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## **Signs and Signatures: A study on the changing use and meaning of sixteenth century marking signs, signatures and its implications for the study of literacy**

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### Signs and Signatures

A study on the changing use and meaning of sixteenth century marking signs, signatures and its implications for the study of literacy.

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## Introduction

On the 13th of August in the year 1500, a man named Claes Woutersz. walked up to the Leiden town hall to collect his yearly sum of *rente* or ‘interest’ owed to him by the urban government. This money came forth of a bond he purchased from the city many years ago and which continued to pay dividends.<sup>1</sup> A government official handed over his money, and before Claes could leave, requested him to attest this payment using receipt. This way, the city’s treasurers could prove that the money reached its intended destination. A receipt was drafted and put before Claes, who read and subsequently authenticated it – quite thoroughly. Looking from left to right, we can see that it was sealed and signed using both a name and a mark, which on closer inspection, is identical to the symbol displayed on his seal (fig. 1). Just as in the present, the people of early modern Europe are generally known to have signed documents once, making this an odd find. What is going on here? From our contemporary point of view, it is easy to think that using three different authentication methods is a bit excessive and that Claes did not really know what he was doing, but in reality, it is us who do not know what is going on. Within the Leiden archive, many more receipts signed using multiple methods from this period can be found, whilst a quick glance at Leiden’s later receipts also shows this practice to have almost completely vanished by the late sixteenth century. There appears to be some kind of logic behind this signing practice, but we simply do not understand it. This should not surprise us. Despite their omnipresence in historical source material, the meaning of signatures, marks as well as the practice of signing in general has received very little attention from early modern historians, which is a shame. Understanding why people would sign using such a symbol is actually essential for the study of literacy where signatures are often seen as a sign of literacy or illiteracy and will teach us much about the related world of these curious symbols, commonly known as ‘marks’.

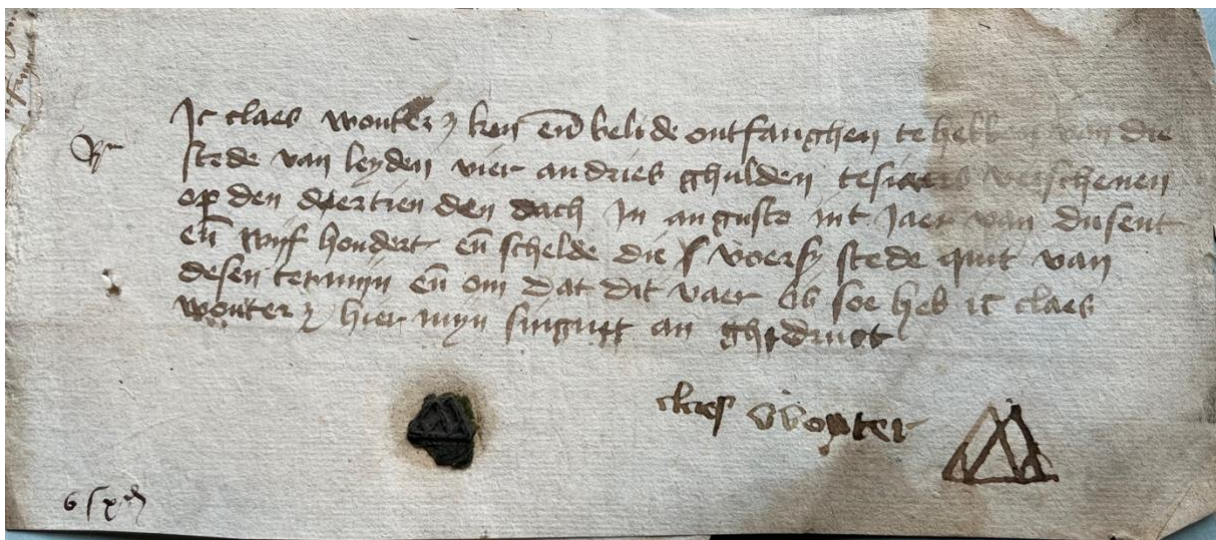


Fig. 1: A receipt confirming the payments of a *termijn* or ‘instalment’ of *rente*, signed and sealed by Claes Woutersz. Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken (ELO), Inventaris van het Archief der Secretarie van de stad Leiden, 1290-1575 (SA I), inv.nr. 646.

Within the field of historical literacy studies, signatures have long been regarded as an essential tool for studying the decline of illiteracy within early modern Europe. Studies on the growing number of schools and printed reading materials long indicated that an increasing

<sup>1</sup> ‘Pay dividends’ is used as an idiom here. ‘Interest’ is the correct technical term.

number of people received training in reading and writing between 1500 and 1800, but in no way offered a means to explain exactly how or why illiteracy declined.<sup>2</sup> Because of these issues, a new method was developed in the late 1960's, based on the most common and direct evidence of people's ability to read and write: the signature. In so-called 'signature studies' people's ability to sign their name was used as a yardstick to measure literacy in early modern towns and villages. If someone was unable to do so, they were considered illiterate. Using local sources that contain large amounts of signatures from all layers of society, many of these studies have been conducted to calculate literacy rates for many parts of Europe.<sup>3</sup> The results have given much more insight into the spread of literacy, as the results from inhabitants of different towns and people belonging to different social classes could now be compared. The popularity of the method increased from the late 1960's onwards, as did criticism against it.

Even in his first 'foundational' article on the signature study method, Roger Schofield had been aware of his and others problematic use of the term 'literacy'.<sup>4</sup> The goal of this method was to measure literacy, but what exactly was meant by this was hard to answer. Was it the ability to read? To write? The ability to read or write to a certain level of quality? These questions were temporarily swept under the rug in order to create uniform, comparable measurements of literacy based on people's ability to sign their name. As the method became more popular, this problem ultimately came to the fore again. With their publications in the 1980's, Margaret Spufford and Keith Thomas re-opened discussions on the meaning of 'literacy' and undermined the perceived stability of the method.<sup>5</sup> Using a large variety of qualitative and some quantitative sources, their articles successfully questioned the results of signature studies and the meaning of literacy with detailed explorations of early modern reading and writing practices. One of their most important critiques is that the results of signature studies probably underestimated European literacy rates. Because people were taught to read before they learned write, the ability to read was much more common than the ability to write, but signature studies offer no way of measuring this 'part' of literacy.<sup>6</sup> Other, rare cases such as people who could write their name and nothing more or the fact that literate people might fail to sign their name because of old age or disability further complicate the signature study method.<sup>7</sup> Disappointment with 'literacy' as an analytical concept and the other issues of the signature study method caused a great shift within literacy

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<sup>2</sup> R.S. Schofield, 'The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England' in: J. Goody ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge 1968) 311-325; L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England 1640-1900', *Past & present* 42 (1969) 69-139.

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive list of famous studies from England, France, The Netherlands and Sweden include; D. Cressy, *Literacy and the social order: reading and writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge 1980); F. Furet and J. Ozouf, *Lire et écrire: l'alphabétisation des Français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris 1977); S. Hart, 'Geschrift en getal: Onderzoek naar de samenstelling van de bevolking van Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw, op grond van gegevens over migratie, huwelijk, beroep en alfabetisme' in: Idem, *Geschrift en Getal: Een keuze uit de demografische-, economische- en sociaal-historische studiën op grond van Amsterdamse en Zaanse archivalia, 1600-1800* (Dordrecht 1976) 115-181; E. Johansson, 'The History of Literacy in Sweden' in: H.J. Graff ed., *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader* (Cambridge 1981) 151-182.

<sup>4</sup> Schofield, 'The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England', 313-318.

<sup>5</sup> M. Spufford, 'First steps in literacy: The reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers', *Social history* 4:3 (1979) 407-435; K. Thomas 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England' in: G. Baumann ed., *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford 1986) 97-131.

<sup>6</sup> Spufford, 'First steps in literacy'; Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England', 100-103.

<sup>7</sup> For these examples, see; R. Houston, 'The Literacy Myth?: Illiteracy in Scotland 1630-1760', *Past & present* 96 (1982) 81-102, 82; Thomas, 'The Meaning of Literacy in Early Modern England', 102; W. Ford, 'The Problem of Literacy in Early Modern England', *History* 78:252 (1993) 22-37, 32-33; C. Sisson, 'Marks As Signatures', *The Library* 9:1 (1928) 1-35, 20-21.

studies. Efforts to calculate literacy rates became less popular towards the 1990's whilst cultural studies on the role of reading and writing within past people's lives flourished. Many of these studies also focused on the role of gender in the teaching and use of these skills in an effort to explain women's low early modern literacy rates.<sup>8</sup> Book collections, marginalia, prefaces and private writings such as letters and diaries have mostly been used to study reading and writing practices.<sup>9</sup>

This 'cultural turn' within the study of literacy initially caused people to move away from quantitative methods and studies of 'writing', but this has recently begun to make somewhat of a comeback – albeit in a different form. Signature studies are now beginning to be used not just as a tool for measuring literacy, but also as a means of studying early modern writing or drawing culture. In such studies, signatures are categorized using a more complex system than the binary 'literate – illiterate' divide. One of these includes a category for people who signed using initials, whilst another created a division between poorly and well written names.<sup>10</sup> More recently, this approach was picked up by Mark Hailwood who applied it even more rigorously on rural English sources. With an expanded signature classification, he sought to capture not just signed names or initials, but all other forms of non-literate signatures, such as crosses, lines, circles and what in English literature tends to be called 'merchant's marks' or simply 'marks'.<sup>11</sup> By measuring the commonality of all these different signs, he sought to explore the 'writing' abilities of English country dwellers in the period 1550-1700.<sup>12</sup>

Hailwood's approach is innovative and makes a valuable contribution towards constructing a new, more broadly oriented study of writing, but at the same time also suffers from an unnoticed, core issue that has afflicted all signature studies since its inception. Despite the fact that people have been conducting these studies for more than half a century now, it appears that no one has seriously looked into the fundamental assumption that the way people signed was determined purely by skill. Whilst most historians of literacy are very aware and critical of signature studies' methodological issues, it appears to be implicitly assumed in almost all signature studies that the way people signed was determined by a hierarchy of skills which people never deviated from.<sup>13</sup> It seems to be widely believed that someone who was physically able to write and had learned to sign using their name would always do so, just as someone who could write individual letters would always sign with their initials and never using a mark. If it could be proven however, that a group of literate people existed in the early modern period who were able to sign their name, but thought it more meaningful to sign using a mark instead, the foundation of the signature study and all literacy rates that have been calculated using it would be put to question. In the early 1980's, David Cressy did address some suggestions that the meaning of a particular symbol might lead literate person to sign

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<sup>8</sup> M.W. Ferguson, *Dido's daughters: literacy, gender, and empire in early modern England and France* (Chicago 2003), 80-81; H. Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy* (Cambridge 2005), 4-5, 57-58.

<sup>9</sup> M. Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700', *Past & present* 260 (2023) 38-70, 44; For a large overview see: Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England*, 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> E. Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven. Onderzoek naar het alfabetiseringsniveau in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam', *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 23:4 (1997) 490-522, 514-517; E. Hubbard, 'Reading, Writing, and Initialing: Female Literacy in Early Modern London', *The Journal of British studies* 54:3 (2015) 553-577.

<sup>11</sup> Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700'.

<sup>12</sup> Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700', 43-45, 52-59.

<sup>13</sup> The idea that signing was determined by a hierarchy of skills is implicitly present in all signature studies although it was recently strongly expressed in: Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700', 57-59, 70.

using this instead of their name, but ended up boldly concluding that, 'People in Tudor and Stuart England used marks when they did not know how to write their names; it was a question of capacity, not of choice'.<sup>14</sup> Evidence from Leiden such as Claes Woutersz.' receipt complicates this widely shared idea. It suggests that skill was not the only factor determining how people signed in the period 1500-1600, forcing us to look into this previously unknown aspect to understand how this 'blind spot' might have affected signature study results. This requires us to look into the history of signing and ask questions that, somewhat surprisingly, have never been answered.

What did specific types of signatures mean? Did these meanings change over time? Why did people use them? These are important questions to ask if we want to understand how meaning affected the way Leiden inhabitants signed and how this, in turn, might change our understanding of literacy rates calculated up until now. Even more useful for the study of literacy however, would be to answer what historical developments prompted these changes to happen in the first place. What caused Leiden signing culture to change in the sixteenth century? That is the main question that will be pursued here to not just answer how Leiden inhabitants signed, why they did so or how this changed, but to also explain what caused these changes to happen. In doing so, it may be possible to understand when a change similar to that of Leiden might have taken place elsewhere and estimate how this might affect signature study results from these places. Answering what caused this change in signing to happen requires us to shift focus from viewing signatures as a source for literacy studies to a source for studying signing itself. Sixteenth-century signing in Leiden should be studied alongside the many different uses of marks to answer what changes within both of these subjects caused Leiden signing culture to change. In the following sections, it will be argued that both of these topics have received quite little attention from historians in the past, how they should be studied and why studying both of these topics for Leiden is particularly fruitful.

Studying the meaning of sixteenth century signing will require us to start almost from the bottom. The main reason for this is that whilst various kinds of historians have paid attention to different aspects of signing, none have ever approached signing as a total phenomenon. Studies of the notarial profession have paid attention to the role of signatures in the procedure of creating authentic acts, and paid some attention to the elaborate signatures of notaries and the advent of signing, but wrote little about the types of signatures used by clients or how this changed over time.<sup>15</sup> Studies of diplomacy have sought to find out when secretaries first started signing charters, but were not interested in how the practice of signing was embraced by commoners or how their signatures looked.<sup>16</sup> The cultural study of calligraphy on the other hand, is interested in the shape or form of writing, but did not view

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<sup>14</sup> Cressy mainly addresses the theory that John Shakespeare, William Shakespeare's father, might have been literate despite the fact that no evidence of him signing using a name has ever been found. According to Cressy, there is a strong tradition in Shakespearian biography to believe John to have been literate despite this lack of evidence, leading scholars to assume that he signed using his 'illiterate' signature for symbolic reasons whilst providing little other evidence of this being a normal practice. Cressy, *Literacy and the social order*, 58.

<sup>15</sup> A.P.H. van den Bichelaer, *Het notariaat in Stad en Meijerij van 's Hertogenbosch tijdens de late middeleeuwen (1306-1531): een prosopografisch, diplomatisch en rechtshistorisch onderzoek* (PhD thesis written at the Vrije Universiteit 1998), 274-308.

<sup>16</sup> A. Giry, *Manuel de diplomatique. Diplomes et chartes. - Chronologie technique. - Éléments critiques et parties constitutives de la teneur des chartes. - Les chancelleries. - Les actes privés* (Paris 1925), 607-614.

everyday signatures as a part of their studies.<sup>17</sup> Findings from Leiden show that studying all of these different dimensions and more is essential for understanding how meaning might affect the way people signed. This can only be achieved by studying signing in a holistic manner. The origins of signing, its relation to sealing practices, types of signature, their usage by different social groups as well as how this changed over time, its social significance and thought on its place within the legal framework will all be discussed here to create a detailed image of the changes in sixteenth century signing and possibly explain them. It may also be possible however, that some of these changes took place because of a shift in the use of marks. Their use as signatures is merely one of the many functions they had in late medieval and early modern world. To find out whether changes in this wider world of marks affected the way people signed, we will have to study these uses for the sixteenth century

Whilst walking through old urban centres, visiting churches or museums, digging through archival material or leafing through antique books, it is almost impossible to avoid the curious, often geometric symbols that are known by many names. *Hausmarken*, *bomärke*, *marques de marchands* or ‘merchant’s marks’ are all used to describe the same symbols, attesting its widespread presence on the European continent as well as describing its core function; to mark. Because of this central feature as well as the fact that marks were used not just by a *Haus* or merchants more neutral, Dutch term will be used to describe them here, *merktekens* or ‘marking signs’ – signs used for marking. Such symbols have been found all across the European continent and have long attracted scholarly attention. Interest in the topic started as early as the seventeenth century, but ‘modern’, academic research began only in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Around this time, two German legal historians were intrigued by mentions of ‘marks’ in medieval law texts and sought to understand its place within pre-industrial Europe, resulting in the publication of two books.<sup>19</sup> Their broadly oriented works aimed to showcase the many historical sites, objects and archival sources where marking signs could be found whilst explaining their place within Northern Europe’s legal framework and showing its use in popular culture and heraldry. Many similar, broadly oriented publications followed in their wake as the topic became somewhat fashionable.<sup>20</sup> Its rise to popularity, however was tied to the advent of nationalism and waned because of political and cultural changes that followed the Second World War – as well as more general academic developments.<sup>21</sup> After a heyday that had lasted for about a century, research ultimately lost steam in the 1960’s.

