mc N° 19 2022

manuscript cultures

Hamburg | Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures 2749-1021

Universität Hamburg
DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF MANUSCRIPT CULTURES
DFG

Publishing Information

Agency: How Manuscripts Affect and Create Social Realities

Edited by Michael Kohs and Sabine Kienitz

Every volume of *manuscript cultures* has been peer-reviewed and is also openly accessible on CSMC's website <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/publications/mc.html>. We would like to thank the German Research Foundation (DFG) for its generous support of the Cluster of Excel-lence EXC 2176 'Understanding Written Artefacts', which has made the printing of this journal volume possible.

Editors

Prof. Dr Michael Friedrich
Universität Hamburg
Asien-Afrika-Institut
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 / Flügel Ost
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel. no. +49 (0)40 42838 7127
Fax no. +49 (0)40 42838 4899
michael.friedrich@uni-hamburg.de

Prof. Dr Jörg H. Quenzer
Universität Hamburg
Asien-Afrika-Institut
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 / Flügel Ost
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel. no. +49 (0)40 42838 7203
Fax no. +49 (0)40 42838 6200
joerg.quenzer@uni-hamburg.de

Translations and Copy-editing

Carl Carter, Amper Translation Service

Print

oeding print, Braunschweig
Printed in Germany

Klimaneutral Druckprodukt
ClimatePartner.com/11339-2303-1094

VEGAN Veganes Druckprodukt

www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de

Funded by
DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

Editorial Office

Dr Irina Wandrey
Universität Hamburg
Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures
Warburgstraße 26
D-20354 Hamburg
Tel. No.: +49 40 42838 - 9420
Fax No.: +49 40 42838 - 4899
irina.wandrey@uni-hamburg.de

Layout

Miriam Gerdes

Cover

A 'letter from Heaven', ID no. I (33 J) 176/1963, Berlin, Museum of European Cultures (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum Europäischer Kulturen). Written in Ernstroda near Gotha, Thuringia, and dated 1776. The original sheet of paper was folded once, making four pages. Here we can see p. 1 with the title 'Himmels=Brief, welchen, Gott selber geschrieben' ('Letter from Heaven, which God Himself has written') and page 4. The written bifolium was then folded four times. Two words were visible on the two outer sides resulting from this: 'Gottes Brief' ('God's letter'), shown on p. 4. The upper part of the letter has been cropped and part of the illumination has been cut off. Photography: Christian Krug.

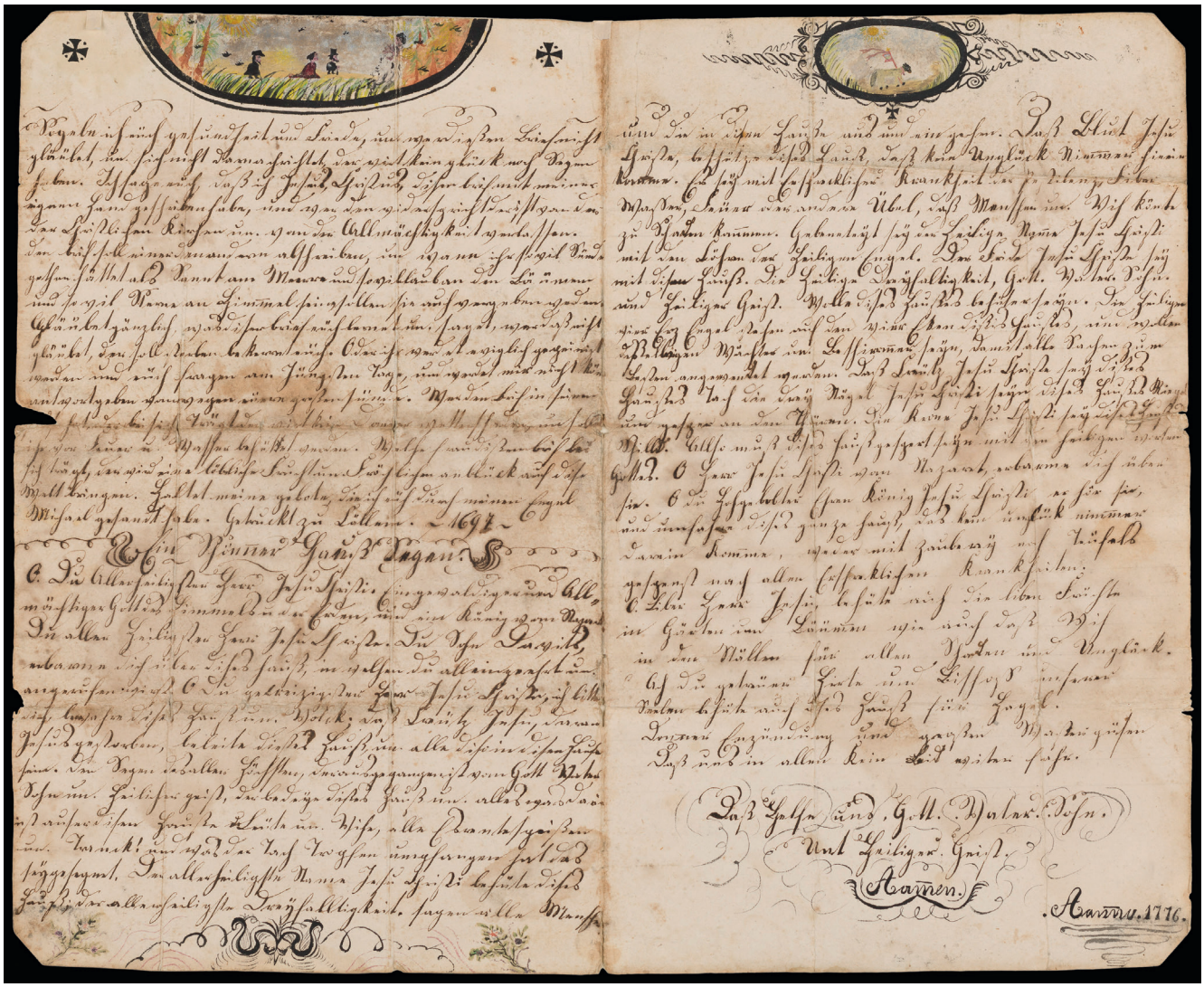
ISSN (Print) 1867-9617
ISSN (Online) 2749-1021

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

SECTION I: Manuscripts as Magical Agents

SECTION II: Manuscripts Shaping Communities



A 'letter from Heaven', written in Ernstroda near Gotha, Thuringia, and dated 1776, Berlin, Museum of European Cultures (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum Europäischer Kulturen) , ID no. I (33 J) 176/1963, pages 2 and 3. For pages 1 and 4 of the same letter see cover image and the accompanying caption on the imprint page. Photography Christian Krug.

Article

'… even the bravest person has his own little superstition.'[1] On the Material Nature and Magical Purpose of Heavenly Letters in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century

Sabine Kienitz | Hamburg

After the First World War broke out in 1914, the German War Ministry in Berlin began issuing *Verlustlisten* – official lists stating the names of German soldiers killed or missing in action, including the date this happened.[2] To supplement these lists, the *Zentralstelle für Nachlaßsachen* (Central Office for Soldiers' Effects) also published information about unidentified members of the armed forces[3] in a bid to put a name to men who had died on the battlefield or in a military hospital.[4] For lack of any official documentation, detailed descriptions were made of objects that had been found on the deceased, such as wedding rings or pocket watches.[5] These are extremely helpful in shedding light on the material aspects of everyday life in wartime.[6] The lists of objects show that soldiers carried all kinds of personal effects around with them even when they were stationed at the war front, photographs[7] and letters[8] being just two of the possible items. Presumably these things were able to give them some consolation and emotional warmth in the face of danger. The large number of rosaries, pictures of the Virgin Mary and medals of saints that were found in the breast pockets, wallets and uniforms of fallen soldiers is a clear indication of how widely Christian practices were accepted, most of which are Roman Catholic.[9] In addition to these, however, items relating to popular devotional practices are also listed, which count as 'forms of subjective belief'[10] and were officially disapproved of by the Church.[11] The finds that once belonged to soldiers include a fair number of letters known as *Himmelsbriefe* in German – 'heavenly letters' or 'letters from Heaven'. These are handwritten amulets or phylacteries,[12] which were 'worn in a small pouch round one's neck (and) only taken out in a

[1] Buddecke 1918, 52–53. The English translation is from Kilduff 2012, 75.

[2] Kienitz 2008, 43–45.

[3] *Unermittelte Heeresangehörige, Nachlaß- und Fundsachen*, Nr. 1, 1 October 1916, supplement to *Armee-Verordnungsblatt: Verlustlisten*, Berlin 1916, 1–4. Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde Dresden (ISGV; Institute for Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology), Nachlass Adolf Spamer ('Adolf Spamer Estate') NaAS/K91/M1: *Notizen, Abschriften und Quellensammlung zum Thema Himmelsbriefe, Schutzbriefe*. This supplement to the normal lists of casualties was published at the beginning of each month from October 1916 till October 1919. Regarding the official handling of casualties' effects, see Schmidt 1918, 39f., 43.

[4] On the role and function of (illustrated) lists of fallen or missing soldiers in general, see Artinger 2000, Adam 1985 and Kienitz 2008.

[5] Many of these finds were personalised by monograms or watchmakers' symbols and were able to give relatives clues about the names of the owner or the workshop and producer. The lists of the effects that had been found were divided into alphabetical lists of names and abbreviations on the objects and a separate list that included the numbers of watches and repairs. According to regulations, these items were supposed to be handed over to the relatives of the deceased person, being his or her personal property. Regarding the handling of finds, also see Schmidt 1918, 41–44, especially p. 43.

[6] See Fuchs, Gygi and Ulrich 2002.

[7] On the social role of photography in the construction of family identities, see Bourdieu 2006, 31.

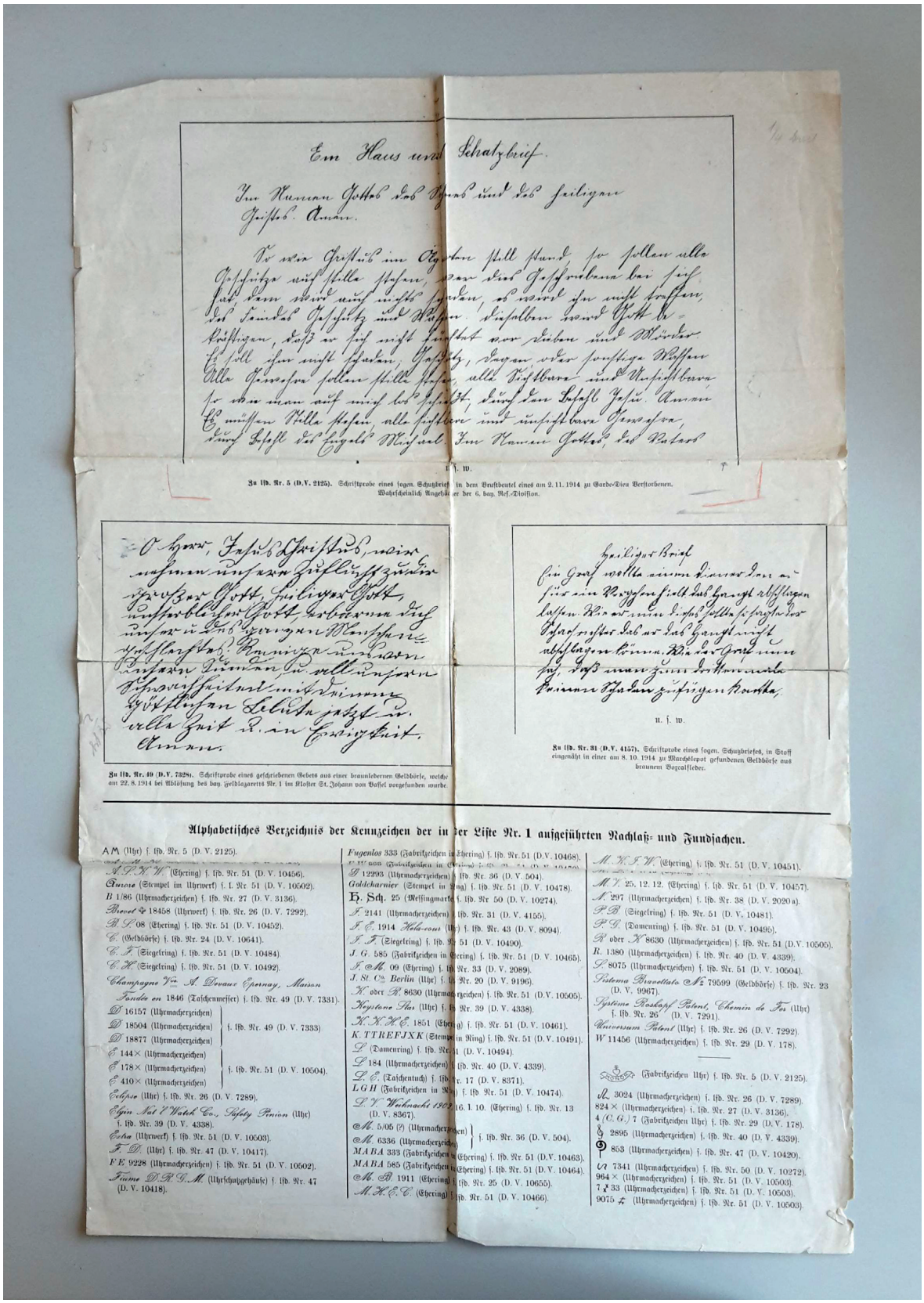
[8] See list no. 14 from 1 November 1917. In this case, extracts from letters are quoted (modes of address, greetings, family relations, etc.) that were regarded as specific to the relationship and identification of the deceased person. In connection with this, also see the debate in the First World War about what became known as *Jammerbriefe* (roughly, 'gloomy letters') and the exhortation to the general public to the effect that women should only send their male relatives in the field *Sonntagsbriefe* ('Sunday letters') in order to keep them emotionally stable: 'Da kann und soll der Brief von zu Hause der Schutzengel sein, indem er das deutsche Heim, die Kinder und vor allem die deutsche Frauen-Liebe und -Treue dem Manne wieder lebendig vor die Seele malt.' ('Letters from home can and should act like a guardian angel by enabling a man to imagine his German home, his children and above all his wife's love and loyalty in vivid terms.'] Malita von Rundstedt, Der *Schützengraben der deutschen Frau*, 1916, 6, cited in Tramitz 1989, 97.

[9] Schlager refers to the specifics of Catholic practices regarding consecrated medals and saints' pictures; Schlager 2011, 63–91.

[10] See Knoblauch 1999, 186.

[11] See Korff 2005, 26.

[12] See Kriss-Rettenbeck 1963, 34–36.



Ein Haus und Schatzbrief.

Im Namen Gottes das Haus und das [illegible] Amen.

[illegible] u. s. w.

Zu lfd. Nr. 5 (D.V. 2125). Schriftprobe eines sogen. Schutzbriefes in dem Brustbeutel eines am 2.11.1914 zu Gorbe-Dieu Verstorbenen. Wahrscheinlich Angehöriger der 6. bay. Res.-Division.

O Herr, Jesus Christus, meine [illegible]

Heiliger Brief

Zu lfd. Nr. 49 (D.V. 7328). Schriftprobe eines geschriebenen Gebets aus einer braunlederner Geldbörse, welche am 22.8.1914 bei Ablösung des bay. Feldlagaretts Nr. 1 im Kloster St. Johann von Vassel vorgefunden wurde.

u. s. w.

Zu lfd. Nr. 31 (D.V. 4157). Schriftprobe eines sogen. Schutzbriefes, in Stoff eingenäht in einer am 8.10.1914 zu Marchelepot gefundenen Geldbörse aus braunem Borcalfleder.

Alphabetisches Verzeichnis der Kennzeichen der in der Liste Nr. 1 aufgeführten Nachlaß- und Fundsachen.

AM (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 5 (D. V. 2125).
A. P. K. W. (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10456).
Aurora (Stempel im Uhrwerk) f. l. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10502).
B 1/86 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 27 (D. V. 3136).
Breuet ✠ 18458 (Uhrwerk) f. lfd. Nr. 26 (D. V. 7292).
B. L. 08 (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10452).
C. (Geldbörse) f. lfd. Nr. 24 (D. V. 10641).
C. K. (Siegelring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10484).
C. K. (Siegelring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10492).
Champagne V.ve A. Devaux Epernay, Maison Fondée en 1846 (Taschenmesser) f. lfd. Nr. 49 (D. V. 7331).
D 16157 (Uhrmacherzeichen)
D 18504 (Uhrmacherzeichen)
D 18877 (Uhrmacherzeichen)
} f. lfd. Nr. 49 (D. V. 7333)
E 144× (Uhrmacherzeichen)
E 178× (Uhrmacherzeichen)
E 410× (Uhrmacherzeichen)
} f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10504).
Eclipse (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 26 (D. V. 7289).
Elgin Nat'l Watch Co., Safety Pension (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 39 (D. V. 4338).
Eska (Uhrwerk) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10503).
F. D. (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 47 (D. V. 10417).
F E 9228 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10502).
Fiume D. R. G. M. (Uhrschutzgehäuse) f. lfd. Nr. 47 (D. V. 10418).
Fugenlos 333 (Fabrikzeichen in Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D.V. 10468).
[illegible] (Fabrikzeichen in Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. [illegible] (D. V. [illegible]).
G 12293 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 36 (D. V. 504).
Goldcharnier (Stempel in Ring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10478).
H. Sch. 25 (Messingmarke) f. lfd. Nr 50 (D. V. 10274).
J. 2141 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 31 (D. V. 4155).
J. E. 1914 Habereau (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 43 (D. V. 8094).
J. T. (Siegelring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10490).
J. G. 585 (Fabrikzeichen in Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10465).
J. M. 09 (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 33 (D. V. 2089).
J. St. Co. Berlin (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 20 (D. V. 9196).
K oder R. 8630 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D.V. 10505).
Keystone Star (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 39 (D. V. 4338).
K. K. K. E. 1851 (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10461).
K. TTREFJXK (Stempel in Ring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10491).
L (Damenring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10494).
L 184 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 40 (D. V. 4339).
L. C. (Taschentuch) f. lfd. Nr. 17 (D. V. 8371).
L G H (Fabrikzeichen in Ring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10474).
L. V. Weihnacht 1907 (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 13 (D. V. 8367).
M. 5/05 (?) (Uhrmacherzeichen)
M. 6336 (Uhrmacherzeichen)
} f. lfd. Nr. 36 (D. V. 504).
MABA 333 (Fabrikzeichen in Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D.V. 10463).
MABA 585 (Fabrikzeichen in Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10464).
M. B. 1911 (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 25 (D. V. 10655).
M. H. C. C. (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10466).
M. K. F. W. (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10451).
M. V. 25. 12. 12. (Ehering) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10457).
N. 297 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 38 (D. V. 2020 a).
P. B. (Siegelring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10481).
P. G. (Damenring) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10495).
R oder K 8630 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D.V. 10505).
R. 1380 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 40 (D. V. 4339).
S. 8075 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10504).
Sistema Brevettato N.o 79599 (Geldbörse) f. lfd. Nr. 23 (D. V. 9967).
Système Roskopf Patent, Chemin de Fer (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 26 (D. V. 7291).
Universum Patent (Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 26 (D. V. 7292).
W 11456 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 29 (D. V. 178).

(Fabrikzeichen Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 5 (D. V. 2125).
R. 3024 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 26 (D. V. 7289).
824 × (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 27 (D. V. 3136).
4 (C. G.) 7 (Fabrikzeichen Uhr) f. lfd. Nr. 29 (D.V. 178).
2895 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 40 (D. V. 4339).
853 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 47 (D. V. 10420).
7341 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 50 (D. V. 10272).
964 × (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10503).
7 ✗ 33 (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10503).
9075 ✗ (Uhrmacherzeichen) f. lfd. Nr. 51 (D. V. 10503).

Fig. 1a: Samples of letters from Heaven from WWI, *Unermittelte Heeresangehörige* ('Unidentified members of the armed forces'), *Nachlaß- und Fundsachen*, Nr. 1, 1. Oktober 1916, *Armeeverordnungsblatt: Deutsche Verlustlisten*, 1-4. Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde Dresden (ISGV), NaAS/K91/M1.

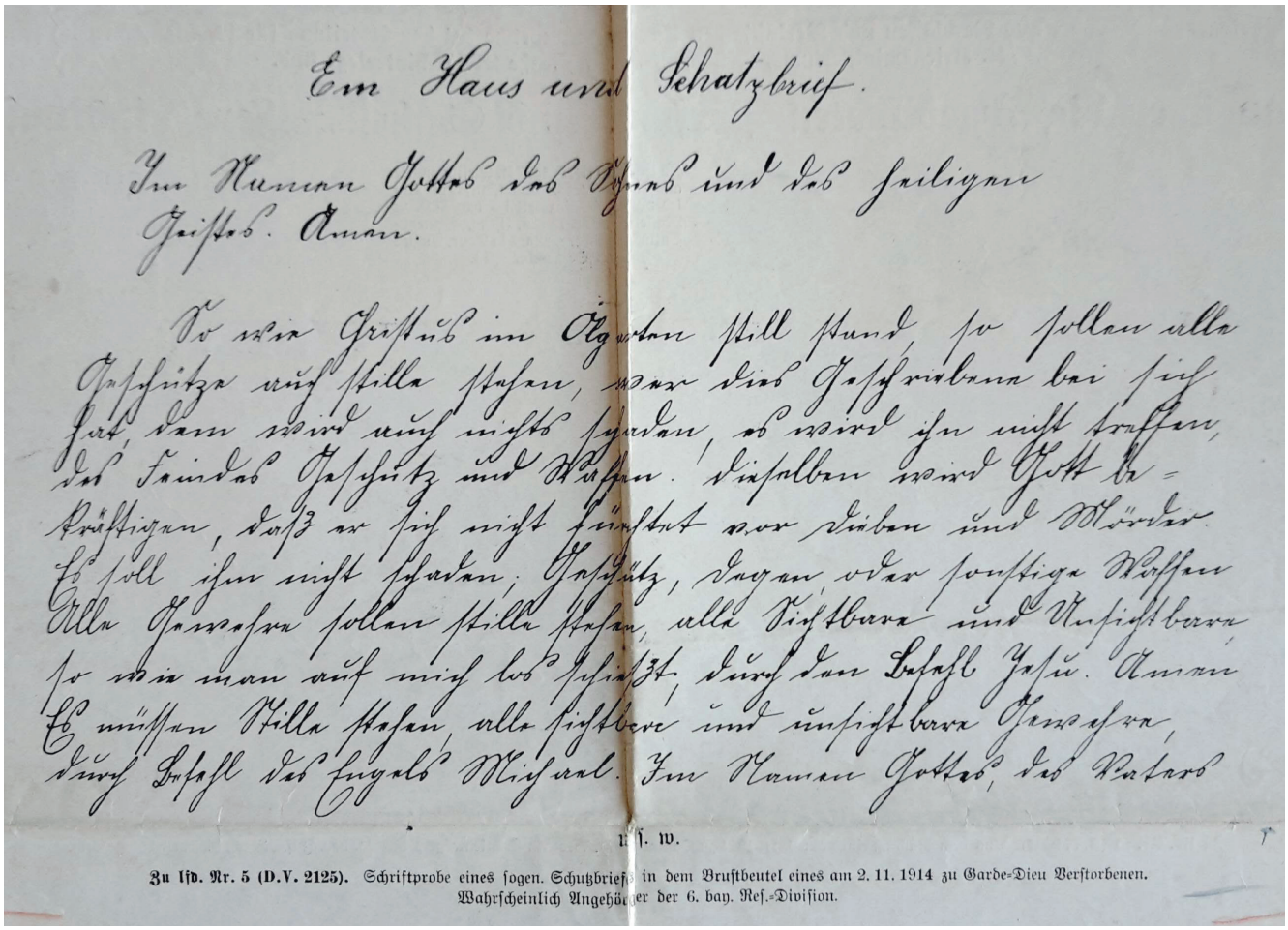


Fig. 1b: *Nachlaß- und Fundsachen*, Nr. 1, 1. Oktober 1916, *Armeeverordnungsblatt: Verlustlisten*, 1-4. ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1. 'Ein Haus- und Schutzbrief. Im Namen Gottes des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes. Amen. A letter of protection that includes the holder's home. ' ('In the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.'). Excerpt from the samples of writing from 1 October 1916.

moment of acute danger' in order to be read.[13] The illustrated supplement to *Bayerische Verlustliste* No. 325 dated 27 December 1916 depicted three of these small manuscripts as 'samples of writing' in the hope that the original authors would recognise their own handwriting and then be able to provide some personal information about the recipients (Fig. 1). It is these letters from heaven that are the subject here – a genre of apotropaic magical manuscripts to which a protective effect was attributed for several hundred years in the face of all kinds of threats, even weapons. The contents of these pieces of writing are important in understanding how they were used in the past. Most of them claim to have been written by Jesus Christ or God Himself and then brought down to Earth by the Archangel Michael, and promise men they will survive wars and assure women they will have a smooth birth in return for them leading a God-fearing life as a Christian.[14] In this study, I shall employ cultural and codicological approaches with respect to the material and handwritten nature of these artefacts in an attempt to clarify the basis for ascribing such a magical quality to them and how this efficacy was achieved and perceived in the course of producing, distributing and using these letters.

The subject at hand: heavenly letters and their contents

From a theological point of view, heavenly letters belong to the genre of *revelatory literature*.[15] They were studied by scholars of religion, history and philology in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.[16] Bible scholars, theologians,

[13] Cf. Prümer 1916, 80.

[14] Some authors assume that these texts belong to the genre of chain letters Cf. Rauchegger 2010.

[15] See Speyer 1970.

