with five other vessels while they sailed off the coast of Kent, hauling the cargo (which included the bag of letters) back to Lübeck. While an array of international actors argued over the fate of the cargo, the mailbag somehow wended its way into the city archive with its letters unopened. There it languished for some half a millennium until 1994, when Stuart Jenks chanced upon the items, convinced the resident archivists to cut them open (a story recounted with aplomb in the first footnote) and set upon the task of editing them for publication. The result is a source edition of great value, reproducing a diverse set of letters and ancillary materials that shed new light on the economic and commercial relationship between two of the most important metropolises in Europe at the time. In their content, personal asides and often intimate tone, the letters themselves offer fascinating perspectives on the individual social and cultural concerns of their authors, both male and female, and their contemporary anxieties and daily lives. From a lowly apprentice writing to introduce his friend to his master to powerful mercers, importing goods worth several hundred pounds a year, penning honest missives to their wives, the letters offer a tantalizing snapshot into mercantile and civic society in the early sixteenth century.

Printing a diverse set of letters written in difficult hands and multiple languages meant both editors had much to exercise them, so there are no fewer than three separate introductions to this volume. Different, one might almost say competing, approaches to transcription in English, German and Dutch academic circles are

highlighted and the complicated political context behind the naval seizures are outlined too. Sections on conflict management, identifying merchants' marks and comments on the wares traded and the trade routes along which they travelled also feature, in a trio of introductory chapters that will be both accessible to a newcomer to the subject and provide the detail desired by the more experienced researcher.

The letters are mostly in English, with a few in Middle Low German and Middle Dutch, authored by both men and women. The present reviewer found the detailed remarks about the changing values and prices of wares traded in Antwerp particularly illuminating, as well as the requests that traders resident in the Brabantine entrepot made of their counterparts in England. One merchant asked his associate in Maldon, Essex, to send over mustard seed for him to sell in Antwerp, provided he could procure it for 12 shillings or less a quarter, as well as any tallow or bacon he could get his hands on. The reviewer was also struck by the near ubiquitous mention of sturgeon, usually purchased by the barrel, and meant for gifting or, as a certain John Smith put it in letter 35 to his counterpart back in England, 'to make acquaintances with'. Procuring access to sturgeon, a fish in high demand for its pork-like texture that allowed individuals to engage in a meat-like delicacy even on fish days, was clearly a perk of living in a coastal trading centre such as Antwerp, and the letters often contained specific instructions on how the valuable marine product should be doled out once arrived in London. One merchant, a certain Harry Austen, specified to his wife that she should give two of the three barrels of sturgeon she was about to receive to a certain 'Master Blank', perhaps a trading partner, while the third should be transported onwards to Coventry, for Austen's mother-in-law to enjoy. There were, however, downsides to being based in Antwerp. The personal touches in the correspondence, evident in letters such as number 32, where a London mercer refers to his smallest son still in his cot as 'the little piggy in the pannier', are also as informative as they are heart-warming, reminding us that individual merchants also had to contend with bouts of homesickness in addition to the daily challenges offered up by the markets in which they sought to make a living.

Following the edition of letters are five further sections compiling testimonies, inventories and quitclaims related to the cargo and people involved. Together, they demonstrate the formidable trail of paperwork left in the wake of the seizure of 19 August and the eagerness of Lübeck's leaders to distance themselves from the actions of their fellow citizens and bring any disputes arising from the act of privateering to a prompt and transparent end. Both editors are to be commended for the clear, detailed and nuanced summaries and scholarly apparatus that accompany all the items published in the volume, the inclusion of helpful maps and tables, a detailed index that doubles up as a glossary and the treasure trove of merchants' marks and examples of handwriting reproduced in high-quality images throughout the volume. This volume will make a valuable addition to any library whose institution teaches medieval and early modern economic, diplomatic and political history, and to cultural and social historians interested in letter writing, personal lives and commercial interaction, especially in urban contexts.

**Mark Whelan** 

University of Surrey

*m.whelan@surrey.ac.uk*