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: A.R.A. Croiset van Uchelen, *Vive la Plume: Schijfmeesters en Pennekunst in de Republiek* (Amsterdam 2005); H. Murphy, ‘From Scribal Marks to Calligraphic Signatures? Print, Scribe, and Script in Early Modern European Writing Manuals’ in: C.D. Bahl and S. Hanß eds., *Scribal Practice and the Global Cultures of Colophons, 1400-1800* (Cham 2022). The signatures which the title of Murphy’s article refers to, are signature used by calligraphists on their finished works of art, not those used to sign legal documents.

<sup>18</sup> The Danish physician and antiquarian Ole Worm was the first to take interest in this topic, see: T. Skånberg, *Glömda gudstecken: från fornkyrklig dopliturgi till allmogens bomärken* (Doctoral thesis, University of Lund 2003), 22.

<sup>19</sup> A.L.J. Michelsen, *Die Hausmarke. Eine germanistische Abhandlung* (Jena 1853); C.G. Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken* (Berlin 1870).

<sup>20</sup> For examples of people who cite them as an inspiration, see: E. Verstraete, *Huismerken en sibbeteekens in Vlaanderen* (Brussel 1943), 11; K.K.U. Ruppel, *Die Hausmarke. Das Symbol der germanischen Sippe* (Berlin 1939), 7; H.W.M.J. Kits Nieuwenkamp, *Het raadsel der huismerken: Proeve van verklaring van huismerken, meestertekens, grafmerken, analphabetentekens, koopmansmerken, notaristekens, poortersmerken en vissersmerken* (Amsterdam 1955), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Before and during the Second World War, the work of *volkskundigen* and their research had become tied to the national-socialist ideology and lost all credibility at the war’s end, which was followed by an effort to

In recent decades, research on marking signs seems to have experienced somewhat of a revival. Historians from subdisciplines such as heraldry, commerce and codicology have suddenly taken interest in the topic of marking signs.<sup>22</sup> For many of them, the so-called 'material turn' from the 1990's may be said to have inspired them to pursue this topic. All authors share an affinity for the study of material objects, guided by the belief that this will be able to complement written sources and help us better understand the world of the past.<sup>23</sup> What characterizes these new studies, besides their interest in the material, is their more narrow, but deeper focus. Whereas old research from the field of marking signs approached the topic as a broad, singular phenomenon, new research from various disciplines brought along with it a much more specific focus. It has resulted in a much more specialized study of marking signs that focuses on its appearance in various sources, on different objects and in specific areas and eras. This new, interdisciplinary approach will undoubtedly enable us to better understand the marking sign's place within European history, although much research is needed before we reach this point. As of yet, few studies have been devoted to understanding its uses in specific towns, let alone states.<sup>24</sup> We are still in a data gathering phase. Two questions that have come up in recent times and may be worthwhile to pursue, are how marking signs were used to express status in Leiden specifically and to what extent marking signs were used as a 'heraldry of the humble' by those without coats of arms.<sup>25</sup> We will expand on these questions at a later point.

Using the city of Leiden's wealth of material and archival sources it will be possible to explore the role of marking signs in urban life, shine a light on the historic development of signing and identify the motor driving its historical change as the city enters the early modern era. Leiden is particularly fit for analysing these phenomena because its unique collection of receipts is actually one of the very few sources that allow us to study people's signing throughout the entire sixteenth century. This, in combination with the city's financial and legal sources, rich cultural heritage in the form of monumental buildings, paintings and historical artefacts makes it an excellent case to study the changing use of signatures and the use of marks in everyday life side by side throughout the sixteenth century. In doing so,

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reform the discipline. Chapter two will discuss this in more detail. Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle*, 65; T. Dekker, *De Nederlandse volkskunde: De verwetenschappelijking van een emotionele belangstelling* (Amsterdam 2002), 275-277.

<sup>22</sup> M. Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs: Heraldic Communication and Urban Visual Culture in Late Medieval England and Germany* (Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Durham University, Durham 2019); J. Hayez, 'La marque, le blason et la figure. Usages de signes identitaires dans l'entourage de Francesco Datini (Toscane, vers 1400)' in: G. Bartholeyns, M. Bourin and P.-O. Dittmar eds., *Images de soi dans l'univers domestique, XIIIe-XVIe siècle* (Rennes 2018) 191-207; S. Jenks and J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, *Message in a Bottle: Merchants' Letters, Merchants' Marks and Conflict Management in 1533-1534. A Source Edition* (Turnhout 2022), 61-68; M. Burghart, 'Signata de mea marcha: les marques de marchands dans les comptes du péage de Chambéry (XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)', *Médiévales* 66:2 (2014) 141-158; T. Kittel, 'Early modern merchant's marks in medieval English manuscripts', *Renaissance studies* 34:2 (2020) 208-227.

<sup>23</sup> Hayez, 'La marque, le blason et la figure', 191; Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle: Merchants' Letters*, 61-65; Kittel, 'Early modern merchant's marks in medieval English manuscripts', 211-213; Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 5-6, 23-25.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Kittel does focus on its use in London, but mostly on the use of marking signs as ownership marking signs in books, see: Kittel, 'Early modern merchant's marks in medieval English manuscripts'; Marcus Meer occasionally looks into the use of marking signs across Germany and England as part of his study comparing the use of heraldry in both areas in the Late Middle Ages, see: Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*.

<sup>25</sup> The term 'heraldry of the humble' was coined by Charles Sisson in 1928, see: Sisson, 'Marks As Signatures', 16.

it should be possible to identify which underlying developments in either of these phenomena led to this great change in signing culture.

Explaining why Leiden signing culture changed requires us to first know how exactly Leiden inhabitants signed around the year 1500. Reconstructing their signing culture will allow us to gain a basic understanding of how meaning might affect signature study results and creates a basis for comparison. By combining information from the city's various administrative sources with its enormous and unique collection of signed receipts, it will be possible to conduct a new kind of signature study, not for measuring literacy, but to reconstruct how various Leiden social groups signed. Findings from this chapter reveal the existence of previously unknown signing methods, a connection between signing cultures and social classes, and most importantly shows that the relation between signing with a mark and literacy is much more complex than previously thought. This interesting conclusion will show that it is absolutely necessary to further study sixteenth century signing culture to understand how these new findings on the role of meaning might affect our current understanding of European literacy levels. Our findings lead us to wonder why literate people would sign using marking signs as well as why they stopped doing so at the end of the century. To understand this, we will have to look into the historical use of marking signs in early modern Leiden.

The second chapter will look into the meaning and use of marking signs in Leiden society, but not before looking deeper into why we know so little about these symbols or how they should be studied in the first place. Following a discussion of the subject's historiography, a new theoretical framework and methodology for studying the historical use of marking signs is proposed based on the ideas of the 'pictorial turn' and methodology from visual studies. Using an interdisciplinary approach, legal and administrative sources discussing or showing marking signs, but also gravestones, paintings and many kinds of museum pieces from Leiden were analysed to understand the mark's use as a tool for visual communication. The first part analyses the use of marking signs in industry and trade where they seem to have essentially functioned as what economic historians have called 'institutions'. At the same time however, marks could also carry a personal and prestigious meaning that was meant to express status. This dimension is explored in the second part of this chapter, which looks at the practice of displaying marks on decorative household, association and guild objects and is followed by a discussion on the relation between mark's uses as a personal, business and family symbol. It will be shown that all of these aspects show a remarkable overlap with practices associated with heraldry. The final part of this chapter tries to reconstruct why people began signing using marks by looking at its ties to medieval sealing practices. In the end, it must be concluded that no great changes took place in the sixteenth century use of marking signs, meaning that the reason for this change in signing must be sought within signing culture itself.

Two more signature studies will form the basis of the third chapter that aims to explain what development within signing culture caused Leiden's sixteenth century signing culture to change. The first will show exactly how Leiden signing culture had changed by the year 1600 whilst the other uses a source from the city of Amsterdam to prove that this change was not unique to Leiden or receipts. Using Holland archival material, an analyses of sixteenth Leiden signing culture and literature on early modern, European developments it is argued that this change in signing was brought about by a changing cultural esteem of writing and the subtle spread of new thought on how legal documents should be authenticated. In the conclusion of this study, we will reflect on the findings of our chapters and how future research can contribute to improving our understanding of early modern literacy.

## Chapter 1. A sign of illiteracy?

Within the city archive of Leiden rests a special historical source in the shape of a unique and truly enormous collection of receipts. It is made up of thousands, if not ten-thousands of receipts, stacked in hundreds of piles that span across centuries. Together, they form a vast collection of signatures that has survived from a remarkably early date – the first stack being created in 1497.<sup>26</sup> Whilst leafing through the earliest receipts, it becomes apparent that signing culture found itself at the crossroads of ages. A few of them were sealed according to old medieval practice, but the majority had signatures penned onto them. Some were signed using a name whilst others show a symbol commonly referred to as a ‘mark’. These signing methods are well-known for the early modern period, but these late medieval receipts also show some fascinating diversions that do not fit into our image of early modern signing. Within the stacks, many examples can be found of individuals who signed using both a name and marking sign, as well as people who could sign their name but chose to use a marking sign instead. A receipt signed by Claes Jacop Zybrantsz. shows one example of this (fig. 2).<sup>27</sup> This receipt confirmed the payment of his salary as assistant-treasurer from the city to him and shows that Claes signed it using both his name and a neatly drawn mark. Leiden mayor Jacop Symonsz. has provided us with an intriguing example of a literate person who signed using a marking sign (fig. 2).<sup>28</sup> He used such a symbol to sign a receipt, confirming that he and a colleague had received a reimbursed for traveling to The Hague, but at the receipt’s end, it is explicitly stated that the receipt had been written by Jacop.

This kind of signing ‘behaviour’ has rarely been observed, and has been explained as a marginal practice that could not severely impact the outcome of a signature study. It was believed that a literate person would always sign using a name unless they had been severely weakened by illness or had become disabled in some way, preventing them from writing, forcing them to use a mark.<sup>29</sup> Another idea was that people might have used marks as a shorthand.<sup>30</sup> The fact that people signed using both a name and marking sign shows that

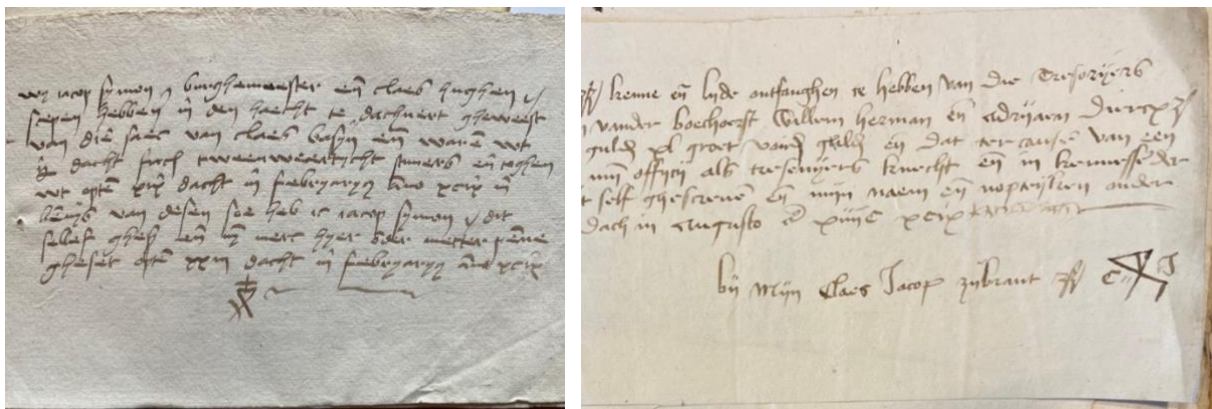


Fig. 2: A receipt signed by Jacop Symonsz. using his mark explicitly stating that he had written it himself and a receipt signed by Claes Jacop Zybrantsz using his name and mark. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 646.

<sup>26</sup> More information on why this is considered the first stack, see page 11-12

<sup>27</sup> For the purpose of identifying the correct receipt, it is useful to know that it was signed on the eight of August 1499: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 646.

<sup>28</sup> This receipt was signed on the third of February 1499: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 646.

<sup>29</sup> Cressy, *Literacy and the social order*, 58-59; K. Wrightson and D. Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700* (Oxford 1995), 147-148.

<sup>30</sup> Wrightson e.a., *Poverty and Piety in an English Village*, 147-148.

speeding up the signing process was not their main concern. Jacop Symonsz. signing a receipt written by himself using marking sign shows that literate people had other reasons to sign using these symbols, other than simply being unable to write. The fact that findings such as these seem so common in Leiden go against everything we know about the practice of signing, leading to many questions about these examples. How common are these practices exactly? Are they unique to Leiden? Are they distinctly late medieval? Why did literate people sign using these symbols and did this change over time? All of these questions will need to be answered now that signature studies' fundamental idea that 'marks equal illiteracy' has come under fire. We should start by addressing the first question. By analysing the Leiden receipts with an amended version of the signature study, it will be possible to show just how common it was for literate people to sign using marking signs within early-sixteenth-century Leiden signing culture at large.

Carrying out this study is no easy task however. It uses a new and rather unknown source that will be analysed using an equally new method to provide results which then have to be supplemented with other data in order to create useful information. This requires some explaining. The first part of this chapter will start of by explaining everything there is to know about our source. It will discuss the origin of the Leiden receipt collection, its usefulness for historians interested in literacy and what an early sixteenth-century receipt is exactly. It will also look into the question whether this source can provide us with reliable information for studying Leiden's signing culture. The second part of this chapter will discuss our method. It briefly looks into its history before explaining how it will be used to fit our case. The final part of the chapter will then use the information gathered using this method to reconstruct the signing behaviour of specific Leiden social groups. By combining the information gathered from receipts with other administrative sources from Leiden, it was possible to reconstruct how the city's *renteniers* and various occupational groups signed, which in turn teaches us about the city's signing culture as a whole.

## Receipts as source

The late fifteenth century was arguably one of the worst periods in Leiden history. Offensive campaigns, a defensive war, an attempted coup and a large-scale revolt followed each other in quick succession, placing heavy burden of taxation on Holland's cities at a time of economic decline.<sup>31</sup> It created large gaps in annual budgets that needed to be filled. To keep themselves afloat, many towns and cities resorted to selling *renten*, a kind of government bond literally called 'interest'.<sup>32</sup> These would be sold in small chunks to large groups of people and formed

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<sup>31</sup> R. Vaughan, *Charles the Bold: The Last Valois Duke of Burgundy* (Woodbridge 2002), 84-122, 414-415; M. Gerrits, 'Financiële relaties van Haarlem en Leiden met het landsheerlijke bestuur, 1505-1518', *Jaarboek der sociale en economische geschiedenis van Leiden en Omstreken* 22 (2010) 37-66, 40-41; L.H.J. Sicking, 'Opstand in Holland en Vlaanderen: De Jonker Fransenoerlog (1488-1490) in transregionaal perspectief', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 133:4 (2018) 28-56, 39-43; H. Kokken, *Steden en Staten. Dagvaarten van steden en Staten van Holland onder Maria van Bourgondië en het eerste regentschap van Maximiliaan van Oostenrijk (1477-1494)* (The Hague 1991), 227-231.

<sup>32</sup> Despite being called 'interest', *rente* was not seem as interest since the Church forbade usury. *Rente* bonds formed an exception that could be used to escape Church law: C.J. Zuijderduijn, *Medieval Capital Markets: Markets for renten, State Formation and Private Investment in Holland (1300-1550)* (Leiden-Boston 2009), 19-21. For the use of *rente* by fifteenth century Leiden and other cities, see: Gerrits, 39-43; H.G. Hamaker, 'De stad

an excellent tool to gather a lot of money at short notice. They were only a temporary solution to a larger problem however. Unable to generate more income, the cities were only dragged down by the annual payment of interest and were forced to realize that they were drowning in debt. With no other options left, they stepped to their ruler and asked for aid.<sup>33</sup> A helping hand was extended in the form of a moratorium, a postponement of payments that allowed most local governments to get a hold on their debts.<sup>34</sup> Leiden and Haarlem required more thorough measures. They requested additional aid, which was handed to them, albeit with a more firm grip. The central government strengthened its hold over both cities from 1497 onwards; dictating how to generate more income and decrease expenditures, choosing its treasures and eventually even appointing its mayors and aldermen until 1510.<sup>35</sup> This substantial decrease of civic autonomy received much attention from Dutch historians and has overshadowed more subtle ways in which the central government tried to improve Leiden's financial situation.<sup>36</sup>

Another method for improving the city's financial state was sought in reorganizing its financial administration. Royal officers were sent in to bring order to Leiden's older administration whilst new treasurers were appointed with instructions on how to organize the finances of years to come.<sup>37</sup> They are particularly adamant about the use of receipts.<sup>38</sup> Similar to the practices of the County's *rekenkamer*, or accounting chamber, each entry in an account had to be justified with evidence to make sure money could not go 'missing'.<sup>39</sup> For every sum the treasurers paid, a *quitantie* or 'quittance' now had to be signed by the receiving party to confirm that the sum had reached its intended destination. At the end of the financial year, a committee was assembled to audit the treasurers' annual accounts to see if each expense was deemed necessary and if they could be corroborated with evidence such as financial registers, sub-accounts and receipts.<sup>40</sup> The use of receipts was not new to Leiden, but the reorganization

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Leiden in staat van faillissement', *Vereeniging tot uitgave der Bronnen van het Oude Vaderlandsche Recht* 3 (1893) 181-207, 181-182, 184; Kokken, *Steden en Staten*, 227-231.