[16] Cf. the overview in Köhler 1898, which attempted to reconstruct the historical origin as well as the reception and the different ways in which the letter was transmitted. 'Doch kann als sicher gelten: Der Brief stammt aus

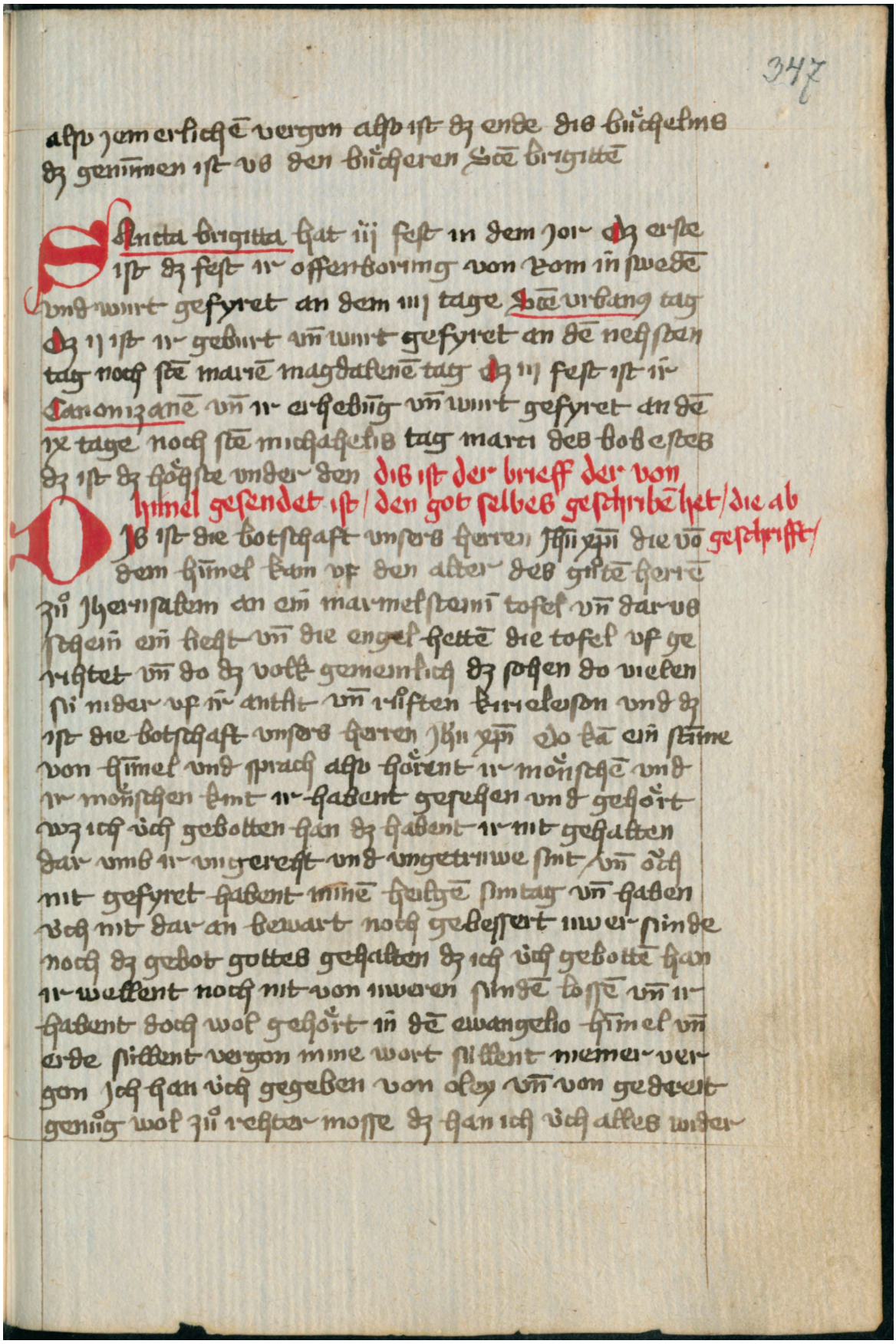


Fig. 2: 'Dis ist der brieff der von hi̅mel gesendet ist / den got selbes geschribē het / die ab geschrifft' ('This is the letter sent from Heaven / which God Himself wrote/ the copy'). *Lives of the Saints*, mid-15th c., manuscript volume, paper, Staatsbibliothek Berlin, Ms. Germ. qu. 189, 417 leaves, fols 347^{v}–349^{v}, here fol. 347^{r}.

Orientalists and church historians in particular documented individual finds of ancient[17] and medieval[18] exemplars in their publications. These discoveries were mostly manuscripts made of parchment or paper, or single-sheet prints from the fifteenth century onwards (Fig. 2), which were part of codices whose exact origin and history of reception were practically unknown.[19] In contrast, the survival of most of the manuscripts discussed in this article is due to their being collected by clergymen, theologians and both laymen and experts in folklore in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, people who took an interest in the phenomena of magic and superstition in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. These two areas of focus determined the interests, interpretation and handling of the artefacts by the collectors themselves. To date, about fifty originals have been identified in archives, museums and libraries, although their age and exact origin still have to be clarified. The vast majority of the handwritten copies that were used as magical aids probably only exist in the form of copies for scholarly purposes now or have just been published as transcripts in anthropological journals.[20]

Building on this practice of collecting such works, the religious scholar Rudolf Stübe (1870–1930) presented a comprehensive, systematic historical study of these manuscripts and the history of their ownership, which also included textual criticism and followed a sound theological approach.[21] Stübe recreated the structure of these texts, which were written in the style of a letter in which either God or Jesus personally addressed individual human beings in His capacity as an author and writer. It was claimed in many similar ways in the letters that God or the Son of God had the ability to write messages – the title such letters have often goes as follows: 'Letter from Heaven, written by My own holy hands ...'.[22] Alternatively, the letter in question was said to have been written by Jesus Christ Himself 'in His own beautiful hand'[23] – and at the same time this phenomenon was cited as an argument for the manuscript's true power:

> Ich sage euch, daß Ich, Ich Christus diesen Brief mit meiner göttlichen Hand geschrieben habe. Wer dawider spricht, der ist verflucht von der christlichen Kirchen und von meinem Göttlichen Angesicht verlaßen.[24]

> I tell you that I, I Christ, have written this letter with My divine hand. Anyone who contradicts Me shall be cursed by the Christian churches and forsaken by My divine face.

In addition, Stübe identified the various types of manuscripts as well as the individual parts of texts from which a heavenly letter could be composed in formulaic terms.[25] Besides containing confirmation of its divine origin, the place where it was found and the year it first appeared, the letter included a reminder to observe Sundays as a day of rest – this is often

dem Orient, dringt von hier nach Gallien, dient den kirchlichen Interessen zur Fixierung des Sonntags als Sabbathfeier, wird in (Mont) St. Michel deponiert und gelangt durch Wallfahrer in Verkürzung nach Schwaben bez. Köln und Straßburg, wo er Anfang des 17. Jahrhunderts wiederholt gedruckt wird. Habent sua fata libelli! Auch Christi Briefe haben ihre Schicksale!' ('But one thing is certain: the letter comes from the Orient, manages to get to Gaul from here, serves the Church's interests in establishing Sunday as a Sabbath celebration, it is deposited in (Mont) St Michel and is taken to Swabia via a shortcut – or rather, to Cologne and Strasbourg – by pilgrims, where it is printed a number of times at the beginning of the 17th century. Habent sua fata libelli! Even Christ's own letters go through a lot!'). Köhler 1998, 119. Also see Stübe 1918.

[17] Cf. Ewald 1847; Delehaye 1899; Bittner 1906; Dieterich 1911; Graf 1928.

[18] See s.v. 'Himmelsbrief' in *Handschriftencensus: Eine Bestandsaufnahme der handschriftlichen Überlieferung deutschsprachiger Texte des Mittelalters* <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/592> (*Survey of Manuscripts*, last seen on 20 November 2022). My thanks to Marco Heiles for this information. Apart from that, see the *Manuscripta Mediaevalia* manuscript database with references to thirteen copies of *Himmelsbriefe* in multiple-text manuscripts <http://www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de/?alles:"himmelsbrief"> (last seen on 20 November 2022). I am grateful to Felix Heinzer for this information. See Dieterich 1911 as well; this author quotes an example of a letter from Heaven from 1451 written on parchment, which is documented in the *Liber de reformatione monasteriorum* (II c. XIX, p. 699f.), which belonged to the Augustinian provost Johannes Busch. Dieterich 1911, 247. Besides that, see Kolb 1897 as well.

[19] Stübe refers to a heavenly letter 'printed in Cologne at Clemens Arnold's, 1604', also printed in Scheible 1847; see Stübe 1918, 22 and Köhler 1898, 117. On heavenly letters from Anglo-Saxon England, see Hebing 2012.

[20] In 1911, the medievalist Walther H. Vogt said that he had looked through a hundred exemplars; see Vogt 1911, 587. Various examples of handwritten copies made for scholarly purposes can be found in Adolf Spamer's estate at the Institute for Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology (ISGV) in Dresden, whose staff I would like to thank for their generous support during my research.

[21] See Stübe 1918. Vogt 1911 takes a similar approach.

[22] Cited in Vogt 1911, 592.

[23] Cf. 'Haus- und Schutzbrief', ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1.

[24] 'True copy of the letter', Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel (MHK; Museum of Hessian History in Kassel) 74 A 4, inv. no. 1928/176 (Fig. 3). According to the inventory card, the artefact was made in Hamelin in 1790 and passed into the Museums' possession in 1928. I am grateful to Martina Lüdicke, MHK, for this information.

[25] In detail, these include the types known as 'Gredoria', 'Sunday letters', 'Holstein letters', the 'Mount of Olives blessing'/'Blessing of weapons', the 'Count's amulet' and 'Charlemagne's blessing'. Cf. Stübe 1918, 7–9 and Vogt 1911, 589. On 'Charlemagne's blessing' see Marco Heiles' contribution in this volume as well.

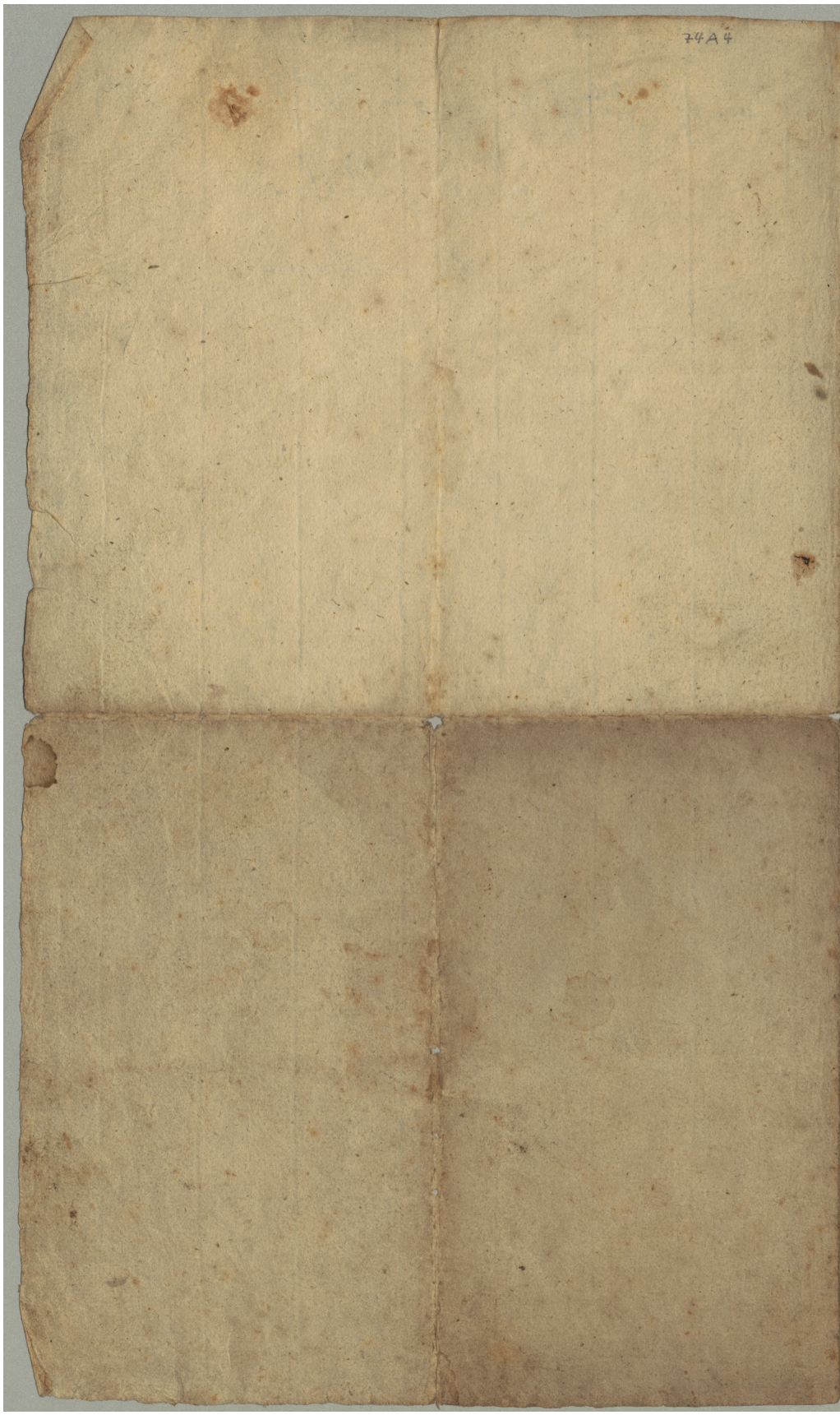
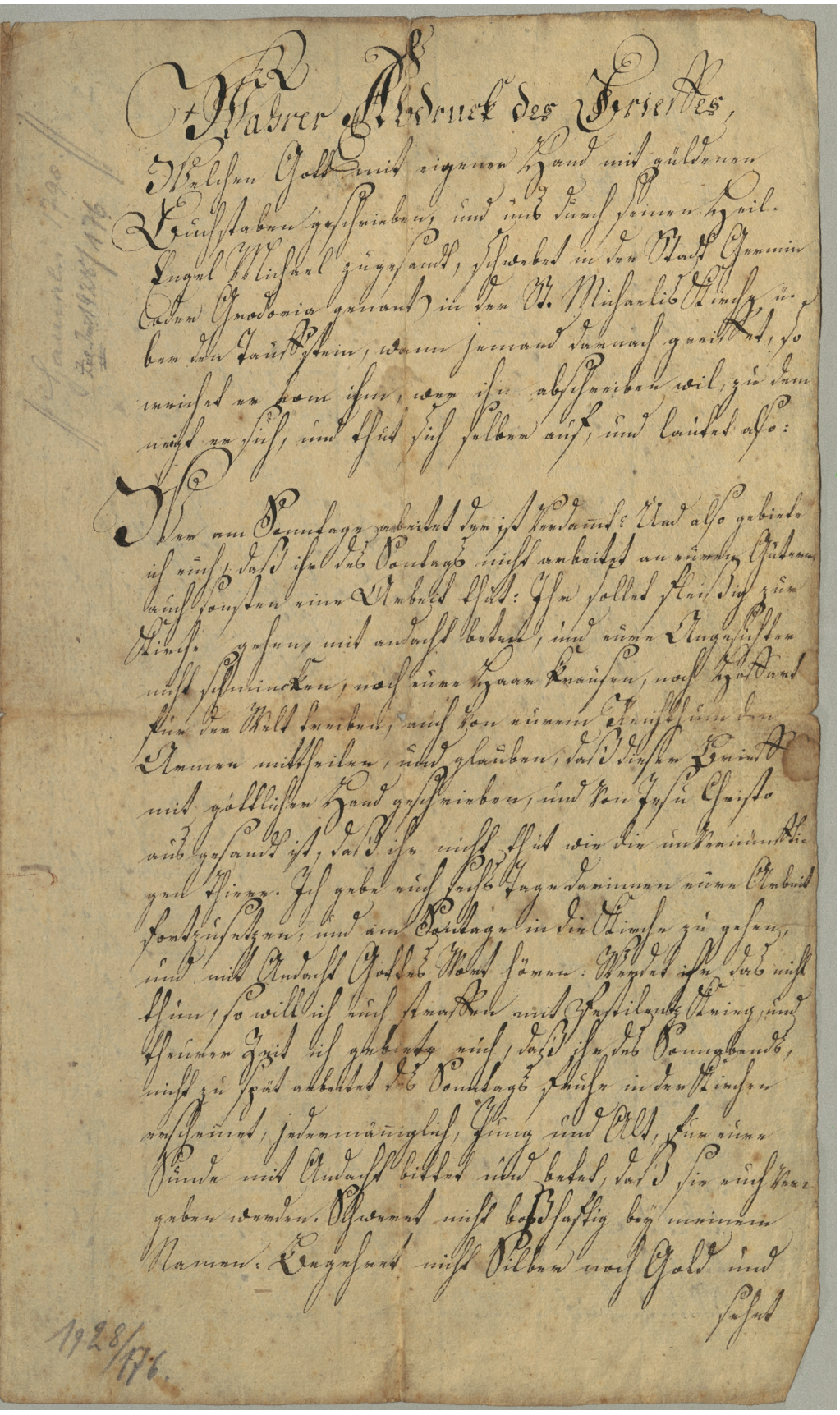


Fig. 3a: 'Wahrer Abdruck des Brieffes, welchen Gott mit eigener Hand mit güldenen Buchstaben geschrieben und uns durch seinen Heil. Engel Michael zugesandt' ('True copy of the letter which God wrote in golden letters with His own hand and sent to us through his holy angel Michael'). Dated 1790, found in Hamelin, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel (MHK), folklore collection, 74 A 4, recto, inv. no. 1928/176.



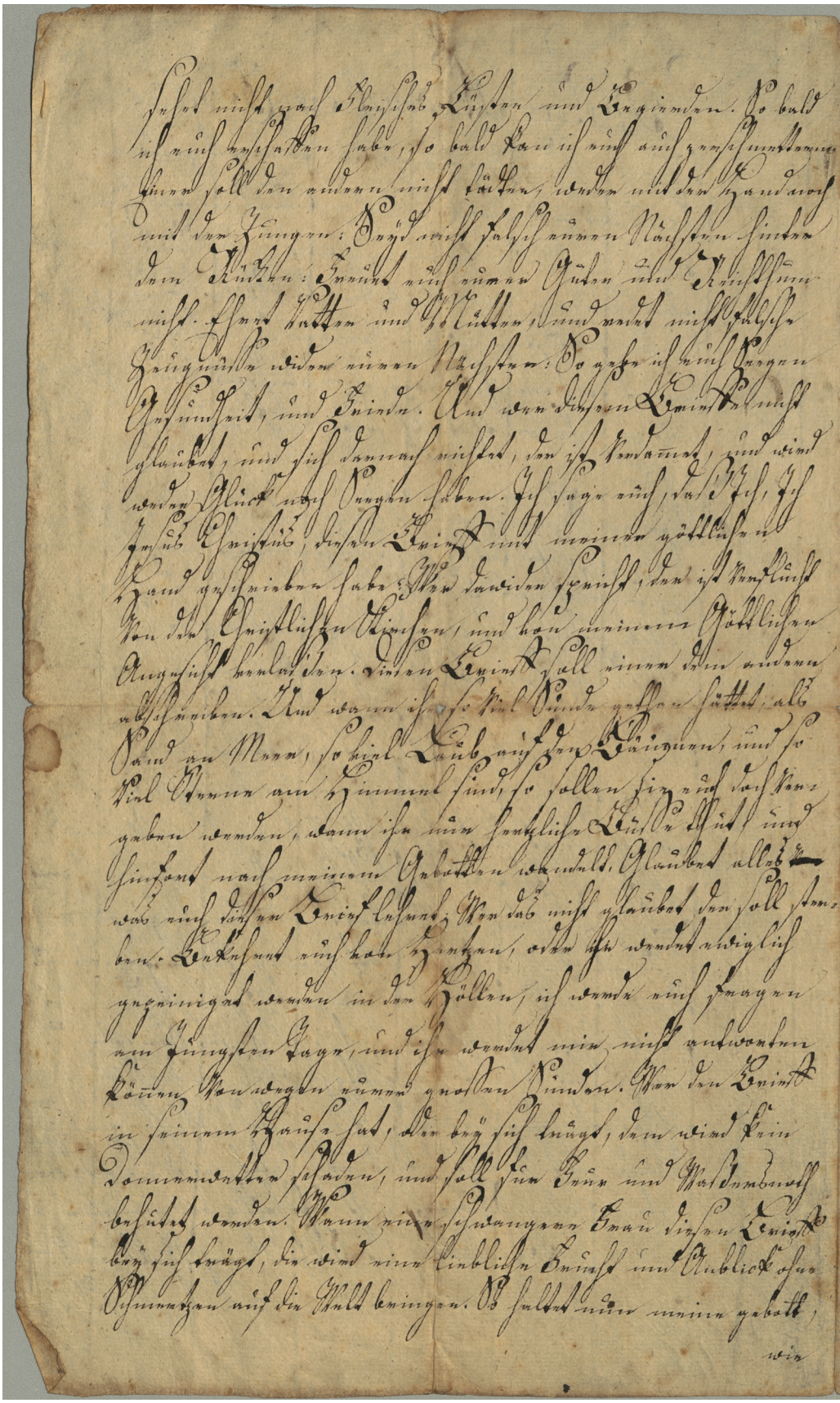
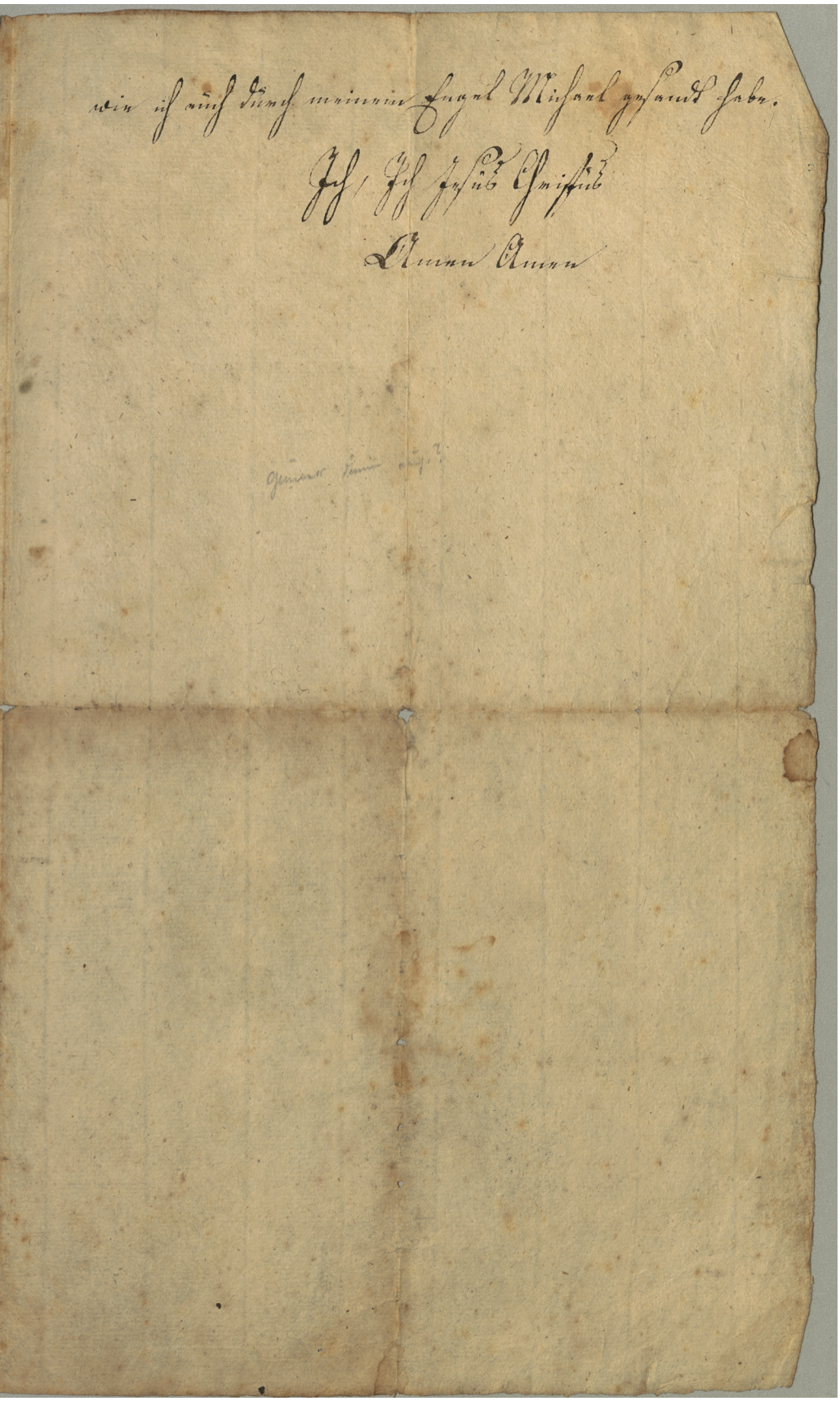
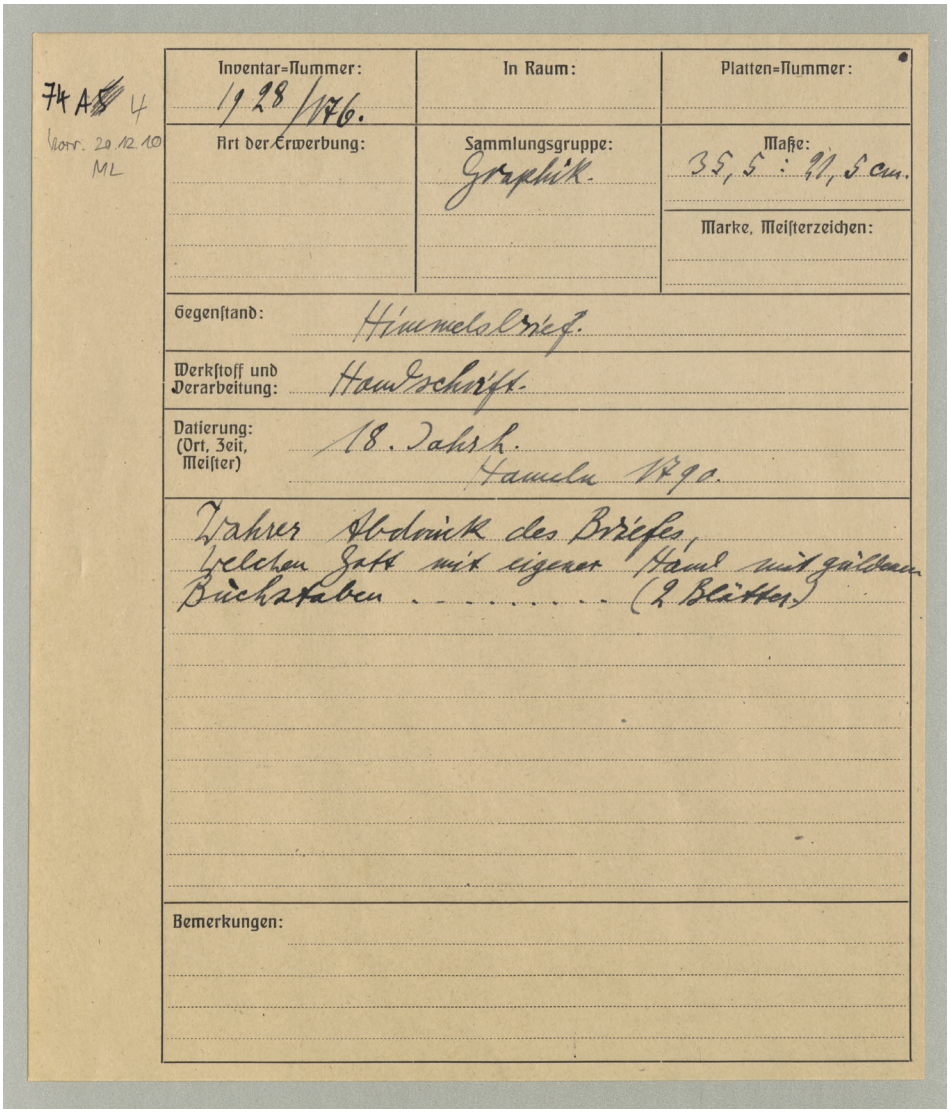


Fig. 3b: 'Wahrer Abdruck des Brieffes, welchen Gott mit eigener Hand mit güldenen Buchstaben geschrieben und uns durch seinen Heil. Engel Michael zugesandt' ('True copy of the letter which God wrote in golden letters with His own hand and sent to us through his holy angel Michael'). Dated 1790, found in Hamelin, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel (MHK), folklore collection, 74 A 4, verso, inv. no. 1928/176.




