

French Historical Studies

The Postmasters' Piggy Bank: Experiencing the Accidental Archive

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Abstract:	Our rediscovery of a seventeenth-century postmasters' trunk in the Museum voor Communicatie in The Hague, containing some 3,000 undelivered letters mostly sent from France, offers the opportunity to think from the ground up about what constitutes an archive and how to approach it. We argue that understanding the process of loss, destruction, and survival of collections is a crucial exercise for historians. Practicing this "archeology of the archive" makes us keenly aware that the questions we ask are often dictated by the genesis and structure of the archive. For, although document survival is often the result of intentional safekeeping, in other cases it can be attributed to sheer accident. Addressing questions of materiality, mobility, and preservation, this article explores the notion of the "accidental archive" to consider what best practices should be developed to ensure responsible access to this unique collection.
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5 **The Postmasters' Piggy Bank: Experiencing the Accidental Archive**
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7 *Rebekah Ahrendt (Yale) and David van der Linden (Groningen)*¹
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10
11
12 **Abstract**
13

14
15 Our rediscovery of a seventeenth-century postmasters' trunk in the Museum voor Communicatie
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17 in The Hague, containing some 2600 undelivered letters mostly sent from France, offers the
18
19 opportunity to think from the ground up about what constitutes an archive and how to approach
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21 it. We argue that understanding the process of loss, destruction, and survival of collections is a
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23 crucial exercise for historians. Practicing this "archeology of the archive" makes us keenly aware
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25 that the questions we ask are often dictated by the genesis and structure of the archive. For,
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27 although document survival is often the result of intentional safekeeping, in other cases it can be
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29 attributed to sheer accident. Addressing questions of materiality, mobility, and preservation, this
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37
38 Dambrogio, Koos Havelaar, and Daniel Starza Smith – for all that they do. It is an honor and
39
40 pleasure to be in this together. Our deepest appreciation goes to the Museum voor
41
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43
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45
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47
48 anonymous reviewers of this journal for their astute readings and sound advice. All translations
49
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51 are our own unless otherwise noted.
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5 article explores the notion of the “accidental archive” to consider what best practices should be
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7 developed to ensure responsible access to this unique collection.
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10 11 12 13 14 **La tirelire des maîtres de postes : l’expérience de « l’archive accidentelle »**

15 16 17 18 19 **Résumé français**

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21 Notre redécouverte d’un coffre postale du XVIIe siècle au Museum voor Communicatie à La
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23 Haye, contenant quelque 2600 lettres au rebut envoyés principalement de la France, offre
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25 l’occasion de repenser ce que constituent les archives et comment il faut les aborder. On soutient
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27 que comprendre les processus de perte, destruction et survie des collections est un exercice
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29 crucial pour les historiens. Pratiquer cette « archéologie de l’archive » nous rend vivement en
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31 compte que les questions qu’on pose sont souvent dictées par la genèse et la structure
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33 accidentelle des archives. Car, bien que la survie documentaire soit souvent le résultat d’une
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35 geste de conservation intentionnelle, dans d’autres cas elle peut être attribuée au pur accident. En
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37 abordant des questions de matérialité, mobilité et préservation, cet article explore la notion des «
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39 archives accidentelles » pour considérer les meilleures pratiques à développer d’assurer l’accès
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41 responsable à cette collection unique.
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8 Hidden away in the vaults of the Museum voor Communicatie in The Hague lies a most
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10 extraordinary trunk (fig.1). Although it appears inconspicuous, the wooden trunk was once a
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12 priceless object, its valuable contents protected from water damage by a layer of sealskin and
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14 from prying eyes by a heavy iron hasp lock. Glistening red wax seals bespeak the well-traveled
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16 nature of the trunk across the centuries. On opening the vaulted lid, a linen-lined interior is
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18 revealed. And the trunk is full, brimming with some 2600 undelivered letters dispatched to The
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20 Hague between 1689 and 1706, including 600 that are still unopened.
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27 [FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]
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29 **Figure 1** The trunk once owned by postmaster Simon de Brienne and his wife Marie Germain,
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31 Museum voor Communicatie, The Hague. Photo used by permission.
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36 The trunk and its contents belonged to postmaster Simon de Brienne and his wife Marie
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38 Germain, a couple based in The Hague, at the heart of Europe’s early modern postal networks.
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40 They were jointly responsible for delivering all mail from Spain, Flanders, Brabant, and, most
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42 importantly, the kingdom of France. The fact that this collection has been preserved in The
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44 Hague, as well as the multiregional nature of its contents, have no doubt contributed to its
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46 neglect in scholarship. Scholars of early modern France – our particular area of expertise –
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48 usually rely on institutional archives located within the historical borders of the French kingdom
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50 to reconstruct the past, resulting in a narrowly “national” history. The trunk thus opens up new
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5 and exciting possibilities for research, as the letters allow us to glimpse the early modern world
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7 as it went about its daily business. Written in English, Dutch, Latin, Spanish, Italian, Danish, and
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9 mostly French, they represent the thoughts, cares, and dreams of a cross-section of society:
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11 ambassadors, dukes and duchesses, merchants, publishers, spies, actors, musicians, lovers,
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13 parents, expatriates, refugees, women as well as men. Here is an archive that will let the voices
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15 of the past speak again.
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20 But what do we hear? Recent scholarship, drawing in particular on concepts put forth by
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22 Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, has questioned the status of the archive as a site of
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24 unmediated truth. While positivist historians looked to the archive as a symbol of truth,
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26 plausibility, and authenticity – a place where the voices of the past could speak for themselves –
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28 we would do well to acknowledge the filters of time, expectation, and desire that shape our
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30 approaches to the materials of the past.² Such positioning is especially crucial when we are
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32 confronted by something like the Briennes’ trunk: a repository that has been only lightly curated,
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39 ² See esp. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Derrida, *Archive Fever*. Historians of
40
41 France will especially note that interest in the archival experience picked up after the publication
42
43 of Arlette Farge’s seminal work *Le goût de l’archive* (1989; translated into English in 2013).
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45 Particularly useful recent evaluations of the archive as a contingent site include Freshwater, “The
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47 Allure of the Archive”; Jardine, *Temptation in the Archives*, 1–17; Fritzsche, “The Archive”; and
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49 Leff, *The Archive Thief*.
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5 and which demands a new set of approaches if we are to unravel its many possible meanings. We
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7 must learn to listen *differently*, for the ways in which we hear those voices and recount their
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9 stories will always be mediated through our own experiences and training. We need a new
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11 archival methodology, one that relies not just on the formal archives consciously created by
12
13 people interested in keeping a record of the past, but also on what we call the “accidental
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15 archive”: a set of sources handed down to us not by an institution, but by people who never
16
17 dreamt of creating a formal record of the past.
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22 That the Brienne Collection entered a *museum*, and not an archive or a library, has had
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24 significant consequences for how its materials were treated and accessed over the years, as we
25
26 shall see. Hence, our approach here has recourse to what in museum studies is referred to as
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28 “object biography”: the tracing of a museal object’s history and meanings throughout time. Since
29
30 its emergence in the 1980s, this concept has proven a fruitful line of inquiry for scholarship that
31
32 aims to construct “cultural biographies” and contemplate the “social lives” of things.³ However,
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34 such studies tend to focus on a singular object.⁴ Here we will apply it to an entire collection, in
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36 order to question the boundaries between material object and textual artifact, between museum
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38 and archive.
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49 ³ The notion is generally attributed to Kopytoff, “The cultural biography of things.” See also
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51 Gosden and Marshall, “The cultural biography of objects.”
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54 ⁴ For an excellent recent example, see Häner, “Restoration Reconsidered.”
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5 In what follows, we will explore how this accidental archive came into being, all the
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7 while remaining mindful of our shifting subject positions within it. Unearthing the history of the
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9 Brienne Collection – practicing the archeology of the archive, one might say – reveals the very
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11 contingency and instability of the notion of archive in itself.⁵ We will thus work backwards
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13 through the layers, considering the processes that formed what we now call the Brienne
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15 Collection, and asking how knowledge of those processes affects our experience and our
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17 scholarship. Above all, we would like to emphasize the problems of access to the physical
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19 objects today and examine how, in our quest to improve access, we might end up altering the
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21 experience of accident. Imposing order on accident, we suggest, runs the risk of erasing layers of
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23 meaning and of denying future researchers access to questions we cannot yet ask.
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32 **Experiencing the Accidental Archive**