<sup>33</sup> C.J. Zijderduijn, 'De gemene landsrenten van 1482/3 en de moratoria voor de Staten van Holland van 1491 en 1497' in: V. Enthoven ed., *Nederland in last: Vijfhonderd jaar overheidsfinanciën in de Lage Landen, 1500-2000* (Leiden 2021) 33-49, 42-43.

<sup>34</sup> Zijderduijn, *Medieval Capital Markets*, 127-128.

<sup>35</sup> For the exact measures of Leiden see the transcripts of the original charters from 1497 and 1504 in which they were ordered: F. van Mieris, *Handvesten, privilegiën, octroyen, rechten en vrijheden, midsgaders, ordonnantien, resolutien, plakkaaten, verbintenissen, costumen, instructien, en handelingen der stad Leyden* (Leiden 1759), 418-439; Hamaker, 'De stad Leiden in staat van faillissement', 189-207.

<sup>36</sup> Hamaker, Kokken, Downer and Marsilje only mention the decrease in autonomy and the central government's greater control over urban finances, see: Hamaker, 'De stad Leiden in staat van faillissement', 183-184; Kokken, *Steden en Staten*, 231-232; W. Downer, *De financiële toestand van de stad Leiden omstreeks 1500* (Voordracht, gehouden voor het oud-vaderlands dispuut 'De Costumieren', 1951), 12-14 (Available at the Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken library); J.W. Marsilje, 'Les modes d'imposition en Hollande, 1477-1515', *Publications du Centre Européen d'Etudes Bourguignonnes (XIVe-XVIe s.)* 28 (1988) 159-171, 169-171.

<sup>37</sup> For the instructions, see: Van Mieris, *Handvesten*, 432, 437.

<sup>38</sup> Van Mieris, *Handvesten*, 437.

<sup>39</sup> On the use of receipts by the Holland accounting chamber see: R. Stein, *Magnanimous dukes and rising states: the unification of the Burgundian Netherlands, 1380-1480* (Oxford 2017), 209-212.

<sup>40</sup> Van Mieris, *Handvesten*, 437. For the period 1497-1500, this committee was entirely made up of central government officers. From the year 1502 onwards, Leiden mayors helped out with the audit and even became solely responsible for this task from 1507 onwards: J.J. Dijkshoorn, *Van vorstelijke rekenkamer tot Leidse liefdadigheidsinstellingen: De verspreiding van de Bourgondische rekenstijl naar de Leidse gasthuisadministratie, 1494-1583* (BA History thesis, Leiden University, Leiden 2022), 26-33. (Available at the Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken library.)

did shift ideas about their value.<sup>41</sup> Enormous packets of receipts from singular or multiple years containing hundreds of these paper slips were suddenly being ‘archived’ as part of an unwritten policy that would be continued for hundreds of years.<sup>42</sup> The receipts were continually stored in Leiden and are currently part of its old city archive.<sup>43</sup> Together, they form a unique but untapped source of signatures.<sup>44</sup>

Up until now, the Leiden receipts received little attention from historians interested in the study of literacy. This can in part be explained by its somewhat unwieldy nature, obscurity or the ‘Dutch’ lack of interest in the topic, but the main reason must be sought within the field of literacy studies itself.<sup>45</sup> Its long focus on calculating literacy rates for towns and villages meant that historians preferred to work with sources containing a random selection of signatures from all parts of society as they are more likely to reflect the literacy rate of society as a whole. Receipts cannot provide this as they are signed only by a specific group of people that were paid for goods they had sold, like wine or baskets, services they provided to the urban government or the *renten* they owned and generally underrepresent the poor. Despite not being the ideal source for measuring literacy rates, receipts as a source do have unique features that distinguishes them from most other signature sources. With receipts, it is often possible to find two receipts signed and sometimes also written by the same person at two different points in time, granting us much more information about a person’s literacy and use of signatures than a single signature.

Unlike marriage registers, notarial acts and court depositions, receipts have not been used as a source for signature studies and were never subjected to the same methodological scrutiny. Understanding the value of receipts as a source for signature studies requires us to examine its place in the greater financial administration where it essentially served as a testimony. It was written for the treasurer who used it to confirm that the sums described in his account reached their intended destination. The recipient acted as the authority who confirmed that a transaction had indeed taken place. According to a solemn formula, they ‘acknowledged and confessed’ from who, how much, why and when they got paid and confirmed the truth of this testimony using seals and many kinds of signatures. Receipts were used to confirm all kinds of payments ranging from products, to services, taxes and interest.

The main issue with the receipt as a source for signature studies is that they could be forged and misrepresent how people actually signed. Why would anyone do this and what effect could it have on the outcome of a signature study? Two main reasons for creating fraudulent receipts can be identified. A first is that writing down fictional expenses in the city account could be used to steal money if they are justified with corresponding, forged receipts. Marks could be forged and the fact that some receivers asked others who could write their

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<sup>41</sup> Receipts had been used in Leiden as early as the fourteenth century, see for example: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 645, 700-705, 893. There are reasons to believe that the reorganization increased the treasurers’ use of receipts, see: Dijkshoorn, Van vorstelijke rekenkamer tot Leidse liefdadigheidsinstellingen, 26.

<sup>42</sup> The introduction of this new ‘policy’ can still be seen in the organization of the current archive. The oldest packet of receipts that has come down to us in relatively small, containing less than two hundred receipts, but spans the period 1420-1497. It is followed up by larger packets, mostly from singular years, that most of the time contain hundreds of receipts. The original labels for these later packets can still be found within the piles and describe what they contain.

<sup>43</sup> The old city archive, the ‘Archief der Secretarie van de stad Leiden’ is stored by the current Leiden archive, ‘Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken’.

<sup>44</sup> This collection of urban receipts is unique to Holland and perhaps to the current day Netherlands as a whole. No other city archive has such a large collection from such an early date.

<sup>45</sup> The Dutch lack of interest was first signaled in 1983 and confirmed in 1997, see: Kuijpers, ‘Lezen en schrijven, 494-495.

name to sign for them created plenty of opportunity to forge signed receipts. Cases of financial fraud in Holland cities are extremely rare however, so we may assume that it did not happen or happened on such a small, undetectable scale that it does not hinder the proposed study.<sup>46</sup> The thorough auditing probably also helped deter potential fraudsters.<sup>47</sup> Laziness could be thought of as a second motivation to forge receipts. Perhaps because of administrative chaos, lots of receipts were written long after the actual transaction had taken place, meaning that people had to be visited or summoned at a later time to get their signature.<sup>48</sup> It would have been much easier for a treasurer to sign receipts for them, but there is no evidence to support that this happened and many of these ‘delayed’ receipts were signed with authentic signatures or seals. Overall, it seems unlikely that the possible creation of fraudulent receipts could seriously affect the outcome of a large-scale signature analysis. Having learned a little more about the history and nature of this source, whilst also having confirmed its reliability as a source for signature studies, it will be addressed how exactly we should analyse this source.

### **A new signature study**

Studying Leiden signing culture through its receipt collection will be done using an amended version of the classic signature study. It is part of a recent revival of the method that seeks to use it not just as a tool for measuring literacy, but as a means of studying writing culture. The cultural turn within the study of literacy started with historians turning away from its quantitative methods, but they seem to have become increasingly aware that, with some amendments, this might actually be a valuable tool for studying the cultural meaning and use of writing. Erika Kuijpers was the first to successfully re-use this method in the late 1990’s.<sup>49</sup> In her study on literacy in early modern Amsterdam, Kuijpers separated fluently and more roughly written signatures from each other to create a distinction between people she believed to be ‘active’ or frequent writers as opposed to ‘passive’ ones. This allowed her to gain an understanding of what percentage of writers actively used this skill during their lives.<sup>50</sup> Almost two decades later, Eleanor Hubbard did something slightly different in her study of women’s literacy in London.<sup>51</sup> In her signature study, she looked not only at who could and could not sign their name, but also registered who signed using an initial. She believed that

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<sup>46</sup> The only known case of financial fraud in a Holland city from the Late Middle Ages is that of the Haarlem secretary Willem Paedze who lowered the interest rates from some people in a *rente* register to slip some of the money into his own pocket. It was quickly found out, in less than a year, when the people he stole from filed a complaint about their lowered payments. Willem was subsequently tried and executed; J.W. Marsilje, ‘Het Haarlemse klerkambt in de 15e eeuw’ in: D.E.H. de Boer and J.W. Marsilje eds., *De Nederlanden in de late middeleeuwen* (Utrecht 1987) 182-198, 187-188.

<sup>47</sup> For more information on the audit, see: page 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> It is highly probable that they were either visited by or summoned to a civic official to sign receipts. This can be gleaned from the fact that most receipts were written by the same set of hands, two of which have been identified as belonging to the civic officials Bruyn Foeytgensz. and Jan Philipsz.

<sup>49</sup> There were others who used more extensive classifications before Kuijpers, but they did not use it to study writing or drawing culture. See for instance: Y. Longuet, ‘L’alphabétisation à Falaise de 1670 à 1789’, *Annales de Normandie* 28 (1978) 207-228.

<sup>50</sup> Kuijpers, ‘Lezen en schrijven’, 514-517.

<sup>51</sup> Hubbard, ‘Reading, Writing, and Initialing’.

this might be done by people who learned to read, but not to write and hence might allow us to measure what percentage of people were able to read.<sup>52</sup>

This new, cultural approach to signature studies was picked up by Mark Hailwood who applied it even more rigorously to learn about the writing or ‘marking’ abilities of English country dwellers in the period 1550-1700. He analysed not just who wrote their name or initials, but also what other types of signatures were used. What many others had heaped together as signs of the illiterate, he split up into ‘icons’, circles, crosses, one- and multi-stroke marks, which enabled him to get a better understanding on the spread and use of ‘pen competency’ in rural England.<sup>53</sup>

Hailwood’s extensive classification of signatures will serve a basis for studying Leiden signing culture, although more categories will be added to accurately reflect the ways in which Leiden inhabitants signed. This will include categories for people who signed using both their name and mark, literate people who chose to sign using a mark and other types of signing behaviour that were not observed by Hailwood, but are found in the Leiden receipt collection. This categorization system is somewhat complicated however, by the fact that many people used different signatures at different points in time. To which category do they belong? Because this study aims to analyse rarer signing behaviour, it has been decided to add these people to the most uncommon signing behaviour they exhibited. In case someone signed with their name on one occasion and with their name and mark on another, they will be added to the second category. When someone used their name and mark to sign one receipt and used only a mark to sign another, they will be added to the category of literate people who signed using marking signs. This classification system will grant us insight into early-sixteenth-century Leidenaars’ ‘signing behaviour’. This term already has, and will continue to be, used to describe the results of our combined study of people’s literacy, signatures and relation between the two.

Carrying out this signature study is in many ways straightforward, a simple case of registering what signatures people used to sign. This task is slightly complicated however, by the category of literate people who signed using marks. How do we identify these people? This can actually be done in multiple ways, which will be explained with the help of some examples. The easiest way to identify this group of people is by reading the receipts they signed. People who could write commonly wrote their own receipt and frequently mention this fact in its closing phrases, which also holds true for people who signed using a mark. The receipt signed by the Leiden mayor Jacop Symonsz. is illustrative of this fact. Others did not explicitly mention this fact, but can still be identified as ‘literate’ if they wrote in a distinct handwriting different from that of civic officials, who usually wrote receipts for the illiterate to sign. Gheryt die Man Wormboutsz. is one of these people who can be identified as literate using his handwriting (fig. 3). On two occasions, he signed a receipt that was written in the same, very distinct handwriting. A last method of identifying literate people who signed using marks is illustrated by the case of Claes Vos. Two receipts with his signature have been preserved in the Leiden archive showing that he switched between signing with a name and a mark (fig. 3).<sup>54</sup> A possible issue of this last method is that there is one case from early modern

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<sup>52</sup> This idea was however, is rightly criticized by Mark Hailwood. For his arguments, see: Hailwood, ‘Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700’, 46-52.

<sup>53</sup> Hailwood, ‘Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700’, 52-59.

<sup>54</sup> In the Leiden archive is a register from the early sixteenth century that shows where the city’s firefighting equipment was supposed to be stored. One of those places was Claes Vos’ house. The registers also shows

England where a man could sign his name, but claimed to be illiterate.<sup>55</sup> If something similar was common in Leiden, it could affect the accuracy of this method, but this seems unlikely. Because receipts were often written by the person who signed, it can often be confirmed that someone who signed their name could write much more than that. With a clear vision of our method, it is now time to put it to use.

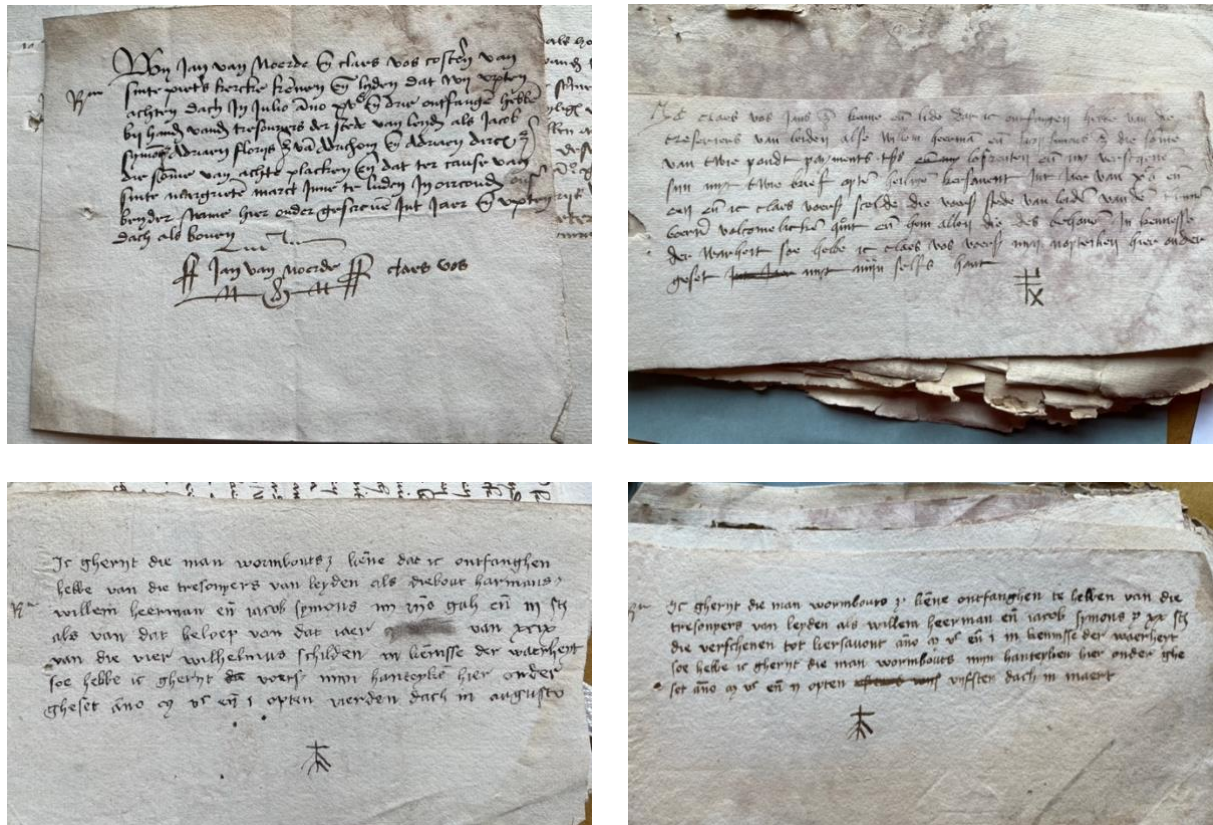


Fig. 3: From top to bottom, two receipts signed by Claes Vos and two receipts signed by Gheryt die Man Wormboutsz. at two different points in time. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 646-648.

