

## Writing and Reading Letters in the Global Renaissance

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In a thematic issue of the **European History Yearbook** [Jahrbuch für Europäische Geschichte / European History Yearbook](#), we aim to look at the wide variety of **transitions and transformations in the reading and writing of letters brought on by, and having contributed to, the Renaissance in Europe and beyond**. We aim to start our inquiry around 1400, with the rediscovery and adoption of ancient models, such as Ciceronian letters and to extend our coverage to 1700 to address the emergence and expansion of new reading publics under the impact of humanist education, religious reformations, the emerging dynastic states, and long-distance trade and conquest. Yet the parallel expansion of historical and geographical horizons, at the heart both of the Renaissance as a cultural phenomenon and of the expansion of letter writing, was not confined to Europe. **We therefore intend to bring the European case into conversation with developments in the Ottoman Empire, the Atlantic World, Muscovy, Asia or India**. In doing so, we aspire to situate the different epistolary cultures, including the related historiographies, in a comparative framework. The latter also requires to scrutinize the significance of regional and structural particularities such as linguistic and religious diversity; the absence or availability of print and adjoined techniques of storage and canonization [e.g. Cho 2016] as well as the possible points of encounter, entanglement and cultural translation.

Scholarship on early modern letters, both in Europe as well as in non-European societies, has focused strongly on the understanding of genre and style [e.g. Vaillancourt 2003], on state and diplomatic correspondence [e.g. Boutier/Landi/Rouchon 2009], but also the role of epistles in establishing scholarly networks (“Republic of letters”) [e.g. Miller 2015]. The special issue we propose here offers to study letters from a different and arguably wider perspective as **cultural and social performances**. We want to query how the writing and reading of letters can be understood as performances **through which individual and group identities were built, displayed, and transformed**. In addition to the comparative angle, this expands the perspective beyond that of interrogating the contrived nature of epistolary self-presentation, as proposed by valuable earlier studies [e.g. Van Hout et al 2002].

The focus is therefore on **the letter as a highly malleable object that allows historical agents to situate themselves within a complex web of relationships that extend from individual to group identity**. Every act of writing and sending a letter is also an act of publication and communication by which the writers position themselves in time and space. Every letter is both anchored in a microcosm and a reflexive engagement with, and vista on, the world that lies beyond it. Altogether, the thousands of letters that were written and circulated throughout the period belong to a macrocosm of acts and interventions that are constitutive of the Renaissance as we study it today.

We are looking for articles that **address any of the questions below as well as questions related to them**, and we are particularly interested in contributions that focus on non-European areas or entanglements across different geographies and/or chronologies:

- What constitutes a letter?
- Who are the writers and readers?
- The interplay between classical languages and vernaculars; cross-cultural/multilingual/translational elements in letter-writing
- Writing and reading as performance of individual and group identity
- The construction of selfhood, including gender, race, ethnicity, through letter-writing
- The material culture of letter-writing, from everyday materials to networks of circulation
- The writers' and readers' positionality within religious, cultural, and political debates of the time
- The interplay between orality and literacy, fact and fiction, past and present in letters
- The significance of letter collections and their circulation vis-à-vis individual letters
- The impact of print technology and the interface between manuscript production and the printed word

**Mentioned bibliography:**

Boutier, Jean, Sandro Landi and Olivier Rouchon, eds. (2009). *La politique par correspondance. Les usages politiques de la lettre en Italie (XIVe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes).

Cho, Hwisang (2016). 'The Epistolary Brush: Letter Writing and Power in Chōson Korea'. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 75/4: 1055-1081.

Miller, Peter N. (2015). *Peiresc's Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press).

Vaillancourt, Luc (2003). *La lettre familière au XVIIe siècle. Rhétorique humaniste de l'épistolaire* (Paris: Honoré Champion).

Van Houdt, Toon et al., eds (2002). *Self-presentation and Social Identification: the Rhetoric and Pragmatics of Letter Writing in Early Modern Times* (Leuven: Leuven University Press).

We invite the **submission of abstracts of up to 500 words** accompanied by select bibliography and a short bio (maximum of 250 words). These elements should be sent in one pdf-file to [Sahin.53@osu.edu](mailto:Sahin.53@osu.edu) and [reinhardt@ieg-mainz.de](mailto:reinhardt@ieg-mainz.de) **by 1 June 2025**. Prospective contributors will be notified by 15 June 2025; complete first drafts are expected by 15 October 2025 and will be discussed and reviewed further in an online workshop in December 2025. The publication of the thematic issue is planned for 2026. The *European History Yearbook* is fully open access.