74 A 4
Vorr. 20.12.10 ML

Inventar-Nummer:	In Raum:	Platten-Nummer:
1928/176.		
Art der Erwerbung:	Sammlungsgruppe: Graphik	Maße: 35,5 : 21,5 cm.
		Marke, Meisterzeichen:

Gegenstand: Himmelsbrief.
Werkstoff und Verarbeitung: Handschrift.
Datierung (Ort, Zeit, Meister): 18. Jahrh. Hameln 1790.

Wahrer Abdruck des Briefes, welchen Gott mit eigener Hand mit güldenen Buchstaben ..... (2 Blätter.)

Bemerkungen:

Fig. 3c: 'Wahrer Abdruck des Brieffes, welchen Gott mit eigener Hand mit güldenen … (2 Blätter.)' ('True copy of the letter which God wrote in golden … [2 pages.]'). Inventory sheet of 74 A 4, inv. no. 1928/176, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel (MHK), folklore collection.

found in letters entitled *Sonntagsbrief* ('Sunday letter') – along with a threat of punishment should the reader fail to observe this Christian duty. This is the message in the 'Hamelin Letter', for instance, which dates to the year 1790 and is documented in the ethnological or folklore collection of the Museum of Hessian History in Kassel (Fig. 3):

> Wer am Sonntage arbeitet, der ist verdammt. Und also gebiete ich euch, daß ihr des Sontags nicht arbeitet an euren Gütern auch sonsten eine Arbeit thut: Ihr sollet fleißig zur Kirche gehen, mit Andacht beten und eure Angesichter nicht schmincken noch eure Haare krausen noch Hoffart für der Welt treiben auch von eurem Reichthum den Armen mitteilen, und glauben, daß dieser Brief mit göttlicher Hand geschrieben, und von Jesu Christo ausgesandt ist, daß ihr nicht thut wie die unvernünfthigen Thiere. Ich gebe euch sechs Tage darinnen eure Arbeit fortzusetzen, und am Sontage in die Kirche zu gehen, und mit Andacht Gottes Wort hören: Werdet ihr das nicht thun, so will ich euch strafen mit Pestilenz, Krieg und theurer Zeit.[26]

> Anyone who works on a Sunday shall be damned. And so I command you not to work on your goods on Sundays or do any other work; you shall go to church [instead], pray with devotion, and not powder your faces, or curl your hair, or be haughty or let the poor know how wealthy you are; and you

[26] MHK, 74 A 4, inv. no. 1928/176.

must believe that this letter was written by a divine hand and sent out [to you] by Jesus Christ, that you do not do as the foolish beasts do. I give you six days in which to continue your work, and to go to church on Sunday, and to hear with devotion the word of God. If you do not do this, I shall punish you with pestilence, war, and the hardest of times.

Besides Christians' duty to observe Sundays, the Ten Commandments were also important here. The letters also contained instructions as to how the recipient should deal with the document so that it could have a positive effect for the user. The standard wording was as follows: 'Get someone else to make a copy of this letter'.[27] Different versions of this wording are rarer, such as this note: 'Whoever reveals this letter to people will be well rewarded for it and leave this world cheerfully'.[28]

Using the so-called *Mount of Olives phrase*, the letter evoked and formulated its own positive effect in many different variations and thus the real purpose of the protective spell (Fig. 4):

Im Namen Gottes des Vaters und des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes Amen. So wie Christus in Ölgarten stille stand, sollen alle Gewehre stille stehen. Wer dieses Geschriebene bei sich trägt, den wird nichts schaden es wird Gott (ihn) beschützen auf (vor) Dieben und Mördern es sollen ihnen nichts (anhaben) Geschütze Degen und Pistolen; alle Gewehre müßen stille stehen, alle durch den heiligen Engel Michael im Namen des Vaters des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes Amen. Gott sei mit mir! Wer diesen Segen bei sich hat der wird vor Gefahr geschützt bleiben […]. Wer diesen Brief bei sich hat der wird nicht gefangen noch durch des Feindes Waffen verletzt werden. […] kann er nicht gestochen noch geschossen werden auch am Leibe verletzt werden und Fleisch und Gedärm sollen in ihm ungeschädigt bleiben.[29]

In the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen. Just as Christ stood quietly in the Garden of Olives, so shall all rifles be silent. The person who carries this piece of writing on them will not be harmed by anything; God will protect (him) from thieves and murderers; nothing will (hurt) him; guns, swords and pistols – all guns must stop shooting, ... all thanks to the holy angel Michael; in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen. God be with me! Whoever has this blessing with him will remain protected from danger […]. Whoever has this letter on him shall not be captured, nor shall he be wounded by his enemy's weapons: [...] he cannot be stabbed or shot, nor can his body be wounded, and his flesh and guts shall stay unharmed.

Furthermore, an imaginary owner of the letter in the text gave advice on how to convince doubters of its effectiveness and usefulness, for example by copying the letter and hanging it around a dog's neck; any attempt to kill the dog would fail – proof of the document's real power. In the final section, God (the 'author' and 'writer') listed the draconian forms of punishment that threatened all those who refused to comply with the instructions and requirements in the letter:

Damit ihr euch hütet vor Sünden, mit Gutem den Feiertag haltet und in der Gottesfurcht lebet, werdet ihr die ewige Seligkeit erlangen, thut ihr dies aber nicht, so werde ich euch strafen mit Feur, Pest, Hunger und Krieg, und mit einer anderen Strafe. Ich werde aussetzen einen König wieder den andern, die Tochter wieder die Mutter, einen Herrn wieder den andern, einen Bruder wieder den andern, eine Schwester wieder den andern, eine Stadt wieder die andern, und werde alsdann meine Hand von euch zurücknehmen, wegen eurer Ungerechtigkeit, werde ich euch ergreifen und vertilgen hernach mit Donner und Blitz und zweischneidigen Schwertern auf die Erde herabfahren.[30]

So that you may guard yourselves against sin, spend the holiday doing good things and live in fear of God, you will attain eternal happiness, but if you do not do this, I will punish you with fire, plagues, hunger and war, and with another form of punishment. I will set one king against another, a daughter against her mother, one lord against another, one brother against another, one sister against another, one city against another, and then I will draw My hand away from you because of your injustice, and I will seize you and then destroy you with thunder and lightning and send double-edged swords plunging down upon the Earth.

[27] ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K50/M2/14. As the paratext shows, the letter originates from the German Erzgebirge ('Ore Mountains') *c*.1900.

[28] Copy of a letter from Johann Philip Weltner, written 'anno 1734'. ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1.

[29] 'Haus- und Schutzbrief', ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1.

[30] 'Letter written by My own hands', ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1.

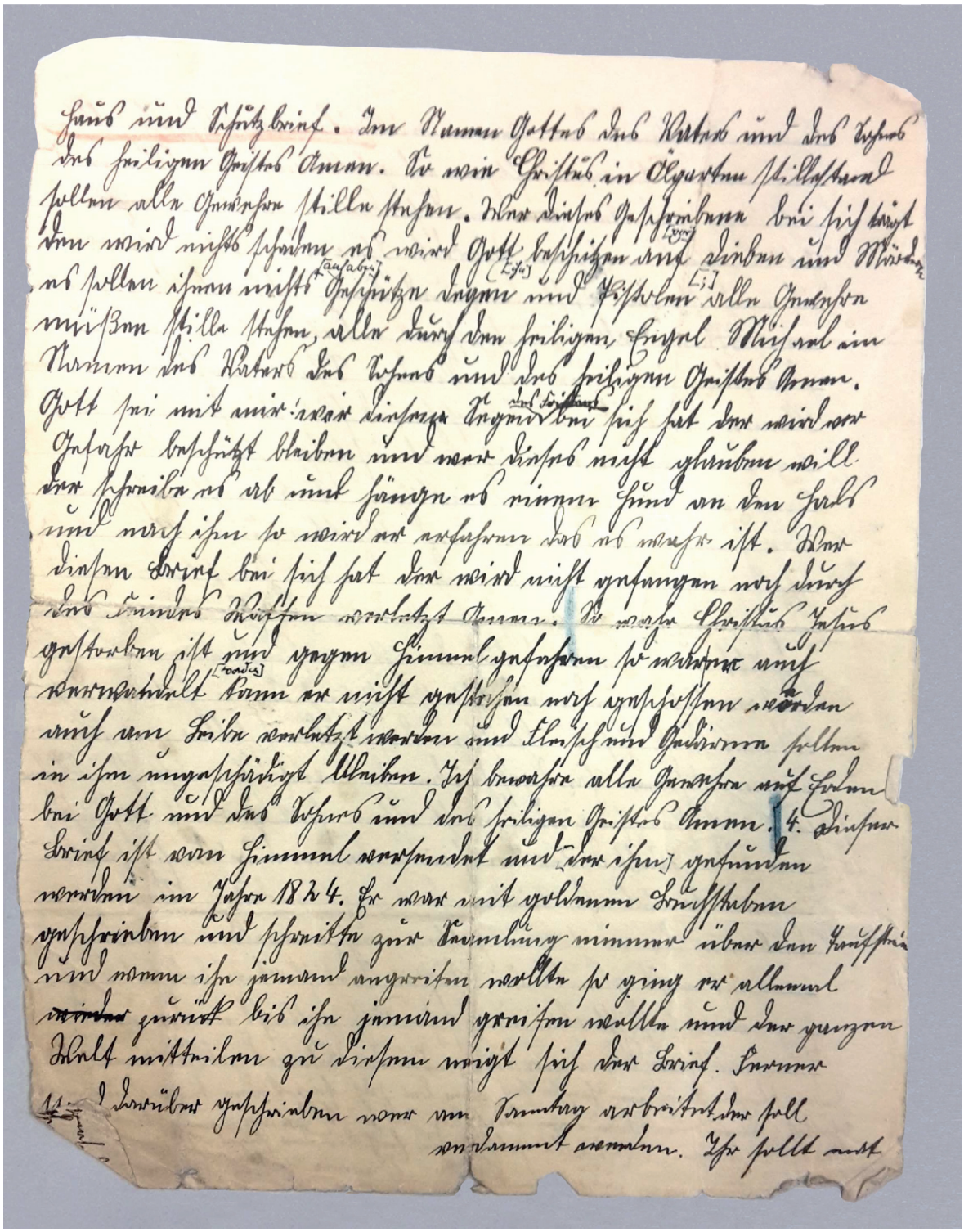


Fig. 4a: 'Haus- und Schutzbrief. Im Namen Gottes des Vaters und des Sohnes und des heiligen Geistes Amen. So wie Christus in Ölgarten stillestand sollen alle Gewehre stille stehen.' ('Letter of protection that includes the holder's home. In the name of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen. Just as Christ stood quietly in the Garden of Olives, so shall all rifles be silent.'). Paper, undated, ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1, recto.

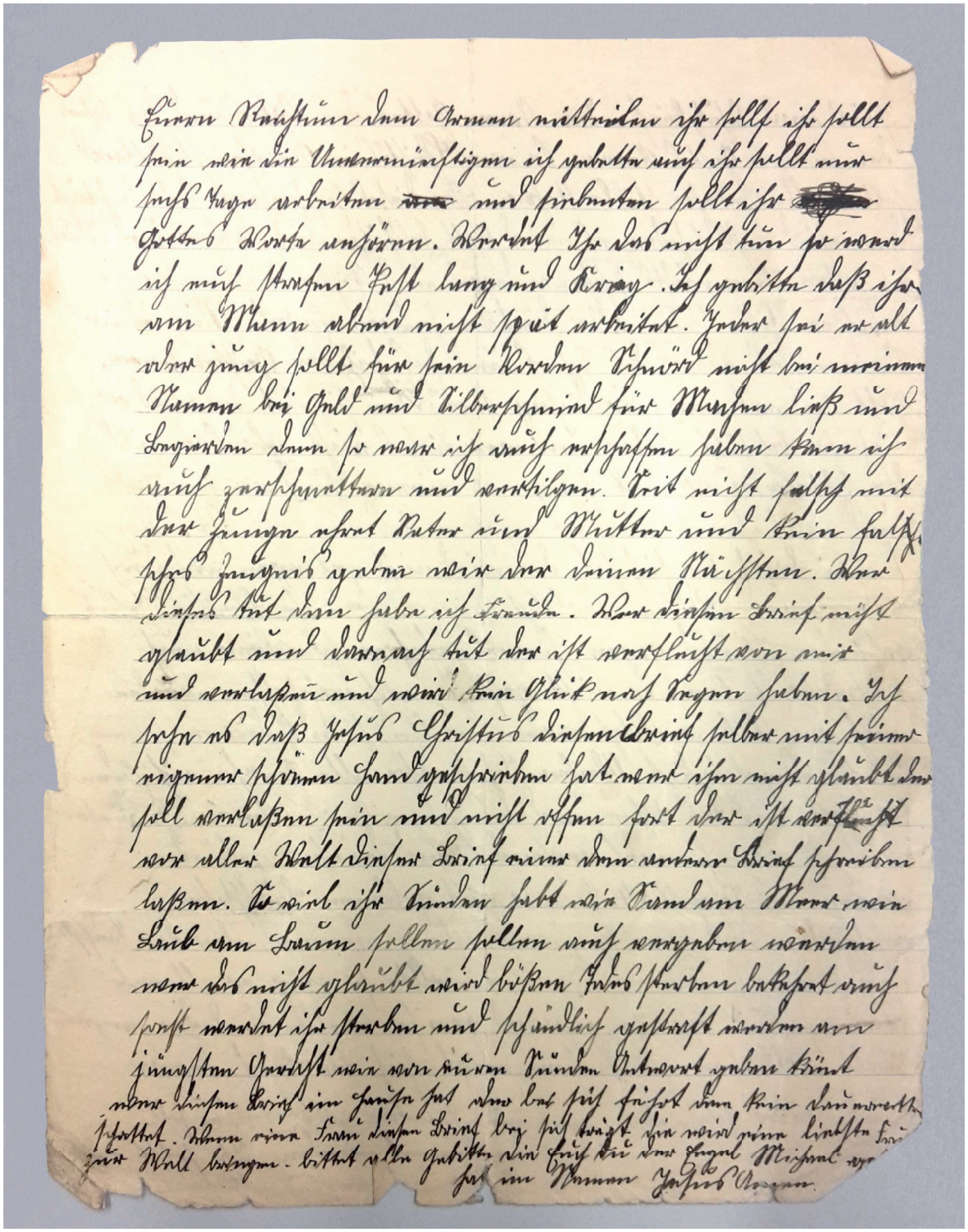


Fig. 4b: ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1, verso.

The ideal sequence of textual elements presented here can only be found in this form in a few heavenly letters, however. The opposite is generally the case, actually: a review of both handwritten and early printed documents from past centuries found in the archives revealed that no two texts are alike and that the number of variations that exist in them is very high. According to Stübe, the archival copies could be classified according to their age on the basis of just this differing text structure. Starting from a 'pure letter from Heaven' of the Gredorian[31] type serving as a kind of 'original version' and template which contained a text designed uniformly, he said the copyists had used different models and each turned them into new variants in the course of the centuries. The more recent the exemplars were, the more the original text had been expanded in the process of copying it. Most of all, changes were made to it and repetitions were created, which Stübe assumed to be an indication of 'strong, uncontrolled and uncultivated growth of the text'.[32] He came to the conclusion that modern letters of this kind from the nineteenth and twentieth century 'unite different subjects and motifs in a way that is completely arbitrary'.[33] In the following discussion, I will concentrate on the variety known as the Holstein type, which Stübe says had existed ever since 1791, the beginning of the revolutionary wars in France, and which had been widely used as 'a heavenly letter for the World War'.[34]

Magical artefacts: cultural and codicological questions

In the following, my focus is not on the theological or philological, text-critical treatment of these artefacts, but rather on the question of the production and practical use of such 'magical' manuscripts, the protective power of which was highly controversial in the First World War. Contemporary critics regarded the fact that many of these letters had been found on the bodies of dead soldiers as fundamental proof of their ineffectiveness,[35] and yet copying a heavenly letter by hand for the writer's husband, brother, father or friend as a personal gift before they went off to do service almost seems to have been a female duty on the 'home front', as it were, even in the early twentieth century.[36] The primary question, then, is what made people believe in the notion of letters having innate magical power and whether – or rather, how – this imaginary power was bound to the specific material nature of these documents. Based on a material-culture analysis of the artefacts, this study will combine codicological questions about the use, design and symbolic character of writing with an interpretive approach from cultural anthropology that looks at the perspectives of the various parties involved and their respective practices and interpretations. The different levels of historical knowledge production, which overlap in the material, must be considered in a differentiated way, however. One of these levels concerns the specific historical practice kept up by soldiers and their womenfolk in the context of the wars fought in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In this case, we need to ask questions about the respective social, cultural and institutional framework in which the manuscripts were produced and used as apotropaic aids. The second level refers to the rationalising strategies of interpretation and objectification of the second and third order with which scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth century classified and evaluated the historical existence and use of heavenly letters within existing time frames and their own disciplinary context.

Theologians and anthropological 'players': some methodological questions and perspectives

Consequently, our sources of information should always be examined with a view to how the scholars who were making specific points positioned themselves in relation to the practices that users actually adopted and how they drew attention to themselves as enlightened academics with their interpretations of what people understood to be strategies of action. On the one hand, this is about the position of the theologians, who strictly distinguished between faith and superstition and decried the use of and belief in heavenly letters as pure superstition. It was primarily representatives of the Protestant Church who criticised heavenly letters as remnants of an outdated Roman Catholic practice, viz.

[31] The term 'Gredoria' comes from the official title of some of the letters, but it does not actually mean anything in any language. Some scholars speculate that it might have been a malapropism of the Latin term *gloria* ('glory', 'praise'). See Figs 7, 8 and 13.

[32] Stübe 1918, 10.

[33] Stübe 1918, 5.

[34] Stübe 1918, 10.

[35] Modersohn 1915.

[36] See Foerster 1915, Krickeberg 1915, Staby 1915 and Stübe 1917, among others. Also see the contemporary accounts in the newspapers regarding the use of heavenly letters: „Unpolitischer Tagesbericht" ('apolitical daily report') 1915; 'Briefkasten („letterbox"), Frage ("question") 83' 1916, ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1.

venerating the saints, and thus as evidence of a misguided superstitious practice. On the other hand, we find the representatives of an early line of anthropological research who had their own agenda, parallel to the theologians'; although they did not engage in the same kind of heated disputes as the theologians concerning the correct religious interpretation of such letters, they did regard the soldiers' practices in the field from a scientific viewpoint as well, putting them down as 'Soldatenaberglauben' ('soldier's superstition').[37] The Swiss ethnologist Hanns Bächtold (1886–1941), for example, interpreted heavenly letters as proof of 'a strange mixture of different faiths, in which ecclesiastical views intermingled with mystical, spiritualistic ideas and remnants of ancient folk religion'.[38] They were regarded as a sign that archaic parts of 'folk belief' and the population's 'true character' or 'ethnic soul' had survived into modernity, parts which were each reactivated as a specific form of popular religious belief under wartime conditions. Bächtold's German colleague, the anthropologist Adolf Spamer (1883–1953), in contrast, viewed *Himmelsbriefe* much more rationally, saying they were 'expressions of people's lives [...] that the war keeps on spilling over towns and villages every day'.[39] In his opinion, these documents ought to be collected systematically as evidence of what modern wartime life is like and provide future generations with information not only about the bloody part of the war, but about 'the entire population's spiritual life in terms of its feelings, thoughts and behaviour'.[40]

Heavenly letters as part of manuscript cultures: their production, distribution and usage

Bearing all this in mind, it is expedient to adopt a critical view of the practice of collecting and assessing the value of heavenly letters in the past and present. We shall now turn to the magical manuscripts themselves, the main focus of this article. What is of particular interest here is their layout and the way the texts were designed, along with the connection between the materiality and the performative aspects[41] of these pieces of writing, 'addressing the agentive roles played by the text and the material of the written sign'.[42] As well as examining the physical and material aspects of these historical artefacts, the social aspects of their materiality will also be looked at here to investigate 'the necessity of studying the materiality of ancient texts in their physical and social contexts', in a similar way to the archaeologists Joshua D. Englehardt and Dimitri Nakassis.[43] What was the (professed) agency of these letters due to? Or rather, how was it actually produced? Under what conditions were these letters produced, *by* whom, and *for* whom? In what ways were they used? And how can the relationship between content, materiality and written form on the one hand and the presumed or hoped-for effect of the artefacts on the other be grasped in concrete terms? If all these different aspects are taken into account, then the question arises of whether (or rather, how) heavenly letters functioned as active components of a network of players, ideas and actions, a network in which 'idea, behaviour and artefact' were related to each other and were 'co-dependent'.[44] The assumption here is that their agency primarily becomes visible in the connection – i.e. the dynamics – existing between these different aspects and relations. Presumably, the power of magical manuscripts was neither intrinsic nor unilaterally evocable, but arose in the interaction between the levels just mentioned.

Three aspects will be examined in more detail in the following section. The first one concerns the *production* of heavenly letters, or the 'emergence of an artefact in the hand of the producer'.[45] How meaningful is the handwriting that was used to the agency of the artefact? What role did handwriting play in a letter's effectiveness? How exactly was the writing (or rather, copying) done? And what does the term *copying* actually mean in this case? How is the copying reflected in the text itself – in its wording, the patterns it contains and its layout, and is it possible to trace the process

[37] Cf. Spamer 1915, 48f. See Bächtold 1917, 17–22 on letters of protection. Cf. the multi-part essay by an unknown author as well, which explicitly refers to literature on cultural anthropology, H. M. 1919 and Beitl 1937.

[38] Bächtold 1917, 2.

[39] Spamer 1915,3; see Kienitz and Müller 2020.

[40] Spamer 1915, 51.

[41] See Bryan Lowe's talk, 'Performing a Manuscript in the Ninth Century and Translating It in the Twenty-first: Methodological Reflections for Manuscript Studies', at the conference *Varieties and Patterns of Manuscripts in Medieval Japan*, 21 22 August 2018, at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg.

[42] Englehardt and Nakassis 2013, 10.

[43] Englehardt and Nakassis 2013, 11.

[44] Knappett 2002, 100.

[45] Knappett 2002, 101.

in the manuscript? The second aspect is the *distribution* of such letters, meaning how the artefacts were embedded in social relationships, so it is concerned with the material side of social networks in a sense. What role do forms of human relationships such as kinship play? What role does the gender of the recipient and that of the letter-writer play in the making and use of a manuscript and the power attributed to it? Thirdly, the actual *usage* (or 'consumption') of these written artefacts is addressed in view of the fact that they were believed to possess divine power by the parties involved, who all wished for protection. In what ways were the letters actually used? Are there any instructions on using them 'correctly' in the manuscripts themselves or were these discussed elsewhere? And where and how were the letters worn as amulets? As a look at the archival sources makes clear – both at the objects themselves and at the narratives about the respective ways in which they were worn – the active use of the letters clearly had an effect on the material of which they were made, especially the surface of it (Fig. 5). What we therefore also need to clarify is whether and how traces of their use and the aura and effect they have are connected and, in a further step, what role the scholarly forms of reception play in objectifying these interpretations.

Magical lettering: the connection between writing and magical power

It is helpful to consider theological and philological theories on the magical power of writing to address these questions. If one follows the argumentation of the Swiss theologian Alfred Bertholet (1868–1951), then the 'Machtgeladenheit' ('power-chargedness')[46] or 'Machthaltigkeit' ('innate power')[47] of writing is based on the idea of a numinous, divine authorship of these texts and on the 'magical' presence the characters have on the piece of paper. In addition, these properties are also based on the notion of the artefacts possessing a potentially miraculous agency. Initially, the social factor of having only limited access to reading and writing played an important role here. According to the Danish folklorist Bengt Holbek (1933–1992), it was primarily the illiterate part of the population that interpreted the process of writing as a kind of magical practice. As he argues, the 'writing itself, the very letters, were seen as magical. The effect is not associated with the text of the writing, but with the writing as such'.[48] The idea behind this was that the writer could also exercise power over the characters he produced himself: 'What appears to me to be the most characteristic feature of the folklore about writing is that writing is interpreted as a physical act of power. [...] a form of rhetoric, in which the being one wants to influence becomes physically bound to the medium one writes upon'.[49] If one follows this line of argumentation, then the power of writing was not only founded in the 'visual signs'[50] themselves, but was equally bound to the process of writing and the nature of the writing surface. As writing for everyday purposes became more popular, however, people gradually stopped attributing magical power to objects.[51] In place of that, the notion of writing possessing magical power in the sense of *ephesia grammata* (mysticism surrounding letters) was transferred to combinations of letters that appear strange or incomprehensible.[52] Rudolf Stübe spoke of a *Wortzauber* ('magic of words') formed by 'meaningless phrases, rows of letters, syllables, [and] complexes of sounds that have a magical effect'.[53] The attribution of power and agency to writing was thus transferred 'to some *special* writing because ordinary writing has lost its nimbus;

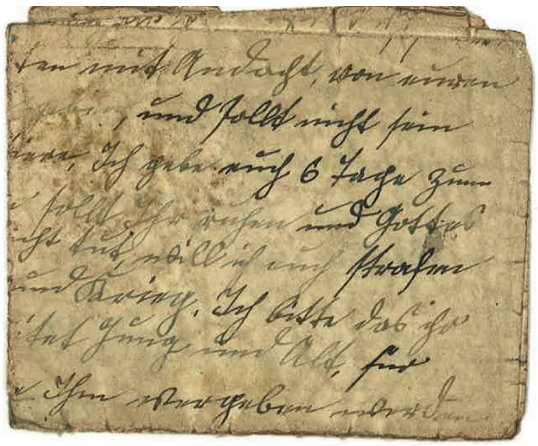


Fig. 5a: ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K70/M3/1, folded together.