### Leiden signing culture, 1498-1508

Studying how common particular kinds of signing behaviour were in early sixteenth-century Leiden requires us to study the signatures of a specific social group. Ideally, this ‘group’ would be the entire population of Leiden, as has been the case with many kinds of signature studies in the past. Using receipts as a source of signatures forces us to work a little different. They do not provide us with a sample that is representative of the entire population, but can be used to create an impression of various social groups’ signing behaviour that can be compared to create useful estimates. By analysing fourteen hundred receipts from the period 1498-1508, it was possible to gather signatures and receipts from hundreds individuals that allow us to reconstruct the signing behaviour of various social groups.

The first group is Leiden’s *rente*-owning class, or *renteniers*. From receipts confirming the pay-out of *rente*, signatures from 322 individuals were gathered, out of which 239 can be

what symbol were used to mark the equipment in his house and it corresponds to the one he uses to sign in fig. 3. For the register, see: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 1173, register ‘Over t’hof’ f. 1r.

<sup>55</sup> Ford, ‘The Problem of Literacy in Early Modern England’, 32-33.

confirmed to have been inhabitants of Leiden. This was done using the city's yearly accounts, which always mention the origin of the people to whom the *rente* was paid. To decrease the chance of confusing people who had the same name, but lived in different places, not only the name but also the exact payment of *rente* mentioned in the receipts and accounts were compared. If there was a receipt and signature from a 'Jan Jansz.' who got paid 20 *schellingen*, the accounts were used to check if there indeed lived a Jan Jansz. in Leiden who got paid this exact amount. This, of course, still means that we might confuse the receipts of two Jan Jansz.'s from different places who were paid the same amount, but the chance of this happening is very low. An interesting lesson drawn from comparing the receipts' information with that of the accounts, is that the accounts mention more payments than that there are receipts, meaning that a quite a few receipts must have vanished over time. Why or how this happened is difficult to answer because the collection does not show a clear bias. It will have to be accepted that it has been 'randomised' somewhat.

The group of 239 people that we are left with seem to form only a small part of Leiden's total population, as sources have allowed us to estimate that the city had around 12.000 inhabitants by the year 1498.<sup>56</sup> They likely belonged to the higher social classes since they were able to save up some of their income and wanted to invest it. This should not give us the impression that only the rich bought *renten*. An extensive socio-economic study on the possessions of inhabitants from the small Dutch town of Edam in the mid sixteenth century showed that even the poor and smallholders regularly invested in *renten*.<sup>57</sup> In the *rente* administration of Leiden we can also encounter people with quite ordinary professions such as brewers, carpenters, coopers, potters and smiths. Despite this, it still seems that an analysis of the ways in which *renteniers* signed is likely to provide us an impression of how common particular types of signing were within a more well-off group.

The data gathered from *rente* receipts teaches us that the signing behaviour of Leiden *renteniers* can be captured in five different categories, which are presented in Table 1. These categories have in turn been divided over two groups. The first is that of people who we can presume to be illiterate. They signed their receipts using something other than their name and no evidence of them being able to write has been found, leading us to assume that they were unable to write. The second group has shown to at least be able to write their own name, from which it would be logical to assume to they could write, although rare examples are known where this was not the case, as mentioned before. As we concluded that did not pose a large threat to the accuracy of the results, it has been assumed that all of these people were able to write. A last note about this table, is that the data of the 239 individuals is made up of 168 men and 71 women.

Looking at the results presented in Table 1, it seems that less than a third of Leiden *renteniers* were unable to write. These people signed using a marking sign or asked someone else to sign for them – something that has rarely been observed within the field of literacy studies. Within this group, about a third signed using a *Marking sign*; a drawing of a personal and often unique symbol that could range from everyday objects to more abstract ones like that of Jacop Symonsz.<sup>58</sup> Letting someone else sign of your behalf, signing *By proxy*, was a

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<sup>56</sup> D.J. Noordam, 'Leiden in last. De financie positie van de Leidenaren aan het einde van de Middeleeuwen', *Jaarboek der sociale en economische geschiedenis van Leiden en omstreken* 13 (2001) 16-40, 17-20.

<sup>57</sup> T. de Moor and C.J. Zuiderduijn, 'Preferences of the poor: market participation and asset management of poor households in sixteenth-century Holland', *European review of economic history* 17:2 (2013) 233-249, 235-240.

<sup>58</sup> Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700', 52.

popular alternative for validating receipts and has rarely been observed signature studies. It deserves a further analysis.

Table 1. *Rentenier* signing behaviour categories, 1498-1508

Signing behaviour of the presumably illiterate	No.	%
Marking sign	16	29,6
By proxy	38	70,4
Total	54	

Signing behaviour of the presumably literate	No.	%
Name	123	66,5
Name & marking sign	44	23,8
Literate but used marking signs	18	9,7
Total	185	

Source: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 580, 646-648.

In Leiden around the year 1500, it seems to have been normal to ask a bystander, most often a civic official or family member, to sign on your half behalf, which was then noted explicitly at the receipt's close. The reason for this is never stated and begs the question why people did not sign it themselves. We can imagine that someone who is unable to hold a pen due to a disability might ask someone to sign for them, but this explanation is perhaps too simple. The question becomes more complicated knowing that women make up two thirds of this group and that the substitute signatory almost always subscribed using a name instead of a mark which anyone could produce. Did people think a man's signature was more authoritative than a woman's?<sup>59</sup> Or did this group of illiterate people know that a signed name would be a more secure proof than an easily forgeable mark?

The other two thirds of *renteniers* seem to have been able to write, but not everyone chose to do so. The majority of these people signed using their *Name*, as classical literacy studies would have us suspect, but a sizeable group preferred to use different methods. For the first time, Table 1. allows us to catch a glimpse of the elusive group of people that were *Literate but used marking sign* to sign documents. It shows that they form a small, but not insignificant group that made up around nine percent of the presumed literate population. It is a fascinating result that begs the question why they signed this way and what the implications of this find are for the results of countless classic signature studies. The first

<sup>59</sup> Another possible explanation for why women did not sign themselves is that they were not allowed to because they were married women and thereby placed under the legal authority of their husbands; M. van der Heijden, E. van Nederveen Meerkerk and A. Schmidt, 'Terugkeer van het patriarchaat? Vrije vrouwen in de Republiek', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 6:3 (2009) 26-52, 36-39; P.J.A. Franssen, *Wanneer de Hen speelt voor den Haan... Huwelijksperikelen in teksten uit de late middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam 1987), 84-85. This theory may however be debunked with many examples of widows who still signed by proxy. These women regained personal legal authority after the deaths of their husbands, but still let others sign for them. Many examples can be found in: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 647.

question becomes even more pressing when we note the existence of an even larger group that signed with both *Name & marking sign*.<sup>60</sup> How did we come to believe that marks and names separate the literate from the illiterate when many contemporaries perceived them as interchangeable or equal? We will have to return to this question at a later point.

The discovery of a substantial group of literate people signing with marks could greatly impact our image of early modern literacy and requires further investigation. The finding that nine percent of literate *renteniers* belonged to this group could be a starting point for reinterpreting literacy rates, but does not tell us anything about how common this signing behaviour was in Leiden society at large. It could have belonged to a class of social elites that may very well be overrepresented in this group. The *renteniers'* literacy rate of seventy percent seems to confirm this image. If the practice belonged to the lower classes however, it is likely to be underrepresented. In order to better interpret what percentage of literate signatories used marking signs, the findings of *rentenier* signing behaviour will be compared to that of other Leiden social groups.

By combining information from all kinds of receipts, various administrative sources and a secondary source it was possible reconstruct the signing behaviour and occupation of 213 individuals, the majority of which could be identified as Leiden citizens. The first step in creating this dataset was achieved by reading the receipts that people signed to confirm the payment for products they sold to the urban government, services that they provided or the *rente* they owned. These receipts occasionally mention the profession of the signatory as part of their name, e.g. 'Dirck Jacobsz. Sawyer', which is very clear and direct evidence of what someone did for a living.<sup>61</sup> In other cases, the services provided strongly indicate what people did for living. On one occasion for example, two people were paid for sawing wood for an entire day, indicating that they probably worked as sawyers.<sup>62</sup>

If receipts did not mention any information on the occupation of its signatory, the corresponding description of the payment in the city accounts as well as in the *rente* administration were looked at.<sup>63</sup> The description of payments in these documents are often slightly different to that of the receipts and occasionally mention people's professions when the receipts do not. One example of this, is the case of Cornelis Jansz. In a receipt signed by him confirming the payment of *rente*, nothing is mentioned about his occupation, but in a corresponding entry in one of the city accounts, he is named Cornelis Jansz. *Tinnegieter* or 'tin caster'.

In case all of the above-mentioned sources were unable to provide any information on people's profession, another, unique source was consulted – the register that was used to administrate the extra-ordinary capital taxation of 1498. This tax was collected as part of the efforts to improve Leiden's financial situation and was documented in great detail, providing us with lots of information on the city's inhabitants.<sup>64</sup> Amongst many other things, it provides information on people's occupation and once again helped reconstruct how a part of Leiden signatories made their living. This could be done once it had been confirmed that the signatory of a receipt was the same person as the one mentioned in the tax administration. Confirming

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<sup>60</sup> The consistent pairing of names and marking signs disproves the idea that marking signs were just used as a shorthand; Wrightson e.a., *Poverty and Piety in an English Village*, 147-148.

<sup>61</sup> ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 646. This receipt was signed by Pieter Gherytsz. and Dirck Jacobsz. on the fifth of April, 1499.

<sup>62</sup> ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 646. This receipt was signed by Joost Gherytsz. and Dirck Jansz. on the third of December, 1498.

<sup>63</sup> The accounts and registers for the period 1498-1508 can be found here: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 578-589, 819-826.

<sup>64</sup> For more information on this source, see: D.J. Noordam, 'Leiden in last'.

this could be done if a signatory had a specific and unique name, and ideally was known to have been a Leiden inhabitant, as in the case of many previously mentioned *renteniers*. For people who fulfilled these criteria, the tax administration could then be used to learn about their profession. In many cases, this source also confirmed information on people's possession gathered from previously mentioned sources.

A last piece of information on the occupation of *Leidenaars* has come from the so-called *Magistraatslijsten* – a secondary source listing the Leiden aldermen and mayors of each year. This has been used to identify people who held one of these positions at one point during their lives.<sup>65</sup> All of this gathered information on peoples signing behaviour and occupations is presented in Table 2. Apart from the 'unskilled workers' and 'government officers' categories, all signing behaviour presented in this table was gathered from individuals who are confirmed to have been Leiden inhabitants. These other categories are still included in this table because they can provide us with a broader perspective on the signing behaviour of specific social classes. Overall, the information presented in Table 2 shows some remarkable differences and similarities compared to the *rentenier* data.

A quick glance at the subscription methods used by the illiterates of Leiden's social groups shows that they are quite different to that of the city's *renteniers*. Signing using a *Marking sign* is the most common in both datasets, but there is a great difference in the use of other signing methods. For illiterate *renteniers*, there was only one alternative to signing with a marking sign and that was to sign *By proxy*, but the other social groups employed a much broader array of signing methods. Amongst the unskilled workers, most of whom were not Leiden inhabitants, one of them simply drew a couple of lines, referred to as *Stroke marks* whilst artisans and people who followed a formal education could also sign using *Initial(s)* or the combined use of a *Marking sign & initial(s)*. This difference in the use of signatures might be explained as a cultural difference between the illiterates from the *renteniers* and the other social groups. Another noteworthy difference between the two datasets is that thirty percent of *renteniers* signed by proxy, whilst among the other social groups only six percent signed using this method. This could once again be explained as a cultural difference, but may also be explained as a gender difference. As mentioned before, the majority of *renteniers* who signed by proxy were women – a group that is excluded from the social groups table as this is based on profession. Women's occupations are almost never mentioned in the primary sources.

Comparing the signing behaviour of literate *renteniers* and the other social groups reveals that they seem to have been part of quite a uniform signing culture, unlike the illiterate. People who signed using a *Name, Name & marking sign* or who were *Literate but used marking signs* seem to have been present amongst all Leiden social groups, albeit in different ratios. The percentage of literate people who signed using a mark seems to be quite consistent amongst most groups and in line with earlier findings from *renteniers*, although the clergy forms somewhat of an exception that cannot easily be explained. Table 2 also shows that signing using both a name and marking sign was a common practice for artisans and people who had received formal education, but becomes rarer once we move on to the clergy and civic officers. It seems that the higher we move up into the social hierarchy, the less people signed using marking signs. The inclusion of a category for central government officers who did not live in Leiden, but left their signatures there helps confirm this idea. Their signing

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<sup>65</sup> P.U. van der Laaken, *Magistraatslijsten 1260-1641* (Leiden 1987).

behaviour suggests that signing using just a name had become the norm in the Court of Holland and had begun trickling down into the lower cultural echelons of society.

Table 2. Signing behaviour categories of social groups, in percentage of total, 1498-1508

<b>Social groups</b> Signing behaviour of the presumably illiterate	Unskilled <sup>1</sup>	Artisanal/ educated <sup>2</sup>	Clergy <sup>3</sup>	Civic officers <sup>4</sup>	Government officers <sup>5</sup>
Stroke marks	5,3	0	0	0	0
By proxy	0	6,2	0	0	0
Marking sign	94,7	75,0	0	100	100
Initial(s)	0	6,2	0	0	0
Marking sign & initial(s)	0	12,6	0	0	0
Total sample size (No.)	19	16	-	2	2

<b>Socials groups</b> Signing behaviour of the presumably literate	Unskilled <sup>1</sup>	Artisanal/ educated <sup>2</sup>	Clergy <sup>3</sup>	Civic officers <sup>4</sup>	Government officers <sup>5</sup>
Name	0	40,0	63,3	70,7	95,8
Name & marking sign	0	51,1	30,0	20,0	4,2
Literate but used marking sign	0	8,9	6,7	9,3	0
Total sample size (No.)	-	45	30	75	24

<sup>1</sup> A term used to denote professions that required little training or education following: A. Knotter and J.L. van Zanden, 'Immigratie en arbeidsmarkt in Amsterdam in de 17e eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 13 (1987) 403-430, 413-414; Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven', 519. This group is mainly made up of labourers and sawyers. Most of them seem to not have lived in Leiden.

<sup>2</sup> People with professions that required formal education or long training following: Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven', 519. This group includes professions ranging from carpenters and thatchers to glassmakers.

<sup>3</sup> Monks, nuns, priests, priors, prioresses and sacristans.

<sup>4</sup> People working for or being appointed by the city of Leiden, ranging from city guards to overseers over church finances to aldermen.

<sup>5</sup> People working for the court of Holland ranging from messengers to counsellors. Most of them lived outside of Leiden.

Source: ELO, IASL I, inv.nr. 580, 645-649.

Marking signs were in no way a sign of illiteracy. That much can be concluded from the signing behaviour of early sixteenth-century Leidenaars. To people ranging from artisans to aldermen, marks were seen as a viable signature that was of equal value or even preferred to signing with a name. About nine percent of literate people seem to have always or occasionally signed receipts using just a marking sign whilst many more signed using both a name and mark. This discovery could change our understanding of early modern literacy rates and raises many questions about this practice and the people that used it. Why did people swap between multiple signing methods? Why did literate people sign using marking signs in the first place? And most importantly, why did this change at the end of the sixteenth century? In an attempt to answer these questions, we will have to look into the historical use of marking signs in early modern Leiden.