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34 When approaching something like the Brienne Collection, we must always ask ourselves
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36 “why do we have what we have?” In other words, we must ask: Why were these items
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38 considered worth saving? What is their history? What value did they have for the collector,
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40 whoever that might have been? And how did disparate materials come to form a “collection,” as
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42 we have been terming it? In essence, this grouping of letters, accounts, and a trunk was never
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44 meant to be an archive, in the sense of a space where official documents are collected, stored,
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51 ⁵ The origin of the phrase “archeology of the archive” may be traced to Cornell, “Mr Boman’s
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53 papers.” See also Burke, “Commentary.”
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5 and interpreted. The collection was not formed with the intention of replicating hierarchical
6 structures of power, nor was it mediated by censorship. Rather, the materials in the trunk
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8 survived accidentally: the traces of a system that had long before broken down.
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12 The Briennes' trunk and its contents constitute an "accidental archive" – a term that has
13 seen increasing use since the early 2000s, but which remains undertheorized. When the term has
14 been applied in scholarship, it is usually employed only in passing, as a means to express an
15 assemblage of items that have come together in a haphazard way.⁶ The operative word here, we
16 argue, is *assemblage*: in a sense first developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an
17 assemblage emerges when heterogeneous elements or objects enter into relations with one
18 another, often unintentionally.⁷ An assemblage, by virtue of its multiplicity, is capable of
19 producing any number of effects. Manuel De Landa further developed the notion to highlight
20 that assemblages are products of historically specific processes, and that components in an
21 assemblage play both material and expressive roles. Hence, while a single component might
22 have meaning on its own, it gains additional meanings in relation to others.⁸ Jane Bennett's
23 description of assemblages as "living, throbbing confederations" emphasizes the conflation of
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44 ⁶ See, for example, Wallace, "Accidental Archives"; Tector, "The Almost Accidental Archive";
45 Heathcott, "Reading the Accidental Archive." More sustained theorization has taken place in
46 digital realms; for instance, Burgess and Green, *YouTube*, esp. 75–99.
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51 ⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.
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54 ⁸ These ideas are most fully developed in De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society*.
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5 materiality and expressivity into what she terms “thing-power,” or the agentive capacity of
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7 inanimate objects. An assemblage’s effects, she reasons, are “emergent properties, emergent in
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9 that their ability to make something happen ... is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each
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11 materiality considered alone.”⁹ The accidental archive can thus be conceived of as a potentially
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13 powerful sort of assemblage, expressing connections across time and space.
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17 While an accidental archive might thus be considered to be an assemblage, it possesses
18
19 its own unique ontological status *as archive*: a repository of information, a container in which
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21 historical truths might be sought and constructed, and whose component parts beg to be further
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23 contained through the processes of ordering, cataloging, and interpreting. How and where such a
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25 container might be found, the form of the container, and the ways in which it is accounted for
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27 thus transforms the assemblage into an archive. In the case of the Brienne Collection, there is a
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29 trunk that has contained paper. The trunk and its contents acceded into the collection of a
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31 museum, and at that moment they were transformed into a unified entity, an archive subjected to
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33 rules and organization.
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39 When we first visited the Museum voor Communicatie in the summer of 2012, we were
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41 simply hoping to find intriguing stories of French expatriates. At the time, our research projects
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43 focused on the circulation of French-language lyric spectacle beyond France and the fate of
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45 Huguenot refugees in the Dutch Republic, respectively. Our primary interest was to somehow
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47 move beyond well-known figures and their achievements by focusing on the many “average”
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53 ⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 24.
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5 performers and refugees who somehow tried to get ahead on unfamiliar territory.¹⁰ The problem,
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7 however, was finding sources to shed light on their everyday experiences. Serendipity brought us
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9 to the Brienne Collection. In the course of her research, Ahrendt came across a brief notice
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11 published in 1938 by the great theater historian Jan Fransen, who transcribed seven letters
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13 addressed to French-speaking actors working in The Hague. Fransen gave a very brief account of
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15 the letters' origins, noting that "The Netherlands possess a Postal Museum in The Hague where,
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17 among other curiosities, one may find a certain number of dead letters."¹¹ That note prompted a
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19 search for these precious documents – did the letters still exist, and would there perhaps be
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21 more? Around the same time, Van der Linden was alerted to the existence of the Brienne
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23 Collection by his PhD supervisor, who had heard a presentation given by Simone Felten, an
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25 external PhD student then working on the collection. Because most of the letters originated in
26
27 France, he hoped they would illuminate the connections between Huguenots living in France and
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29 those who had fled. The desires that guided our first entry into the archive, in other words, were
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31 those of the hunter-historian, searching for hidden gems to be unearthed – in our case, letters that
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33 captured the marginalized voices of French expatriates.
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46 ¹⁰ Ahrendt, "A Second Refuge"; Van der Linden, *Experiencing Exile*.
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49 ¹¹ Fransen, "Lettres au rebut," 85: "Les Pays-Bas possèdent à La Haye un Musée Postal où,
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51 parmi d'autres curiosités, on trouve un certain nombre de lettres tombées au rebut." All
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53 translations are our own.
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5 We were not disappointed. At the same time, we felt slightly frustrated by the access
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7 problems that were immediately apparent. For, as we encountered the collection, we were also
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9 confronted by the rules that governed access to it. To examine the letters, one would first have to
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11 make an appointment with the collection's curator, Koos Havelaar, whose cooperation in this
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13 project is invaluable. Havelaar, a part-time employee, is only present at the museum two days per
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15 week, meaning that time is extremely limited. Work with the letters takes place in Havelaar's
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17 own office, at a small table across the room from his desk on the upper floor of the Museum voor
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19 Communicatie. There are no book weights, so the researcher must improvise a safe way to hold
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21 the often tightly-folded letters open in order to read or document them. Given the constraints of
22
23 access, a visit comes with the imperative to work quickly: to request as many letters as possible,
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25 to make as many photographs as possible and thus create a personal archive of the collection.
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27 These images themselves often document further assemblages, the experiences of the researcher
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29 in the archive. Consider, for example, this photograph (fig. 2).
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39 [FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE]