[46] Cf. Bertholet 1949, 7.

[47] Bertholet 1949, 13.

[48] Holbek 1989, 191. The narratologist Sabine Wienker-Piepho also assumes that the 'ambivalent aura of writing' is primarily due to the fact that 'the ability to write, writing and what is actually written' was attributed a 'high, numinous value' by large parts of the rural population, Wienker-Piepho 2000, 330.

[49] Holbek 1989, 192.

[50] Englehardt and Nakassis 2013, 11.

[51] On the importance of writing in everyday culture, see Goody 1986.

[52] Bertholet 1949, 14f. and 35.

[53] Stübe 1918, 45.

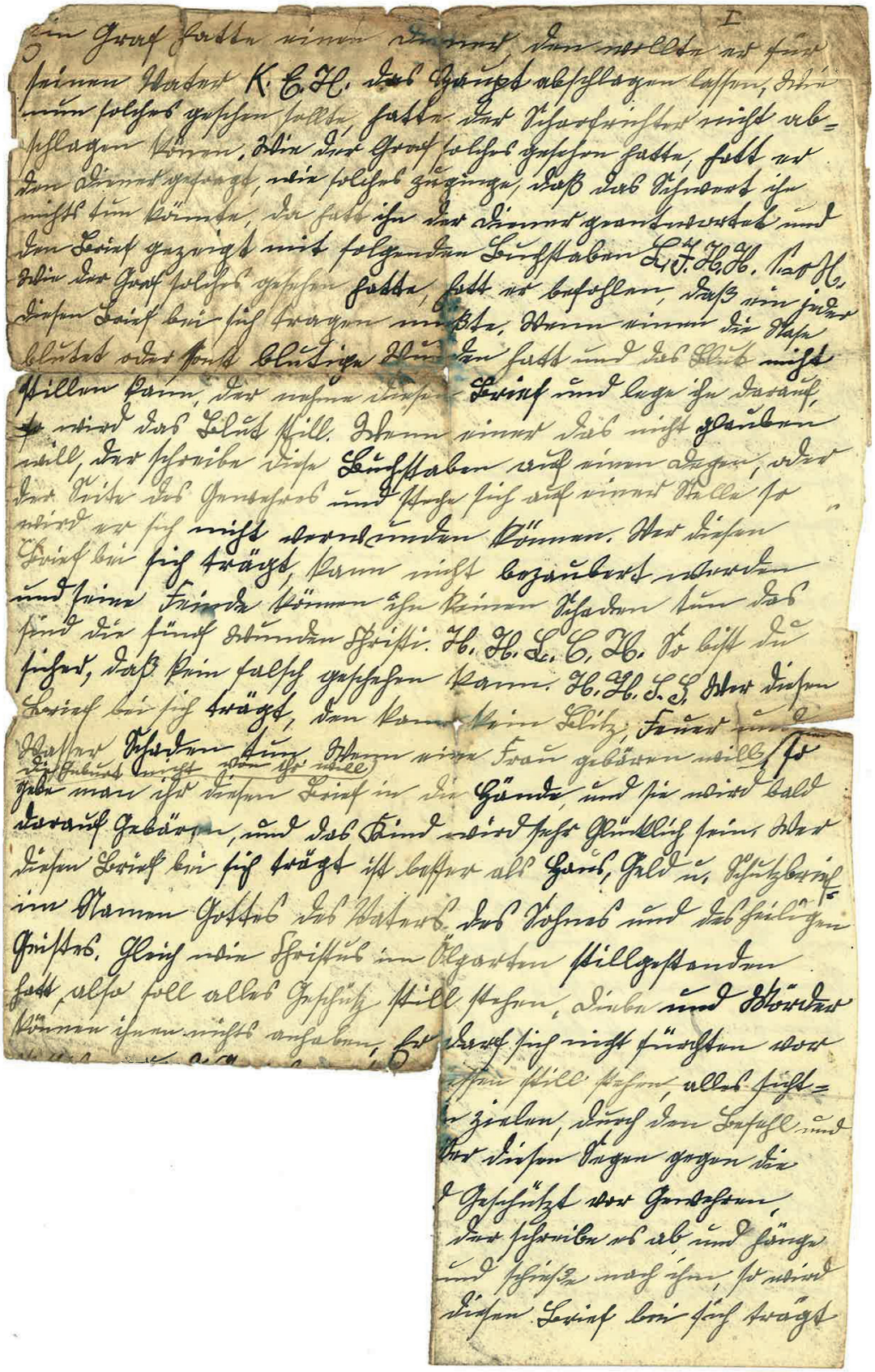


Fig. 5b: The letter beginns with the words 'Ein Graf hatte einen Diener, den wollte er für seinen Vater K. E. H. das Haupt abschlagen lassen. Wie nun solches geschehen sollte, hatte der Scharfrichter nicht abschlagen könen' ('A count had a servant whose head he wanted to cut off for his father, K. E. H. When this was supposed to happen, the executioner was unable to cut it off'). ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K70/M3/1, recto. According to documentation in the archive (ISGV Dresden, CSB, Himmelsbrief 119), the owner, who came from Ludwigslust, said he had carried the letter on him from WWI until 1966 and was sure nothing had happened to him because of it.

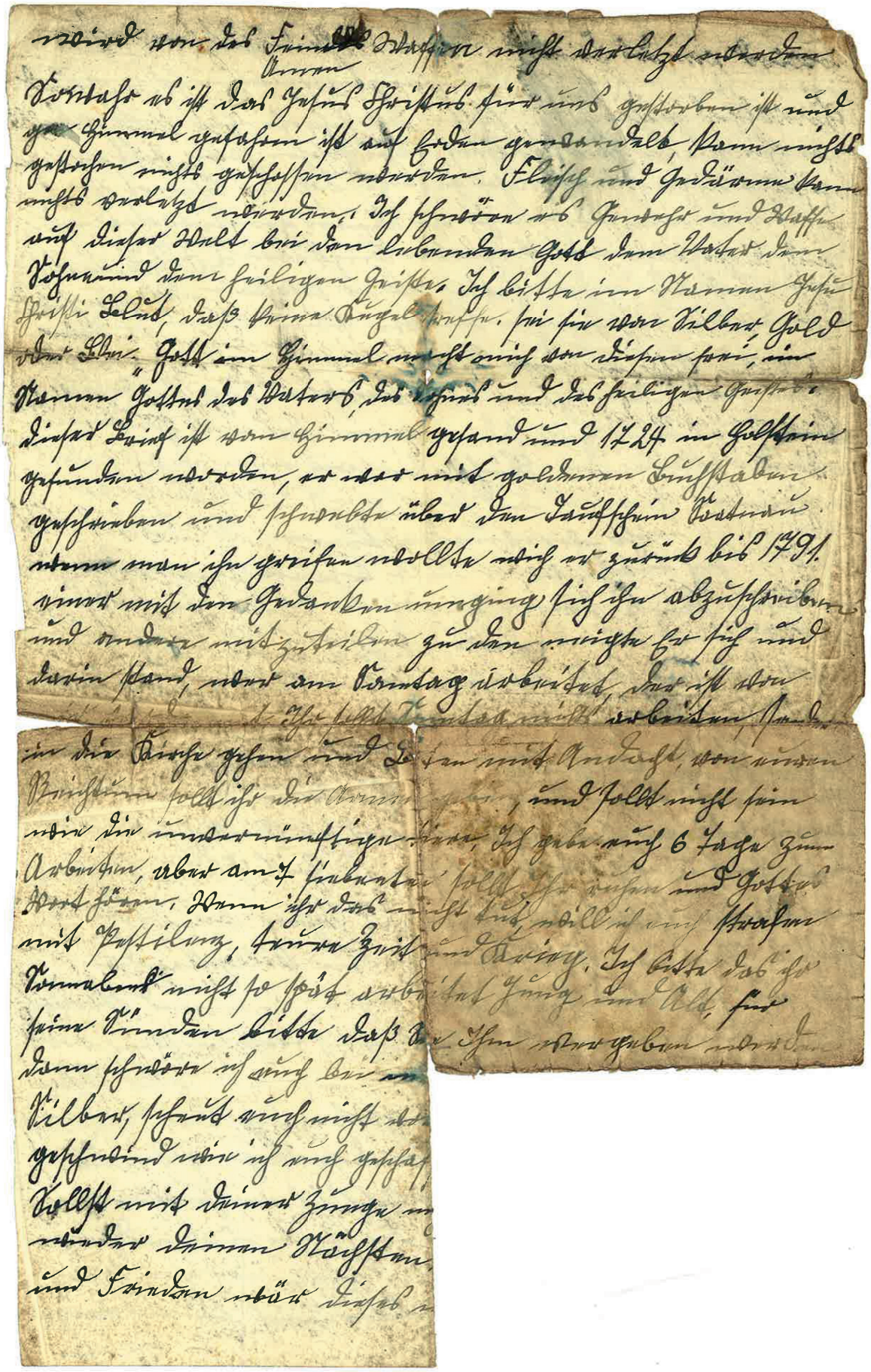


Fig. 5c: ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K70/M3/1, verso.

it is used by too many'.[54] The idea of – or rather, desire for – written communication with God was also based on this symbolic glorification of writing. Letters from Heaven, for example, were regarded as 'a particularly revealing chapter of the apotheotic idealisation of writing and literacy', similar to the biblical portrayal of God handing down the Decalogue to Moses on tablets of stone or clay.[55] Seen against the backdrop of the historical debate on God's ability to write, these letters served as evidence that Christ himself had written a letter to the faithful, the particular power of which had to be shared and maintained by specific forms of reproduction.[56]

Production: the power of handwriting

First of all, a central aspect of this genre of manuscripts will be examined in terms of the letters' production, namely the question of the link that exists between the production and distribution of heavenly letters and the agency ascribed to them, and what dynamics existed that influenced this relationship. According to the 'fable about their origin', as Vogt called it,[57] the very existence of such letters was based on the idea of a handwritten copy (Fig. 6). Although the individual sections of heavenly letters vary, depending on what type of letters they are,[58] one consistent feature of them that is important in all the surviving manuscripts is that they tell their own history, according to which each letter was written by Christ or God Himself and brought down to Earth by the Archangel Michael. The letters we are concerned with here mention different places and dates when people were first confronted with them in their 'original' form, which obviously relate to different wartime events as well. Legend has it that these divine appearances always took place in a church. The heavenly letter 'hovered in the air'[59] above the baptismal font, avoiding any attempts by those present to catch and possess it. Written in 'golden characters',[60] it only turned to the person who wanted to copy it: 'It moves away from anyone who wants to snap at it, but it tilts towards anyone who wants to copy it and then opens itself up'.[61] As we can see here, the reproduction of the original version by the handwritten copy is already part of the legend about its creation, including the 'fact' that it may not be touched because of its divine origin.[62] In the letter itself, it explicitly states that it should be copied and passed on to someone else as a result of any human encounter with it: 'This letter shall be copied [and passed on] from person to person ...', it said – a clear instruction by virtue of which the power of the protective magic associated with the artefact was meant to be preserved.

This wording only changed in later versions created in the nineteenth century, parallel to the emergence of mass production, and it was then amended as follows: 'This letter shall be passed on from one person to another in written or printed form ...'.[63] In this case, the variant of the handwritten copy is still mentioned as being a prerequisite for the recipient to be able to benefit from the letter's divine power. But the reference to the letter being distributed as a printed version suggests that both possible forms of reproduction – handwriting and printing – were available at that time and were also taken into consideration in the instructions on how users should handle the original letter. A number of questions arise here concerning the change of media just mentioned, especially regarding the relationship between handwriting and printing, not to mention the validity of and power ascribed to the different versions.[64] Did this transition from handwriting to printing only take place in one direction or did both variants continue to exist parallel to each other? In this case, we need to look for pointers as to whether a change from printing to handwriting was also possible after moving from handwriting to printing, or whether (and if so, how) these medial variants can be linked to the respective context in which the letters were used.

[54] Holbek 1989, 192. The emphasis is in the original version.

[55] Wienker-Piepho 2000, 321.

[56] Regarding the issue of whether God and His son can actually write, see Spener 1844 and Bertholet 1949, 10.

[57] Vogt called this section the 'fable about their origin' (598) or the 'fable of the heavenly provenance of the Sunday letter'. Vogt 1911, 586, 609–11.

[58] See the accounts in Olbrich 1908, Abt 1909, Vogt 1911 and Stübe 1918 on the matter.

[59] Stettler 1985.

[60] The note that the letter was written in 'golden characters' needs to be examined in more detail with regard to the meaning and use of golden characters in medieval Gospels, for instance. See Trost 1991. I would like to thank Bruno Reudenbach for this information.

[61] Branky 1902, 150.

[62] Speyer 1970, 38.

[63] This example is from John 1900, 51.

[64] See Benne 2015, 26–28.

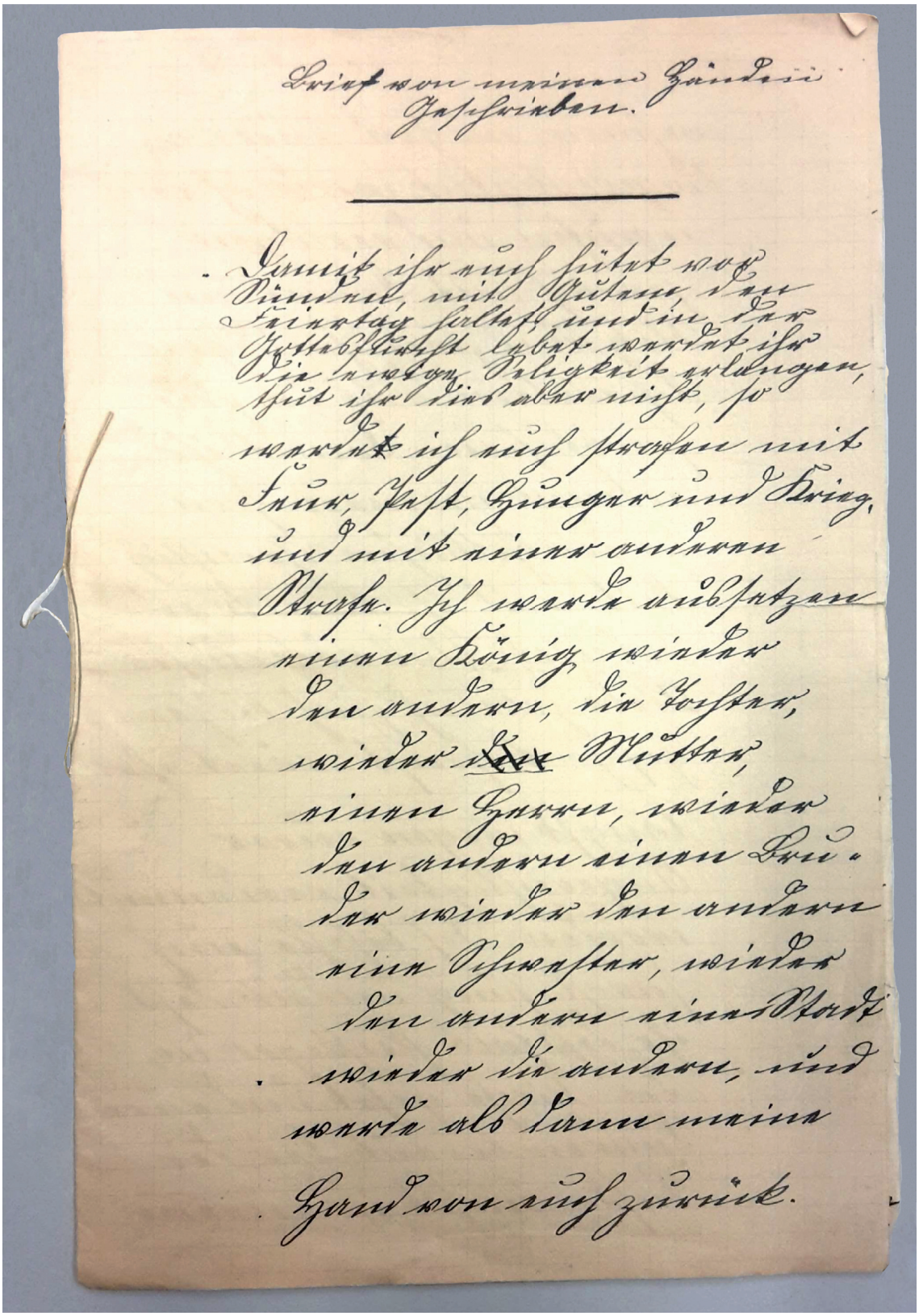


Fig. 6a: 'Brief von meinen Händen Geschrieben' ('Letter written by My own hand'). In German Kurrentschrift. ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1. Eight pages in all, here p. 1.

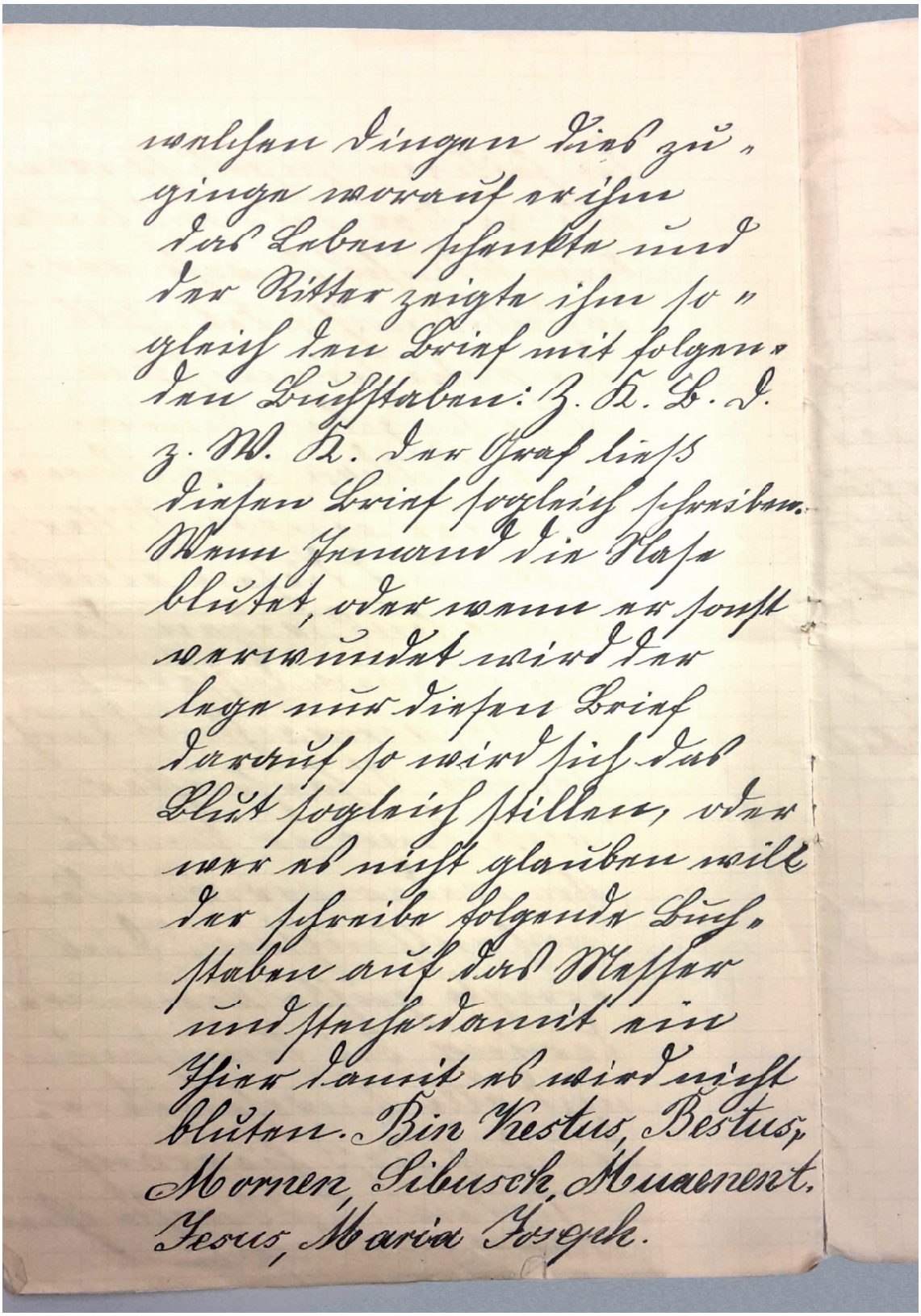


Fig. 6b: ISGV Dresden NaAS/K91/M1. The writer changed to Latin script to write the magic words '[I] Am Kestus, Bestus, Mornen, Sibusch, Muaenent, Jesus, Mary Joseph' on p. 6.

The practice of copying letters: rules for making an authorised copy

What exactly did this copying look like, what conditions was it subject to and how did the copying affect the layout of the letters? The power of writing did not just catch people's attention in a religious context, but in connection with *magical* words and phrases as well, which were particularly intriguing, it seems. According to contemporary experts on folklore and theology, the writing of magical words was a key factor in their power because spoken language was considered transitory and ephemeral. 'If a magical effect is to last, then just saying the spell out loud is usually not enough; it has to be recorded, [i.e.] written down', noticed the Wroclaw theologian Adolf Wuttke (1819–1870) in his standard work on current superstition among Germans, *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube der Gegenwart*.[65] In a further step, Stübe compared the process of copying with the transferral of saints' mortal remains or lending of relics in the Middle Ages, practices by which 'the sphere of influence' these artefacts had could be increased. In his interpretation, 'distributing the letter by copying it [...]' was 'a form of "transmission" through which the power of the letter was to be increased'.[66]

The copying and duplication of the original letter was thus part of the attribution of magical power to it in two respects. According to this logic, the owner of a heavenly letter was responsible for the agency of his copy himself and ought to carefully consider whom he gave it to for the purpose of copying it. Anyone who lent the letter to a person who quite obviously did not believe in its protective effect – such as a sceptical folklorist or a theologian who rejected the whole thing as mere superstition – ran the risk of his own 'original copy' losing its effect this way. If it turned out that the letter of protection did not work in the face of danger, then the bearer himself was to blame because of his attitude. The literature on folklore research provides a host of examples of this kind. The criminologist and folklorist Albert Hellwig (1880–1950), a lieutenant and member of an ammunition column, searched for heavenly letters during his stay in the field and reported in 1916 about an encounter he had had with two brothers who had each received such a letter from their mother.[67] One of the brothers, the gunner Karl E., had reluctantly lent his own letter to Hellwig for him to copy it – 'all the more so since I made no secret of the fact that I did not believe in its effectiveness', Hellwig explained. Later, when Karl was seriously wounded despite him carrying his letter from Heaven around with him, both brothers had apparently interpreted the injury as punishment for lending the letter to someone who did not believe in its miracle power. Another explanation about the loss of its power that Hellwig recounted was that 'a mistake had been made while copying the letter, which rendered the whole letter ineffective'.[68] The folklorist Karl Olbrich (1865–1931), who served in the war as an officer, discovered that his boy did not even want to show him his heavenly letter: 'But I can't show you that!' was always the response he got, from which Olbrich concluded that 'the spell loses its power by being made known to others'.[69]

According to the contemporary logic of those who used heavenly letters, then, copying was not just copying, but its performance and effectiveness were linked to the context and the writer's intentions and legitimation (to him- or herself). The reason for feeling that a letter had lost its magical quality due to its unauthorised reproduction was the fact that the copyist's intention of making a copy of it for scientific purposes was obviously believed to be likely to damage its aura. Collectors required precise copies of such letters to be made, but not because it was important to them to preserve the letter's value as a magical 'gift' – on the contrary. The type of mechanical copying that was called for thus did not follow the instructions or use the set phrases formulated in the manuscript itself to lend it its magical power. As we can argue here with reference to Alfred Gell, the lack of miraculous power in this case was due to the fact that the purely technical character of a copy made for reference purposes in the sense of *indexicality* was not the same as authentication, i.e. the simultaneous transferral of meaning to the newly created manuscript in the sense of *iconicity*.[70] Here it becomes clear that there were different categories of authenticity and that those who used the letters had to differentiate exactly and decide who was entitled to copy the letter in such a way that not only a *technical* copy of it was created, but a copy that could become an effective original

[65] Wuttke 1869, 166. See Nemec 1976, 99–104 as well.

[66] Stübe 1918, 43.

[67] Hellwig 1916, 47ff.

[68] Hellwig 1916, 51.

[69] Olbrich 1917, 144.

[70] See Knappett 2002, 108. Knappett refers to Alfred Gell's terminology and argumentation here.

itself. In order to produce such power and create 'authorised copies',[71] the intention behind the process of copying had to be one that re-authenticated the letter in handwriting terms by believing in it and distinguished it in its function as a 'divine gift' from a mere copy made for its own sake.

Samples of writing and writing skills

As many of the archived examples of heavenly letters show, the writing skills of their authors varied considerably. If the artefacts are judged according to codicological and palaeographical criteria, then certain letters such as the one handed over to the Museum of Hessian History in Kassel in 1928 exhibit a high degree of skill at writing (Fig. 3). This particular letter, which is apparently from Hamelin and was penned in 1790, is a 'true copy of the letter which God wrote in golden letters with His own hand and sent to us through his holy angel Michael ...'.[72] This is evident from the regular handwriting, which is clearly legible, the regularity of the line spacing, the low number of mistakes and corrections it contains and the regular page layout. The fluent use of German *Kurrentschrift* (a style of cursive handwriting once used in Germany) also indicates that the author was an experienced writer. The ornamentation of the capital letters in the title line indicates that the writer was familiar with official writing and probably worked in an office, which is additionally confirmed by the reclamantes, i. e. by the way in which the handwriting runs from one page to the next (as in an official document) and it always runs up to the margin, but no further.

