

HISTORY NOW

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Signed, sealed and undelivered
A selection of the letters found in a trunk (below) in The Hague. An international team of experts are exploring the missives' contents using innovative new techniques

17th-century tales of love, loss and delinquent husbands

Experts examining a stash of undelivered letters are learning about life in early modern Europe - without even opening them. By **Matt Elton**

From the outside, it's an unassuming trunk, rather battered and peppered with the wax seals of customs officials. Only once opened does its true value become clear: it's crammed with thousands of letters sent over 300 years ago.

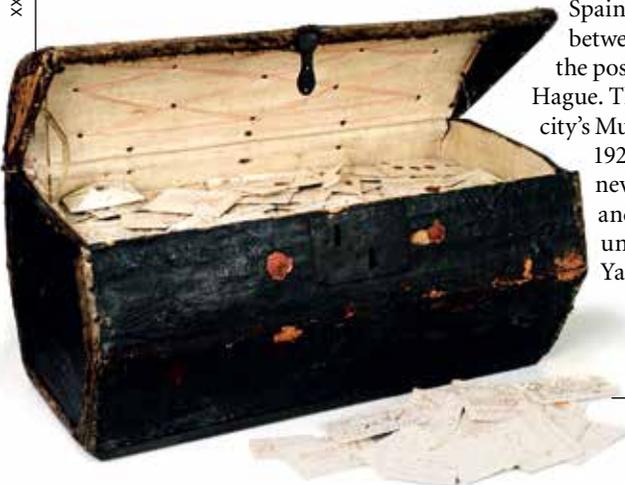
This hoard of some 2,600 undelivered missives dispatched to and from France, Spain and the Spanish Netherlands between 1689 and 1706 was collected by the postmasters of the Dutch city of The Hague. The trunk has been stored in the city's Museum voor Communicatie since 1926, but the letters within have never been fully examined before and, in about 600 cases, remain unopened. Now, academics from Yale University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the universities of Leiden,

Groningen and Oxford are exploring the hoard, in a project funded by MIT Libraries, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and the Dutch paper heritage programme Metamorfoze.

Rebekah Ahrendt, from Yale, and David van der Linden, from the University of Groningen, discovered the trunk in 2012 while researching itinerant entertainers and Huguenot exiles. "The Huguenot letters offer precious evidence of the emotional toll that displacement could take," says Van der Linden. "Letter-writers sorely missed friends and family, or complained about the hardships of exile."

Indeed, as Ahrendt told *BBC History Magazine*: "So many of the concerns expressed in these letters are the same as today: parents worried about their children, wives were angry at delinquent husbands."

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Pushing the envelope
Many of the letters feature intricate designs (left) and folding mechanisms (above), designed to keep their contents secret. The find offers opportunities in an “entirely new area of study” of a technique known as ‘letterlocking’

“Some of my favourites are letters from actors and musicians, who were often socially marginalised in this period. There’s gossip about fellow professionals: the mistresses, the pregnancies and the guy who drank too much, for instance. But there’s also genuine concern for the welfare of friends and colleagues.”

It’s not just the written information that’s interesting. The trunk itself is a valuable physical resource, as is the form of the letters. “How a letter was folded can express personality and period, just as handwriting can,” says Jana Dambrogio from MIT. “The inventiveness and complexity here is like nothing we have ever seen before. It allows us to study what we call ‘letterlocking’: the tradition of folding and securing a writing surface to function as its own envelope. This is

“The inventiveness and complexity of the letter-folding here is like nothing we have ever seen before”

an entirely new area of study.”

The team is employing a range of techniques to examine the letters. Instead of opening those that are sealed shut, techniques from the field of dentistry are used to explore their contents. “With the help of a team led by Dr David Mills from Queen Mary, University of London, we’re going to use 3D x-ray microtomography to read the letters,” says Nadine Akkerman from Leiden University. “Because early modern ink contained iron, purpose-built scanners can detect it on the paper. After scanning a letter packet, then extracting the layers and reassembling them using our knowledge of the folding techniques, we should be able to piece the letters together like jigsaw puzzles.”

The team is excited about the research possibilities, from learning more about the postmasters who kept the trunk to the lives of people whose correspondence it still holds. “Something about these letters frozen in transit makes you feel like you’ve caught a moment in history off guard,” says Daniel Starza Smith from Lincoln College, Oxford. “I’ve looked through thousands of letters in archives and have never seen anything like this.”

WHAT WE’VE LEARNED THIS MONTH

Another ancient Syrian site has been destroyed

An archway in the northern Syrian city of Palmyra is the latest ancient monument to be demolished by Islamic State (IS) militants who have taken control of the region. The destruction of the Arch of Triumph, which is thought to have been about 2,000 years old, marks the third part of the Unesco World Heritage site to be reduced to rubble. It is believed that IS destroys such sites to restrict worship of other religions and to curb nationalist (anti-IS) sentiment.

The British Museum has appointed a new chief

A German art historian will take over as director of the British Museum in 2016 – the first time that the institution has appointed a non-British chief since 1856. Hartwig Fischer, currently director general of the Dresden State Art Collections, will replace Neil MacGregor, who has run the London institution since 2002. The museum is the most popular visitor site in the country, attracting nearly 7 million people in 2014.

Abbey toilet works reveal medieval find

The removal of a 1950s toilet block at Westminster Abbey has led to the discovery of the remains of at least 50 people, thought to date from the 11th and early 12th centuries. Many of the bones, found under Victorian drainage pipes, were stacked into piles by workmen building the abbey during the reign of Henry III. The presence of a three-year-old child’s skeleton, among the remains of clergy and monks, has experts stumped.



Skulls at Westminster bear holes from medieval workers’ pickaxes

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