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41 **Figure 2** An assemblage from the archives. Author's photograph.
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46 This image, taken by Ahrendt in May 2014, would ordinarily never be included in an
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48 article about the Brienne Collection. It was intended for personal use, as a way to save time by
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50 avoiding the challenges of transcription while onsite. And yet it is itself a document of a certain
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52 moment and of the working conditions in the museum. Reflecting on the image, Ahrendt would
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5 note the keys to her bicycle serving as a weight. The weather that day was pleasant: the picture is
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7 illuminated by light from the windows of Havelaar's office, and it was nice enough to have
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9 ridden a typically Dutch bicycle to the museum. A favorite pencil, now lost, serves as an
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11 additional weight. Two fingers of her left hand are also clearly imaged; in an attempt to touch as
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13 little of the fragile paper as possible, she has balanced the downward pressure of her fingers with
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15 upward pressure from her thumb, just visible beneath the edge of the table. Her memory of the
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17 experience is thus kinesthetic as well: she can still feel the smoothness of the table and the coarse
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19 grain of the paper. This she remembers when reading this letter, from a woman whose brother
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21 has gone missing. Van der Linden would have a very different experience of the picture. Because
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23 he was not present when the photograph was taken, he lacks Ahrendt's recollections. What
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25 strikes him instead are the contents of the letter, the near-oral language of its author, and the
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27 beautiful folds in the paper. He also wonders if Ahrendt's pencil isn't a pen, an illegal item in the
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29 modern archive. Were this same letter to be imaged for documentary purposes, as is so common
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31 in today's mad dash to digitize archives, no such "personal touch" would ever be permitted in the
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33 official record. All noise would be removed from the recording. It is only by accident that fingers
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35 sometimes appear on Google Books, which actually invites users to report such "faulty images."
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37 And yet, we might also acknowledge that the assemblage recorded in the photograph becomes
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39 another part of the Brienne Collection's accidental archive: it has the potential to create multiple
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5 associations depending on who views it, associations that in turn color the experience of archival
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7 texts.¹²
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10 Like any archive, access to the Brienne Collection is also governed by a catalogue,
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12 allowing researchers to navigate the archive and search for letters that pique their interest. The
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14 catalogue was crucial in helping us to quickly locate the letters that seemed most promising, but
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16 we were frustrated by its limitations. The catalogue was created using the AdLib system, the
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18 museum's collection database. However, this is a database designed for *objects*, not textual
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20 artifacts, and it is only accessible on site. The capabilities of the database indeed call into
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22 question the point at which "object" ends and "text" begins: attempting to record textual
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24 information resulted in a multiplicity of only marginally-searchable fields. While the database is
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26 able to express object-ness (size, format, type of object, etc.), most textual information has to be
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28 crammed into a single field that is typically reserved for the curator's comments. And, as we
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30 later discovered, the information contained within this database was itself the product of
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32 numerous hands, each with different goals and methods. As Havelaar recounted to us, a first
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34 attempt at cataloguing the collection had been undertaken by two students of French literature
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36 sometime before he arrived at the museum in 1997. They keyed basic metadata derived mostly
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38 from the address panel of each letter into AdLib, including recipient, address, and date. A more
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40 systematic effort was made between 2010 and 2012 by Felten. Her laborious process included
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51 ¹² For further on tracing associations between and within assemblages, see esp. Latour,
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53 *Reassembling the Social*.
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5 unfolding the already-opened letters, reading as much as she could, and adding new pieces of
6 information regarding occupations, keywords, and locations to AdLib. Felten's growing
7 knowledge of the collection is traceable through her personal notes, making it obvious that had
8 she had more time with the collection and a different database, she might have developed a
9 usable system. Tragically, her part-time work in the museum was ended by the onset of
10 pancreatic cancer in late 2012. She died in May 2013, leaving her own archive of materials
11 related to the project to the museum: a further component of the assemblage that makes up the
12 Brienne Collection.
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15 Having identified letters that might be of interest by using the incomplete catalog, the
16 researcher then asks Havelaar to bring them out of storage. After a few minutes, a stack of letters
17 appears. To better preserve the letters they are no longer stored in the trunk, but kept in
18 individual protective polyester sleeves, which are in stored in acid-free boxes. Each sleeve
19 contains a sheet of acid-free cardstock, annotated in pencil with an inventory number,
20 occasionally with notes made by Felten regarding possible relationships to other items in the
21 collection. The inventory numbers represent a first and crucial layer of ordering the archive. As
22 Havelaar explained, the numbering system was devised in two steps. When the Brienne
23 Collection entered the museum in 1926 it received the general inventory number 0046, inscribed
24 in pencil on each letter. Individual numbers for each letter were added in pencil much later by the
25 two students of French. It seems that no clear structure guided their numbering, though some
26 letters were clearly grouped by occupation. Hence, the first thirty-seven letters all concern
27 members of resident theater or opera troupes in The Hague. Material condition also seems to
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5 have played a role: the majority of the unopened letters were placed toward the end of the
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7 numbering system. Yet these attempts at organization were not consistently carried through, as
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9 letters to or from actors are present throughout the collection, and sealed letters crop up
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11 randomly.
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15 Despite its shortcomings, the numbering system proved crucial in restoring order to an
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17 archive that had gradually been dispersed throughout the museum (and beyond) over the years,
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19 either by accident or on purpose. Before Havelaar's arrival, around 100 letters had been
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21 separated from the collection to become part of a touring exhibition on postal history. The letters
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23 were placed into eight frames, each with a unique theme. When Felten started her project
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25 Havelaar decided to reunite them with the other letters, partly because he felt they needed better
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27 curating, but mostly because he realized they were part of the Brienne Collection and needed to
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29 be properly catalogued. Only at this point did they re-enter the collection and receive inventory
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31 numbers, since they had apparently escaped the notice of the two students. Havelaar discovered a
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33 further letter hiding amongst the 100,000 others the museum houses, which he was able to
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35 identify only because it was clearly marked with the number 0046. Havelaar assigned this letter a
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37 unique inventory number, too, thus reintegrating it into the Brienne Collection.
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44 Beyond the various enclosures that have become separated from their missives over the
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46 years, there are a further 100 or so letters that may once have "belonged" to the collection. A
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48 number of letters from the same period and bearing similar marks were disassociated in the early
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50 twentieth century by Jan van Nifterik, one of the founding fathers of the postal museum. A well-
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52 known philatelist, he removed all letters sent from Geneva, one of the first postal centers to use a
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5 stamp, because he was interested in the history of postal marks. Van Nifterik not only opened the
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8 Genevan letters, he also unfolded and flattened them, tucking them into an album – which he
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10 then took home. He eventually (re-)donated the album to the museum later in life. By then the
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12 possible connection to the Brienne Collection had been forgotten, which explains why the album
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14 was stored apart from the rest of the letters and instead became part of the “Van Nifterik
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17 Collection.” Again, it was the cooperation of Felten and Havelaar that restored these letters, at
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19 least conceptually, to the Brienne Collection.
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22 Van Nifterik’s treatment of the Genevan letters is indeed an anomaly in the history of the
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24 collection, but it is perhaps indicative of what might have happened to the entire collection had
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26 they ended up in another kind of institution. It may have something to do with the institutional
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28 context of the museum: a place where artifacts are intended to be preserved in what is imagined
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30 to be their “original” state. However, as we have seen, the Brienne Collection hardly remained
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32 stable even within the walls of the museum – items were separated, dispersed, removed, altered.
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34 This raises an interesting question: should we try to revert to the “original” collection, or must
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36 we also acknowledge the layers of meaning added by people like Van Nifterik? Uncovering the
37
38 many accidents that helped to constitute this archive in the first place may help to answer this
39
40 question, for from the very outset it has been unstable.
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49 **The Archeology of the Archive**

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51 As we brush away further layers of dust, more questions emerge. First and foremost is the status
52
53 of the museum itself, which was organized quite differently from other museums in the
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5 Netherlands. How the collection came to this particular museum and under what conditions the
6
7 collection was formed in the first place underscore its accidental nature. The biography of the
8
9 archive indeed calls into question the limits of the collection; as we shall discover, parts that may
10
11 be deemed to be constituent remain dispersed to this day.
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15 The Museum voor Communicatie first opened its doors as Het Nederlandsche
16
17 Postmuseum in November 1930. The initiative for founding a postal museum goes back to 1924,
18
19 when Dutch philatelist Pieter Wilhelm Waller offered to donate his collection to the Dutch state
20
21 in order to found a museum.¹³ Connections within the Dutch postal system, various ministries,
22
23 and the elite sports world led to the foundation of a committee for a postal museum, which began
24
25 collecting items by 1925. The first director was J.D. Tresling, a lifelong postal employee and
26
27 friend of Waller's from the world of professional hockey. It was Tresling who brought the
28
29 Brienne Collection to the museum. A letter from the Secretary-General of the Dutch Ministry of
30
31 Finance, J.P.A. Laman de Vries, now kept with the Brienne Collection, reveals that the trunk and
32
33 "two packets" of undelivered letters were donated to the Rijkspostmuseum (State Postal
34
35 Museum) by the Ministry of Finance on 10 April 1926, following Tresling's oral request.¹⁴ A
36
37 note from Tresling to the Ministry two days later acknowledged receipt of the gift: one small
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48 ¹³ Koevoets, "Het Nederlandse PTT Museum," 119.
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51 ¹⁴ The Hague, Museum voor Communicatie (hereafter MvC), AWS 260420: Letter from the
52
53 Ministry of Finance to J.D. Tresling, The Hague, 10 April 1926.
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5 chest and two packets of hundreds of letters “from the archive of the office of Trusts.”¹⁵ Thus,
6
7 materials that had once been part of a state archive became part of a (planned) state museum.
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9