## Chapter 2. Leaving your mark upon the world

Walking around a late medieval or early modern city, it would have been absolutely impossible to avoid the countless little symbols that we now know as ‘marking signs’. A glance at its streetscape would have revealed these symbols to be everywhere, displayed on all sorts of buildings and objects. It would have immediately made clear that they played an important role in everyday life. Much of this world has disappeared, of course. Only its traces in the form of objects, writings and paintings remain. It is through putting these various traces together that we can gain an impression of this world and the place of marking signs within in. In doing so, this chapter hopes to explain why sixteenth century literate people signed using marking signs as well as answer whether changes in the use of marking signs can explain why the practice of signing using these symbols was largely abandoned in Leiden at the end of the century. Answering these questions requires us to venture deeper into these symbols’ rich and largely unexplored past, but not before answering why it has remained unexplored or how it should be studied in the first place. Interest on the topic can be traced back to the early seventeenth century, although an academic study would not appear before the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup>

### From *Rechtsinstitut* to visual communication method. A historiography of marks

Reading the many publications that followed in its wake, it becomes clear that Andreas Ludwig Jacob Michelsen’s and Carl Gustav Homeyer’s publications on this topic are seen as the foundation of the modern, academic study of marks.<sup>67</sup> Inspired by mentions of ‘marks’ in medieval laws, these nineteenth century legal historians started a thorough research on marks to reconstruct what they thought to be a lost, uniquely German *Rechtinstitut*.<sup>68</sup> Inspired by a healthy dose of German nationalism, they travelled through Northern Europe and contacted their colleagues to collect information on the mysterious signs.<sup>69</sup> Homeyer in particular gathered enormous amounts of evidence and not only on the mark’s legal functions. Information passed over to him and findings of his own made him realise that marks were used for all kinds of purposes. Thus, he decided to devote his work to try and understand the mark’s many uses by presenting all legal, popular and heraldic uses he encountered, following the interests of his time.<sup>70</sup> In his book, he also included a catalogue with images of many different kinds of marks he encountered. The book set the standard for a long tradition of scholarship that sought to understand the meaning and use of the mark from different perspectives within very wide or local scopes.<sup>71</sup> These were often written by amateur

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<sup>66</sup> Skånberg, *Glömnda gudstecken*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Michelsen, *Die Hausmarke*; Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*. For examples of people who were inspired by them, see: Verstraete, *Huismerken en sibbeteekens in Vlaanderen*, 11; Ruppel, *Die Hausmarke*, 7; Kits Nieuwenkamp, *Het raadsel der huismerken*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Michelsen, *Die Hausmarke*, 2-4; Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*, v-viii.

<sup>69</sup> Michelsen, *Die Hausmarke*, 2-7; Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*, vii-viii.

<sup>70</sup> Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*, vi. On the nineteenth century study of popular culture and heraldry, see: P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York 1978), 3-9; Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> The perspectives ranged from legal, to folkloric, to economic and heraldic ones, whilst the geographic scope would often range from Northern Europe, to individual countries, to individual towns, for examples see: Skånberg, *Glömnda gudstecken*, 22-26; Verstraete, *Huismerken en sibbeteekens in Vlaanderen*, 12; Kits

historians or researchers of popular culture belonging to the early North-European discipline of *volkskunde*. Heraldists kept their distance, as they regarded marks to be an ‘improper’ form of heraldry.<sup>72</sup> Over time, this research taught us much about the use of marks across the European continent before losing much of its momentum in the 1960’s.

Two reasons for this decline may be identified. A first is related to the academic developments within the field of *volkskunde*. Scholars from this discipline had shown great interest in the study of marking signs and were among the leading publishers on this topic until this suddenly came to an end as the discipline underwent a critical reformation. *Volkskundigen* and their research suffered grave criticism after the Second World War as they had been – willingly or unwillingly – tied to the national socialist ideology.<sup>73</sup> The study of marks had also been inextricably linked to the older, now tainted, research interests and scientific paradigm.<sup>74</sup> The subject was slowly abandoned in the late fifties, which seems to coincide with the international effort to reform the discipline in the early sixties.<sup>75</sup>

A second reason for its decline may be sought in the field’s isolation from the broader study of history. Whilst research on marks had long been able to show that these symbols had all kinds of social, cultural and economic functions across European society, its impact on the study of history as a whole remained marginal. It has long been a niche study focused on understanding the mark and nothing more, unwilling to reach out to other subfields of history. As a consequence, few historians of social, economic and cultural history have shown interest in this quaint little field. This is perhaps best illustrated by two reviews of Frank A. Girling’s *English Merchant’s Marks* – a work that is still considered foundational for the study of English marks.<sup>76</sup> Both reviews were written by economic historians who complained that the work’s scope was too broad whilst its findings on the mark’s economic uses remained superficial.<sup>77</sup> It is a critique that applies to most of these studies and could have come from social and cultural historians as well. Declining output from *volkskunde* combined with the failure to attract more attention to the topic resulted in a steady drop in publications.<sup>78</sup> It was the end of an era that had lasted about a century. Interest died down until a slow increase starting taking place from the turn of the millennia onwards, which has been gaining speed ever since.

This renewed interest was not caused by a reinvigoration of the field itself, but by archaeologists and historians from all kinds of subdisciplines finally ‘discovering’ the marking

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Nieuwenkamp, *Het raadsel der huismerken*, 6-9; F.I. Schechter, *The Historical Foundations of the Law Related to Trade-Marks* (New York 1925).

<sup>72</sup> Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 11.

<sup>73</sup> Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle*, 65; Dekker, *De Nederlandse volkskunde*, 275-277.

<sup>74</sup> In the Netherlands, it was mainly followers of the national-socialist ideology such as G. Schaap, H. Reydon and F.E. Farwerck who published on marks. In Germany, marks had been used as part of national-socialist propaganda: Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle*, 65.

<sup>75</sup> Dekker, *De Nederlandse volkskunde*, 277.

<sup>76</sup> F.A. Girling’s exploratory research on English marks from the nineteen sixties still used in recent English publications on marks, see for example: Kittel, ‘Early modern merchant’s marks in medieval English manuscripts’, 211-212; Hailwood, ‘Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700’, 65; Girling, *English Merchant’s Marks*.

<sup>77</sup> E.M. Carus-Wilson, ‘English Merchants’ Marks: A Field Survey of Marks Made by Merchants and Tradesmen in England between 1400 and 1700. By F.A. Girling’, *The English Historical Review* 81:318 (1966) 223; T.S. Willan, ‘English Merchants’ Marks. A Field Survey of Marks Made by Merchants and Tradesmen in England between 1400 and 1700. By F.A. Girling’, *The Journal of economic history* 25:1 (1965) 146-147.

<sup>78</sup> An analysis on Tuve Skånberg’s extensive bibliography on marks and the amount of publications on ‘hausmarken’ in the Regesta Imperii database seem to indicate that interest in this topic waned in the 1970’s. For the sources see: Skånberg, *Glömda gudstecken*, 219-233; Regesta Imperii – RI OPAC, [http://opac.regesta-imperii.de/lang\\_en/](http://opac.regesta-imperii.de/lang_en/) (Consulted on the twelfth of March 2024).

sign. Historians from the fields of heraldry, codicology, commerce and cultural history from countries such as England, France, The Netherlands, Germany and Poland have suddenly taken interest in the mark's historical use, signalling somewhat of a revival.<sup>79</sup> What ties these authors together is their affinity for the study of material objects, which seems to be inspired by the so-called 'material turn' of the 1990's.<sup>80</sup> It is a development that has brought historians, archaeologist and museum curators together as they believe that an interdisciplinary approach to historical sources will allow us to deepen our understanding of historical developments and past lives.<sup>81</sup> These new studies from various subdisciplines have brought with them a much more specialized study of marking signs that focuses on its appearance in various sources, on different objects for specific times and places. Old and new research has taught us much about the mark's uses, and promises to teach ever more, but none have been able to offer a framework to understand 'the mark' as a totality. The mark had an important use in trade, but it was also a status symbol, but then again it sometimes was not. How do we tie all of its various uses together? Perhaps the best way to approach the mark is as means of visual communication.

In recent decades there has been a great interest in premodern visual communication which has dovetailed neatly with the theoretical developments of the so called 'pictorial turn'. Historical interest in visual communication began in the late 1980's and received important impetus from French medievalist Michel Pastoureau who wrote and edited many volumes on this topic. By studying clothes, colours, heraldry and other symbols through a socio-economic and anthropological lens, much has been learned about their meaning and the messages that they were used to send.<sup>82</sup> It continues to inspire and unknowingly primed historical research for a theoretical shift.<sup>83</sup> In the early 1990's art historians William J.T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm separately advocated for a 'pictorial' or 'iconic' turn against the decades long dominance of the linguistic turn within academia. Urged by the realisation that language is merely one method of human communication, they argued that we should seek to understand how humans comprehend the world around them through images.<sup>84</sup> Answering this question is no simple task and requires insights from many disciplines such as epistemology, semiotics and anthropology.<sup>85</sup> Some historical perspective is also expected of course and can be achieved by analysing visual communication through the lens of visual studies. This field closely followed these developments and has adapted its own questions and methods correspondingly. Focus has shifted from analysing the image itself towards understanding its effect on a world full of viewers. 'Why are images being produced? Who makes them and how

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<sup>79</sup> For English, German and Polish examples, see: Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle*, 61-68. French examples include: Hayez, 'La marque, le blason et la figure'; M. Burghart, 'Signata de mea marcha: les marques de marchands dans les comptes du péage de Chambéry (XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)', *Médiévales* 66:2 (2014) 141-158.

<sup>80</sup> For examples of author's affinity for material objects, see: Hayez, 'La marque, le blason et la figure', 191; Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle: Merchants' Letters*, 61-65; Kittel, 'Early modern merchant's marks in medieval English manuscripts', 211-213; Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 5-6, 23-25.

<sup>81</sup> T. Hamling and C. Richardson, 'Introduction' in: Idem, *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings* (Farnham-Burlington 2010) 1-23, 1-3.

<sup>82</sup> M. Pastoureau, *Figures et couleurs - Études sur la symbolique et la sensibilité médiévales* (Paris 1986); M. Pastoureau, *Couleurs, images, symboles. Études d'histoire et d'anthropologie* (Paris 1989); M. Pastoureau ed., *Le Vêtement - Histoire, archéologie et symbolique vestimentaire au Moyen-âge* (Paris 1989); M. Pastoureau ed., *Histoire héraldique, sociale et culturelle des armoriaux médiévaux* (Paris 1998).

<sup>83</sup> Recent studies that cite Pastoureau as an inspiration: C. Aust, D. Klein and T. Weller, 'Introduction' in: Idem, *Dress and Cultural Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Berlin 2019), 1; Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture* (Berlin-Boston 2016), 245-249.

<sup>85</sup> Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 250.

are they used? What is the impact of these images and how are they being perceived?’<sup>86</sup> These questions invite us to think about the context of images, ways of viewing, differing receptions and the economic and cultural power relations tied to an image’s production.<sup>87</sup> A similar shift from analysing meaning towards studying effect has taken place within the study of heraldry, which now aims to reconstruct coats of arms’ physical place within past society to learn about its political and cultural function.<sup>88</sup> The study of marks also has much to gain from such a perspective. It will be shown that visual studies’ complex approach is vital for understanding the use of marks, as they could be used to communicate a wide array of messages – often multiple at once – depending on their physical placement and even the quality with which they were reproduced. All of these variables will be considered in an effort to understand the use and meaning of marks in post-medieval Leiden.

Reconstructing why and how marks were created and perceived has received little attention in The Netherlands, and doing so with a focus on Leiden requires us to start from the bottom.<sup>89</sup> This is actually a privilege rather than predicament, as Leiden’s city archive and museum contain a true wealth of source material that is waiting to be used for such an inquiry. Legal sources such as law books and privileges teach us about the mark’s use within industry and trade in the first part of this chapter whilst the second addresses marks’ symbolic meanings using its many material traces in combination with more Leiden archival material. It will discuss the decorative display of marks in various social settings to show that these symbols were also used to construct identity and status, showing that these symbols could have great personal and prestigious meanings. The relation between the mark’s use as a personal, business and family symbol will then be discussed in an attempt to answer to what extent these symbols can be understood as a ‘heraldry of the humble’. With all of this knowledge on sixteenth century marking practices, the final part of this chapter seeks to explain why literate people came to sign using them by looking at its ties to late medieval sealing practices.

### **A sign used for marking**

The oldest and probably original function of marking signs was to mark possession. The first traces of this in post-roman Europe can be found in early medieval laws that describe the use of marks to claim ownership over trees and animals.<sup>90</sup> It is only in the late medieval period that more traces come to the fore. Icelandic and Danish laws reveal that marks played an important role in organising society ever since the twelfth century. They ordered that weapons, clothes, cattle and even harpoons used for the catching of whales should be

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<sup>86</sup> Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 258.

<sup>87</sup> Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 256-259.

<sup>88</sup> For a short overview of the fields historiography, see: Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 10-15.

<sup>89</sup> A couple of ideologically influenced publications on marking signs were published in the Netherlands before the Second World War and general booklet on the topic was written by Kits Nieuwenkamp in the early fifties. In 1982, a short-lived study group, ‘Werkgroep Dokumentatie Handwerken’, was founded who published small booklets for a little less than a decade. Marking signs have also been occasionally discussed in Dutch genealogists’ journals, especially by Anton C. Zeven. In the late 1970’s, an overview of the heraldry and marks displayed on funeral monuments in the Dutch province of Groningen was published: A. Pathuis, *Groninger Gedenkwaardigheden. Teksten, Wapens en Huismerken van 1298-1814* (Assen-Amsterdam 1977).

<sup>90</sup> Skånberg, *Glömda gudstecken*, 26-27.

branded with the marks of its owner so that no ownership disputes could arise.<sup>91</sup> Sixteenth-century sources and objects reveal that the marking of objects was also an established practice in Leiden. An ordinance on firefighting from 1515 for example, ordered that the city's well-off inhabitants should store marked firefighting equipment such as ladders and buckets within their properties.<sup>92</sup> The marks displayed should be that of the owner and of the administrative unit, called a *bon*, in which the property was located. Lists of who owned what equipment and how it was marked have been preserved and often correspond with the signs people used to sign (fig. 4).<sup>93</sup> Other, 'normal' possessions were also marked, as is revealed by objects preserved in Leiden's city museum. On the bottom of a sixteenth-century tin plate and pitcher, marks can be seen carved into it (fig. 5, 6)<sup>94</sup>

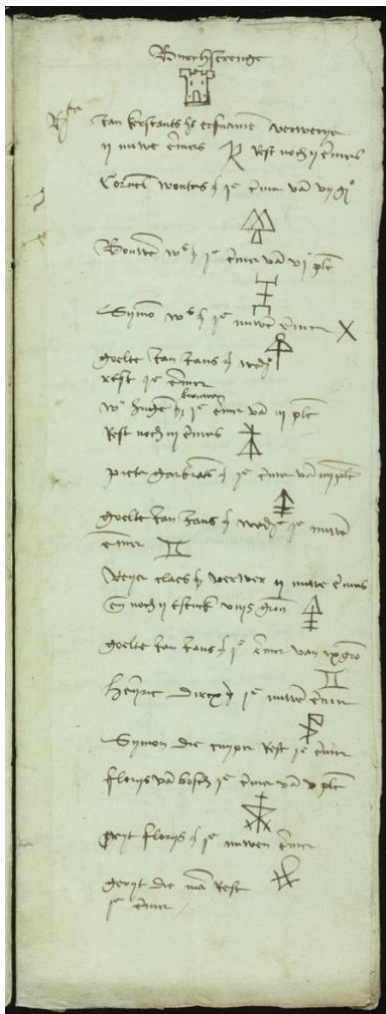


Fig. 4: A page from the Leiden firefighting equipment list from 1515 showing what equipment people owned and how it was marked. The top of the list shows the symbol of the district or *bon* in which the equipment was housed, the *Burchstrenge*. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 1173. I would like to thank Hans Endhoven for pointing me to the existence of this source.

<sup>91</sup> Skånberg, Glömnda gudstecken, 27-28.

<sup>92</sup> ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 1172.

<sup>93</sup> ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 1173.

<sup>94</sup> Both objects can be traced to first having belonged to inhabitants of Leiden. The pitcher was first owned by the Van Der Laen-Van Montfoort family, whilst the plate belonged to mayor Pieter van der Werf. The marks were presumably carved in by a later owner and do not belong to its maker or an urban government; those marks are displayed elsewhere on the objects. For more information on the marks, see inventory number 7483 and 2911.1 in the Museum De Lakenhal catalogue.



Fig. 5: Detail of a tin pitcher's bottom showing a stamped-in icon and two carved marks. Anonymous. *Kan met eigendomsmerk van het echtpaar Van der Laen-Van Montfoort*. Second or third quarter of the sixteenth century. Tin. 15,3 x 17 x 12cm. Museum De Lakenhal (MDL) 7483, Leiden.



Fig. 6: Detail of a tin plate's underside showing a carved in mark. Anonymous. *Bord met opschrift P.Az.V.D.W.* Second half of the sixteenth century. Tin. 3 x 21,5cm. MDL 2911.1, Leiden.

Aside from being used to brand personal belongings, marking signs also grew to have an important commercial function. Accounts from a French tollhouse and the famous merchant Francesco Datini as well as a detail on Lorenzetti's famous *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* reveal that marks also played an important in regulating trade ever since the Late Middle Ages (fig. 7).<sup>95</sup> Producers as well as the merchants who traded their products started using marks to denote what had been made or was transported by them as part of what seems to be an international development. The place of Leiden in all of this only becomes clear at the end of the Middle Ages.