The folkloristic collectors also recorded and commented on the writers' (lack of) skills in very clear terms. Albrecht Dieterich, a philologist and religious scholar (1866–1908), found that a 'most awkward hand' had been at work in the majority of heavenly letters he examined.[73] Karl Olbrich, a German officer posted to the front who collected a large number of such letters, believed he could even tell how quickly the author of a letter had written it from its appearance; he noted 'what painstaking care' the copyists had taken to reproduce them slowly, letter by letter, word by word.[74] The original *Himmelsbriefe* from Adolf Spamer's collection in Dresden also show a lack of routine in writing and presenting texts, as their layout and handwriting reveal.[75]

In addition, however, the differences between an *original* from a soldier's possessions and a copy made *for scientific purposes* are clearly apparent in the artefacts themselves. On the one hand, there are obvious traces of use, which shall be discussed in more detail in a moment. On the other hand, the letters that were actually used as amulets were mostly designed without any margin, as if the front and back of the unlined paper had to be filled up right to the edge of the page. The writing is clumsy and the lines are not spaced apart evenly; some of them even overlap. The fact that many of these texts contain insertions and corrections suggests that the copy was made in a hurry or the content was actually dictated to the writer and that little attention could be paid to writing perfectly or even carefully to transfer the contents of one original letter to another one.[76]

Copyists' mistakes: 'slips of the pen'[77] and 'inventive arbitrariness'[78]

Only when these letters are transcribed carefully does it become clear that the process of copying a text – which was partly meant to recreate originality – was often nothing more than a mechanical exercise. The copies were obviously intended for personal use and meant to be magical, and the way they were organised was rather disorderly. Even contemporary experts assumed that this could have been a case of 'fleeting and thoughtless copying [...] by untrained hands'[79] since the writer obviously lacked a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Apart from the malapropism of individual terms, this was indicated by omissions of words. There are cases, though, where parts of sentences or even whole paragraphs have been copied twice, which Olbrich reckons must either have been due to lack of attention or the idea of two passages being better

[71] Wienker-Piepho 2000, 324f.

[72] Museum of Hessian History in Kassel, Volkskundesammlung (Ethnographic Collection), 74 A 4, inv. no. 1928/176. The year 1790 is not mentioned in the letter itself, so this information probably comes from when it was first documented and possibly refers to the year the letter was created.

[73] Dieterich 1901, 10.

[74] Olbrich 1917, 145.

[75] See 'Ein Graf hatte einen Diener' ('A count had a servant'). ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K70/M3/1 (Fig. 4).

[76] Bertholet, however, refers to the duty a writer has towards the written text and to 'the emphasis placed on [producing] the most accurate version of the written text possible if it is to have full effect'; see Bertholet 1949, 32.

[77] See Dieterich 1901, 10.

[78] See Wuttke 1869, 168.

[79] Olbrich 1897, 91.

than just one, making the magic stronger.[80] However, certain slips of the pen suggest that the spelling mistakes could have been due to a dialect or unclear pronunciation, which would mean that the texts may have been written down from memory and in the copyist's own dialect or dictated (this would explain mistakes like 'Gereina'/ 'St. Gemeine' instead of 'St. Germain', 'Mademburg in Prussia' instead of 'Magdeburg',[81] 'Preisen' instead of 'Preußen' [Prussia], 'Perlen' instead of 'Berlin' and 'Resetenz' instead of 'Residenz').[82] Julius Jordan, a vicar from Warendorf who received a copy of a heavenly letter from a dying craftsman while working as a hospital chaplain, interpreted exactly this kind of mistake as the result of a long-term copying process and thus as a phenomenon to do with perception: 'The numerous variants, which are certainly more than just spontaneous spelling mistakes, really are characteristic witnesses of a long journey from one hand to the next'.[83] However, there are also indications that these could be deliberate regional adaptations that were intended to authenticate the 'fable of origin' by naming familiar sites and significant dates of military campaigns and wartime events in the region (e.g. 'found in Rendsburg', 'found in Magdeburg' or 'found in Berlin').[84] In many cases, though, the place names mentioned were simply made up ('Rödergau', 'Rudena', 'Redamu', 'Wanda' and countless others). The fact that a copyist was inexperienced in writing down the words of a text he read or had read out to him on a blank sheet of paper and occasionally failed to understand the meaning of the sentence either is shown by mistakes like 'Goldstein' instead of 'Holstein', 'kann nicht gehangen werden' instead of 'kann nicht *gefangen* werden', 'Ölgraben' instead of 'Ölgarten' and 'Tägen' rather than 'Degen' or 'Segen'.[85] This equally applies to the adoption of terms that were spelt correctly, but did not make sense at that particular point in the text. In another case, the intended haemostatic effect of a letter from Heaven we see in the words 'wenn einem die *Nase* blutet' ('if one's nose bleeds') got changed to the more ominous 'wen einem die *Strafe* blutet' ('whoever awaits punishment'), possibly because the capital letter *N* could also be read as *St* in German cursive script at the time.[86]

While many of the folkloristic collectors and reporters tacitly corrected these apparent errors when the transcribed copies were being published in order to present a coherent, well-written text, in 1901 Dieterich specifically addressed 'slips of the pen' he had identified himself and by doing so made readers aware that he had adapted the original himself to make it more understandable for them. In one letter from Heaven that he had a copy of, for example, it originally said that the letter 'über der Tanche flätig strebte', which is utter nonsense; in Dieterich's opinion, though, it ought to have said 'über der Taufe … schwebte', which means 'hovered over the baptismal font'. Nonetheless, Dieterich had to admit that some of the passages in the text had remained a mystery to him, however: 'was sich in *flätig* verbirgt, kann ich nicht sagen' ('I can't say what *flätig* is supposed to mean').[87]

Both the manuscript examples and the comments in them suggest that the reason why those who wrote the letters replaced terms with others was mainly because they did not understand the content; they changed words with which they were not familiar or which they simply were unable to decipher in the handwritten pattern of text. By doing this, they altered the content, creating new elements, some of which were mysterious, incomprehensible words that reinforced the numinous character of the text for contemporary recipients in the course of further copying and distribution.[88] In one case, for example, a writer had modified the passage about the baptismal font, turning it into something that sounded miraculous: 'über Tausende zu Statagami' (literally, 'about thousands to statagami'). Another writer added meaningless 'magical' words to it and used Latin script to mark the magic in them: 'Bin Kestus, Bestus, Mornen, Sibusch, Muaenent. Jesus, Maria Joseph' (literally, '[I] am Kestus, Bestus, Mornen, Sibush, Muaenent.

[80] Olbrich 1897, 91. In a version of the text from 1908, Olbrich goes into more detail about the crude compilation of the text 'according to the principle of "two is better than one"'. One of the letters he examined could therefore 'serve as a textbook example of how our compiled letters of protection might have come into being in the first place'; see Olbrich 1908, 48.

[81] Dietrich 1911, 248.

[82] References to slips of the pen and misreadings can particularly be found in Vogt 1911, 609f. Kirchner called for the texts to be read out loud, as he presumed 'one will realise what sense is hidden in the nonsense if one surrenders [sic!] to the sound of the phonetics and not to their written form'; Kirchner 1908, 21.

[83] Jordan 1908, 335.

[84] See Köhler 1898, 117 on this point; he developed the thesis that one 'adapts the place where [the heavenly letter] was found to the place where it is needed so as to sanctify it'.

[85] See Vogt 1911, 618 regarding these examples.

[86] See the commentary in Schütze 1912, 345, 352 on this point.

[87] Dieterich 1901, 10.

[88] Bertholet 1949, 34–36.

Himmels-Brief,

welcher mit goldenen Buchstaben geschrieben, und zu sehen ist in der Michaelis-Kirche zu St. German,

Gredoria genannt, allwo der Brief über der Taufe schwebt.

Wer ihn angreifen will, vor dem weichet er, wer ihn aber abschreiben will, zu dem neigt er sich und thut sich selbst auf.

Vor dir, o Gott! sich kindlich scheuen,
Ist unsre allergrößte Pflicht.
Kein Mensch kann deiner Huld sich freuen,
Scheu't er dein heilig Auge nicht.
Denn wer in wir durch heiligen Geist,
Die Furcht vor dir die kindlich heißt.

Inallem, was ich thu' und denke,
Laß, Herr, das meine Weisheit sein,
Daß ich mein Herz zur Sorgfalt lenke,
Vor jeder Sünde mich zu scheu'n.
Denn wer noch Lust zur Sünde hat,
Der fürchtet dich nicht in der That.

Gieb, daß ich stets zu Herzen nehme,
Daß du allgegenwärtig bist,
Und, das zu thun mich ernstlich schäme
Was dir, mein Gott, zuwider ist.
Der Beifall einer ganzen Welt
Hilft dem ja nichts, der dir mißfällt.

Um deines Beifalls mich zu freuen,
Erwecke steten Ernst in mir,
Verborg'ne Sünden selbst zu scheuen,
Damit ich nie den Trost verlier':
Du Herr, erbarmst dich väterlich
Der Schwachen, die nur fürchten dich!

5.
Ja, Vater, laß mit Furcht und Zittern
Mich schaffen meine Seligkeit.
Soll nichts mein ewig Glück erschüttern,
So laß mich in der Gnadenzeit,
Mit Vorsicht alles Unrecht flieh'n,
Und nur um deine Gunst bemühn.

6.
Gieb, daß ich stets ein gut Gewissen
Vor dir zu haben sorgsam sei;
Und mache von den Hindernissen,
Zur wahren Tugend, selbst mich frei.
Nie störe Furcht und Lust der Welt
Mich, das zu thun, was dir gefällt.

7.
In deiner Furcht laß mich stets wandeln,
Und überall, auch wo ich sei,
Nach deiner Vorschrift redlich handeln.
Du hassest alle Heuchelei.
Wer dich von Herzen scheu't und ehrt,
Nur der ist dir, o Vater, werth.

8.
In deiner Furcht laß mich einst sterben,
So schreckt mich weder Tod noch Grab,
So wer'd ich jenes Leben erben,
Dazu dein Sohn sich für mich gab.
Gott! deine Furcht bringt Segen ein,
Ihr Lohn wird groß im Himmel sein

Sollt' ich meinem Gott nicht singen?
Sollt' ich ihm nicht dankbar seyn?
Hab' ich doch in allen Dingen,
So viel Anlaß mich zu freu'n.
O, es ist ja nichts als Liebe,
Die sein Vaterherz bewegt,
Die mich mit Erbarmen trägt,
Wenn ich seinen Willen übe.
Alles währet seine Zeit;
Gottes Lieb' in Ewigkeit.

Weil denn ohne Ziel und Ende,
Vater, deine Gnaden sind,
So erheb' ich Herz und Hände
Freudig zu dir, als dein Kind;
Bitte: woll'st mir Gnade geben,
Dir mein ganzes Herz zu weih'n,
Deiner Liebe mich zu freu'n,
Ganz zu deinem Ruhm zu leben,
Bis ich dich nach dieser Zeit
Lieb' und lob' in Ewigkeit.

Also gebiete ich euch, daß ihr des Sonntags nicht arbeitet an euren Gütern, und sonst keine Arbeit thut, sondern fleißig in die Kirche gehet und mit Andacht betet, eure Haare nicht kräuselt, noch Hoffarth in der Welt treibet, und von eurem Reichthum den Armen mittheilet und glaubet, daß ich diesen Brief von meiner Hand in Jesu Christo ausgesandt, damit ihr nicht thut wie die unvernünftigen Thiere. Ich gebe euch sechs Tage eure Arbeit fortzusetzen, und am Sonntage früh in die Kirche zu gehen, die heilige Predigt und Gottes Wort zu hören; werdet ihr das nicht thun, so will ich euch strafen mit Pestilenz, Krieg und theurer Zeit. Ich gebiete euch, daß ihr des Samstags nicht zu spät arbeitet, des Sonntags früh in der Kirche mit Jedermann, Jung und Alt, andächtig für eure Sünden betet, daß sie euch vergeben werden. Schwöret nicht boshaftig bei meinem Namen, begehret nicht Silber oder Gold, und sehet nicht auf fleischliche Lüste und Begierden, denn sobald ich euch erschaffen habe, sobald kann ich euch auch wieder zernichten. Einer soll den andern nicht tödten mit der Zunge und sollet nicht falsch hinter den Rücken eures Nächsten seyn. Freuet euch eurer Güter, und eures Reichthums nicht. Ehret Vater und Mutter. Redet nicht falsch Zeugniß wider euren Nächsten; so gebe ich euch Gesundheit und Segen. Und wer diesen Brief nicht glaubet und sich darnach nicht richtet, der wird kein Glück noch Segen haben. Diesen Brief soll einer dem andern geschrieben oder gedruckt zukommen lassen, und wenn ihr so viel Sünden gethan hättet als Sand im Meere, Laub auf den Bäumen und Sterne am Himmel sind, so sollen sie euch vergeben werden, wenn ihr glaubet und thut, was dieser Brief euch saget, wer das aber nicht glaubet, der soll sterben. Bekehret euch, oder ihr werdet ewiglich gepeinigt werden, und ich werde euch fragen am jüngsten Tage, dann werdet ihr mir Antwort geben müssen wegen euren vielen Sünden. Wer diesen Brief in seinem Hause hat oder bei sich trägt, dem wird kein Donnerwetter schaden, und ihr sollt vor Feuer und Wasser behütet werden. Welche Frau den Brief bei sich trägt, die wird eine liebliche Frucht mit fröhlichem Anblick zur Welt bringen. Haltet meine Gebote, die ich euch durch meinen Engel Michael gesandt habe.

Ein schönes christliches Gebet, zu jeder Stunde des Tages zu beten.

Es hat uns heißen treten, o Gott! dein lieber Sohn mit herzlichen Gebeten vor deinem hohen Thron, und uns mit theuren Namen Erhörung zugesagt, daß man in seinem Namen nur bittet fleht und klagt; darauf komm' ich gegangen in dieser bangen Stund; ach laß mich doch erlangen, was ich aus Herzensgrund an dich, mein Gott, begehre im Namen Jesu Christ und gnädig mir gewähre, was Seelen nützlich ist; nicht aber mir zu geben bitt' ich aus deiner Hand: Geld, Gut und langes Leben, kein Ehr' noch hohen Stand, denn dieses ist nur nichtig und lauter Eitelkeit, vergänglich, schwach und flüchtig und schwindet mit der Zeit. Ich bitte mir zu schenken ein frommes keusches Herz, das nimmermehr mag denken auf liederlichen Scherz, das stets mit Liebe flammet zu dir Gott himmelan, und alle Lust verdammet der lastervollen Bahn; hernach laß mich gewinn'n durch deine große Kraft: Kunst, Weisheit, klugen Sinn, Verstand und Wissenschaft, daß all' mein Thun und Handeln dir mag gefällig seyn; laß vor der Welt mich wandeln wohl ohne falschen Schein, so wirds von jenen allen, Stand, Leben, Ehr' und Geld auf meine Seite fallen, so dir es, Gott gefällt. Man muß die Seel' erst schmücken, so wirst du allgemach den Leib auch schön beglücken, Glück folgt der Tugend nach. Amen.

Fig. 7: 'Himmels-Brief, welcher mit goldenen Buchstaben geschrieben, und zu sehen ist in der Michaelis-Kirche zu St. German. ' ('Heavenly letter which is written in golden characters and can be seen in Michaelis Church in St German.'). Dated to *c.*1800, paper, 42 x 34 cm, woodcut, stencil colouring, letterpress printing, collection at the Museum of European Cultures (MEK), Berlin.

Jesus Christus zu finden ist
Im Wort, da man von Jesu lies't.
Jesus gibt Heil und Seligkeit
Dem, der ihm dienet allezeit.
Wer sich des Namens Jesu tröst't,
Der wird durch Jesum Christ erlös't.
Jesu, dem lieben Kindelein,
Dem herzlieben Jesulein
Sei Lob und Preis! O Jesu mild,
Schütz' du uns stets durch deinen Schild.
Gib uns, Herr Jesu, deine Gnad',
Daß uns Welt, Teufel, Tod nicht schad'.

Gewiß ist der Tod, ungewiß ist der Tag.
Die Stund' auch niemand wissen mag,
Drum trau' auf Gott und denk' dabei
Daß jede Stund' die letzte sei.
Im Leiden habe guten Mut,
Und liebe den, der Leid dir tut.

Freu' dich von Herzen in Schwachheit.
Das ist die ganze Vollkommenheit,
So geht es zu in aller Zeit,
Tu' mir die Lieb', ich tu dir Leid,
Hilf mir auf, ich stoß dich nieder,
Ehr' mich groß, ich schänd' dich wieder,
Sage nicht alles, was du weißt,
Glaube nicht alles, was du hörst, —
Richte nicht alles, was du siehst.

Ach Gott, dies ganze Haus bewahr'
Vor Feuer, Schaden und Gefahr.
Mit Gnad' und Segen über uns walt,
Und uns dein reines Wort erhalt'.
Herr Jesu! durch den Namen dein
Gib mir ein selig Stündelein;
Stehe mir bei am letzten End',
Nimm meine Seel' in deine Händ'.

Himmels-Brief,

Wird genannt Credoria.

Also gebiete ich euch, daß ihr des Sonntags nicht arbeitet an euren Gütern, und sonst keine Arbeit tut, sondern sollt fleißig zur Kirche gehen und mit Andacht beten, eure Haare nicht kräuseln, und Hoffahrt in der Welt treiben, und von eurem Reichtum den Armen mitteilen und glauben, daß ich diesen Brief von meiner Hand, in JESU CHRISTO, ausgesandt, damit ihr nicht tut wie die unvernünftigen Tiere. Ich gebe euch sechs Tage, eure Arbeit fortzusetzen, und am Sonntage früh in die Kirche zu gehen, die heilige Predigt und Gottes Wort zu hören; werdet ihr das nicht tun, so will ich euch strafen mit Pestilenz, Krieg und teurer Zeit. Ich gebiete euch, daß ihr des Sonnabends nicht zu spät arbeitet, des Sonntags früh in der Kirche mit Jedermann, Jung und Alt, andächtig für eure Sünden betet, damit sie euch vergeben werden. Schwöret nicht boshaftig bei meinem Namen, begehret nicht Silber oder Gold, und sehet nicht auf fleischliche Lüste und Begierden; denn sobald ich euch erschaffen habe, sobald kann ich euch auch wieder vernichten. Einer soll den andern nicht tödten mit der Zunge, und sollet nicht falsch gegen euren Nächsten hinter dem Rücken sein. Freuet euch eurer Güter und eures Reichtums nicht. Ehret Vater und Mutter. Redet nicht falsch Zeugnis wider euren Nächsten, so gebe ich euch Gesundheit und Segen. Wer aber diesen Brief nicht glaubet und sich darnach nicht richtet, der wird kein Glück und Segen haben. Diesen Brief soll einer dem andern geschrieben oder gedruckt zukommen lassen: und wenn ihr so viel Sünden getan hättet, als Sand am Meere, Laub auf den Bäumen und Sterne am Himmel sind, sollen sie euch vergeben werden, wenn ihr glaubet und tut, was dieser Brief euch lehret und saget; wer das aber nicht glaubet, der soll sterben. Bekehret euch, oder ihr werdet ewiglich gepeinigt werden, und ich werde euch fragen am jüngsten Tage, dann werdet ihr mir Antwort geben müssen wegen eurer vielen Sünden. Wer den Brief in seinem Hause hat oder bei sich trägt, dem wird kein Donnerwetter schaden, und ihr sollt vor Feuer und Wasser behütet werden. Welche Frau den Brief bei sich trägt, und sich darnach richtet, die wird eine liebliche Frucht und fröhlichen Anblick auf die Welt bringen. Haltet meine Gebote, die ich euch durch meinen Engel Michael gesandt habe.

Nr. 202.

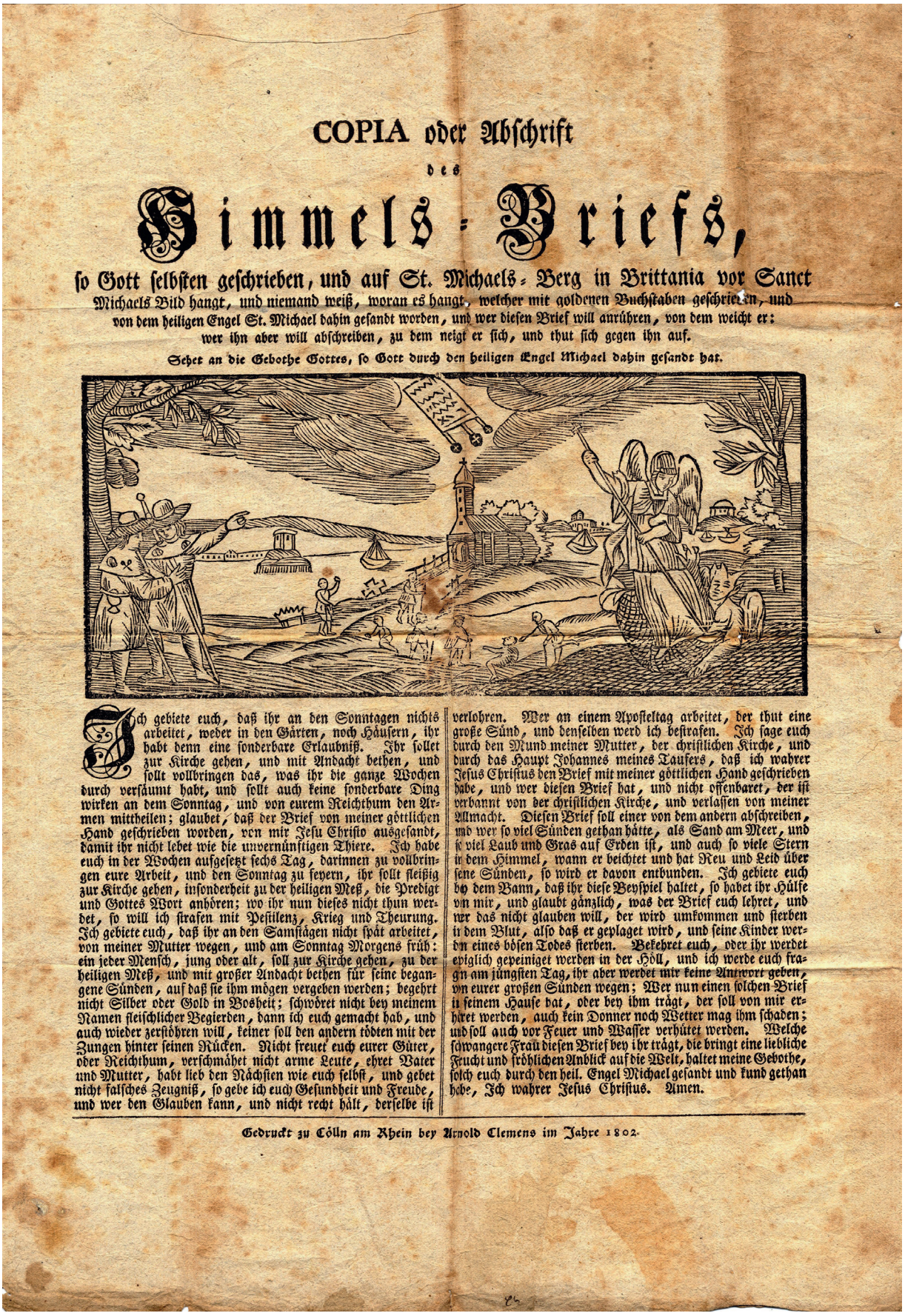
Ein schönes christliches Gebet, alle Tage und Stunden zu beten.

GOTT bescheeret, Hoffnung ernähret. Ach Gott, ich bitte, verlaß mich nicht. Wer Gott vertraut, hat wohl gebaut, den will er nicht verlassen; ob schon die Feinde dich verfolgen und hassen, so trau' auf Gott, er wird dich auch in keiner Not verlassen. Je größer die Not, je näher ist Gott. Trink und iß, Gott und die Armen nicht vergiß. Gottes Güt' und Treu' ist alle Morgen neu. Was Gott tut erquicken, kann Niemand unterdrücken. Gott läßt die Seinen sinken, aber nicht ertrinken. Ich trau' auf Gott allein, menschliche Hilfe ist zu klein: Gott weiß wohl Hilfe und Rat, wenn Menschenhilf' ein Ende hat. Mit Gott fang' deine Sachen an, so wird es guten Fortgang ha'n. Gott hab' vor Augen und sein Wort, dann geht dir's wohl so hier als dort. Wer willig gibt den Armen, dessen wird sich Gott erbarmen. Wer zum Himmel ist erkoren, stechen täglich Disteln und Dornen. Jammer, Kreuz, Elend, Angst und Not, ist aller Christen täglich Brot. Im Unglück hab' ein' Löwenmut, auf Gott trau', es wird werden gut, ja besser, als man hoffen tut. Zu dir, Herr Jesu, Gottes Sohn, steht meines Herzens Freud' und Wonn'. Mein Ruhm, mein Trost, mein höchstes Gut ist mir, Herr Christ, dein teures Blut. Sorg' und sorge nicht zu viel, es geschieht doch, was Gott haben will. Der Christen Herz auf Rosen geht, wenn's mitten unterm Kreuze steht. Verzage nicht im Kreuze dein, nach Regen folget Sonnenschein. Herr Jesu, der süße Name dein, erquicke mir die Seele mein. Herr Jesu Christ, mein Trost und Freud', ich trau' auf dich zu jeder Zeit. O frommer Christ, hie leid' und meid', bald kommt darauf die gute Zeit. Vielleicht kommt der wohl über Nacht, der aller Not ein Ende macht. Kirchengehen versäumet nicht, Almosen geben armet nicht. Bete rein, und schütz' dich klein; arbeite fein, trau auf Gott allein, die Sorge laß Gott befohlen sein! Amen.

Gott, der du deine Lust im Himmel hast zu wohnen,
Im Wesen einig bist, dreieinig in Personen:
Gott Vater, Sohn und Geist, all' die dich rufen an,
Kein Gott mir ohne dich den Himmel geben kann.

Druck u. Verlag von Gustav Kühn in Neu-Ruppin.

Fig. 8: 'Himmelsbrief genannt Gredoria' ('Letter to Heaven called "Gredoria"'). Picture sheet no. 202, Gustav Kühn, Neuruppin, Picture-sheet no. 202, *c.*1880, 39,5 x 32 cm, collection at the Museum of European Cultures (MEK), Berlin.



COPIA oder Abschrift

des

Himmels-Briefs,

so Gott selbsten geschrieben, und auf St. Michaels-Berg in Brittania vor Sanct Michaels Bild hangt, und niemand weiß, woran es haugt, welcher mit goldenen Buchstaben geschrieben, und von dem heiligen Engel St. Michael dahin gesandt worden, und wer diesen Brief will anrühren, von dem weicht er: wer ihn aber will abschreiben, zu dem neigt er sich, und thut sich gegen ihn auf.

Sehet an die Geborhe Gottes, so Gott durch den heiligen Engel Michael dahin gesandt hat.