10 The donation of the Brienne Collection was in fact the final outcome of a decades-long
11
12 process of streamlining the management of Dutch orphanages. For hundreds of years, Dutch
13
14 cities had maintained an important system of orphanages (*weeshuizen*), which were controlled by
15
16 the *weeskamers*. In 1852, the Dutch government decided to centralize administration of the
17
18 orphanages and liquidate the *weeskamers*. The process of elimination lasted almost thirty years,
19
20 with the state-appointed oversight committee delivering its final reports in 1880. Important for
21
22 our story is that from 1852 onwards, material effects belonging to the private trusts managed by
23
24 the *weeskamers* were gradually transferred to the Ministry of Finance in The Hague.¹⁶ As we
25
26 know from De Vries’s letter, the remaining effects of Simon de Brienne came to The Hague in
27
28 1860 as part of this process.
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34 But how did the letters and trunk end up in the orphanage system in the first place? For
35
36 that, we must turn back to 1707, the year in which Brienne died. The circumstances of his death
37
38 and the distribution of his estate created the conditions in which the collection was preserved.
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43 ¹⁵ “Ten geschenke ontvangen ten behoeve van het Rykspostmuseum uit het archief van het
44
45 bureau Stichtingen ... 1 koffertje en 2 pakketten van honderden brieven uit de nalatenschap ‘de
46
47 Brienne.’” MvC, AWS 260410: Letter from J.D. Tresling to the Minister of Finance, 12 Apr.
48
49 1926.
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53 ¹⁶ Smit, “Het afstervingsproces der weeskamers,” 91.
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5 The most important factor in the preservation of the collection was Brienne’s confessional
6 identity. Born as Simon Veillaume in the rural French village of Jouy-le-Châtel and raised a
7 Catholic, he converted to Protestantism in the 1660s. His new-found faith proved remarkably
8 durable: when the childless Brienne drew up his will shortly before his death, he created of his
9 estate a private trust to prevent his heirs – his Catholic brothers still living in France – from
10 directly inheriting his fortune. The trust was to be managed by the *weeskamer* of Delft. The
11 Hague would have been a more logical choice, as it had been Brienne’s residence for many
12 years, but for reasons unknown he decided to “expressly exclude the Lords *Weesmeesters* of The
13 Hague and all other courts, officials, and persons, who could or would otherwise claim
14 governance [of the estate].”¹⁷ Instead, he appointed the directors of the Delft orphanage to handle
15 payments:
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32 The Testator declared that he did not to want or desire that these his heirs, or any one of
33 them [individually] should have full disposition of their share of the inheritance; but that
34 the capital will be administered by the Directors of the Orphanage of the City of Delft,
35 who shall annually send or distribute to each of them and their descendants their portion
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46 ¹⁷ “Secluderende tot dien eijnde wel expresselijk bij desen de Heeren Weesmeesteren van ’s
47 Gravenhage ende alle hooven, magistraten en personen, die het bewind van dien haar andersints
48 souden kunnen of willen aenmatigen.” Gemeentearchief Delft, Weeskamer nr. 11867: Testament
49 of Simon de Brienne, The Hague, 13 Jan. 1707.
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5 of the interest on the said sum, for so long as they will be and remain within the
6
7 community of the Roman Church.¹⁸
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10 Only when Brienne's brothers or their descendants would "renounce the errors of the Roman
11 Church" and settle in Holland could they lay claim to his full inheritance. They never did, which
12 explains why Brienne's materials sat in Delft for more than 150 years, potentially untouched,
13 until they moved to The Hague in 1860. And, despite the fact that his trust was liquidated by law
14 in 1922, Brienne's descendants continued to enjoy the interest on his capital until at least 1929,
15 with the remaining cash deposited into state coffers in 1930.¹⁹
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24 Yet not all of Brienne's materials found a resting place in the museum. In 1879, the
25 oversight committee had decided that all of the *archives* – likely meaning records on paper – of
26 the *weeskamers* should be returned to their respective cities.²⁰ This was probably in conjunction
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34 ¹⁸ "Verklaarde de Testateur niet te willen of te begeeren, dat deselve sijne erfgenamen ofte
35 eenige van deselve de dispositie van haar erfportien zullen hebben; maar dat de Capitalen van
36 dien sullen werden gebragt onder de Heeren Weesmeesteren ende ter Weeskamer der Stad Delft
37 welke aan haar en hare descendenten jaarlijks yeder sijn portie in de suijsere reserven van
38 deselve Capitalen sullen oversenden of uijtreyken zoolange als zij in de gemeijnschap van de
39 Roomsche Kerk zullen sijn en blijven." Ibid.
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48 ¹⁹ See the accounts attached to the proceedings of the Dutch parliament, 1930–1931,
49 kamerstuknummer 249, ondernummer 2 (*Staten-Generaal Digitaal*.)
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51 ²⁰ Smit, "Het afstervingsproces der weeskamers," 101–5.
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5 with the state's push to reorganize and fortify municipal archives at the time. As a result,
6
7 Brienne's personal papers and most of his postal administration may be found in the Delft
8
9 municipal archives (founded in 1859) – except for the accounts of 1702–1703, which
10
11 accidentally ended up in the museum. Whatever the reasons may be, should we not consider the
12
13 papers that were returned to Delft to be a part of the Brienne Collection nonetheless? And why
14
15 did the trunk and its letters not go back to Delft? One answer may be found in the 1926 letter to
16
17 Tresling. De Vries indicated that those materials would be given to the museum because “they
18
19 have nothing to do with the trust ‘S. de Brienne,’ set up during his lifetime.”²¹ The materials
20
21 were excess, judged to be unnecessary and perhaps accidental.
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27 Can we assume that the Delft archive was simply uninterested in repossessing a trunk and
28
29 letters that were not formally part of Brienne's financial legacy? If so, they might have been
30
31 mistaken, for the letters were indeed accumulated for financial purposes. To explain that, we
32
33 have to go even further back in time, to the beginning as it were, to the moment at which the
34
35 earliest layers of this archive came into existence. On 13 January 1676 the burgomasters of The
36
37 Hague appointed Simon de Brienne, *né* Veillaume, to the lucrative office of postmaster,
38
39 responsible for all mail to and from “the city of Antwerp and all surrounding places and cities in
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51 ²¹ “Bedoelde brieven ... hebben geen betrekking op de door hem in het leven geroepen stichting
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53 ‘S. de Brienne.’” MvC, AWS 260420.
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5 Brabant, France, Flanders, Mons in Hainaut, and Spain.”²² Brienne initially shared his office
6
7 with Christoffel Tromer, a secretary to William III’s intimate friend – and future Duke of
8
9 Portland – Hans Willem Bentinck. In 1686, Tromer relinquished his position to Brienne’s wife
10
11 Marie Germain, who was appointed as postmistress alongside her husband. The day-to-day
12
13 running of the office was entrusted to commissary Hugo van der Meer, who kept the meticulous
14
15 accounts that have been preserved to this day.²³ From 1689, Brienne and Germain served King
16
17 William III at Kensington Palace, not returning to The Hague until 1700. And it was precisely at
18
19 the point that they left the Dutch Republic that the undelivered letters began to be preserved.
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22 Could this have been an injunction on the postmasters’ part? Or rather an initiative of Van der
23
24 Meer?
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30 Further digging can help to explain why the letters went undelivered in the first place.
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32 Judging from the surviving accounts and the fact that most of the letters in the trunk originated in
33
34 France, we can assume that the postal route between the French kingdom and The Hague was by
35
36 far the most important. And sending a letter from France to the Dutch Republic could be a
37
38 complicated and costly affair, largely due to the fact that postal routes across the Southern
39
40 Netherlands were controlled by the Counts of Thurn and Taxis. A series of reforms and treaties
41
42 between France and the Dutch Republic resulted in a system that ran as follows: French postal
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48 ²² Delft, Gemeentearchief, Weeskamer nr. 11851: Charter appointing Simon de Brienne as
49
50 postmaster, The Hague, 13 January 1676.
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52

53 ²³ Graswinckel, “Simon de Brienne”; Benschop, *Het postwezen van 's Gravenhage*, 80–82.
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5 Additionally, a number of letters were only accidentally in The Hague. Addressed to “La Haye
6 en Tourraine” or “La Haye en Flandre,” these letters were mistakenly bundled with those for “La
7 Haye en Hollande” by the French postal services. And more still did not have The Hague as a
8 final destination. Rather, they were intended for London, Copenhagen, Berlin, Frankfurt,
9 Warsaw, Hamburg, Stockholm, and other European cities and towns.²⁵

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17 By treaty Dutch postmasters were obliged to return such “dead letters” to France within a
18 fortnight, so that the French could be reimbursed for their costs to the Dutch border.²⁶

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22 Fortunately, the Briennes disregarded this injunction. Perhaps it had something to do with an
23 ongoing dispute between Brienne and the French post.²⁷ Or perhaps the post office hoped that
24 recipients would still turn up to retrieve the letters – and pay the postage. A note by the Briennes’
25 accountant Van der Meer, inserted into the accounts of undelivered letters after Brienne’s death
26 in March 1707, explains this in detail:

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34 It should be remarked that the undelivered letters had always been available for those
35 who came to ask after undelivered letters, so that after the accounts had been completed a
36 letter was sometimes sought after and handed over, which [transaction] was then settled
37 by divvying up the general fund, known as the piggy bank (*spaarpotje*), the proceeds of

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49 ²⁵ Giphart, “Lettres et estampilles.”

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51 ²⁶ Vaillé, *Louvois*, 437–8.

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54 ²⁷ Giphart, “Postmerk en postgeschiedenis,” 23.