Fig. 7: Detail of Lorenzetti's *L'Allegoria* with added arrows pointing to where marking signs can be seen. Ambrogio Lorenzetti (ca. 1290-1348). *L'Allegoria ed Effetti del Buono e del Cattivo Governo*. 1338-1339. Fresco. 296 × 1.398cm. Palazzo Pubblico (Siena). These marks were discovered by: Burghart, 'Signata de mea marcha', 150.

### Maker's and merchant's marks

On the fourth of August 1462, Leiden's town hall bells rang out to announce the promulgation of a new law. A crowd gathered before the building as a speaker prepared himself to read out to them. With a loud voice, he began to proclaim the following. The town's magistrate had decided that any person who baked and sold bread within the city would be ordered to have the mark registered that they would henceforth use to stamp the loafs they baked. If they refused to register or stamp, they would be fined 18 *schellingen* and would not be allowed to sell bread for a month.<sup>96</sup> The speaker's last words echoed through the streets and faded, but the rulings themselves would be preserved for centuries. The proclamation of this law is merely one example of the many efforts to regulate production quality. From the fifteenth century onward, production would be increasingly regulated with standards and systems to uphold them. Leiden's respected broadcloth industry was the first to be highly regulated. Its laws from the 1390's already ordered artisans to sow their registered mark into their finished products, a mark which in the cloth industry is commonly referred to as a *nopteyken*.<sup>97</sup> As with

<sup>95</sup> Hayez, 'La marque, le blason et la figure'; Burghart, 'Signata de mea marcha'.

<sup>96</sup> H.G. Hamaker, *De middeeeuwsche keurboeken van de stad Leiden* (Leiden 1873), 257.

<sup>97</sup> Artisans were ordered to sow their *nopteyken* on the broadcloth they produced since some time between 1393 and 1397, but it was only on the tenth of March 1439 that they were ordered to register their name and

the production of bread, marks were used as a kind of signature, meant to ensure that a products' creator could be traced and punished if it was found to be flawed. Unlike bread however, Leiden broadcloth and many other products also required a kind of authentication. Once a broadcloth had passed the city's inspection, a lead seal was attached to it, whilst many other objects would be marked with the *stede teyken* or city sign. A law for tin casters from 1450 for example, dictated that any Leiden citizen who made tin cans would be ordered to brand them with their mark and have it inspected by a government officer. If the can's dimensions accorded to local law, it would then be branded with the city sign as proof.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, clippers used in the cloth industry, boats and even barrels used specifically for the transportation of chalk had to have their quality or dimensions inspected and marked with the city sign, failure to do so attracted a fine or another penalty.<sup>99</sup> When a Leiden pipe makers' guild was established in 1661, the founding charter immediately specified that on a finished product, a pipe maker should, '... place his own mark as perfectly as possible so it can be distinguished from other marks'.<sup>100</sup> What all of these rulings make clear, is that marks formed an essential tool in creating regulated but open industries. All were allowed to work in these fields as long as they used a marking sign to brand the products they created and registered this sign in government records. Although the use of marks has now almost faded out of existence, its codification ensures that its important role in regulating early modern production will not be forgotten.<sup>101</sup>



Fig. 8: A detail from the downside of a late medieval plate showing the city of Leiden's coat of arms in the middle, the presumed mark of the producer on the right and another mark on the left. Anonymous. *Tinnen teljaar of plakje*. Ca. 1480. Tin. 0,6 x 13,7cm. MDL 8906, Leiden.

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mark in the city book: Hamaker, *De middeleeuwse keurboeken van de stad Leiden*, 122-126; N.W. Posthumus, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van de Leidse textielnijverheid: Eerste deel* (The Hague 1910), 152-156.

<sup>98</sup> Hamaker, *De middeleeuwse keurboeken van de stad Leiden*, 225-226.

<sup>99</sup> Hamaker, *De middeleeuwse keurboeken van de stad Leiden*, 73, 224, 238, 258-259.

<sup>100</sup> '... gehouden te wesen zijn eygen merck soo perfectelijck te stellen dat het bequamel[ijck] uyt anders merceken onderscheyden can werden': J. van der Meulen, and H. Tupan, *De Leidse tabakspijpmakers in de 17e en 18e eeuw* (Hoogezand 1980), 29.

<sup>101</sup> Marks have continued to be used in the production of items made from precious metals up to the present day.



Fig. 9: A painting depicting the washing and sorting of wool in Leiden as a part of its broadcloth industry. Marking signs can be seen branded onto the sheepskins and sown onto bags of wool. Isaac Claesz. van Swanenburg (1537-1614). *Het wassen van de vachten en het sorteren van de wol*. 1607 or 1612. Oil paint on wood. 131 × 182cm. MDL S 419, Leiden.

This use of marks is of course not at all specific to Leiden. At all levels of society, we see increasing levels of regularization using marks from the fifteenth century onward. A decree from 1423 for example ordered that all Holland herring casks should be of the same dimensions and that local authorities should inspect and mark them with the urban sign if they adhered to the rules.<sup>102</sup> About 75 years later the rules had become even more strict. Casks now had to be branded with the mark of the cooper that made it, the captain on whose ship it was filled and the port in which it was first brought ashore.<sup>103</sup> Other industries received similar regulations. A decree from Philip the Fair in 1503 ordered that all gold and silver smiths of Holland should henceforth brand products with their personal mark and the city sign once in had passed inspection – a procedure identical to those of Leiden.<sup>104</sup> It should furthermore be noted that marks played an important in the construction industry of the Netherlands. Marking signs can often be found chiselled into the large stone blocks that were used to build churches and other large, medieval stone buildings. Although there are multiple reasons why this may have been, the most likely theory is that masons made these marks so that their finished work could be quickly identified for inspection.<sup>105</sup> It is clear that having and using a mark was essential to late medieval and early modern artisans. Marked products also needed

<sup>102</sup> J.E.C Dijkman, *Shaping medieval markets: the organisation of commodity markets in Holland, c. 1200-c. 1450* (Leiden-Boston 2011), 219-220.

<sup>103</sup> Dijkman, *Shaping medieval markets*, 221.

<sup>104</sup> E. Voet, *Nederlandse goud- en zilvermerken. 1445-1951* (The Hague 1951), viii-ix.

<sup>105</sup> H. Janse and D.J. de Vries, *Werk en merk van de steenhouwer. Het steenhouwersmacht in de Nederlanden voor 1800* (Zwolle 1991), 49-51.

to be shipped however, introducing another world where marks played a vital role, that of trade.

In trade, too, marks proved increasingly important, as they allowed merchants to identify their wares. When exactly merchants started marking their wares is hard to say, but there are strong indicators that it became more important in the thirteenth century. It is around this time that an increasing number of laws were put into effect by the counts of Holland to stimulate trade. One of these measures was the arrangement to make sure that lost goods would be returned to their rightful owners. On the first June 1245, Count William II of Holland granted merchants of Lübeck and Hamburg the right to have their goods returned to them in cases of shipwreck and a similar charter would be granted to Bremen and Stade merchants in 1252.<sup>106</sup> Almost a century later, the same rights would be given to all Westphalian and Prussian merchants in the year 1340.<sup>107</sup> How this cargo would be returned, is not specified however. Fourteenth century urban, administrative sources reveal that marks played a vital role in identifying and returning lost shipments. In a ship inventory from 1342, written in Bruges, we find marks pictured next to products and in Hamburg and Thorn, lists of marked containers that were retrieved from shipwrecks near the two cities, from 1350 and 1377 respectively, have been preserved.<sup>108</sup> A well-documented recovery of merchants' goods from 1533 confirms that drawing up inventories of containers and their marks was indeed the first step towards returning wares to their rightful owners.<sup>109</sup> Marking your merchandise was instrumental to maintain ownership over it.

Granting freedom from toll another way to stimulate trade, which also heavily relied on the use of marks. This right had been given to the ecclesiastical institutions and the nobility since the twelfth century and would be extended to urban citizens in the thirteenth.<sup>110</sup> To make use of this privilege, citizens had to bring a *tolbrief* or *poorterbrief* whenever they shipped their wares. This 'toll-letter' had to be renewed yearly by local authorities and confirmed that a merchant was one of their citizens and thus exempt from paying toll.<sup>111</sup> The role of marks in all of this remains unclear until the year 1519. In an effort to reduce the large-scale fraud that was taking place, a new and comprehensive set of regulations were issued for the toll keepers of Iersekeroord in late November. Amongst its many pages, a passage on toll freedom and toll-letters can be found. It states that such a letter should not just mention which person was a citizen of what town, but also had to show a drawing of the *gewoonelicke merck* or 'ordinary mark' that the merchant used to brand his goods.<sup>112</sup> Having a registered mark was needed for anyone who wished to make use of this right. Many cities must have had registers of their citizen's marks, although few have come down to us. One late medieval

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<sup>106</sup> J.G. Kruisheer, *Oorkondenboek van Holland en Zeeland tot 1299. Deel II, 1222-1256* (Assen-Maastricht 1986), 226, 254, 603.

<sup>107</sup> Registers van de Hollandse grafelijkheid 1299-1345, WI 542, <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/registersthollandsegrafelijkheid> (Consulted on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2024).

<sup>108</sup> Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*, 267-271.

<sup>109</sup> Jenks e.a., *Message in a Bottle*, 30-44.

<sup>110</sup> J.G. Kruisheer, *Oorkondenboek van Holland en Zeeland tot 1299. Deel IV, 1278-1291* (Assen-Maastricht 1997), 805-808, 810-811.

<sup>111</sup> Registers van de Hollandse grafelijkheid 1299-1345, NH 335, WI 63, WI 77, WI 475, <https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/registersthollandsegrafelijkheid> (Consulted on the twentieth of September 2024).

<sup>112</sup> W.S. Unger, *De tol van Iersekeroord. Documenten en rekeningen, 1321-1572* (The Hague 1939), 103.

register of 'marks that our citizens used in their toll-letters' has survived in the city archive of Bergen op Zoom.<sup>113</sup>

Marks' uses are seemingly endless. From the Early Middle Ages to the early modern era, these personal signs were used in all sorts of ways to bring order to society. They formed a simple, visual communication method whose meaning was decided by local cultural practices or law. In Europe, its uses seem to have primarily pertained to confirming ownership, organizing trade and assuring product quality. In its essence, marks can be seen as a very accessible technology that can be used to reduce information asymmetries and protect possession. Within their cultural and legal context, they act as what economist Douglas North has called 'institutions' – formal and informal humanly constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction.<sup>114</sup> So far, very little attention has been given to the mark's place in new institutional economic history.<sup>115</sup>

Nevertheless, the marks' economic functions within Leiden society only tell half the story. The reason why marks function is because they are individual, unique symbols. Leiden's efforts to enforce product standards was entirely based on their ability to solely reproduce their unique symbol, their 'city sign' upon wares, confirming that they adhered to city standards. They represented a piece of civic authority. In case of Leiden, this symbol was Saint Peter's keys, which were also displayed on its civic heraldry. This symbol was shown on the aforementioned tin cans, clippers, boats and barrels and was visible in more elaborate representations on public buildings. It was everywhere, imposing itself on visitors and inhabitants, reminding them where they were and who is in charge – expressing identity and authority.<sup>116</sup> Signs or marks had an important place in the visual, symbolic 'language' that was used to shape social order. This was spoken not only by urban governments, but by all of society, from members of noble courts to mundane village scribblers.

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<sup>113</sup> 'Die navolgende sijn de merken van ondergeschreven poorters die zij gebruyken in huer tholbrieven': West Brabants Archief, Archief van de stad Bergen op Zoom, inv.nr. 3092, f. 134r.

<sup>114</sup> D.C. North, 'Institutions', *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5:1 (1991) 97-112.

<sup>115</sup> Dijkman mentions marks in her book on the development of institutions in medieval Holland, but has taken no further interest in them; Dijkman, *Shaping medieval markets*, 199-235.

<sup>116</sup> For more on the expression of urban identity and authority through urban signs, see: C.F. Weber, *Zeichen der Ordnung und des Aufbruchs: Heraldische Symbolik in italienischen Stadtkommunen des Mittelalters* (Cologne 2011).

## The meaning of marks



Fig. 10: Braunschweiger Monogrammist (active 1525-1545). *Die lockere Gesellschaft*. Ca. 1530. Oil paint on wood. 30,1 x 46,5cm. Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin 558, Berlin. These marks were discovered by: A.C. Zeven, 'Handmerken op een schilderij van Jan S. van Hemessen', *Mededelingen Werkgroep Dokumentatie Handmerken* 6 (1988) 11-13.

There is much to see in this sixteenth-century brothel scene (fig. 10). A merry company is having some drinks in the middle whilst their attention – and ours – is attracted to the women fighting on the right, averting our sight from shady business taking place on the left. Many interesting details can be discovered on this painting, but what is particularly interesting for our purpose is the collection of marks graffitied above the door on the right. Patrons of this establishment apparently felt a need, or thought it would be funny, to have a piece of themselves or, perhaps even more hilarious, a piece of someone else eternalized on its walls. Similar defacements have survived carved into the walls and woodwork of churches and prison cells, revealing that marks were a beloved graffiti object.<sup>117</sup> Why exactly people drew or engraved marks on these semi-public spaces is hard to answer. Current day graffiti culture may shed some light on this practice. Drawing or carving marks is not unlike the modern practice of 'tagging', the writing of stylized autographs or symbols in public spaces. Such acts are often regarded as mindless vandalism which we should pay no further heed. Contemporary research on tagging however, has shown that it is far from mindless and is used to communicate values and beliefs, create a sense of community and achieve personal

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<sup>117</sup> Maartenskerk Texel – Stichting Vrienden van de Maartenskerk, <https://www.maartenskerktexel.nl/de-maartenskerk/bijzondere-bezienswaardigheden/> (Consulted on the eight of October 2024); Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*, 46-47, 63-64; M. Brekelmans, 'Inkervingen in de gevangendoor te Den Haag', *Mededelingen Werkgroep Dokumentatie Handmerken* 5 (1987) 17-21. They can also be found carved into the late medieval 'Broodbank' of the St. Bavokerk in Haarlem.

status.<sup>118</sup> Could premodern graffiti have had similar meanings? It is hard to say. Much of it has been lost.<sup>119</sup> Even its fragments may reveal to us something of a world of visual communication as complex as that of the social elites of which so much has been preserved.

In the last twenty years, there has been a growing interest in how early modern people used dress, codes of conduct, funeral monuments, interior, public rituals, heraldry and symbols to achieve or maintain social status.<sup>120</sup> This research is driven by the realization that the appearance of wealth and power is just as – if not more – important as actually having it. As in the plot of many nineteenth-century novels, social climbers and sinkers constantly had to be ‘keeping up appearances’ in order to secure their position. Interest in the subject has drawn historians to the rich heritage of literary and visual works, inspiring interdisciplinary research.<sup>121</sup> Publications on this topic have mostly focused on the world of high culture however, probably because it is more accessible, better preserved. It is because of this focus that the marks’ use as a status symbol has not yet come into view.

Research from the older studies of marks has long shown that these symbols had more than just a functional purpose. Numerous scholars from throughout Europe have long ago noted that marks were also displayed on buildings, gravestones and coats of arms, but few took interest in studying its societal meaning.<sup>122</sup> This dimension has only now come to the fore. Thomas Kittel has recently argued that marks were drawn in books to express its owner’s status whilst Jérôme Hayez explored how Francesco Datini’s coat of arms and mark were used to express status and identity to different publics.<sup>123</sup> Marcus Meer occasionally touches on marks in his doctoral thesis on the public use of heraldry on graves, banners, buildings, interiors and in rituals within the late medieval English and German city.<sup>124</sup> These publications have provided useful observations, but also left many questions to be explored. An old but pertinent question is to what extent marks were used as a status symbol for people without coats of arms, as a kind of ‘heraldry of the humble’ as Charles Sisson suggested almost a century ago.<sup>125</sup> Signature studies have long proven that many early modern, ‘humble’ people had marks, but we still know quite little about its use as personal or family symbols, how this relates to the use of marks in business or how the people themselves viewed their marks in relation to coats of arms. Newer publications have almost exclusively focused on how the social elite used marks and viewed them in relation to coats of arms.<sup>126</sup> Another important

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<sup>118</sup> L. MacGillivray and M.S. Curwen, ‘Tagging as a social literacy practice’, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 50:5 (2007) 354-369, 354-356, 366.

<sup>119</sup> M. Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England’s Churches* (London 2015), 3-5; Hailwood, ‘Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700’, 63.

