The Prize Papers at the National Archives in London offer unique insights into the history of the early modern period from the perspective of individuals whose letters and personal notes would not normally have survived the centuries. The collection comprises hundreds of thousands of documents and artefacts from the period between 1652 and about 1815, which were stored in boxes at the Archives and all but forgotten for many years. In a long-term project led by historians at the University of Oldenburg, this treasure trove of records is being opened up and made available to researchers and the general public.

Letters were once the primary means of long-distance communication. They were sent with gifts, sealed agreements, and helped connect people far away from each other. Many of the estimated 160,000 letters in the Prize Papers collection are still unopened. Pictured here is a box containing bundles of letters from mailbags seized from the Spanish ship La Perla, which fell into the hands of English privateers off the Azores in 1779 (TNA, HCA 30/311).

Although Johann Pohl's notebook was sugar and cotton, but also the mailbags it was carrying, as well as the ship's papers and the personal belongings of the captain, the nine seamen and one boy on board that made up its crew. These documents – known as the "prize papers" – were then submitted as evidence before the High Court of Admiralty in London so that it could uncover any links to an enemy party, in this case France, and decide whether or not the capture of the ship had been legal. For centuries the capture of "enemy" ships and their cargo was considered a legitimate tactic of warfare during times of war, including an own jurisdiction.

In the Prize Papers Project, which officially began in 2018, based at the University of Oldenburg and the UK National Archives London and funded by the German government and the federal state of Lower Saxony and is set to run until 2037. Alone the 90 different document types that make up the collection continue to offer new surprises and insights, inspiring historical research in Oldenburg and across the globe. For Oldenburg historian Dr. Lucas Haasis, the notebook belonging to Johann Pohl – or "Jean Pol" as the ship's crew called him – is among the most moving documents he has encountered so far. "At first glance it looks like a scruffy notebook used for writing exercises," says Haasis, who coordinates the international research cooperations connected with the project. "But on closer inspection, you see that it is much more. For one thing, it shows very clearly that more people were literate or learning to write in the 18th century than has long been assumed – and not just men from bourgeois or aristocratic origins was moved to The National Archives in London so that it could uncover any links to an enemy party, in this case France, and decide whether or not the capture of the ship had been legal. For centuries the capture of "enemy" ships and their cargo was considered a legitimate tactic of warfare during times of war, including an own jurisdiction.

Although Johann Pohl's notebook was not used as evidence in the ensuing court process, it was kept with all the other documents and items taken from the Concordia in the archives of the High Court of Admiralty, and stored for several decades in the Tower of London together with the papers and artefacts seized from more than 35,000 other ships the English captured between 1652 and 1815. During that period alone, the European powers fought out 14 naval wars in their own waters and on the world's oceans. In 1858 the entire collection comprising several million historical records and objects of many different types and origins was moved to The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, London.

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In the 17th and 18th centuries, glass beads made in Europe were a popular means of payment and exchange in Africa, and millions of them exchanged hands within the slave trade. In 1803, J.A. de Marré, a Dutch official, sent the bead necklaces pictured above from Elimina in present-day Ghana to Amsterdam, a centre of glass bead production at the time, as a sample for ordering further supplies (TNA, HCA 32/996).

The notebooks also bear witness to the everyday perspective of migration, expansion and colonialism, the Reformation and teaching the early modern period into question, but the past appears far more complex and contingent. "This is just one of the many unheard voices that have become audible through the sorting and analysis of this unique archive collection, thus deepening our knowledge of those times," Oldenburg historian Professor Dr. Dagmar Freist, who is the project director, also sees the Prize Papers as an opportunity for a shift in perspective. "The major upheavals of European expansion, such as colonialism and poverty-driven migration, are depicted here from the everyday perspective of social groups from which we normally have no testimonies at all. So, our knowledge is not necessarily called into question, but the past appears far more complex and contingent."

Freist, who has been researching and teaching the early modern period at Oldenburg since 2004, describes the Prize Papers as a “treasure trove”. Spanning over 400 years from around 1450 to 1850, this period was marked by dramatic upheavals, including the invention of printing, European expansion and colonialism, the Reformation and the formation of nation states. She is fascinated by the way the Prize Papers, as an “accidental” archive, provide ever new historical constellations and insights into experiences of migration, disease or slavery in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, depending on the context, time, location, and persons involved. Their diversity, she explains, offers points of departure for historical research in all kinds of areas, including medicine, climate, communications, law, religious plurality, cartography, shipbuilding, and the history of the 19 languages identified in the documents to date.