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5 which were last split between my Lord de Brienne and my Lord Dedel after New Year's
6
7 Day 1707.²⁸
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9

10 As Van der Meer's note tells us, undelivered letters were always kept in a separate location, apart
11 from the rest of the post, yet always ready to be given over to anyone who asked. Each letter was
12 ascribed a monetary value, marked on the letters in red crayon: a letter from Dunkirk cost the
13 recipient 10 stuivers, from Rouen and Paris 12, from Bordeaux and La Rochelle 17.²⁹ The note
14 also tells us that the Brienne's post office practiced a rather obsessive form of accounting:
15 projected income (all letters received by the office) was balanced against actual income (all
16 letters delivered), which was in turn balanced against actual and projected expenses on a
17 quarterly basis. Monies transacted from tardy delivery went into a general operating fund, which
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31 _____
32 ²⁸ "Sij te remarqueren dat de onbestelde brieven altijd voor de hand gelegen hebben gehad voor
33 die na onbestelde brieven quaemen vragen soodat na het sluijten der Reeckeninge wel nu en dan
34 een brief is gesoght en oock uijtgegeen [sic], tgeene daer nae is ook voldaan met het ledigen van
35 de gantse kas, dat men het spaerpotje plagh te noemen die nogh na nieuwjaer 1707 laetst aen
36 mijn Heer de Brienne is behandicht voor d'een helft en aen mijn Heer Dedel voor de andere
37 helft." Delft, Gemeentearchief, Weeskamer nr. 11856: Accounts of undelivered letters,
38 unfoliated notice.
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48 ²⁹ These fees had been fixed by the burgomasters of The Hague in 1673, following complaints
49 about duties leveled arbitrarily by the previous postmaster: Benschop, *Het postwezen van 's*
50 *Gravenhage*, 84.
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5 was divided annually between Brienne and his deputy-cum-successor Willem Gerrit Dedel, who
6
7 had been appointed in 1703 to replace Brienne's deceased wife.³⁰ The undelivered letters thus
8
9 were an "archive" collected with a financial purpose – to fill the "piggy bank" of the
10
11 postmasters.
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15 It is the trunk itself that raises some of the most significant questions. At least since the
16
17 nineteenth century, and perhaps earlier, the trunk has been imagined as the container of the
18
19 letters. A faded note affixed to the back of the trunk reads "Unopened letters/Inheritance De
20
21 Brienne/Orphanage Delft."³¹ Was this note attached upon Brienne's death in 1707 as his effects
22
23 were moved to Delft, or only in the 1850s as the trunk and its contents were transferred to the
24
25 government committee for the liquidation of the orphanages in The Hague? It is difficult to say.
26
27 Assuming the trunk was already in use at the turn of the eighteenth century, it would have been a
28
29 good choice for Brienne's office, as trunks had been the most common form of "archive
30
31 furniture" for centuries. Trunks were mobile, and could easily be transported in case of imminent
32
33 danger like fire, flood, or war.³² They could also follow the travels of a peripatetic owner, much
34
35 like Brienne himself. The *site* of the archive is thus in itself mobile: this archive, to the extent we
36
37 can think of it as such, is within the box designed to contain it.
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49 ³⁰ Ibid., 84.

50
51 ³¹ "Ongeopende brieven/Boedel De Brienne/Weeskamer Delft."

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53 ³² Friedrich, *Die Geburt des Archivs*, 178–79.
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5 But it was not a state museum that came to house the trunk and its letters. Indeed, the
6
7 premature donation of state property like Brienne's materials to a proposed state museum caused
8
9 a flurry of parliamentary debate beginning in the summer of 1928. By that time, the Queen's
10
11 cabinet had come to the conclusion that it would be better to create a museum as a public-private
12
13 partnership. A proposal submitted to the Dutch parliament on 2 July 1928 noted that a private
14
15 foundation would have distinct advantages: prominent private collectors could serve as board
16
17 members of the foundation, and thus encourage further donations. The state would only have to
18
19 donate pre-existing space within the headquarters of the state post, telephone, and telegraph
20
21 company, and provide for the salary of the Director. Thus, at minimal cost, The Hague would be
22
23 on a par with the many foreign locales that already opened postal museums, including Berlin,
24
25 Bern, Copenhagen, London, Madrid, Nuremberg, Paris, Petrograd, Stockholm, and Vienna, with
26
27 more planned in Hungary, Japan, Mexico, and Poland.³³ Objections were raised, however,
28
29 principally because of the fact that state property had already been donated to the founding
30
31 committee. If the museum really were going to be a private foundation, then "it should not have
32
33 been necessary – as is now already the case – for state property to have been given away."³⁴
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46 ³³ Kamerstuk Tweede Kamer 1927-1928, kamerstuknummer 384 ondernummer 3: Memorie van
47
48 Toelichting, 2 July 1928 (*Staten-Generaal Digitaal*).

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51 ³⁴ "In dit geval zou het niet – gelijk thans wel het geval is – noodig geweest zijn, dat
52
53 Rijksgoederen werden weggeschonken." Kamerstuk Tweede Kamer 1928-1929,
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5 Fears were assuaged, and by December of 1928, a revised proposal including text for the
6
7 foundation articles and language for a new law was sent to parliament. The law was enacted on
8
9 18 May 1929 by Queen Wilhelmina. According to the first article of the law, ministries were
10
11 *retroactively empowered* to give state goods to the private museum.³⁵ It is perhaps fortunate that
12
13 most parliamentarians at the time were avid postage stamp collectors; the minutes of both the
14
15 first and second houses of parliament regarding further plans for the museum are full of
16
17 references to specific stamps. Hence, the list of state properties given to the museum attached to
18
19 the proposal includes detailed accounts of hundreds of different stamps, as well as brief notices
20
21 of other materials.³⁶
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27
28 Oddly enough, the trunk and its letters were not named, even though they became a long-
29
30 standing attraction at the museum. It is quite possible that the trunk was already exhibited in the
31
32 museum's first location, a series of rooms within the headquarters of the Dutch national post,
33
34 telephone, and telegraph company on the Kortenaerkade in The Hague, when the museum was
35
36 known as Het Nederlandsche Postmuseum. It was certainly on permanent display after the
37
38

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40
41 _____
42 kamerstuknummer 84, ondernummer 1: Report of the Commission, 23 Oct. 1928 (*Staten-*
43
44 *Generaal Digitaal*).

45
46 ³⁵ “Wet, betreffende het in het leven roepen van een stichting ‘Het Nederlandsche
47
48 Postmuseum,’” *Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, Wet no. 249, 18 May 1929.
49

50
51 ³⁶ “Staat van Rijks roerende goederen behorende bij den Stichtingsbrief, bedoeld in 1^o, van het
52
53 Eenig artikel van de wet...” Ibid.
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5 museum's relocation to its current premises on the Zeestraat after World War II. The trunk
6
7 remained in the public eye after the museum became the sole responsibility of the Dutch postal
8
9 service, the PTT, in 1989, and was renamed the PTT Museum. When the state's postal monopoly
10
11 was at last broken up in 1998, the museum was privatized as the Museum voor Communicatie. In
12
13 2002, the trunk moved into storage, to be brought out again for an exhibition in Amsterdam in
14
15 2012–13. And it was again briefly on display in The Hague in November 2015 in conjunction
16
17 with the public announcement of our project, until the museum closed for refurbishment in
18
19 March of 2016.
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23

24
25 "Ownership" of the Brienne materials has thus passed through a number of different
26
27 institutional configurations, each time essentially becoming "reacquired" and achieving a new
28
29 identity. It has been the piggy bank of the postmasters, part of an inheritance, archival evidence
30
31 for a state-appointed oversight committee, an undesired leftover, and a museum object. And, just
32
33 as the trunk and its letters have helped to change Dutch law, so have they affected how we and
34
35 others have attempted to comprehend them. Their *presence* – their pristine condition in their
36
37 original folded states, their paper and seals, the still-noticeable sealskin on the trunk – has
38
39 generally engendered a strong desire amongst those who have seen and handled them to do no
40
41 harm.³⁷ Put simply, this collection has taught us to read and to see and to think *differently*.
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51 ³⁷ For what is essentially an extension of Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" into a theory of
52
53 "presence," see Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*.
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5 Acknowledging the “thing-power” of the collection can help to explain its history, as well as
6
7 point toward its future.
8
9

10 11 12 **Forms and Meanings** 13 14

15 Only on accession to the collections of the museum did the trunk and its contents achieve
16
17 the temporal and spatial stability (what Derrida calls *domiciliation*) required for an archive to
18
19 begin.³⁸ And yet it is hardly stable: what is housed at the museum can rather be viewed as part of
20
21 a noisy assemblage of documents, experiences, and images that span vast geographical distances,
22
23 from the archives of Delft or The Hague, to the personal archives on our computers, to our
24
25 project documents stored in the cloud. Noisier still are the voices recorded in these letters frozen
26
27 in transit, voices that were intended to communicate across distance and time. Our challenge is to
28
29 animate them again.
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33
34 Merely attempting to read the letters as we have been trained to read presents significant
35
36 challenges. Many writers spelled phonetically in their local dialects, their handwriting as
37
38 frequently chaotic as it is beautiful. Some of the letter-writers were in fact barely literate: their
39
40 letters lack punctuation and words are run together as they would have been spoken.³⁹ Indeed,
41
42 one can best understand these letters as a written record of an oral tradition. The only way to
43
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48 ³⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4.
49

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51 ³⁹ Examples of linguistic studies “from below” based on early modern letters include Rutten and
52
53 Van der Wal, *Letters as Loot*; Nobels, “(Extra)Ordinary letters.”
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5 comprehend the content of these letters is, quite literally, to give them voice. Around 1702, for
6
7 example, Nicolas Beaujean, a musician from Nancy, wrote to his brother in The Hague:
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9