<sup>120</sup> W. Blockmans, ‘The Feeling of Being Oneself’ in: W. Blockmans and A. Janse eds., *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout 1999) 1-16.

<sup>121</sup> Blockmans, ‘The Feeling of Being Oneself’, 3.

<sup>122</sup> A list of authors who paid attention to this use: Homeyer, *Die Haus- und Hofmarken*, 164-185, 351-356; Girling, *English Merchant’s Marks*, 31-117; Kits Nieuwenkamp, *Het raadsel der huismerken*, 7; F.W. Kuhlicke, ‘Merchant Marks: their origin and use’, *The Amateur Historian* 5:4 (1962) 98-106, 104-106; P. Walsh, ‘The Medieval Merchant’s Marks and Its Survival in Galway’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 45 (1993) 1-28.

<sup>123</sup> Kittel, ‘Early modern merchant’s marks in medieval English manuscripts’; Hayez, ‘La marque, le blason et la figure’.

<sup>124</sup> Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 36-41, 72-75, 98-106, 111-112.

<sup>125</sup> Sisson, ‘Marks As Signatures’, 19.

<sup>126</sup> Kittel and Meer discuss only what English and German members of urban governments and rich merchants thought of the relation between marks and heraldry. Some of them viewed marks and heraldry as equals, see: Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 36-41; Kittel, ‘Early modern merchant’s marks in medieval English manuscripts. Mark Hailwood is somewhat against this idea. He believes that it, ‘might be a stretch to consider

question to ask, of course, is how marks were used to express status in Leiden. It might bring us closer to understanding why literate people choose to sign using marks and will open the discussion on their place within the cultural competition for status within the Netherlands.



Fig. 11: A selection gravestones displaying marking signs from the St. Pancras church or 'Hooglandse Kerk' in Leiden.

Upon entering the St. Pancras church of Leiden, one cannot help but notice the many marks chiselled upon its graves – the floor is littered with them (fig. 11). Some of these gravestones mention the deceased's name, date of birth and death, whilst others display only a mark. Sometimes marks are neatly carved and embellished whilst others are roughly hewn, but in almost all cases, they feature prominently on the grave. It must have meant a lot to the deceased or their families. The fact that so many graves beautifully display these marks seems to indicate that it played an important role in how early modern Leidenaars represented themselves in society. To understand this use, we will have to look into the meaning of marks and their decorative use outside of the church.

Pieter de Hooch is one of the many famous, seventeenth century Dutch painters who have provided us with windows into the past lives of the Republic. One of his many interior paintings gives us a little insight on the meaning of marks in a person's life (fig. 12). In the upper right corner of *A Boy Bringing Bread*, two pristine glass windows can be seen showing an elaborate depiction of two marks presented as coats of arms. The painting was made in the early 1660's and was probably based on an Amsterdam living room.<sup>127</sup> The quality of the painted glass and that fact that it is displayed on such a prominently placed window shows that people were proud to display their mark to guests and the outside world. A piece of Leiden history teaches us that decorated windows were commonly owned by members of its upper classes: during a student riot in the late sixteenth century, the stained-glass windows of the city's secretary, mayors and many others were smashed out of protest.<sup>128</sup> Interestingly,

simple stroke marks as a form of heraldry', see: Hailwood, 'Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700', 65.

<sup>127</sup> S. Duffy and J. Hedley, *The Wallace Collection's Pictures: A Complete Catalogue* (London 2004), 214.

<sup>128</sup> J.C.H. de Pater, *Jan van Hout (1542-1609): een levensbeeld uit de 16e eeuw* (The Hague 1946), 68; J. Koppenol, *Leids heelal: het Loterijspel (1596) van Jan van Hout* (Hilversum 1998), 131.

one of such windows seems to have survived the onslaught and is currently stored in the collection of Leiden's art museum (fig. 13). It is an exquisite piece showing a detailed depiction of a landsknecht holding a decorated cup whilst standing next to a large shield displaying a mark. In an outer ring above the main image, the year '1560' can be read. It once again shows that people were willing to invest what must have been a substantial amount of money to beautifully display their marks for all onlookers to see.

The desire to show your mark to the public can also be traced through a preserved register of bread stamps. After passing the 1462 law, bakers would long be ordered to register their names and marks together in registers, of which one sixteenth-century example has come down to us, giving us insight into the small but vibrant world of Leiden stamps (fig. 14).<sup>129</sup> The process of registering stamps was quite simple. A baker's name and address would be written down after which their stamp would be dipped in ink and pressed on paper, leaving an impression of how it would have normally looked when it was pressed into a loaf. It shows that some marks were very simple and others quite complex. With the simpler designs, it seems as if its makers simply took a wooden circle and gouged a few lines out or slammed a couple of nails through it, creating simple geometric patterns. Others chose to create more complex designs. This includes more complex geometric designs, symbols and figures that can quite clearly be identified as marking signs. The choice to invest time or money into creating these stamps express some desire to express a kind of refinement – a simpler, unique design would have also been sufficient to comply with the law. The fact that some chose to specifically create a stamp of their mark tells us something about their self-image, how they wished to present themselves. A baker like Allaert Jansz. did not choose to make simple but good-enough stamp, or a stamp with a nice but unspecific pattern, he wanted something that something that was unmistakably his (fig. 14). Perhaps he used this mark for other business as well or had it displayed in or on his house and chose to also display it on their bread, to broadcast a coherent message of who he has and what was his.

Marks also had a place in the commemorative culture of associations. Coats of arms and marks of its leaders were often displayed on communal decorative objects such as silverwork, glasswork, trunks, paintings and sculptures that would have once been placed in a communal space or used in ceremonies.<sup>130</sup> Leiden's rhetoricians chamber 'de Witte Acoleyen' had a richly decorated silver shield from around 1620 depicting scenes from the city's famous siege (fig. 15). It was probably made around 1624 to commemorate the siege and relieve, which had taken place fifty years earlier. Attached to it are three, small decorative shields one of which shows a mark flanked by initials. It is likely the mark of the chamber's patron at the time, as the same letters are also hung from the shield.<sup>131</sup> More marks can be found hanging of the burial shield belonging to the city's glass writers and makers guild from 1692. The shield depicts St. Lucas, Lady Justice and the guild's master's proof, and would have been attached to funeral shroud of a deceased guild member (fig. 16). Hanging of it, are thirteen small, silver shields that depict the insignia of the guild's headmen as well as their name and a date. Marks flanked by initials and monograms can be found on the earliest dated shields, whilst later ones display full coats of arms instead. The inclusion of marks within this mix of personal identifiers and family signs once again shows that they played an important part in how people represented themselves in society, yet it also brings to us to a question not yet answered – to whom did a mark belong?

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<sup>129</sup> ELO, Inventaris van het stadsarchief van Leiden, 1574-1816 (SA II), inv.nr. 2536.

<sup>130</sup> See for example: Museum de Lakenhal, inv.nr. 1176, 1243, 1253, 1255, 1264, 1265.1, 1282.

<sup>131</sup> This patron was the head of the chamber and was often called 'prince' or 'emperor'.



© The Wallace Collection

Fig. 12: Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684). *A Boy Bringing Bread*. Ca. 1663. Oil paint on canvas. 73.5 x 59cm. Wallace collection P27, London. The marking signs displayed on the windows were originally discovered by: Kuhlicke, 'Merchant Marks', 105.



Fig. 13: Anonymous. *Glasruitje met voorstelling van een lansknacht*. 1560. Lead and glass. 24,5cm diameter. MDL 717, Leiden.

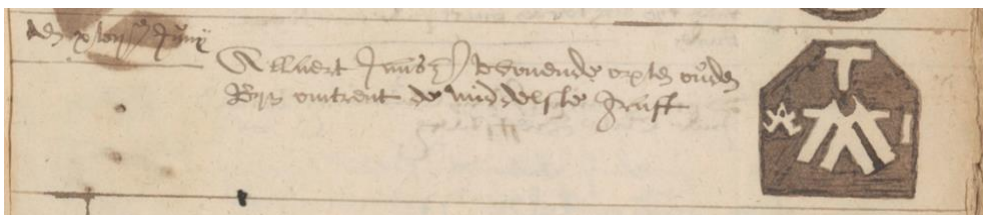


Fig. 14: Two scans of the Leiden brand stamp register and an enlarged detail. ELO, SA II, inv.nr. 2536, f. 57v-58r, 59v-60r.



Fig. 15: Obverse of the De Witte Acoleyen's shield. Bartholomeus Willemsz. Dolendo (ca. 1570-1626). *Schild van de rederijkerskamer De Witte Acoleyen*. Ca. 1620. Silver. 12,2 x 13,4 x 0,7cm. MDL 8353, Leiden.

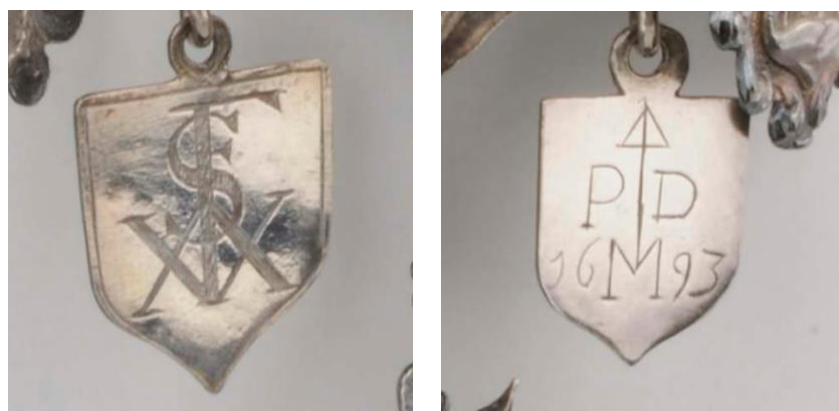


Fig. 16: Blazon of the glass writers and makers' guild with two details of shields bearing marking signs that cannot be seen from the front. Johannes Hofman (-). *Blazoen van het gilde van glasschrijvers en glazenmakers*. 1692. Silver. 37,5 x 26 x 1,7cm. MDL 1253, Leiden.

Coats of arms are always passed on within a family whilst monograms are often a strictly personal identifier – in between the two signs, the mark can be situated. A shared symbol was often passed on within families, but amended in subtle ways so that people could tell its family members apart. This will be illustrated with two cases, which will also show that marks used for signing were in fact the same as those used in business. The first case is that of the Van Zijl family. In 1503, the draper and dyer Pieter van Zijl signed a receipt confirming that the Leiden government had paid him a subsidy to slate his roof, which he did using his name and mark.<sup>132</sup> He specifically mentions this act in the receipt's main text and refers to the mark as his 'ordinary mark'. We have previously seen this term used to refer to marks that were registered to specific burghers so that they could be exempt from paying tolls. Pieter seems to have signed this receipt using this 'functional' mark. A sixteenth-century 'grave book' from the St. Pancras church shows how this sign was passed on within the family. This 'book' or register was used to keep track of who owned which grave within the church and provides crucial information on the use of marks on funeral monuments.<sup>133</sup> From the late sixteenth century onwards, its keepers developed a habit of drawing marks that were displayed on the graves next to their entries.<sup>134</sup> The reason for this is unknown, although we can speculate that it made it easier to identify graves, especially when we consider that some displayed only a mark. Within this register, we also find Pieter. He owned a grave when the register was made in 1550. It was later passed on to different Van Zijl family members. In 1559, it was owned by Claes van Zijl and in 1585 by Heynrick Claesz. van Zijl, who might have very well been his son. The mark written behind Heynrick's entry is very similar to that of Pieter and seems to be a variation of his mark, which is also flanked by his initials (fig. 17). Perhaps Claes was a brother of Pieter who had his own variation of the mark, which he passed on within his family. A similar case where two brothers used variants of a similar mark is known from fifteenth century Savoy.<sup>135</sup>

Something similar can be seen in the case of the rich draper Gerrit Heye and his descendants.<sup>136</sup> On the fourth of march 1502, he signed a receipt using only his mark, which he referred to as his *nopteuycken* – the sign that cloth makers had to sow into their broadcloths. As in the case of Pieter, we can trace how this sign was passed on, for Gerrit also owned a grave in the St. Pancras church that would be inherited by his family.<sup>137</sup> In 1552, ownership of the grave was transferred to Baerte Heye, Gerrit's daughter. It then left the hands of the Heye family at an unknown time and was passed on two more times, ending up in the hands of Simon Gerbrantsz. in 1585. Nothing indicates that he belonged to the Heye family, but the mark that was written in the margin at that time shows a clear variation of Gerrit Heye's mark; a horizontal stripe had simply been added to it (fig. 18). It could have very well belonged to Baerte, distinguishing her mark from that of her father whilst continuing the family mark. Similar traditions existed early-twentieth-century Europe.<sup>138</sup> The cost of making a new

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<sup>132</sup> ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 648.

<sup>133</sup> ELO, Inventaris van het archief van de Kerkvoogdij van de Nederlands Hervormde Gemeente te Leiden, 1347-2004 (2009) (NHKV), inv.nr. 1023.

<sup>134</sup> See for example: ELO, NHKV, inv.nr. 1023, f. 105r.

<sup>135</sup> Burghart, 'Signata de mea marcha', 146-149.

<sup>136</sup> During an exceptional taxation in 1498, the inhabitants of Leiden had to pay a percentage of their total wealth as taxes to the urban government. The records of this collection show that Gerrit Heye belonged to the top twenty of wealthiest Leidenaars: ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 578, 68r.

<sup>137</sup> ELO, NHKV, inv.nr. 1023, f. 109v.

<sup>138</sup> Early-twentieth-century German inhabitants of the Polish peninsula Hell are known to have used an intricate system of marks to tell each other's fishing equipment apart. Multiple families had a 'base' mark to which more

gravestone or the grave changing owners quickly could explain why it was not replaced after it left Baerte's hands. Alternatively, she may have married one of these men and transferred her property to them.

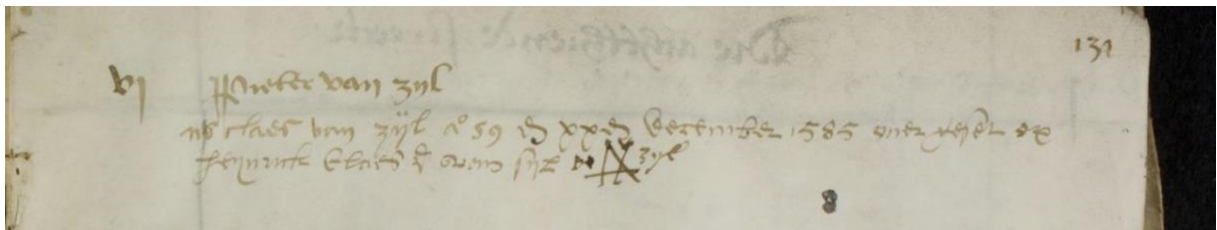
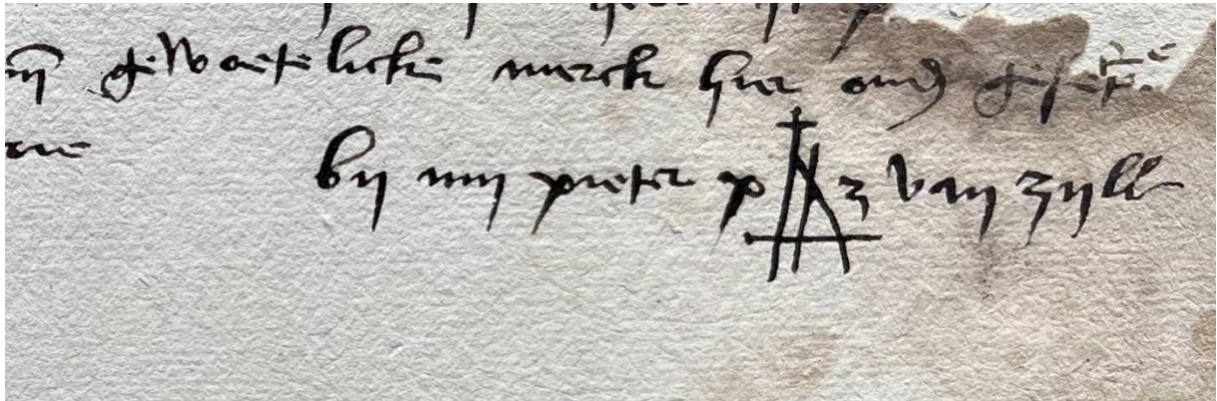


Fig. 17: Details from a receipt signed by Pieter van Zijl and a page from the St. Pancras grave book portraying marks used by Pieter in 1503 and his later family members in 1585. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 648; ELO, NHKV, inv.nr. 1023, f. 105r.