Whether it’s a plea for help from a woman to her husband who has emigrated to America leaving her and their children behind; the letter book of a Jewish merchant driven from the Iberian Peninsula to North Africa, entertaining a huge trade network with its correspondence uncovers, at the same time giving intimate insights into Jewish life 400 years ago; or the reports of Moravian missionaries who had been sent from the German-Danish border region to Suriname – the Prize Papers “demonstrate clearly that this era cannot be understood solely from the national historical perspective that still prevails in research on the European expansion and colonialism”, says Freist.

Many of the approximately 160,000 undelivered letters preserved in the Prize Papers collection remain folded or even sealed, some of them shielding centuries-old seeds or the letter sand sprinkled onto the ink to make it dry. As the only means of communicating across large distances, letters played a vital role in helping people to stay in touch. They were often accompanied by a small gift – something exotic sent from home, or something exotic sent home from abroad. In the case of important business documents, several copies were often sent on different ships, Freist adds, in the knowledge that if the vessel was captured, they might not reach their intended recipient.

In a letter dated February 27, 1795, Catharina Borck, a 33-year-old Moravian Church missionary born in Flensburg and stationed in Paramaribo, wrote to another member of her church: "Now I hope that (...) of my letters will reach you safely (...), only recently a ship that was on its way here was captured by privateers. They unloaded its cargo and it left sail on without it. They brought one sack of letters, but left the other behind."

Despite the vast distances and the sometimes uncertain, often months-long delivery times, the authors often adopted a chatoyant tone in their missives. Borck, who ran a small bakery with her husband in the Moravian Church mission in Paramaribo, also treated her correspondence as a “conversation”.

In her letter to Peter, Catharina de Mestermans wrote: "It is with great pleasure that I once again take up the thread to converse a little with my dear parents in these few lines."

Nonetheless, the careless tone of her letters contrasts starkly with their content at times – at least from today’s perspective. A letter that raised many questions for historian Freist was also penned by the young Catharina and addressed to Peter, a member of the Moravian Church in Christiansfeld, Denmark. Catharina describes her introduction to plantation society in Suriname, which at the time was a Dutch colony where the use of slaves was commonplace – tens of thousands of enslaved people had been brought here from the west coast of Africa. Three of them worked in Borck’s bakery. In her letter to Peter, Catharina describes a visit to a plantation and how its manager had his enslaved workers led into the courtyard to crush coffee beans for the entertainment of his guests: "It almost looked like soldiers in a drill, except that they were all black. There were probably almost a hundred of them."

For Freist, the missionary’s description of the scene is “disconcerting from today’s perspective because she seems to have no understanding of the blatant oppression and slave labour being presented to onlookers like a stage production”. Instead, she compares the rhythmic movements of coffee-bean crushing with a military drill. Yet as Christians, the Moravian Church missionaries had an ambivalence towards slavery, Freist explains. "This example shows how challenging it is to contextualize this kind of account and compare it with others in order to understand how slavery was perceived and practiced by Europeans from many different backgrounds and levels of education." There is still a lot of catching up to do when it comes to research on slavery, Freist notes, adding that the most important thing now is to integrate the perspectives.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, glass beads made in Europe were a popular means of payment and exchange in Africa, and millions of them exchanged hands within the slave trade. In 1803, J.A. de Marré, a Dutch official, sent the bead necklaces pictured above from Elimina in present-day Ghana to Amsterdam, a centre of glass bead production at the time, as a sample for ordering further supplies (TNA, HCA 32/996).
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Haasis explains. His focus was on the letter-writing and business practices of Hamburg merchant Nicolaus Got-
tiel Luetkens. Through the letters, Haasis was able to follow how Luet-
kens, who was travelling in France at the
time, founded his own merchant house and
created his marriage – “all through the medium of letters” as the
historian emphasizes.