10 Mon frère si il ya du risque ne uous a jardé pas car ie ceré bien fâché du Malheur qui
11
12 uous pourray ariué sur les chémain si uous uouller a uoir un passeport de Sons Altesse
13
14 Royal ie uous en anvoyré un mandé le moy si uous aué une basse uandé la car lon a n'a
15
16 une qui est a Sons Altesse que lon uous donnera, qui est tres bonne de faite uous deué
17
18 toute ce que uous pourré de hardes de peurre destre uollez sur les chémain.⁴⁰
19
20
21

22 In orthographically correct modern French, that would be:
23

24 Mon frère, s'il y a du risque, ne vous hasardez pas, car je serais bien fâché du malheur
25
26 qui vous pouvez arriver sur les chemins. Si vous voulez avoir un passeport de Son
27
28 Altesse Royale, je vous en envoie un. Mandez-le moi. Si vous avez une basse, vendez-la,
29
30 car l'on en a une qui est à Son Altesse que l'on vous donnera, qui est très bonne. En fait,
31
32 vous devez vendre tout ce que vous pouvez de hardes, de peur d'être volé sur les
33
34 chemins.
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38

39 It was only through performing the act of reading aloud – of ventriloquizing the letter writer –
40
41 that we have been able to transcribe and then modernize texts such as this one. Thus,
42
43 unconsciously, the materials prompted in us the same response that they would have had they
44
45 reached their intended recipients, for it was common practice to share letters orally.
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49

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51 ⁴⁰ MvC, Brienne Collection, DB-0456: Nicolas Beaujean to Philippe Beaujean, Nancy and
52
53 Lunéville, 16 August [s.d., c.1702].
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5 Besides listening to the voices of the letters, we have also come the view the materials
6
7 differently. Since we first encountered the collection, our experience has been changed by other
8
9 voices, the colleagues we have met along the way. After Felten’s death in 2013 we determined to
10
11 continue her work, reaching out to other specialists we connected with both accidentally and on
12
13 purpose. Our core team, *Signed, Sealed, & Undelivered* (SSU) now includes scholars of
14
15 correspondence, literary, and material culture (Nadine Akkerman and Daniel Starza Smith) and
16
17 conservation and curatorial sciences (Jana Dambrogio and Koos Havelaar). Their expertise has
18
19 profoundly altered the ways in which we approach the collection. In short, we have become
20
21 interested not just in the content of the undelivered letters (uncovering fascinating stories from
22
23 the archives), but also in the often invisible structures that governed early modern
24
25 correspondence networks, ranging from the production of paper and wax, the practice of letter-
26
27 writing, the functioning of international postal services, and issues of privacy. The work of our
28
29 colleague Jana Dambrogio in particular has fundamentally changed the ways in which we
30
31 approach our materials. The Thomas F. Peterson (1959) Conservator at MIT Libraries, she has
32
33 revolutionized the field of paper conservation by creating the field of “letterlocking”: the process
34
35 by which a substrate such as paper, parchment, or papyrus has been folded and secured shut to
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37 function as its own envelope.⁴¹ Crucially, the way in which a letter was locked could enhance its
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39 security while acting as an authentication device, not unlike a signature.
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53 ⁴¹ Dambrogio, “Historic Letterlocking.”
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5 appears inconspicuous, addressed to “merchant Folcher in The Hague in Holland” (fig. 3), but
6
7 once opened Folcher would find another sealed letter inside, with instructions “to carry the
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9 enclosure to its address,” that of refugee minister Couët du Vivier in The Hague (fig. 4). The
10
11 contents of the second letter were also protected: instead of the usual single seal, the author
12
13 applied no fewer than three seals to lock his letter shut (fig. 5). He also took the sensible
14
15 precaution to sign this letter with the asterisks of anonymity instead of his real name. The
16
17 postscript informs us why this Huguenot preacher practiced such an obsessive form of epistolary
18
19 security: “I ask you to greet my family, and those who are honored to love me. But it is
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21 important that they do not know where I am, nor where I am going.”⁴³ Clearly, the very human
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23 desire to stay in touch with family and friends in The Hague had prompted him to write a letter,
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25 but in order to protect his identity and clandestine preaching mission on Catholic territory, it was
26
27 vital to devise security measures. Ironically, these strategies worked a little too well: the letter
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29 passed across French territory without being intercepted, but was never delivered because
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31 Folcher had moved to Leiden and Brienne never forwarded the letter.
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42 [FIGURES 3–5 NEAR HERE]
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51 ⁴³“Je vous prie de saluër ma famille, et ceux me font l’honneur de m’aider. Mais il importe
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53 qu’on ne sache où je suis, ni où je passe.” Ibid.
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5 **Figure 3:** The address panel of the letter. MvC The Hague, Brienne Collection, DB-0367.

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8 Author's photograph.
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12 **Figure 4:** The same letter, now unfolded, with written instructions on the inside to hand the
13 enclosed letter to minister Couët du Vivier. MvC The Hague, Brienne Collection, DB-0367.
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17 Author's photograph.
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22 **Figure 5:** The enclosed letter in its unfolded state (address panel), with the three wax seals
23 clearly visible. MvC The Hague, Brienne Collection, DB-0367a. Author's photograph.
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30 We can only guess who eventually opened the preacher's letter. As the collection stands
31 today, out of the c. 2600 letters there are some 2000 that have had their seals and other security
32 devices broken. Whether that happened in Brienne's post office or elsewhere, a long time ago or
33
34 much more recently, is unanswerable. But, most remarkably, after more than 300 years since
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36  Brienne's death, management by two different state institutions, two relocations and three major
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38 reorganizations of the museum, four curator-conservators, at least three students, and an
39
40 unknown number of scholars, collectors, and interested members of the public, 600 of the letters
41
42 remain unopened. This cannot be mere coincidence or simply the product of a lack of people-
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44 power to "process" the collection. While the museal context may be a factor, more significant
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46 still are the emotional connections that people have made and continue to make with these
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5 letters.⁴⁴ We know for a fact that Felten, for one, felt very strongly that closed letters should not
6
7 be opened. Havelaar, the collection's curator, shares her opinion. For those who have handled the
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9 letters in the past, we cannot be so sure. But surely it is not for nothing that Fransen, whose 1938
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11 article so eagerly reported the discovery of letters addressed to the early modern actor Jean des
12
13 Urlis, did not open further letters within the collection addressed either to Des Urlis or to
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15 members of his company. The thoughts of our colleagues Nadine Akkerman and Daniel Starza
16
17 Smith echo through our minds: we know of thousands of opened letters from the early modern
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19 period, but how many can we think of that are still sealed? Once opened, those letters lose their
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21 unique material forms – and hence a great portion of their interest and value for study.
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32 For all of these reasons, an accidental archive like the Brienne Collection necessitates the
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34 development of methodologies that ethically and responsibly account for the polyphonic
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36 counterpoint between our own interests as academics, archivists, curators, or conservators today
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38 and the motivations and experiences of past subjects, many of whom were marginalized in their
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40 own day. We would do well to acknowledge our own affective positions when studying them,
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42 asking: to what extent can an archival method be built which gives the material the freedom to
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44 speak with its own voice and not merely ventriloquize the preferences and prejudices of those
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51 ⁴⁴ For reactions from the general public, see the commentary on the many media stories about
52
53 this project, linked via www.brienne.org/press.
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5 who “discover” it? And how can practicing an archeology of the archive change our position
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7 within it?
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10 We have only just begun to come to know the Brienne Collection. Our project is to
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12 conserve, digitize, edit, and understand it. But before we can do that, we must do some hard
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14 mental work, as we have attempted in this article. The accidental nature of this archive – in all of
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16 its widely distributed parts, as we outlined above – offers a rare opportunity: to think from the
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18 ground up about what constitutes an archive, how to describe it, and how best to make it
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20 accessible via cataloging strategies, database links, image files, editorial practice, and sensitive
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22 reading. This collection is especially rare, in that it presents at least 600 additional accessibility
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24 problems: the letters that have never been opened, but which promise a multiplicity of historical
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26 insights. Researchers might once have simply opened the letters to mine their information, much
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28 as is being done today with similar collections. Similarly, the current trend towards digitization
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30 of archives tends to focus only on the obtention of content, rather than the appreciation of how
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32 *form* is an integral part of creating meaning out of content 
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39 The Brienne Collection thus offers uniquely challenging issues of access that invite
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41 particularly innovative strategies. We are therefore creating an open-access catalogue that
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43 records material features of the letters as well as notes on content. Our recently-completed
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45 digitization project pushed the boundaries of archival-quality digitization by insisting on leaving
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47 the folds visible. And, as regards the sealed letters, we have no intention of physically opening
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49 them, for in their pristine material condition these letters speak volumes about the care taken by
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51 letter writers to ensure that their rials remained private until reaching their final destination.
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5 Moreover, technologies are now being developed that may yet allow us to uncover their stories
6 without altering their forms – or at the very least, to ponder doing so. We are so far encouraged
7 by the results of experiments we have carried out using non-invasive advanced scanning
8 techniques. Even if we ultimately fail to obtain 100% readable text, we feel it is our duty to
9 continue to preserve these letters intact, until future generations will have more adept
10 technology.
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20 We are keenly aware of how knowledge is negotiated, filtered across time, and through
21 expectation and desire. To understand the importance of such a find requires also requires an
22 understanding of the processes of circulation, loss, and survival. It is our goal to responsibly
23 document and improve access to the collection so that anyone interested might consult these
24 uniquely personal letters and hear the voices of the past again. Listening to this noisy assemblage
25 of archives – shaking the piggy bank, as it were – while aware of our own presence within it,
26 might just cause us to hear a very different story of the past.
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Figure 1