Ich gebiete euch, daß ihr an den Sonntagen nichts arbeitet, weder in den Gärten, noch Häusern, ihr habt denn eine sonderbare Erlaubniß. Ihr sollet zur Kirche gehen, und mit Andacht bethen, und sollt vollbringen das, was ihr die ganze Wochen durch versäumt habt, und sollt auch keine sonderbare Ding wirken an dem Sonntag, und von eurem Reichthum den Armen mittheilen; glaubet, daß der Brief von meiner göttlichen Hand geschrieben worden, von mir Jesu Christo ausgesandt, damit ihr nicht lebet wie die unvernünftigen Thiere. Ich habe euch in der Wochen aufgesetzt sechs Tag, darinnen zu vollbringen eure Arbeit, und den Sonntag zu feyern, ihr sollt fleißig zur Kirche gehen, insonderheit zu der heiligen Meß, die Predigt und Gottes Wort anhören; wo ihr nun dieses nicht thun werdet, so will ich strafen mit Pestilenz, Krieg und Theurung. Ich gebiete euch, daß ihr an den Samstägen nicht spät arbeitet, von meiner Mutter wegen, und am Sonntag Morgens früh: ein jeder Mensch, jung oder alt, soll zur Kirche gehen, zu der heiligen Meß, und mit großer Andacht bethen für seine begangene Sünden, auf daß sie ihm mögen vergeben werden; begehrt nicht Silber oder Gold in Bosheit; schwöret nicht bey meinem Namen fleischlicher Begierden, dann ich euch gemacht hab, und auch wieder zerstöhren will, keiner soll den andern tödten mit der Zungen hinter seinen Rücken. Nicht freuet euch eurer Güter, oder Reichthum, verschmähet nicht arme Leute, ehret Vater und Mutter, habt lieb den Nächsten wie euch selbst, und gebet nicht falsches Zeugniß, so gebe ich euch Gesundheit und Freude, und wer den Glauben kann, und nicht recht hält, derselbe ist verlohren. Wer an einem Apostelstag arbeitet, der thut eine große Sünd, und denselben werd ich bestrafen. Ich sage euch durch den Mund meiner Mutter, der christlichen Kirche, und durch das Haupt Johannes meines Taufers, daß ich wahrer Jesus Christus den Brief mit meiner göttlichen Hand geschrieben habe, und wer diesen Brief hat, und nicht offenbaret, der ist verbannt von der christlichen Kirche, und verlassen von meiner Allmacht. Diesen Brief soll einer von dem andern abschreiben, und wer so viel Sünden gethan hätte, als Sand am Meer, und so viel Laub und Gras auf Erden ist, und auch so viele Stern in dem Himmel, wann er beichtet und hat Reu und Leid über seine Sünden, so wird er davon entbunden. Ich gebiete euch bey dem Bann, daß ihr diese Beyspiel haltet, so habet ihr Hülfe von mir, und glaubt gänzlich, was der Brief euch lehret, und wer das nicht glauben will, der wird umkommen und sterben in dem Blut, also daß er geplaget wird, und seine Kinder werden eines bösen Todes sterben. Bekehret euch, oder ihr werdet ewiglich gepeiniget werden in der Höll, und ich werde euch fragen am jüngsten Tag, ihr aber werdet mir keine Antwort geben, von eurer großen Sünden wegen; Wer nun einen solchen Brief in seinem Hause hat, oder bey ihm trägt, der soll von mir erhöret werden, auch kein Donner noch Wetter mag ihm schaden; und soll auch vor Feuer und Wasser verhütet werden. Welche schwangere Frau diesen Brief bey ihr trägt, die bringt eine liebliche Frucht und fröhlichen Anblick auf die Welt, haltet meine Gebothe, solch euch durch den heil. Engel Michael gesandt und kund gethan habe, Ich wahrer Jesus Christus. Amen.

Gedruckt zu Cölln am Rhein bey Arnold Clemens im Jahre 1802.

Fig. 9: 'Copia oder Abschrift des Himmelsbriefs' ('Copy or transcript of the letter from heaven'). Dated Cölln (Cologne) 1802, paper, woodcut, 44,1 x 37,5 cm, letterpress printing. TVKM 27637, Tiroler Landesmuseen, Volkskunstmuseum, Innsbruck, Austria.

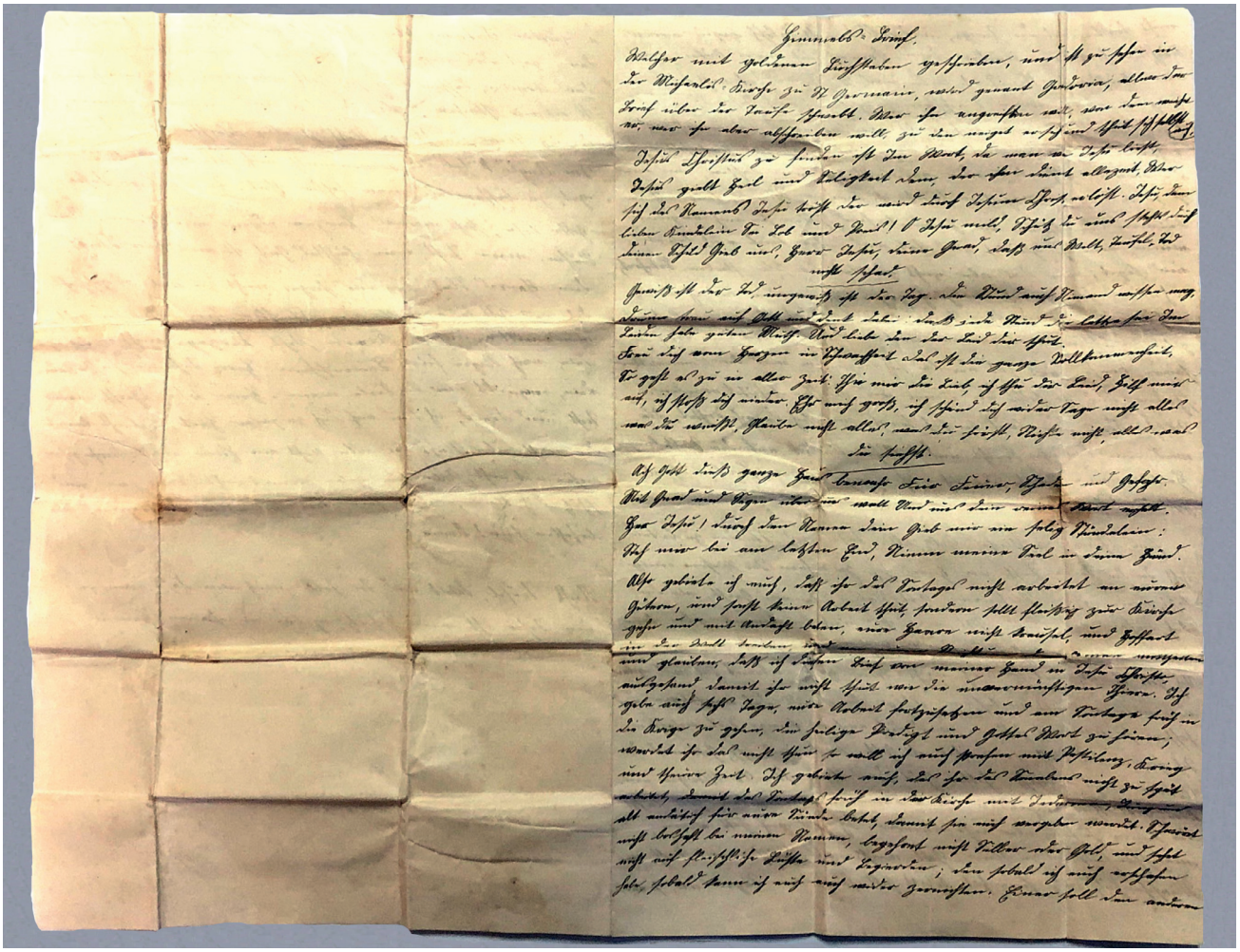


Fig. 10a: 'Himmelsbrief' ('Heavenly letter'). Written by Minna Heller for her husband Ernst Friedrich Heller, undated, but probably August 1914. Moritz Private Archive, Erfurt, recto.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph').[89] In his comments on the matter, Wuttke assumed that texts that had once been meaningful had been 'changed into something completely meaningless' by copying, and called this process 'inventive arbitrariness'.[90] In Englehardt and Nakassis' view, misunderstanding the original like this 'created gaps or contingencies that necessitated textual innovation to preserve the coherence of the text as a complex whole'.[91] In cases of this kind, they state, 'copying then means producing new meaning'.[92] So the process of copying documents did not automatically preserve their contents and pass them on to others. In his own analysis, the medieval historian Walther H. Vogt (1878–1951) therefore also assumed that the protective letters that soldiers carried on them in the twentieth century 'should not be regarded as a direct continuation of seventeenth-century letters', but were 'essentially new entities' that had been re-assembled, supplemented and transformed on the basis of different templates.[93] He explained the incomprehensibility of texts with the thesis that the phenomenon was now in its final stage, in the process of 'constant deterioration'.

The oral and handwritten processes of passing on the contents of such manuscripts outlined here, which were characterised by the development or lack of both reading and writing skills, indicate that the result of producing texts of this kind was by no means stable and lasting, but transitory and constantly changing. This is why it is necessary 'to see writing not as an artefact that once invented remains stable but as an

[89] See the 'Letter written by My own hands', ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91 M1 (Fig. 6b).

[90] Wuttke 1869, 168.

[91] Englehardt and Nakassis 2013, 15.

[92] Ibid., 10.

[93] Vogt 1911, 617.

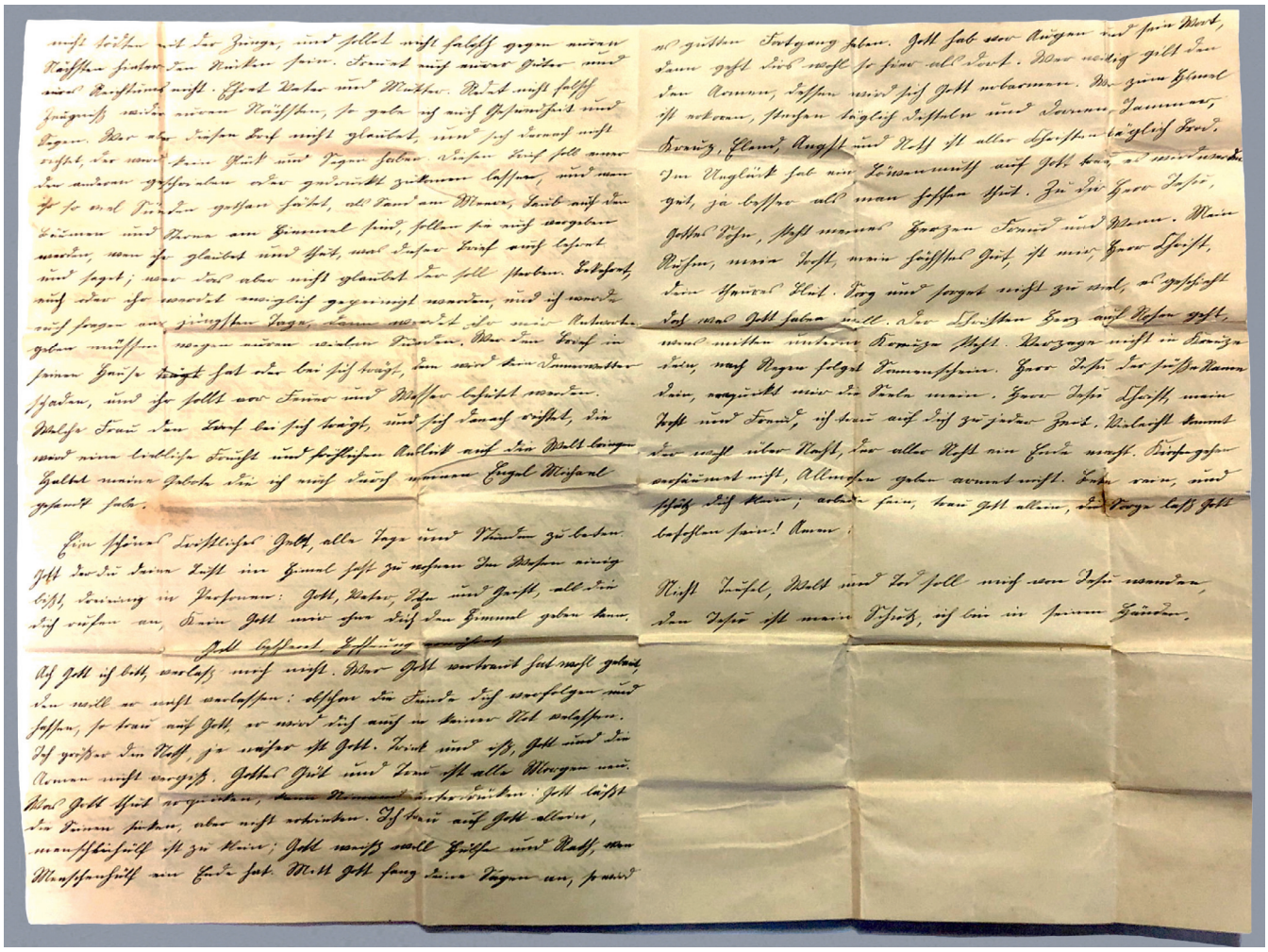


Fig. 10b: 'Himmelsbrief' ('Heavenly letter'). Moritz Private Archive, Erfurt, verso.

ongoing process', as Englehardt and Nakassis notice.[94] Like Korff, one could also speak of a 'religious bricolage' here.[95] What this refers to is 'the "tinkering" combination of different styles of thinking and forms of practice, the linking of ritual pictorial traditions (use of amulets and talismans) to modern technology, the juxtaposition and interweaving of para-psychological forms of knowledge and those handed down in regional cultures', all of which should be counted as 'ways of processing wartime reality'.

It was not until mass printing was established on an industrial scale – from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards – that conditions for (re)producing heavenly letters stabilised and faulty copying was largely prevented from happening. Walther Vogt's hypothesis was based on this fact – that it was the transition to printing and mass production that had a homogenising effect on the contents of letters of this type. Above all, however, he said that the possibilities of individually adapting the content that were still available in handwritten manuscripts had thus been eliminated, just like any dialectal or regional 'peculiarities'.[96] Even so, the question yet to be clarified here is what kind of relationship existed between technical reproduction and the handwritten manuscript, or rather, which artefact the user ultimately ascribed greater power to.

Distribution: heavenly letters and the material nature of social structure

This second part of my article is concerned with the embedding of heavenly letters in the respective contemporary forms of social relations and the question of whether and how such letters reflected the materiality of the social element at the same time. What role did social relationships such as friendship and kinship play, and what role did the gender of the recipient and the producer play in the creation, power

[94] Englehardt and Nakassis 2013, 8.

[95] Korff 2006, 12.

[96] Vogt 1911, 618f.

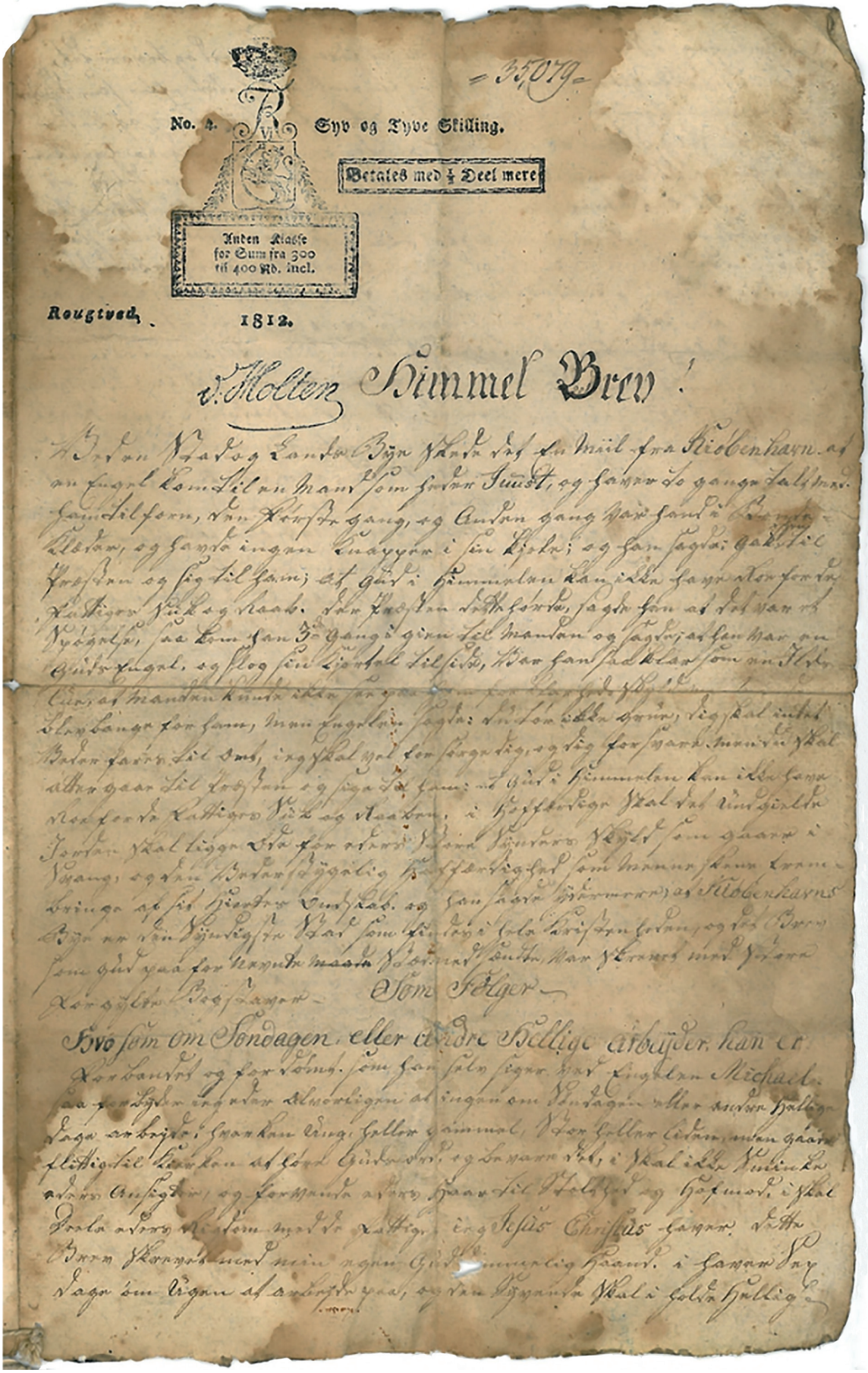


Fig. 11a: 'Himmel Brev!' ('Heavenly Letter!'). Dated 7 April 1813, Trøndelag Folk Museum, Trondheim, Norway, p. 1.

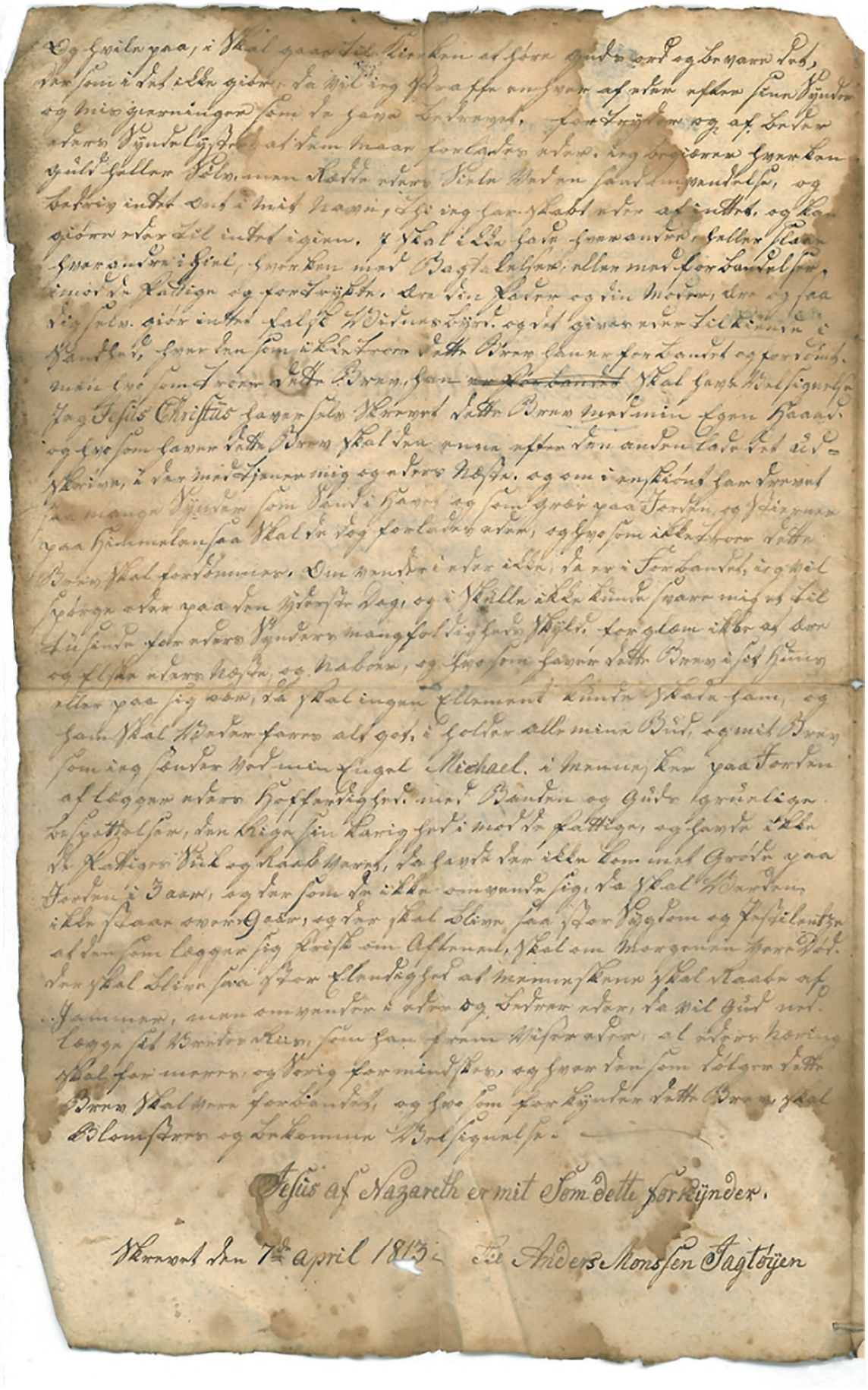


Fig. 11b: 'Himmel Brev!' ('Heavenly Letter!'). Dated 7 April 1813, Trøndelag Folk Museum, Trondheim, Norway, p. 2.

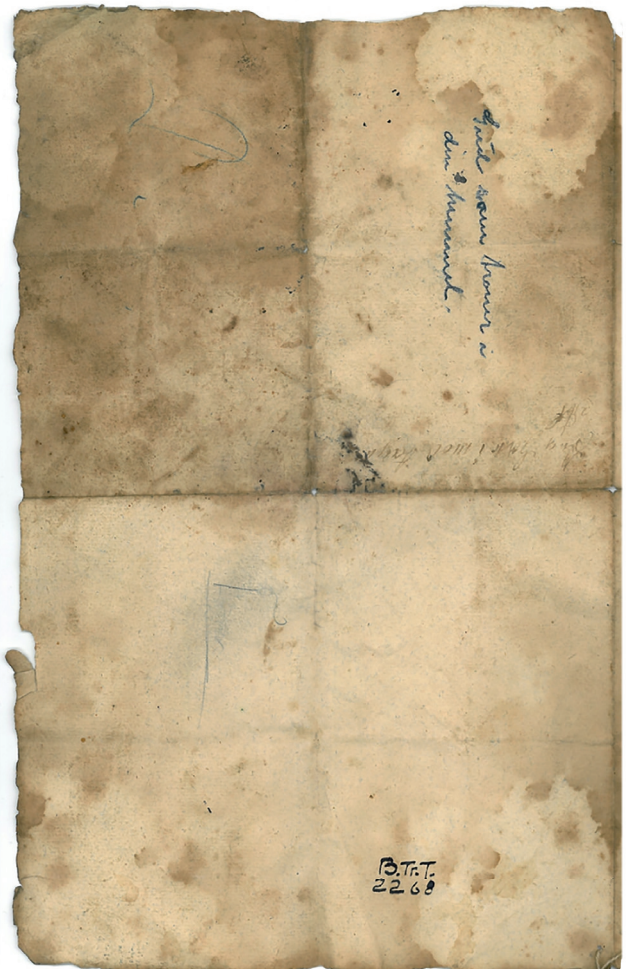


Fig. 11c: 'Himmel Brev!' ('Heavenly Letter!'). Dated 7 April 1813, Trøndelag Folk Museum, Trondheim, Norway, p. 4.

and actual use of the manuscript? If the recipient ever had to make use of the instructions formulated in a letter, then one of the central provisions applied, namely to pass the letter on to someone else as a template for the next copy and thus to share the 'secret' knowledge about its protective magic with others. The only prerequisite for this was that all those involved tacitly believed in its power. The second important point to note was that the letter was meant to be circulated as a copy and passed into the cycle of social relations. Consequently, these letters were transferred on a face-to-face basis, i.e. personally and by actual contact, both in connection with emotionally close forms of relationships (kinship and love relationships) and as 'valuable gifts' to friends.[97] We even know of an actual case in which one person gave a heavenly letter to his 'enemy': in his war diaries, Friedrich von Frankenberg-Ludwigsdorf described his initial mistrust when an old woman had secretly given him a letter of protection in French while he was visiting Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in 1870. The fact that she had asked him beforehand whether he spoke any French indicates that the bearers assumed that the amulet not only had to be worn, but actually read as well in order to be effective.[98]

The above example makes it clear that these letters were not only the result of existing relationships and served to strengthen them, but they also established relationships themselves. If, like Marcel Mauss, one interprets a letter from Heaven as a specific type of *gift*, then this process also refers to the 'inherently material nature of social structure'.[99] It is precisely this form of circulation – from person to person – that makes the social dimension of these manuscripts visible. In other words, the circulation of these material objects was part of the social dimension of writing.

This raises many questions that can hardly be clarified in detail here, since although the objects themselves have been handed down, the individuals who passed them on and their specific strategies and reasons for doing so are hard to identify. So the question of what rules applied here or how ritualised these actions were – how a person got access to a letter, who actually wrote the letters and put them in envelopes, who handed them over, sent them off or sewed them into uniform jackets, and when – is likely to remain unresolved.[100] The Hessian folklorist Carl Heßler, however, provided us with a number of details about the actual production conditions and the materials used:

> Man trägt sie, in Täschchen von grauem Leinen eingenäht, auf der bloßen Brust. Beim Nähen des Beutelchens muß grauer Zwirn verwendet werden, und der Faden ist so lang zu nehmen, daß kein Knoten gemacht zu werden braucht. Bei der ganzen Arbeit darf kein Wort gesprochen werden. Das Band, das zum Tragen des Beutelchens um den Hals geschlungen wird, muß ebenfalls von grauer Farbe sein.[101]

[97] Olbrich 1897, 91.