Luetkens’ correspondence was one of those chance discoveries. Haasis, like his colleagues Christina Beckers and Dr. Jessica Cronshagen, has been a member of the Oldenburg Prize Papers team since the preparatory phase of the project before its official launch in 2018. He was on his second visit to the National Archives when he came across several boxes full of
documents seized from the Hamburg merchant ship Die Hoffnung. Haasis describes them as “a time capsule, whose contents were unknown”. He took lots of photos so he could read the documents in peace at home. “It was only then that I realized this was a complete archive of letters, and that it all belonged to the same guy!” Galva-
tin and his crew that the
Atlantic coast. More than 3,400 letters in total had been stored by Luetkens in the wooden travel chest, as well as invoices, outstanding bills of exchange, newspapers, and items of clothing. As Haasis later learned from the court documents, this wooden chest was hidden under a stack of barrels of sugar in the hold of the Hoffnung when the ship fell into the hands of privateers on August 23, 1745, on its way to Hamburg. The entire process of establishing his merchant house there took two years of preparation.

But Luetkens’ loss is a huge gain for scholars researching the history of letter-writing and business practices. The documents enabled Haasis to not only reconstruct the merchant’s jour-
ney from all the way to the south of France to Brest in the north. Moreover, the historian could observe how he spent his time. The documents also included personal letters, such as letters to his brother Anton: “Since (...) the turmoil of war has

The project “Prize Papers. Cataloguing – Digitization – Presentation” is led by the Oldenburg historian Professor Dagmar Freist and funded within The Academies Programme of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, Germany’s most comprehensive hu-
manities and cultural sciences research programme, since 2018. The programme currently funds 37 long-term projects. For a prospective funding period of 20 years, the Prize Papers project has been awarded 5.7 million euros, half of which is provided by the German government and the other half by the federal state of Lower Saxony. The project is assigned to the Academy of Sciences and Humani-
tics in Göttingen. The members of the international Prize Papers team are based in Oldenburg, London and Göttingen. The Oldenburg team led by Professor Freist includes six researchers in various academic posts and ten student assistants. Two archives and one record specialist are cataloguing the collection at the National Archives (TNA) in London. In addition, two TNA conservators are ensuring that all items in the archive are preserved in the best possible condition.

Pandemic prevention almost three centuries ago: a document in which officials of the city of Marseille certify to Captain Jacques Cheron-
mazin and his crew that the city’s port was “free from any suspicion of plague or other contagious diseases” upon their departure in February 1742, and request that other authorities therefore give the ship free passage on its way to the then French colony of Saint-
Dominique in modern-day Haiti (TNA, HCA 32/94).

of those who were enslaved, and for research to be conducted in collabo-
ration with scholars from the places of origin.

The aforementioned letter is also an example of the unadorned and un-
censored insights that the Prize Pa-
ers offer. “The content of mail bags became accidental archives,” TNA ar-
chivist Dr. Amanda Bevan and Dr. Randolph Cocker, who work in the
project for TNA sorting, write in an article. “A unique survival of mail in transit, in bulk, unmediated by being scattered in delivery, or family censorship, or the ravages of time.” The unique state of preservation of many records, hav-
ing survived in their original material condition from the past, is another
distinctive feature of the Prize Papers.

Furthermore, Catharina Borck’s let-
ters are a good example of how the Prize Papers can render global micro-
histories visible, of how such sourc-
ters are a good example of how the

As an academic partner, the German Historical Institute London (GHI) works with the organization of international conferences and employs the project’s two photographers. As an open-access database, the Prize Papers portal will continue to make the digitized doc-
uments and artefacts of this vast and

One of the ways to find long-winded, at times pomp-
ous, descriptions of how such sourc-
ters are a good example of how the

Since (…) the turmoil of war has
given some people reservations about loading cargo onto our ships (…), I had the idea that you should become a citizen (…). Then I would sell you a share in the ships so that you could swear in good conscience (…) that they belong to you.”

Being in France, which was at war with England, Luetkens had decid-
ed to use his brother as a straw man so that his ships could sail under the neutral flag of Hamburg and thus avoid being captured as “prizes”. However, at least in the case of the

Hoffnung, this strategy failed. But de-
pite such setbacks, he succeeded in founding his own merchant house in Hamburg, married his fiancée in 1749, and even went on to become a sen-
ator of the Hanseatic City. His Bele-
tage (luggage entrance hall of his vil-
a), with its French gilt furniture, can still be admired today in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg. It remains unknown to this day, how-
ever, whether sailor Johann Pohl from Bremen – after losing his notebook – ever found a way to send his daughter the christening poem he had spent so long learning to write. (GA)