Figure 2

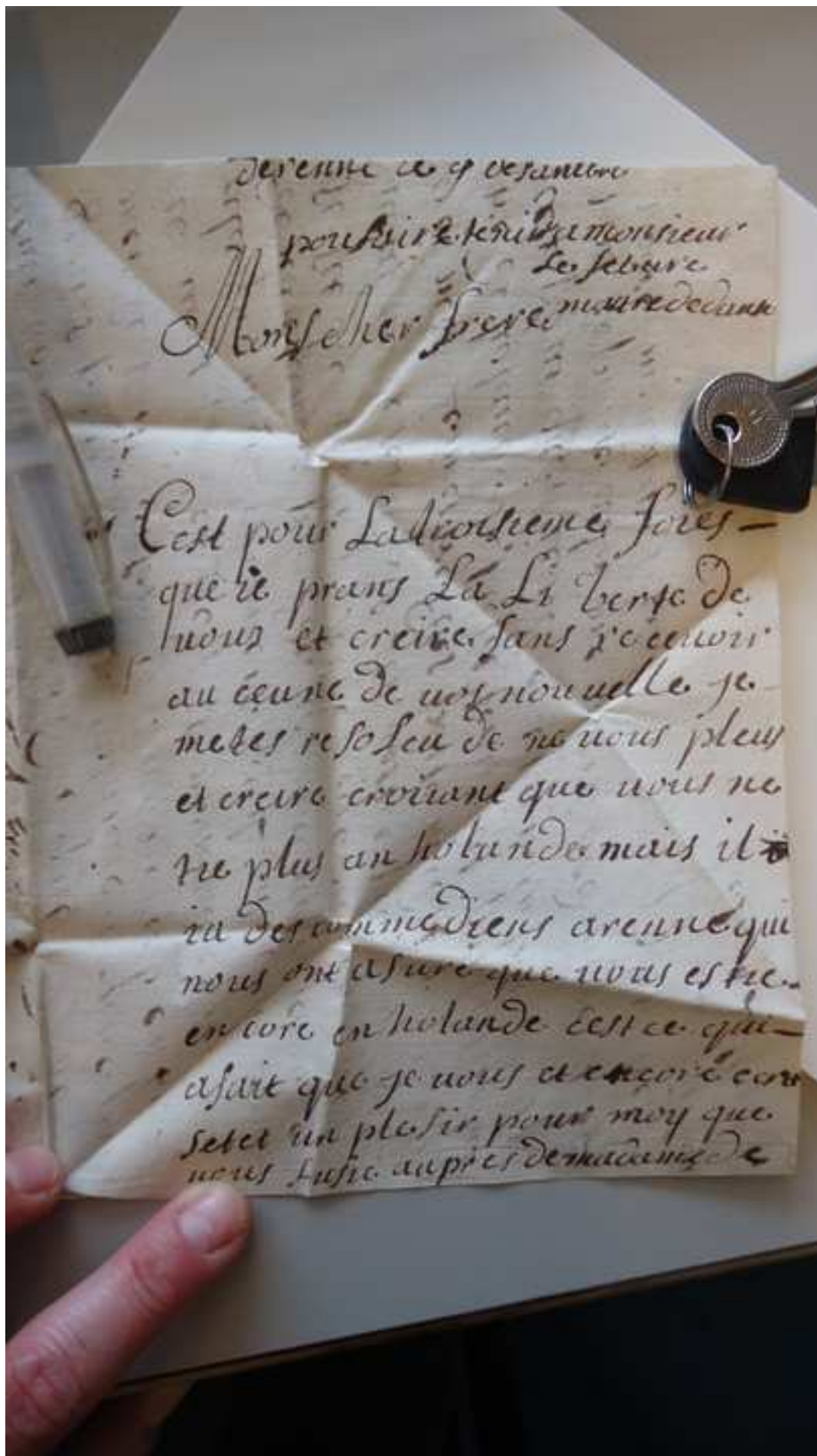
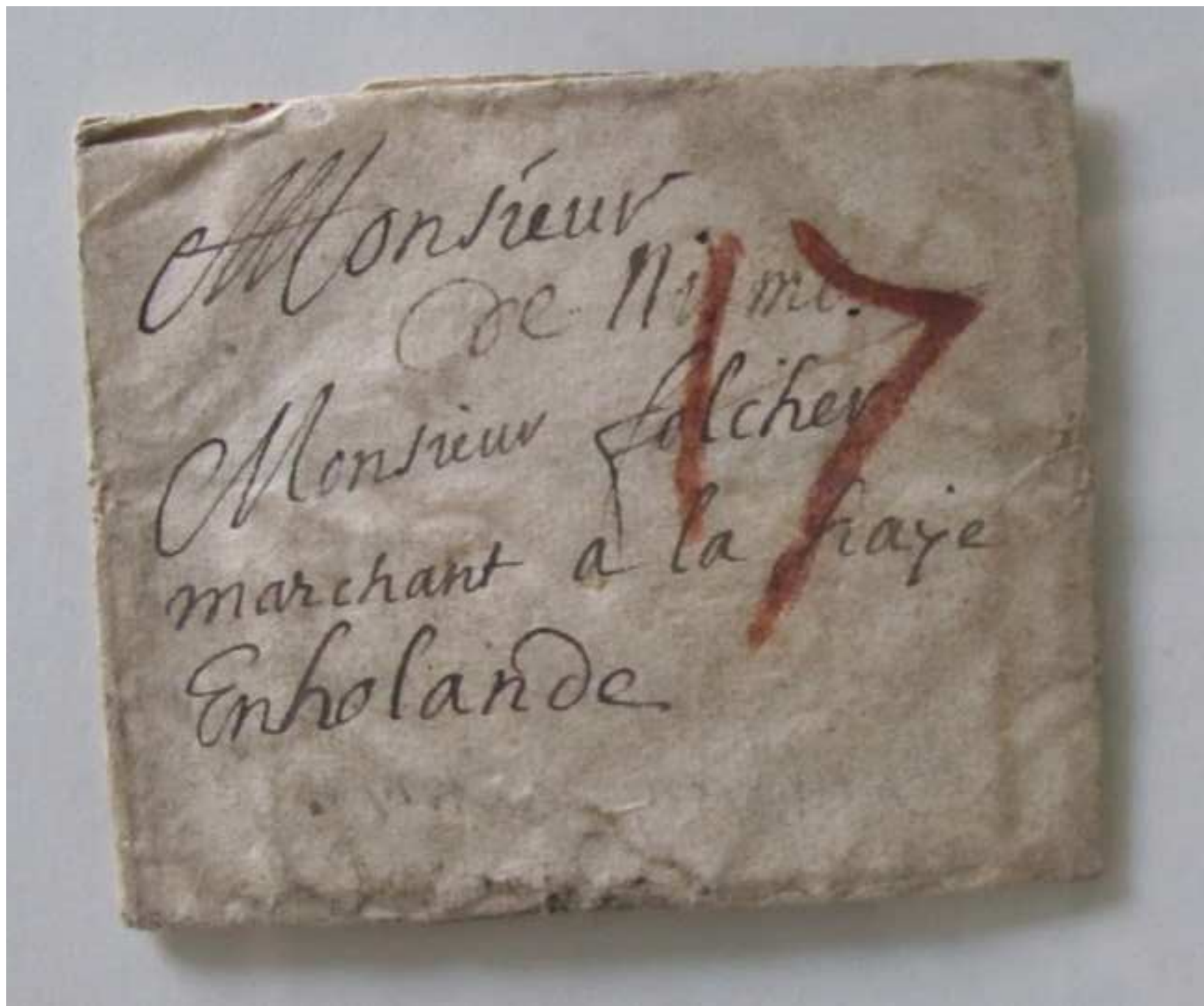
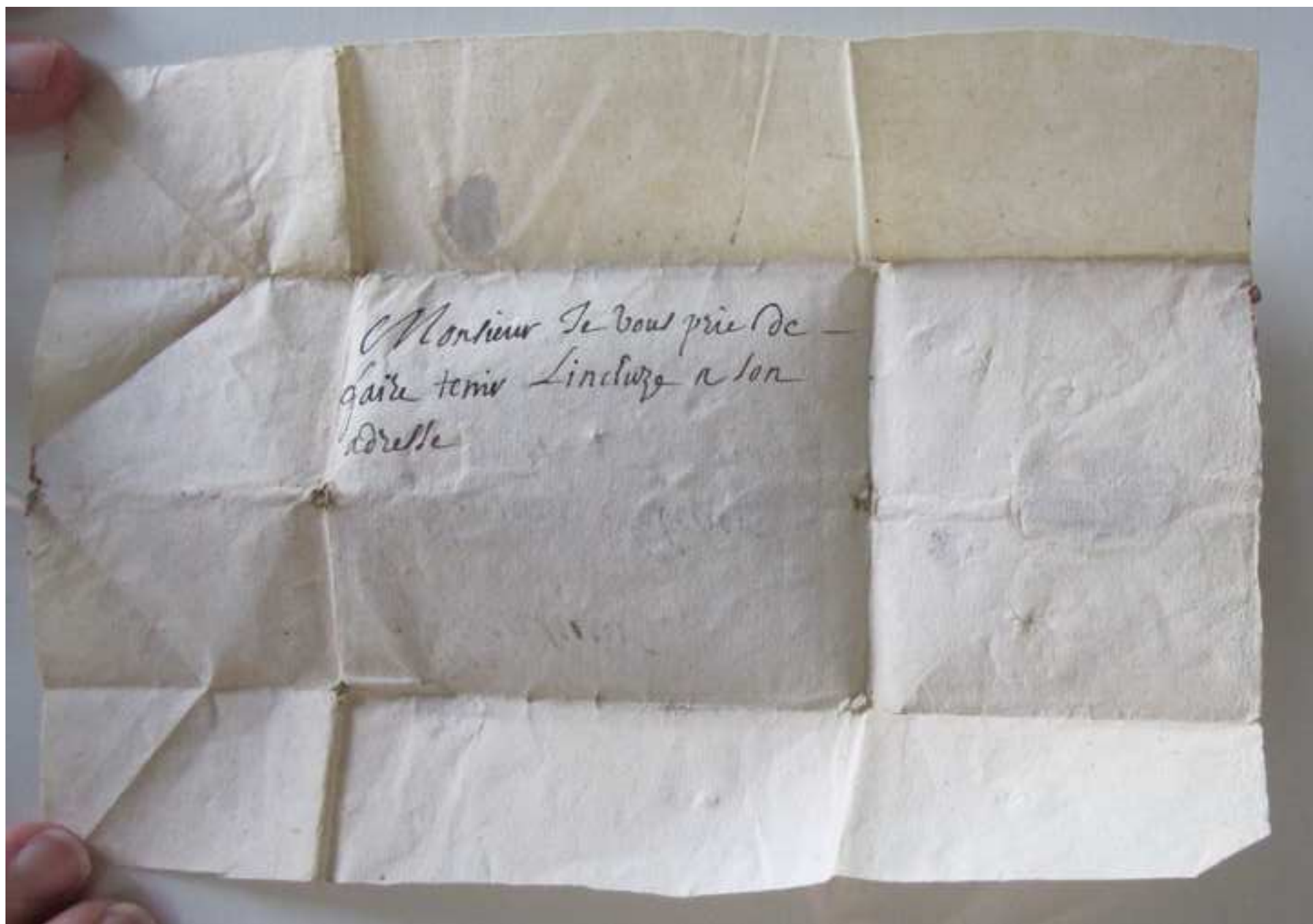