[98] Frankenberg 1870, 191.

[99] Englehardt and Nakassis 2013, 6.

[100] See the example from the Second World War: Maximilian Schels, 'Der Himmelsbrief: Die Geschichte von Johann Pirzer': 'An old woman from the village gave his mother a piece of paper, which she sewed into the breast pocket of his new uniform'; <http://www.meihern.de/html/body_der_himmelsbrief.html> (28 November 2022).

[101] Heßler 1904, 534. See the picture of a small bag of this kind on p. 104 and in Moritz 2014, 52.

> They are carried in small bags made of grey linen and worn on one's bare chest. Grey thread must be used to sew the bag and the thread must be long enough for a knot to be unnecessary. One is not allowed to say a word while all the work is being done. The ribbon wrapped around the neck to carry the bag must also be grey in colour.

In this description, we can again see that the folklorist collectors themselves were actively involved in the production and presentation of forms of folk magic and superstition. Korff says that the folklorist 'expert' always acted like a kind of *mythomoteur* in this case.[102] Here, as in many other places, it is hardly possible to distinguish between what was handed-down factual knowledge and what, in turn, was the folkloristic reinterpretation of an everyday action as a practice interpreted as being 'magical'.

This is also the case with regard to contemporary studies according to which gender – as a relational reference system – controlled the way in which people dealt with heavenly letters and their character as gifts. Based on the reports available to him and his own observations, Olbrich assumed that a letter of this kind was meant to be handed over to the recipient by someone of the opposite sex, which usually meant that women copied it for the men who were related to them.[103] This observation that those who handed over such letters 'were always women'[104] then led to the assumption that women were predestined or even obliged to copy and pass them on because of their own gender. According to Olbrich, this act could be 'explained by the loving woman, who is more inclined to believe in the supernatural and would [therefore] like to give an amulet to the man going off to war'.[105] Ultimately, almost every (male) author repeated the theory that 'weak, hysterical women'[106] were more susceptible to superstition than men, which is exactly why the female sex was the author of texts and procurer of gifts – as Otto Herpel, a village priest in Hessia, wrote in 1916, 'die Weiber sind's – ob "fromm" oder "ungläubig" – die den Brief mit heißen Köpfen abschreiben' ('it's worked-up women who make copies of the letter, regardless of whether they are "devout" or "disbelievers"').[107] These observations are probably responsible for normative instructions appearing, according to which a heavenly letter would only become magical if it was written by a member of the opposite sex.

These examples seem to confirm the theory that social relations materialised in these manuscripts. A host of questions arise here nonetheless, both regarding the social reference spaces in which these gender stereotypes prevailed and regarding writing traditions which assumed a normative character themselves, especially in the context of war and threats, and in turn were influential enough to make social behaviour take place. Essentially, family relationships and dependencies were at the heart of this behaviour, such as women's concern about the war making them widows or having to bring up their children alone without a male breadwinner to help. Hellwig, reporting on his folkloristic research at the war front, reflected on the positions that married and unmarried combatants were in. He also mentioned the situation of women at home and the threat that war posed to them as a specific starting point for magical practices:

> Günstig für den Aberglauben ist eigentlich nur, daß die meisten von uns Weib und Kind zu Hause haben, daß sie infolgedessen den Kriegsgefahren doch nicht so unbefangen und verhältnismäßig gleichgültig gegenüberstehen wie die jungen unverheirateten Burschen und daß sie auch, bald mehr, bald minder, unter dem Einfluß ihrer Frauen stehen, die ja dem Aberglauben gegenüber im allgemeinen recht zugänglich zu sein pflegen und auch das größte Interesse daran haben, daß ihr Mann, der Vater ihrer Kinder, gesund und unverletzt heimkehrt.[108]
>
> The only thing favourable for superstition, really, is that most of us have wives and children at home, so they are not as impartial and indifferent to the dangers of war as the young unmarried lads are and they are influenced by their wives to a varying extent – women who seem to be quite open to superstition, generally, and are particularly interested in

[102] See Korff 1996 on the role of lay folklorists and experts as mythomoteurs in the creation of ideas and symbols in folk culture. Regarding the term itself, see Smith 1986, 15.

[103] Olbrich 1897, 91.

[104] Olbrich 1917, 143. Klapper 1925, 244: 'The following letter of protection was written by a woman on a quarto sheet of paper which was folded lengthwise three times and crosswise four times and [obviously] carried around a great deal'.

[105] Olbrich 1897, 91.

[106] See Hellwig 1916, 47.

[107] Herpel 1916, 34f.

[108] Hellwig 1916, 24.

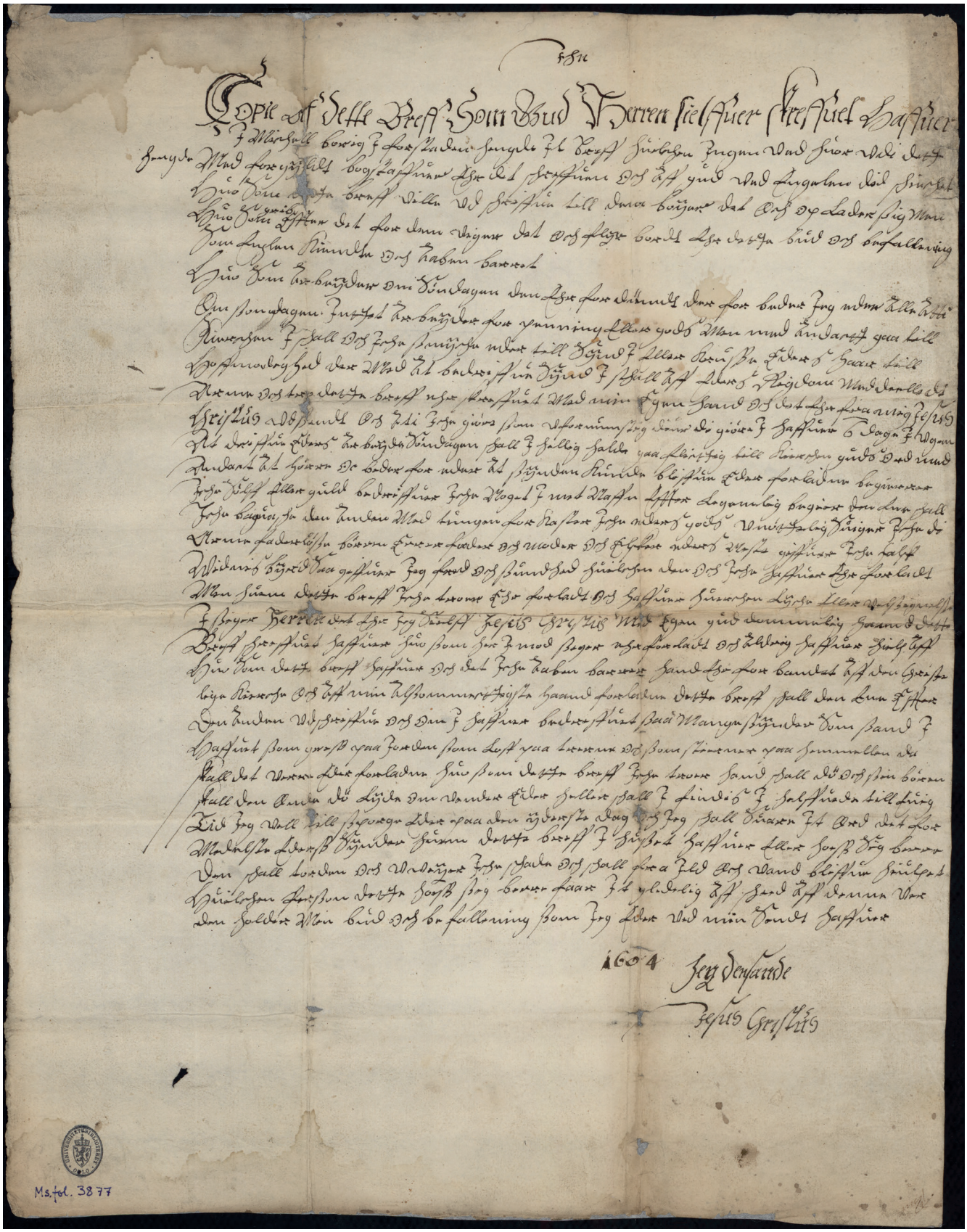


Fig. 12a: 'Copie af dette Breff' ('Copy of this Letter'). Dated 1604, National Library of Norway, Ms. fol. 3877, recto.

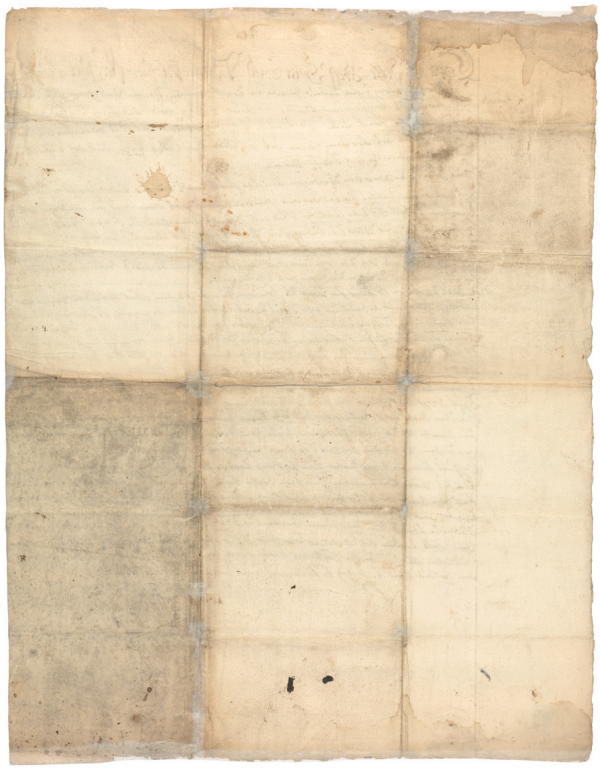


Fig. 12b: National Library of Norway, Ms. fol. 3877, verso.

their husband – the father of their children – returning home healthy and unharmed.

The type of social relationship that existed thus preceded the production of the letters. It could be confirmed by handing the artefacts over, however, or it could be displayed openly by all the participants. The process of copying a letter by hand was an unusual form of private writing in itself, especially for women in a social class where education had little value, so it was a particularly meaningful act with which the writer made her mark in the recipient's life as well by virtue of her own handwriting.[109]

This is yet another example of the social dimension that manuscripts possess: the social relationship materialises in the manuscript because a direct connection is created between the writer and the recipient of the letter. One of the few cases in which this material form of reassurance can be seen in a specific relationship is the story of the factory worker Ernst Friedrich Heller and his wife Minna from Trusen in Thuringia.[110] When her husband died in a military hospital in 1916 after being injured by shrapnel and losing a leg, she became a widow – at the age of 29 and with three young children to look after (four by the end of the war). She received her husband's personal effects, including the 'letter from Heaven' she had given him in a little, hand-sewn bag like almost all of the women in the village, apparently, copied from another letter (Fig. 10).[111] In the family history, it says that Minna had looked after her husband's letter 'as if it were a relic' in the years that followed.

The letters were also passed down from one male to the next within the family. Their circulation was therefore also subject to the generational principle, by means of which the effect and effectiveness of the manuscript were proven or invoked: if the father, grandfather or even the great-grandfather had gone to war with a heavenly letter on him and had survived the ordeal, then it was thought that the son, grandson or great-grandson would also benefit from its proven power.[112] In this case, too, it was usually a female member of the family who passed it on to the next male in the family who was drafted for military service. So not only did women copy the letters, they also kept them and were responsible for their proper safekeeping and transmission. In his last letter to his mother, Max Immelmann, the famous German WWI fighter pilot, confirmed that he had received her letter and its special contents:

> Also dieses Blatt soll ich immer bei mir tragen? Wenn ich das mit jeder Glücksblume, jedem Kleeblatt usw. täte, hätte ich immer einen kleinen Gemüsegarten bei mir. Außerdem müsste ich dann, um gerecht zu sein, die mir geschickten Rosenkränze, Kruzifixe und andere Talismänner bei mir haben. Es gibt eben zu viele junge Mädchen, die solche sinnigen Einfälle haben. Sicher alles sehr feinfühlige, junge Damen. Das eine ist zweifellos: Die Wünsche sind alle gut gemeint, und das freut mich bei all diesen Sendungen.[113]

[109] Cf. Englehardt and Nakassis 2013.

[110] Moritz 2014.

[111] Moritz 2014, 54. In this book, Moritz reconstructs the life history of her great-grandfather on her mother's side on the basis of archives and letters. I am grateful to Marina Moritz for her support.

[112] See the copy of the accompanying letter with which a woman by the name of Geiger had lent her son's headmaster a heavenly letter that he had asked to copy. She pointed out that the original letter had not only helped her husband survive the war, but it had saved other men's lives as well. Here is the English translation: 'Headmaster, my husband has been out there ever since the beginning of the war, & has often been in danger, & has always managed to get out of it with God's help, & like me, my husband says it's because of the letter, & the gentlemen I have given the letter to are still alive. This letter has already been carried around in 4 campaigns, & all those who carried it on them have come back again. But you really do have to believe in the letter.' ISGV Dresden, NaAS/K91/M1.

[113] Immelmann 1916, 127.

> So, I should always carry this letter on me, should I? If I did that with every flower that was meant to bring me luck, every four-leaf clover and suchlike, then I'd always have a little flower garden with me. To be fair, I'd have to have all the rosaries, crucifixes and other talismans I've been sent on me, too. There are just too many young girls around who have such apt ideas – I'm sure they're all very sensitive young ladies. One thing is for certain: all these wishes are well meant, and I'm pleased about that as I've got so many.

Immelmann's example shows us that the recipients of such letters often responded rather reservedly to these magical gifts. In letters they sent to their families, many soldiers said that they were only carrying the heavenly letter they had been given for the sake of their relatives, which led Hellwig, an enlightened folklorist, to the conclusion that not everything that appeared be to superstitious to outsiders was actually evidence of superstitious practices. This interpretation can also be understood as an attempt to free male recipients from the suspicion of being superstitious and to attribute full responsibility for the letter to the female members of their family, as Hellwig argued that the amulet itself 'is not proof of the wearer being superstitious, but of the person for whom the amulet is being worn'.[114] If one takes a closer look at the material state of the artefacts, however, the question is how distanced rationality that is interpreted as being masculine could be reconciled with the traces of wear on such letters and thus with the intensity of these pious practices.

Consumption: aura and effect

The final part of my article will therefore focus on the aspect of consumption and thus on practical use of heavenly letters. Once again, the question is to what extent the power ascribed to these artefacts was doubly justified by their materiality, or rather, how far usage of the manuscripts altered their materiality so that the notion of them possessing some sort of magical power can be interpreted as the result of their aesthetic reception. A key feature of the strategies for using heavenly letters is the practice of wearing them since, as the examples show, they had to be acquired and worn in a particular way. The proximity of the magical object to the body proves to be important in this context.

The fact that these magical manuscripts always exerted a certain fascination is also evident from the collectors' descriptions. While theologians were rather harsh and derogatory in their judgement, it is clear from the almost emotional reactions shown by folklorist researchers that they were impressed by the auratic effect of the objects. The anthropologist Karl Wehrhan (1871–1939), teacher and co-publisher of the *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Rheinische und Westfälische Volkskunde* ('journal of the association for Rhenish and Westphalian ethnography'), is cited here as representative of many others: 'Before me lies a letter of protection written on a sheet of paper the size of a small letter. The handwriting is fairly legible, but rather hesitant; three and a half pages are densely filled'.[115] What he found particularly striking was the 'number of errors it contains, a sign of the agitation and haste with which it was copied; it was most likely produced in the eleventh hour before departing for the battlefield'. The letter was dated to the 'historically momentous day of 1 August 1914, when the Great War broke out', and hence to that point in time when 'all superstitious beliefs were reawakened as if from the darkness of the grave and rose towards the light in brilliant vibrancy'. It could be seen from the state of the letter that it had then

> [...] mit ins Feld gewandert. Viermal eingeknickt oder zusammen gefaltet, um in der Brieftasche oder wahrscheinlich in der Geldbörse bezw. dem Brustbeutel Platz zu finden, trägt er an den Knicken die Spuren der Zeit an sich, Risse und Löcher; der Schweiß hat ihn mürbe gemacht, und an einigen Stellen fällt er deshalb bei rauher Berührung auseinander wie Zunder.
>
> [...] wandered into the battlefield as well. Creased or folded together four times to fit into a wallet or probably a purse or neck pouch, the creases bear the tracks of time, tears and holes; sweat has made it brittle, and it disintegrates like cinder in some places if handled roughly.

It is these obvious signs of wear and tear that make it possible to reconstruct the difference between copies produced for research purposes and 'originals' carried in the war. This included the folding, since the initial size of the paper used

[114] Hellwig 1916, 33–35.

[115] Wehrhan 1916, 67. The letter belonged to a soldier from the Rhineland who was seriously wounded in action, and which was given to him by a teacher who was himself a member of the society and had attended to the wounded man in his capacity as medical sergeant.

to write on could not be conveniently transported.[116] Wuttke also elaborated on the external appearance of these 'written amulets'. According to his description, the objects examined by him were mostly 'quartos, folded four to eight times and tucked into a canvas cover; some are whole books stitched together to form octaves or half-octaves, some are folios, folded together like letters, some are strips of paper the width of a finger, but long, rolled up to the size of a bean, featuring small writing that is almost illegible'.[117] Cultural historian Joseph Klapper (1880–1967) cited two examples of fifteenth-century manuscripts he had found in the State and University Library of Breslau (Wrocław). He saw the creases as an indication that one of the manuscripts 'had once been folded three times, hence worn for protection'. The other one had been used to line the inside of the two wooden covers of a manuscript. It was also clearly written 'on a sheet of paper at one point folded four times width-wise and once height-wise', which had later been cut.[118] A legal expert concerned with the subject of superstition in the context of crime-solving described the materiality of a heavenly letter studied by him in some detail:

> Bezeichnend ist, daß das auf einen ganzen Bogen geschriebene Schriftstück so klein zusammengefaltet war, daß es in einen Brustbeutel ging, wie ihn z.B. Soldaten tragen. Es ist offenbar viel benutzt und lange herumgeschleppt, denn es ist in den Kniffen vielfach schon ausgebrochen und unleserlich geworden.[119]

> It is significant that the document written on a whole sheet was folded up so small that it fitted into a neck pouch like those worn by soldiers. It has obviously been well used and carried around a lot, for it has several tears along the creases where it is now illegible.

One of the principal reasons for identifying and classifying this document as an original, apart from the handwriting and the paper, was the manner in which it was folded. This allowed the experts to conclude that the manuscript had been packed in a small pouch or 'carefully wrapped in paper upon the chest, as an amulet, as it were'[120] or 'upon the bare heart'[121] and thus carried as a letter of protection or blessing.[122] Based on how they were folded and their covers, the cultural anthropologist Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck (1923–2005) identified these manuscripts as *phylacteries*, i.e. small slips of paper inscribed with salvific passages which have been traced back to the second century CE and were also prevalent in a Christian context.[123] Despite the use of Christian symbols and texts, these documents were controversial in the eyes of the Church and were repeatedly banned as evidence of a 'pagan' belief in the power of amulets. According to Kriss-Rettenbeck, the custom of carrying amulets for protection against war, weather and disease became established in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards and was particularly popular in Protestant circles. Instructions on how phylacteries should be worn were a key characteristic of these amulets. In order to be effective, heavenly letters had to be worn on the body, specifically 'directly on the body, on the chest, on the navel',[124] a practice which had an impact on their physical condition due to the contact with the bearer's skin and the hygiene conditions typical of the time and context. According to the experts, the 'fissures and the dark colouring of part of the back page' found in numerous exemplars were a clear sign that they really had been 'worn upon the bare chest'.[125]

The Thuringian theologian Victor Kirchner also referred to the external traces visible on the objects in the following analysis:

> Vor mir liegt Brief B. Daß er vergilbt, beschmutzt und zerrissen ist trotz des starken dabei verwendeten Papiers, ist gewiß auch das Zeichen hohen Alters. Der eigentliche Grund aber ist ein anderer, man hat wirklich ihm gegenüber befolgt,

[116] The folds are also found in printed exemplars and are an indication that these artefacts were also worn on the body as amulets. Cf. single-leaf print from Göttingen, 1720, which has clear traces of four folds on the back page. The inner pages are lighter in colour than the last two outer pages and are also soiled from wear. (Fig. 13; see also Figs 7 and 9).

[117] Wuttke 1869, 170.

[118] Klapper 1929, 136f. Klapper refers to data from two manuscripts, Hs. IV F 13 and Hs. I F 644, which were accessible in the State and University Library of Breslau (Wrocław) at the time of their publication.

[119] Schütze 1912, 351.

[120] Jordan 1908, 334.

[121] Herpel 1916, 35f.

[122] Schnerring 1915; Wuttke 1869, 166 also cites the instruction: 'The letter must always be carried on one's person'.

[123] Kriss-Rettenbeck 1963, 34–36.

[124] Wuttke 1869, 166.

[125] Seyfarth 1913, 143.

Nro. 65.

Jesus Christus zu finden ist
Im Wort, da man von Jesu liest.
Jesu giebt Heil und Seligkeit
Dem, der Jesu dient allezeit.
Wer sich des Namens Jesu tröst't
Der wird durch Jesum Christ erlös't.
Jesu, dem lieben Kindelein,
Dem herzlichlieben Jesulein.
Sey Lob und Preis! O Jesu mild,
Schütz uns stets durch deinen Schild.
Gieb uns, Herr Jesu, deine Gnad,
Daß uns Welt, Teufel, Tod nicht schad'

Gewiß ist der Tod, ungewiß ist der Tag,
Die Stund' auch niemand wissen mag,
Darum sorg' auf Gott und denk' dabei:
Daß jede Stund' die letzte sey.
Im Leiden habe guten Muth,
Und liebe den, der dir Leid thut.

Freu' dich von Herzen in Schwachheit
Das ist die ganze Vollkommenheit.
So geht es zu in aller Zeit,
Thu, mir die Lies' ich thu' dir Leid,
Hilf mir auf, ich stoß' dich nieder,
Ehr' mich groß, ich schänd' dich wieder.
Sag' nicht alles, was du weißt,
Thu' nicht alles, was du hör'st,
Richte, nicht alles, was du seh'st.

Ach Gott, dies ganze Haus bewahr'
Für Feuer, Schaden und Gefahr.
Mit Gnad und Segen über uns walt.
Und uns dein reines Wort erhalt.
Herr Jesu durch den Namen dein
Gieb mir ein seliges Ständlein,
Steh mir bei am letzten End',
Nimm meine Seel', in deine Händ'.

Himmels-Brief

welcher mit güldenen Buchstaben, geschrieben und ist zu sehen in der Michaelis Kirche

zu St. German, wird genannt Gredoria, allwo der Brief über der Taufe schwebe. Wer ihn angreifen will, vor dem weichet er, wer ihn aber abschreiben will, zu dem neiget er sich, und thue sich selbst auf.

Also gebiete ich euch, daß ihr des Sonntages nicht arbeitet an euren Gütern, und sonst keine Arbeit thut, sondern sollt fleißig zur Kirche gehen und mit Andacht beten, eure Haare nicht kräuseln, noch Hoffarth in der Welt treiben, und von eurem Reichthum den Armen mittheilen und glauben, daß ich diesen Brief von meiner Hand, in JESU CHRISTO, ausgesandt, damit ihr nicht thut, wie die unvernünftigen Thiere. Ich gebe euch sechs Tage, eure Arbeit fortzusetzen, und am Sonntage früh in die Kirche zu gehen, die heil. Predigt und Gottes Wort zu hören: werdet ihr das nicht thun, so will euch strafen mit Pestilenz, Krieg und theurer Zeit. Ich gebiete euch, daß ihr des Sonntages nicht zu spät arbeitet, des Sonntags früh in der Kirche mit jedermann, Jung und Alt, andächtig für eure Sünden betet, daß sie euch vergeben werden. Schwöret nicht boshaftig bei meinem Namen, begehret nicht Silber oder Gold, und sehet nicht auf fleischliche Lüste und Begierden: denn sobald ich euch erschaffen habe, sobald kann ich euch auch wieder zernichten. Einer soll den andern nicht tödten mit der Zunge, und sollet nicht falsch gegen euren Nächsten hinter den Rücken seyn. Freuet euch eurer Güter und eures Reichthums nicht. Ehret Vater und Mutter. Redet nicht falsch Zeugniß wieder eurem Nächsten: so gebe ich euch Gesundheit und Segen. Und wer diesem Brief nicht glaubet, und sich darnach nicht richtet, der wird kein Glück noch Segen haben. Diesen Brief soll einer dem andern geschrieben oder gedruckt zukommen lassen, und wenn ihr so viel Sünden gethan hättet, als Sand am Meere, Laub auf den Bäumen, und Sterne am Himmel sind, sollen sie euch vergeben werden, wenn ihr glaubet und thut, was dieser Brief euch lehret und saget; wer das aber nicht gläubet, der soll sterben. Bekehret euch, oder ihr werdet ewiglich gepeiniget werden: und ich werde euch fragen am jüngsten Tage, dann werdet ihr mir Antwort geben müssen wegen eurer vielen Sünden. Wer den Brief in seinem Hause hat oder bei sich trägt, dem wird kein Donnerwetter schaden, und ihr sollt vor Feuer und Wasser behütet werden. Welche Frau den Brief bei sich träget, und sich darnach richtet, die wird eine liebliche Frucht und fröhlichen Anblick auf die Welt bringen. Haltet meine Gebote, die ich euch durch meinem Engel Michael gesandt habe.

Ein schönes christliches Gebet, alle Tage und Stunden zu beten,

Gott, der du deine Lust im Himmel hast zu wohnen / Im Wesen eins; bist, dreieinig in Personen: | Gott Vater, Sohn und Geist, all' die dich rufen an / Kein Gott mir ohne dich den Himmel geben kann.