Figure 3



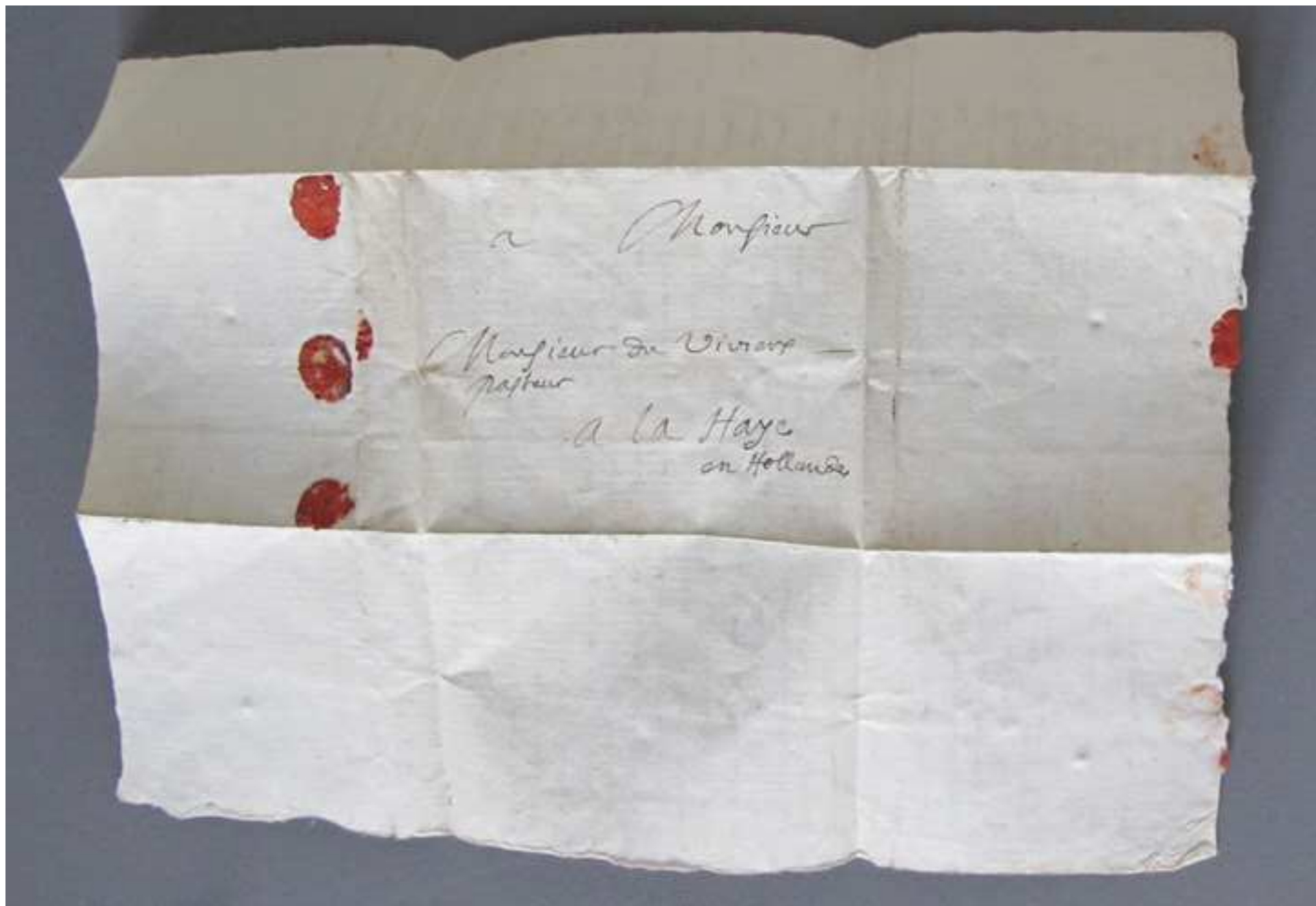
Monsieur
de Nijme.
Monsieur Folcher
marchant a la haye
Enholande.

Figure 4



Monsieur Je vous prie de
faire tenir Lincluzz a son
dorelle

Figure 5



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4 **La tirelire des maîtres de postes :**

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7 **l'expérience de « l'archive accidentelle »**

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11 **Résumé français**

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13
14 Notre redécouverte d'un coffre postale du XVIIe siècle au Museum voor Communicatie à La
15
16 Haye, contenant quelque 3000 lettres au rebut envoyés principalement de la France, offre
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18 l'occasion de repenser ce que constituent les archives et comment il faut les aborder. On soutient
19
20 que comprendre les processus de perte, destruction et survie des collections est un exercice
21
22 crucial pour les historiens. Pratiquer cette « archéologie de l'archive » nous rend vivement en
23
24 compte que les questions qu'on pose sont souvent dictées par la genèse et la structure
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26 accidentelle des archives. Car, bien que la survie documentaire soit souvent le résultat d'une
27
28 geste de conservation intentionnelle, dans d'autres cas elle peut être attribuée au pur accident. En
29
30 abordant des questions de matérialité, mobilité et préservation, cet article explore la notion de «
31
32 l'archive accidentelle » pour considérer les meilleures pratiques à développer d'assurer l'accès
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34 responsable à cette collection unique.
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