Gott beschweret, Hoffnung ernähret. Ach Gott ich bitt', verlaß mich nicht. Wer Gott vertraut hat wohl gebaut, den will er nicht verlassen; ob schon die Feinde dich verfolgen und hassen so trau auf Gott, er wird dich auch in keiner Noth verlassen. Je größer die Noth, je näher ist Gott. Trink und iß, Gott und den Armen nicht vergiß; Gottes Güt' und Treu' ist alle Morgen neu. Was Gott thut erquicken, kann niemand unterdrücken; Gott läßt die Seinen sinken aber nicht ertrinken. Ich trau auf Gott allein, menschliche Hülfe ist zu klein. Gott weiß wohl Hülfe und Rath, Menschenhülf' ein Ende hat. Mit Gott fang deine Sache an, so wird es guten Fort gang haben. Hab Gott vor Augen und sein Wort, so geht's dir wohl hier und dort. Wer willig giebt den Armen, dessen wird sich Gott erbarmen. Wer zum Himmel ist erkoren, stechen täglich Disteln und Dornen. Jammer, Kreuz, Elend, Angst und Noth, ist aller Christen täglich Brodt. Im Unglück hab einen Löwenmuth, auf Gott trau, es wird werden gut, ja besser, als man hoffen thut. Zu dir Herr Jesu, Gottes Sohn, steht meines Herzens Freud' und Wonn'. Mein Ruhm, mein Trost, mein höchstes Guth, ist mir Herr Christ, dein theures Blut. Sorg' und sorge nicht zu viel, es geschieht doch, was Gott haben will. Der Christen Herz auf Rosen geht, wenn's mitten unterm Kreuze steht. Verzage nicht im Kreuze dein, nach Regen folget Sonnenschein. Herr Jesu, der süße Name dein, erquicke mir die Seele mein. Herr Jesu Christ, mein Trost und Freud', ich trau auf dich zu jeder Zeit. O frommer Christ, hie leid' und meid', bald kömmt darauf die gute Zeit. Vielleicht kommt der wohl über Nacht, der aller Noth ein Ende macht. Kirchgehen versäumet nicht, Almosen geben, armet nicht. Bete rein, und schätz dich klein: arbeite fein, trau Gott allein, die Sorgen laß Gott befohlen sein, Amen. Nicht Teufel, Welt und Tod, soll mich von Jesu wenden, denn Jesus ist mein Schutz, ich bin in seinen Händen.

Fig. 13a: 'Himmels-Brief welcher mit güldenen Buchstaben, geschrieben und ist zu sehen in der Michaelis Kirche zu St. German, wird genannt Gredoria, allwo der Brief über der Taufe schwebt' ('Heavenly letter which is written in golden letters, named Gegoria and can be seen in the Michael's Church of St German, wherever the letter hovers over the baptismalfont'). Dated 1720, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, DD97 D 1, recto.

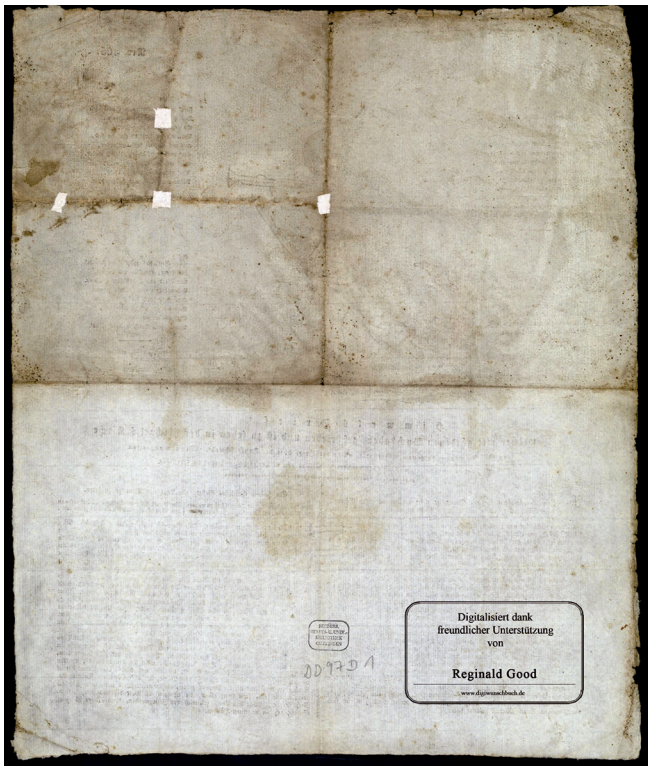


Fig. 13b: Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, DD97 D 1, verso.

> was er ‚unter dem Strich' (!) in Nr. 26 fordert: Wer diesen Brief …. bei sich träget …. Man könnte gar Vermutungen darüber aufstellen, wo er am Körper getragen sein wird. Das eine Blatt ist einfach zusammengefaltet. Von innen heraus, ist der Brief – sit venia verbo – verschwitzt, gebräunt und von da aus naturgesetzmäßig gebrochen und gerissen![126]
>
> Before me lies letter B. The fact that it is yellowed, soiled and torn despite the strong paper is undoubtedly due in part to its advanced age. But the real reason is a different one; what it demands 'below the line' (!) in no. 26 – 'Whoever wears this letter upon him …' – has been truly adhered to. One could even speculate as to where on the body it will have been worn. One of the sheets has been folded once. From the inside out, the letter is – sit venia verbo [pardon the word] – soaked with sweat, discoloured and from there naturally fissured and torn!

There could only be one explanation for this in his eyes: 'We are actually dealing with Protestants wearing amulets here. Horribile dictu!'

As an obvious consequence of the practice of wearing the letters, 'consumption traces'[127] were identified which altered the surface texture and the material: '(S)urfaces of the object receive physical imprints or traces from the activities in which they are caught up'. Knappett speaks here of a 'patina of experience, of accumulated knowledge'[128] which becomes inscribed in the object through practical use, resulting not only from the proximity to the body and continuous wearing, but also from passing down the objects through the generations from one user to another. In other words, the physical substance could also embody 'age, influence and something like "wisdom"'.[129] These signs of use thus became the object of an aesthetic reception in their own right and changed the meaning of the artefact and the power ascribed to it. Olbrich confirmed this hypothesis on the basis of his personal observations:

> Besondere Wertschätzung genießen die alten, vergilbten, schweißdurchtränkten Briefe, welche bereits in früheren Kriegen getragen wurden und ihre Kraft schon wiederholt bewährt hatten.[130]
>
> The old, yellowed letters, soaked in sweat, which were already worn in earlier wars and had repeatedly proven their power, are held in particularly high regard.

Art historian Friedbert Ficker (1927–2007) also reported that his father had kept his handwritten exemplar of a heavenly letter from the Second World War in his *Soldbuch* (pay book) and that it showed signs of intensive use: 'The paper is worn through along the folds in some places, and the upper edge has been damaged by a number of small tears. The impact of moisture has also left its mark and the legibility of the writing has been partly compromised due to the smudging of the brown ink'.[131] Even as an academic in the twenty-first century, Ficker was obviously not entirely able to avoid interpreting the magical power of the object, whose history had only been disclosed to him by his mother. The concluding comment on his find among the many objects left by

[126] Kirchner 1908, 64f.

[127] Knappett 2002, 101.

[128] Knappett 2002, 108.

[129] Gell 1998, 231, cited in Knappett 2002, 108.

[130] Olbrich 1917, 143.

[131] Ficker 2007, 193.

his father certainly sounds as if he put his survival down to the fact that he was in possession of a letter from Heaven:

> Abschließend sei noch vermerkt, dass der Träger des Schutzbriefes 1939 einberufen wurde und die gesamte Kriegszeit als Soldat heil überstanden hat. In der amerikanischen Frühjahrsschlacht 1945 zerfetzte ihm ein ca. 20 cm langer Granatsplitter ohne weitere Verletzungen den Mantel über der Brust und durchschlug den Bauch seines neben ihm hockenden Kompaniechefs mit tödlichem Ausgang.[132]

> Finally, it should be mentioned that the wearer of the letter of protection was called up in 1939 and survived the whole of the war uninjured although he was a soldier. During the battle with the Americans in the Spring of 1945, a piece of shrapnel approximately 20 cm in length shredded the coat over his chest, without causing injury, and severed the stomach of his company commander crouched next to him, with a fatal outcome.

Concluding thoughts

The specific examples from just two centuries indicate that while the production of these 'magical' manuscripts was subject to certain rules and interpretive patterns, as was the way in which they were used and perceived, they were still handled individually and tailored to subjective religious practices which existed in parallel with belief systems shaped by the Church. This was definitely linked to a certain pragmatism which labelled heavenly letters as nonsense and superstition from various angles, but also recognised their value in an emergency and thereby accepted them as 'useful fiction'.[133] With regard to the experiences of the First World War, the use of heavenly letters to boost the morale of the troops was even viewed in a positive light. The impression was that the faith in such manuscripts

> [... hat sich] als ein sehr wirksames Gegengift gegen die Todes-furcht erwiesen und muss daher als ein psychologischer Faktor gebucht werden: Furcht und Todesschauer hatten für die Gläubigen ihre Macht vollständig eingebüßt, und mancher überlieferte Zug von Heldenmut und Todesverachtung, von Tollkühnheit und rücksichtslosem Draufgängertum mag seine Wurzeln im Wahnglauben haben.[134]

> [...] proved to be a very effective antidote to the fear of death and must therefore be booked as a psychological factor: dread and fear of death had been completely divested of their power in the minds of the faithful, and some traditional traits of valour and contempt of death, of recklessness and careless bravado may have their roots in delusion.

If men were made more courageous by these magical aids, according to the unanimous opinion of contemporary observers, they should by all means use them.[135] This approach was validated by Hans-Joachim Buddecke (1890–1918), among others – a highly decorated German fighter pilot who confessed to following superstitious practices despite his deep faith in God:

> Man suche bei jedem Flieger – man wird immer irgend etwas finden, meist einen ganz schmutzigen Brustbeutel, mit komischen Sachen darin, ohne die es eben nicht geht, und auch der mutigste Mensch hat seinen kleinen Aberglauben.[136]

> You can look at every aviator – you will always find something, usually a very soiled neck pouch with strange things in it, which the wearer just can't do without. Even the bravest person has his own little superstition.

Many questions inevitably remain unanswered at this point. The aspect of inscribing magical power into these manuscripts requires further investigation along with the issue of how such unspectacular handwritten notes, some of which were barely legible, came to be ascribed a protective function. There is also a lack of clarity concerning the transition from manuscript to mass circulation through wood printing and the comeback of handwritten letters based on printed ones. There are indications that printed heavenly letters that were purchasable from publishing houses in Wissembourg/Alsace and Neuruppin[137] were received by the general public with great acclaim in the nineteenth century,

[132] Ficker 2007, 194f.

[133] Geertz 1987, 89.

[134] H. M. 1919, 365.

[135] Staby 1915.

[136] Buddecke 1918, 52f. The English translation is from Kilduff 2012, 75.

[137] See Jaenecke-Nickel 1962, 140f.

especially when there were rumours of an approaching war. The question here concerns the correlation between the modernisation and standardisation brought forth by mass production and the special regard for individually produced manuscripts, and how exactly printing contributed to the broader dissemination and wider use of these magical objects.[138] Further issues arise on account of the evidence we have of heavenly letters being used beyond the national borders focused on in this article. In Norway and Sweden, for example – two Protestant countries– numerous museums house heavenly letters whose history still needs to be researched. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century folk literature alludes to the existence of heavenly letters in an even broader European context than this, along with the belief in their apotropaic function, namely in Estonia, Russia and Ukraine.[139] The wave of emigration to the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also brought heavenly letters to American battlefields as well, and there is evidence that they were also used by soldiers in the Second World War.[140] These traces are all worthy of further investigation.

[138] See Benne 2015, 28.

[139] See Poldmäe 1938 and Zayarnyuk 2006.

[140] See Earnest, Earnest and Rosenberry 2005, 232–45; Fogel 1908; Oda 1949.

REFERENCES

Abt, Adam (1909), 'Von den Himmelsbriefen', *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde*, 8.2: 81–100.

Adam, Hans Christian (1985), 'Totensuche: Illustrierte Verlustlisten aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Fotogeschichte*, 5.16: 37–44.

Artinger, Kai (2000), 'Die weißen Flecken hatten ein Gesicht: Illustrierte Verlustlisten und das Berliner Nachweisebüro im Ersten Weltkrieg', *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 59: 99–114.

Bächtold, Hanns (1915), 'Volkskundliche Mitteilungen aus dem schweizerischen Soldatenleben', *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 18: 201–264.

—— (1917), *Deutscher Soldatenbrauch und Soldatenglaube* (Straßburg: Trübner).

Beitl, Richard (1937), 'Brauch und Glaube der Soldaten', in Bernhard H. Schwertfeger and Erich Otto Volkmann (eds), *Die deutsche Soldatenkunde*, vol 1, (Leipzig/Berlin), 325–329.

Benne, Christian (2015), *Die Erfindung des Manuskripts: Zur Theorie und Geschichte literarischer Gegenständlichkeit*, (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp).

Bertholet, Alfred (1949), *Die Macht der Schrift in Glauben und Aberglauben* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag).

Bittner, Maximilian (1906), *Der vom Himmel gefallene Brief Christi in seinen morgenländischen Versionen und Rezensionen* (Wien: Hölder).

Bourdieu, Pierre (2006), 'Kult der Einheit und kultivierte Unterschiede', in Pierre Bourdieu et al. (eds), *Eine illegitime Kunst. Die sozialen Gebrauchsweisen der Fotografie* (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt), 25–84.

Branky, Franz (1902), 'Himmelsbriefe', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 5: 149–158.

'Briefkasten, Frage 83' (1916), *Im Schützengraben*, 28 (9.7.1916).

Buddecke, Hans Joachim (1918), *El Schahin: Der Jagdfalke, Aus meinem Fliegerleben* (Berlin: August Scherl).

Delehaye, Hippolyte (1899), 'Note sur la légende de la lettre du Christ tombée du ciel', *Bulletins de l'Académie royale de Belgique*, 2: 171–213.

Dieterich, Albrecht (1901), 'Himmelsbriefe', *Blätter für Hessische Volkskunde*, 3.3: 9–12.

—— (1911), 'Weitere Beobachtungen zu den Himmelsbriefen', in Albrecht Dieterich, *Kleine Schriften* (Berlin: Teubner), 243–237.

Earnest, Russell, Corinne Earnest, and Edward L. Rosenberry (2005), *Flying Leaves and One-Sheets: Pennsylvania German Broadsides, Fraktur and Their Printers* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Books).

Ebertz, Michael N., and Franz Schultheis (1986), 'Einleitung: Populare Religiosität', in Michael N. Ebertz and Franz Schultheis (eds), *Volksfrömmigkeit in Europa. Beiträge zur Soziologie populärer Religiosität aus 14 Ländern* (München: Chr. Kaiser), 11–52.

Englehardt, Joshua, and Dimitri Nakassis (2013), 'Individual Intentionality, Social Structure, and Material Agency in Early Writings and Emerging Script Technologies', in Joshua Englehardt (ed.), *Agency in Ancient Writing* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado), 1–18.

Ewald, Heinrich von (1847), 'Ueber eine zweite Sammlung Aethiopischer Handschriften in Tübingen', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 1.1: 1–43.

Ficker, Friedbert (2007), '"Wer diesen Brief bei sich hat". Anmerkungen zu einem "Haus- und Schutzbrief"', *Traditiones*, 36.2: 191–195.

Foerster, Erich (1915), 'Himmelsbriefe', *Der Kunstwart und Kulturwart*, 28.7: 30–31.

Fogel, Edwin M. (1908), 'The Himmelsbrief', *German American Annals*, new ser., 6: 286–311.

Frankenberg, Friedrich (1897), *Kriegstagebücher von 1866 und 1870/71*, 3. Aufl. (Stuttgart/Leipzig: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt).

Fuchs, Leonie, Fabio Gygi, and Anne Ulrich (2002), 'Verdinglichte Kriegserfahrung: Eine Reflexion in sieben Gegenständen', in Gottfried Korff (ed.), *Kleines aus dem Großen Krieg: Metamorphosen militärischen Mülls, Begleitband zur Ausstellung* (Tübingen: TVV), 36–45.

Geertz, Clifford (1987), 'Religion als kulturelles System', in Clifford Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung: Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp), 44–95.

Gell, Alfred (1998), *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Goody, Jack (1986), *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Graf, Georg (1928), 'Der vom Himmel gefallene Brief Christi', *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und verwandte Gebiete*, 6: 10–24.

H. M. (1919), 'Soldatenaberglaube', *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitung. Organ der schweizerischen Armee*, 65.44–48: 349–351, 357–359, 365–367, 374f, 381–383.

Hebing, Rosanne (2012), 'The Textual Tradition of Heavenly Letter Charms in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts', in Laszlo-Sandor Chardonnens, Bryan Carella (eds), *Secular Learning in Anglo-Saxon England* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), 203–222.

Hellwig, Albert (1916), *Weltkrieg und Aberglaube: Erlebtes und Erlauschtes* (Leipzig: Heims).

Herpel, Otto (1916), *Das Dorf auf dem Hügel: Wie es den Krieg erlebte* (Heilbronn: Salzer).

Heßler, Carl (1904), *Hessische Landes- und Volkskunde: Das ehemalige Kurhessen und das Hinterland am Ausgange des 19. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 2, (Marburg: Elwert).

Hoffmann-Krayer, Eduard (1915), 'Volkskundliches aus dem Soldatenleben: Eine Anregung', *Allgemeine Schweizerische Militärzeitung*, 61.16: 123–125; 61.17: 131–134.

Holbek, Bengt (1989), 'What the Illiterate Think of Writing', in Karen Schousboe, and Mogens Trolle Larsen (eds), *Literacy and Society* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag), 183–196.

Immelmann, Max (1916), *Meine Kampfflüge: Selbsterlebt und selbsterzählt* (Berlin: Scherl).

Jaenecke-Nickel, Johanna (1962), 'Neuruppiner Bilderbogen', *Jahrbuch für brandenburgische Landesgeschichte*, 13: 136–145.

John, Ernst (1900), 'Von Sachsens Bauern an der altenburgischen Grenze', *Mitteilungen des Vereins für sächsische Volkskunde*, 2.2: 38–55.

Jordan, Julius (1908), 'Himmelsbriefe', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 6: 334–336.

Kienitz, Sabine (2008), Beschädigte Helden: Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914–1923 (Paderborn: Schoeningh).

—— and Theresa Müller (2020), 'Der Sammler als Zeitzeuge. Zur Objekt- und Wissensgeschichte von Schutz- und Himmelsbriefen im Nachlass Adolf Spamers', *Volkskunde in Sachsen. Jahrbuch für Kulturanthropologie*, 32: 123–44.

Kilduff, Peter (2012), Iron Man Rudolf Berthold: Germany's Indomitable World War I Fighter Ace (London: Grub Street).

Kirchner, Victor Gotthilf (1908), Wider die Himmelsbriefe: Ein Beitrag zur religiösen Volkskunde (Leipzig: Bruno Volger).

Klapper, Joseph (1925), *Schlesische Volkskunde auf kulturgeschichtlicher Grundlage* (Breslau: Ostdeutsche Verlagsanstalt).

—— (1929), 'Altschlesische Schutzbriefe und Schutzgebete', *Mitteilungen der schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, 30: 134–179.

Knappett, Carl (2002), 'Photographs, Skeuomorphs and Marionettes: Some Thoughts on Mind, Agency and Object', *Journal of Material Culture*, 7.1: 97–117.

Knoblauch, Hubert (1999), *Religionssoziologie* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter).

Köhler, Walther E. (1898), 'Vom Himmel gefallene Briefe', *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, new ser., 2: 113–119.

Kolb (1897), 'Ein eigenhändiger Brief Jesu', *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, new ser., 1: 189–192.

Korff, Gottfried (1996), 'Volkskunst: ein mythomoteur?', *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde*, 92.2: 221–233.

—— (2005), 'Vorwort', in Gottfried Korff (ed.), KriegsVolksKunde (Tübingen: TVV), 9–28.

—— (2006), 'Einleitung', in Gottfried Korff (ed.), Alliierte im Himmel: Populare Religiosität und Kriegserfahrung (Tübingen: TVV), 9–32.

Krickeberg, Elisabeth (1915), 'Amulette und Talismane', *Die Gartenlaube*, 18: 279–281.

Kriss-Rettenbeck, Lenz (1963), *Bilder und Zeichen religiösen Volksglaubens* (München: Georg D.W. Callwey).

Modersohn, Ernst (1915), 'Der beste Schutz. Ein Wort der Mahnung an unsere Soldaten', *Gott mit uns: Flugblätter für Kriegs- und Notzeiten*, 5 (23).

Moritz, Marina (2014), *Für Kaiser, Gott und Vaterland? Das kurze Leben des Ernst Heller* (*1884–1916*) (Erfurt: Museum für Thüringer Volkskunde).

N.N. (1870), 'Einiges über den Aberglauben des deutschen Soldaten im Kriege', *Die Gartenlaube,* 1: 19–20.

Nemec, Helmut (1976), *Zauberzeichen: Magie im volkstümlichen Bereich* (Wien und München: Anton Schroll).

Oda, Wilbur H. (1949), 'The Himmelsbrief', *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*, 1.21: 3.

Olbrich, Karl (1897), 'Über Waffensegen', *Mitteilungen der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, 2: 88–93.

—— (1917), 'Deutsche Himmelsbriefe und russische Heiligenamulette im Weltkriege', *Mitteilungen der schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, 19: 140–156.

Poldmäe, Rudolf (1938), 'Die früheste Verbreitung der Himmelsbriefe in Estland', *Acta Ethnologica*, 2–3: 100–115.

Prümer, Karl (1916), 'Über Amulette im gegenwärtigen Kriege', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für rheinische und westfälische Volkskunde*, 13: 79–81.

Rauchegger, Andreas (2010), *Copy and Paste: Himmelsbriefe und Kettenbriefe als Schreib- und Kopierrituale im Wandel* (Saarbrücken: VDM).

Scheible, Johann (1847), 'Wahrhafte Abschrift des Himmelsbriefs', in Johann Scheible, *Das Schaltjahr, welches ist der teutsch Kalender mit Figuren und hat 366 Tage,* vol. 4, (Stuttgart/Leipzig: Henne), 594–596.

Schlager, Claudia (2011), *Kult und Krieg: Herz Jesu – Sacré Coeur – Christus Rex im deutsch-französischen Vergleich 1914–1925* (Tübingen: TVV).

Schmidt, Kurt (1918), *Die Kriegsstammrolle und ihre Führung. Mit einem Anhange: Verfahren bei Sterbefällen und Vermißten*, 7th edn (Oldenburg: Stalling).

Schnerring, C. (1915), 'Volkskundliches von der Alb aus der Kriegszeit. I. ', *Blätter des Schwäbischen Albvereins*, 27.7–8: 152–154.

Schütze, W. (1912), 'Ein Himmelsbrief', *Archiv für Kriminal-Anthropologie und Kriminalistik*, 47: 345–352.

Seyfarth, Carly (1913), *Aberglaube und Zauberei in der Volksmedizin Sachsens* (Leipzig: Heims).

Smith, Anthony D. (1986), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell).

Spamer, Adolf (1915), 'Der Krieg, unser Archiv und unsere Freunde: Ein Aufruf des Volkskundearchivs des Bayerischen Vereins für Volkskunst und Volkskunde in München', *Bayerische Hefte für Volkskunde*, 2.1: 1–53.

Spener (1844), 'Warum schrieb Christus nicht eigenhändig? ', *Der christliche Botschafter*, 9.2: 11.

Speyer, Wolfgang (1970), 'Bücher vom Himmel', in Wolfgang Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 23–42.

Staby, Ludwig (1915), 'Die Hieb- und Schußfestigkeit im Kriegsaberglauben', *Über Land und Meer*, 50 (28.12.1915), 928.

Stettler, Karl (1985), 'Lufthangende Briefe: Eine volkskundliche Absonderlichkeit', *Jahrbuch des Oberaargaus*, 28: 155–160.

Stübe, Rudolf (1917), 'Der Himmelsbrief', *Westermanns Monatshefte*, 62.123, first part, 699–702.

—— (1918), *Der Himmelsbrief: Ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Religionsgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr).

Tramitz, Angelika (1989), 'Vom Umgang mit Helden. Kriegs(vor)schriften und Benimmregeln für deutsche Frauen im Ersten Weltkrieg', in Peter Knoch (ed.), *Kriegsalltag. Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung* (Stuttgart: Metzler), 84–113.

Trost, Vera (1991), *Gold- und Silbertinten: Technologische Untersuchungen zur abendländischen Chrysographie und Argyrographie von der Spätantike bis zum hohen Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz).

'Unpolitischer Tagesbericht' (1915), *Tägliche Rundschau*, no. 358 (17.7.1915).

Vogt, Walther Heinrich (1911), 'Die Schutzbriefe unserer Soldaten: Ihre Zusammensetzung und letzte Geschichte',in Theodor Siebs (ed.), *Festschrift zur Jahrhundertfeier der Universität zu Breslau* (Breslau: Marcus), 586–620.

Wehrhan, Karl (1907), '"Himmelsbriefe" aus Lippe und Westfalen', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für rheinische und westfälische Volkskunde*, 4: 94–101.

Wienker-Piepho, Sabine (2000), *"Je gelehrter, desto verkehrter"? Volkskundlich-Kulturgeschichtliches zur Schriftbeherrschung* (Münster u.a.: Waxmann).

Wuttke, Adolf (1869), *Der deutsche Volksaberglaube der Gegenwart*, 2nd rev. edn (Berlin: Wiegand & Grieben).

Zayarnyuk, Andriy (2006), 'Letters from Heaven: An Encounter between the "National Movement" and "Popular Culture"', in John Paul Himk and Andriy Zayarnyuk (eds), *Letters from Heaven: Popular Religion in Russia and Ukraine* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 165–200.

PICTURE CREDITS

Fig. 1: © Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde Dresden (ISGV, Institute for Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology).

Fig. 2: © Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (State Library Berlin – Prussian Cultural Heritage).

Fig. 3: © Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel (MHK, Museum of Hessian History).

Figs 4, 5, 6: © Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde Dresden (ISGV, Institute for Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology).

Figs 7 and 8: © Museum Europäischer Kulturen (MEK, Museum of European Cultures), Berlin.

Fig. 9: © Tiroler Landesmuseen (Tyrolean State Museums), Volkskunstmuseum (Museum of Tyrolean Regional Heritage), Innsbruck, Austria.

Fig. 10: © Privatarchiv Moritz (Private Archive Moritz), Erfurt.

Fig. 11: © Sverresborg Trøndelag Folkemuseum (Trøndelag Folk Museum), Trondheim, Norway.

Fig. 12: © Nasjonalbiblioteket (National Library of Norway), Oslo, NBdigital: URN:NBN:no-nb_digimanus_24814.

Fig. 13: Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen (State and University Library of Lower Saxony), Public Domain Mark 1.0 (PDM) <http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?PPN895407833>.