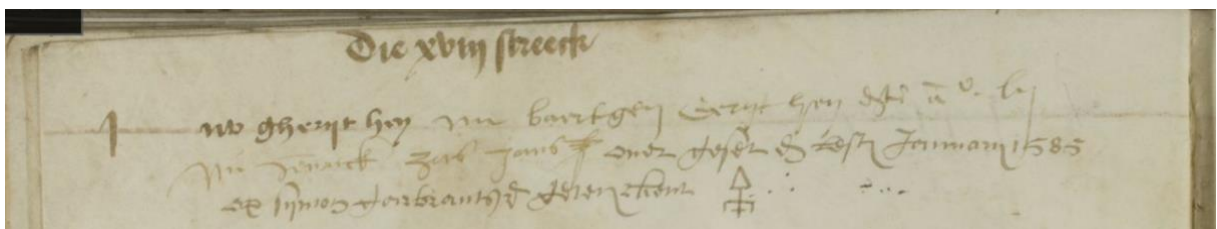
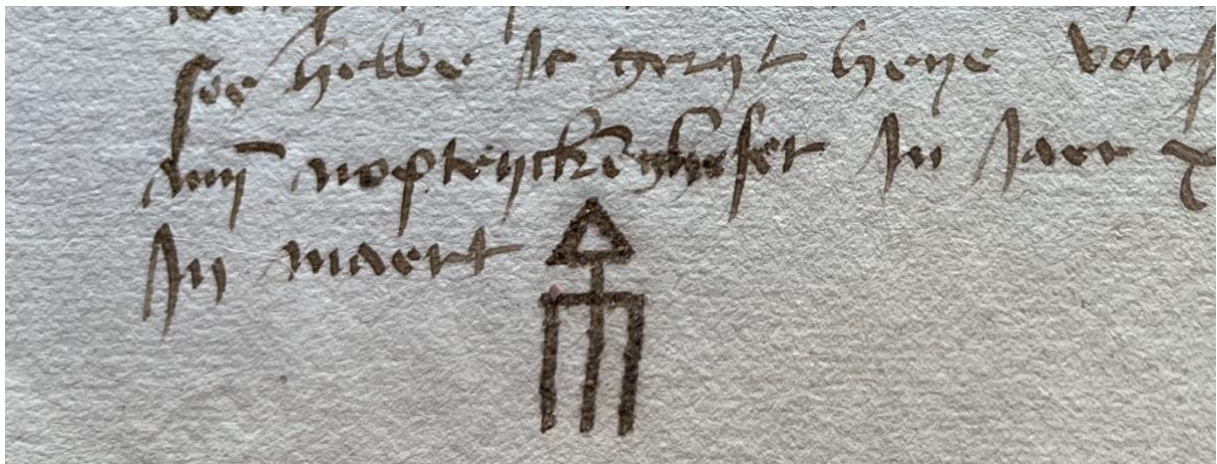


Fig. 18: Details from a receipt signed by Gheryt Heye and a page from the St. Pancras grave book portraying marks used by Gheryt in 1502 and his later family members in 1585. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 647; ELO, NHKV, inv.nr. 1023, f. 109v.

elements were added to tell the equipment of different family members apart. This was mostly done by adding stripes in different directions. For more information, see: Kits Nieuwenkamp, *Het raadsel der huismarken*, 21-28.

The mark being used as a family symbol explains its close relation to heraldry. Both can be used to identify individuals as belonging to a certain family, albeit in a slightly different way. The two methods are graphically different and the use of heraldry was increasingly regulated from the fourteenth century onward.<sup>139</sup> The use of the mark as a family symbol seems to have developed outside the cultural sphere of the nobility, lacking the prestige of heraldry. The fact that anyone could make use of it indicates that it may indeed be seen as somewhat of a ‘heraldry of the humble’, although it is unknown how common it was to use marks in a heraldry-like fashion. Leiden sources can only indicate that it was used by rich drapers, guild headmen and some bakers, leaving much of the truly ‘humble’ parts of society outside our view. The practice of placing marks on a heraldic shield seems to have been an attempt to assimilate the world of marks into that of heraldry, aimed at claiming some of its cultural prestige. In Germany and England, it has also been observed that some people had a separate mark and coat of arms, which is also true for Gerrit Heye (fig. 19).<sup>140</sup> Displaying marks on graves, windows, decorative shields used in public spaces and even bread seems to also parallel aspects of European heraldic culture. Like armigerous individuals, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century inhabitants of Leiden seem to have been eager to express their identity and claim their place within society through the public display of their mark.<sup>141</sup>

Exploring the mark’s many guises has brought us much closer to understanding its incredibly rich history. The gravestones, household equipment, production laws, decorative shields, tollhouse regulations and windows all attest the versatility of this communicative symbol. In its essence, the mark was a unique symbol that represented an individual and its most basic use was to denote ownership. This appears to have been common knowledge in medieval and early modern Europe. Placing a mark on an object was meant to broadcast who owned it in hopes of deterring theft and aiding other’s in returning it to the rightful owner. Then again, a mark could also identify who made an object or product, which could often be distinguished from an ownership mark by its physical proximity to the city sign or cloth seal.<sup>142</sup> In this sense, it functioned as what economists would call an economic ‘institution’, although they do not seem to be widely regarded and studied as such. A subtle difference in placement could give marks an entirely new meaning, just as the quality and beauty with which it had been reproduced could simultaneously be used to express the standing of the person or family associated with the business. On buildings and decorative objects, marks solely fulfilled this purpose. Subtle variations of a similar mark were used to show family ties, whilst presenting marks within a shield signalled a desire to assimilate into the prestigious world of heraldry. All of these findings show that besides clothing, manners and many other kinds of symbolic capital, marking signs too should be studied to understand how status was expressed in the late medieval and early modern Low Countries

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<sup>139</sup> R. Barber, ‘Heralds and the Court of Chivalry: From Collective Memory to Formal Institutions’ in: A. Musson and N. Ramsay eds., *Courts of Chivalry and Admiralty in Late Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge 2018) 15-27.

<sup>140</sup> Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*, 36-41.

<sup>141</sup> Meer, *Cities, Citizens, and their Signs*; P. Seiler, ‘Kommunale Heraldik und die Visibilität politischer Ordnung: Beobachtungen zu einem wenig beachteten Phänomen der Stadtästhetik von Florenz, 1250–1400’ in: M. Stolleis and R. Wolff eds., *La bellezza della città: Stadtrecht und Stadtgestaltung im Italien des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Tübingen 2004).

<sup>142</sup> Various sources make it seem that artisans’ marking signs could often be found next to the city sign. We have seen this in the detail of a tin plate shown in fig. 8 and this practice also seems to be confirmed by Leiden laws. From the Leiden cloth industry laws, we know that *nopteykens* were sown in the same corner as where the lead seal would be attached once it had passed the city’s inspection: Posthumus, *Bronnen tot de geschiedenis van de Leidse textielnijverheid: Eerste deel*, 152.

All of these legal and cultural uses attest marking signs' widespread acceptance as an authoritative symbol that brings order to society in both an economic and social sense. Placing the mark within its historical, urban context allowed us to reconstruct part of Leiden's past visual world. It showed us how marks could have been encountered on the street, in workshops, houses and churches as well as who displayed them, in what forms, and for what purpose. Up to this day, marks preserved on material objects continue to visually inform us about possession, quality and status in the medieval and early modern world. A final question to ask, of course, is how all of this relates to signatures.

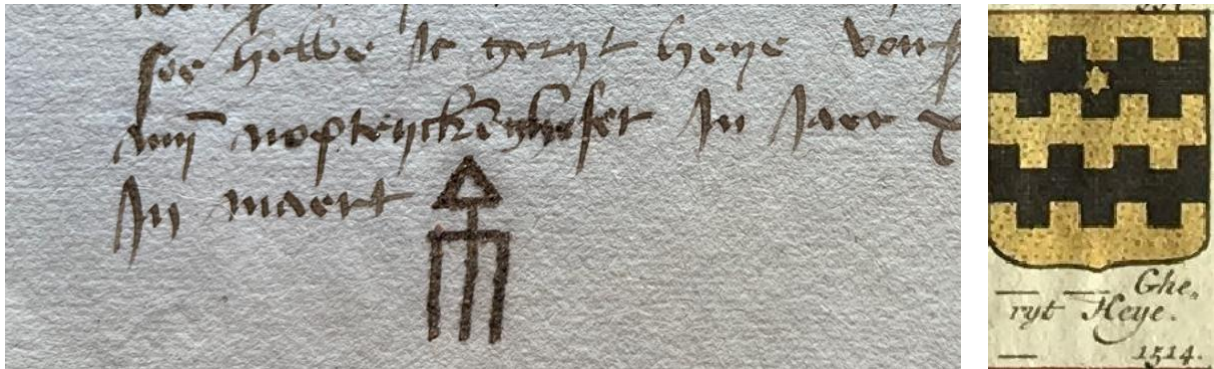


Fig. 19: The mark and coats of arms belonging to Gerrit Heye. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 647; Gijsbert van Rijckhuijsen (1707-1772) and Abraham Delfos (1731-1820). *Wapenkaart met wapens en namen van de Heeren Veertigen der stad Leyden*. 1758. Paper, waterpaint, cartboard, ink, linnen. 43,5 x 53,9 x 1cm. MDL 4732, Leiden.

Somewhat surprisingly, quite little is known about the origin of the early modern signing and even less is known about the practice of signing with a mark. Within the Netherlands, it has been observed that signing with a name developed in ecclesiastical, seigniorial and urban courts in the thirteenth century and slowly spread across society.<sup>143</sup> Eventually, the practice grew to replace the wax seal in the fifteenth century, probably because they were much faster, cheaper and simpler to make.<sup>144</sup> As the practice of sealing waned, the mark became a popular alternative to signing with a name. This should not surprise us. In a world where the majority of people were unable to read and write, drawing a mark on a document to state that you agree with or confirm its contents seems rather logical as it follows the medieval practice of signing using coats of arms. In an illiterate society, coats of arms or marks are symbolic personal or family identifiers that to its maker and close relations may have had the same meaning as a name, its oral counterpart. It may even be argued that signing using a mark can be seen as the illiterate equivalent of writing out your name in letters. Our finding that marks could also play a central role in how individuals represented themselves in society, might explain why wealthy, literate people would sign using it. This idea seems to be confirmed by the existence of mark-bearing seals. Just as people with coats of arms chose to display this upon their seal, others chose to seal with an image of their mark (fig. 20). Sealing was apparently seen as another opportunity to showcase your personal sign, a practice that might have spilled over into the world of quill and ink (fig. 20). The Leidenaars who switched between signing their mark and name seem to have found themselves 'stuck' between the two signing methods. Signing with a mark was meaningful and culturally established through sealing practices, but could also be associated with the illiterate

<sup>143</sup> Van den Bichelaer, *Het notariaat in Stad en Meijerij van 's Hertogenbosch tijdens de late middeleeuwen*, 308-315.

<sup>144</sup> Giry, *Manuel de diplomatique*, 607-614.

and did not offer the same legal security as the unique, handwritten name. Unsure what would be better, they signed with their mark on one occasion and with their name on another, without any clear reason. Many others chose the middle path, they signed using both.



Fig. 20: Details of Leiden seals or signets displaying marking signs from 1488-1489 and a drawn coat of arms from 1502-1503. ELO, SA I, inv.nr. 645, 648.

Looking back at the findings of this chapter, it must be concluded that the use of marking signs in industry, trade and as decorative personal identifiers remained popular in Leiden throughout the sixteenth century and beyond. This means that the reason for why literate people stopped signing using these symbols must be sought within signing culture itself. This chapter has helped us rule out the possibility that this change was caused by a changing use of marks whilst teaching us much about mark's functions in society and explaining why literate people would sign using them. Placed within its cultural context, a literate person signing a receipt, marriage register or court deposition with a mark seems not as odd or improbable as historians believed it to be. The 'fact' that early modern, literate people always signed using their name has turned out to be a teleological assumption. Modern practices and ideas were projected onto the early modern past, as is often the case. It is now becoming clear that our lacking knowledge of signing culture and marks has allowed this assumption to dominate the field of literacy studies. There is a certain irony to the fact that the main tool for studying literacy, the 'signature study', has taught us very little about signatures, and turns out to have been based on wrong assumptions about them. The next chapter will continue to look into how meaning affected the way people signed by analysing how signing culture changed at the end of the sixteenth century and finally answering why this change took place.

### **Chapter 3. Leiden signing culture in a broader perspective**

In previous chapters, it has been shown that to early-sixteenth-century, literate Leidenaars it was quite normal to sign documents using not their name, but a marking sign – something that most historians of literacy thought to be highly improbable. As most of our understanding of early modern literacy has come from literacy rates that were calculated using the idea that literate people always signed using their name, the findings from our previous chapters could have a serious impact on our understanding of European literacy. Yet, a preliminary glance at Leiden signatures from the end of the sixteenth century also showed us that most literate Leidenaars stopped signing using these symbols at the end of the century. That meant that we had to be careful when drawing conclusions from our early-sixteenth-century findings for the entire early modern period. It was decided that the best way to understand the implications of these findings for the study of literacy was to identify the developments leading to this change. If these could be identified, it might become possible to understand when a similar change took place in other areas, which would help us judge the accuracy of signature studies conducted for these places. The second chapter looked into whether a change in the use of marking signs in sixteenth century Leiden could explain why people stopped signing using these symbols. This turned out to not be the case. Marks continued to be used for all sorts of functional and decorative purposes throughout and beyond this century. The reason for this change then, must be sought in signing culture itself.

The goal of this chapter is to build on earlier findings to study what underlying developments caused sixteenth-century, Leiden signing culture to change. The first part seeks to gain a better understanding of how exactly this culture changed throughout the century. This will be done by comparing the results from our signature study for the period 1498-1508 with results of a new, very similar Leiden signature study for the year 1600. It will grant us much more insight into what changes exactly took place within this period. Then, focus will shift to another source in another place. Seeing as very little is known about the signing culture of other places or whether people signed receipts differently than other documents, the signing culture of Amsterdam will be analysed using its signed wedding registers and compared to that of Leiden. It will show us that the signing culture of Leiden's receipts was quite similar to that of Amsterdam and its registers, revealing the existence of what we may call a shared urban, Holland signing culture. This is an important conclusion as it shows that the reasons for why Leiden's signing culture changed, most likely apply to a broader region – to the County of Holland at least. The final part will try to explain the observed changes in signing by combining our insights on this change with Holland archival material and literature on larger, European changes to identify the underlying developments that promoted this change.

#### **Leiden signing culture, 1600**

The extensive collection of receipts stored in the city archive of Leiden make them an excellent source for studying signing culture across the early modern period. Just as they have been used to map the signing behaviour of Leiden social groups around the year 1500, they will be used to do the same about a century later. The method for gathering this data is largely identical to that of the first chapter. Once again, hundreds of receipts were read to document how people signed them – most often on multiple occasions – in order to chart what has been

called individuals' 'signing behaviour'. Just as before, people who swapped between different signing methods have been added to the rarest category of the signing behaviour they exhibited and literate people who signed using a mark were identified in three ways. Firstly, this was done by finding examples of one person signing with a name on one occasion and a mark on the other; in other cases, receipts were found explicitly stating that they had been written by the signatory, who signed using a mark. A third way these people were identified, was by finding multiple examples of receipts that were signed by the same person using a mark, but which are written by the same, distinct hand, suggesting that this person was in fact literate.

Different from the signing behaviour analysis of the first chapter, is what information was collected and how this was done. The first difference is that now, only data on the signing behaviour from Leiden *renteniers* has been gathered, instead of also reconstructing the signing behaviour of specific social groups. This last task was already immensely time consuming for the period 1498-1508 and would become even more extensive for the late sixteenth century. The number of yearly preserved receipts used in Leiden's financial administration increased by thousands within this period. Once again reading through all of these and cross-referencing their information on people's occupational status using other sources would be an immense task. Luckily, the first chapter has shown that there is not too great of a difference between Leiden *renteniers* and other social groups when it comes to the percentage of literate people who signed using a mark and signing culture in general. Comparing *rentenier* signing behaviour from the period 1498-1508 to that of the year 1600 should provide a good reflection of changes in Leiden signing culture as a whole.

As before, Leiden's *rentenier* signing behaviour will be analysed using the receipts they signed confirming the payment of interest they received from the *rente* or 'obligations' they had bought from the urban government. This time, not all receipts will be included in the analysis however. Just as all other receipts from this period, the number of preserved *rente* receipts grew enormously, meaning that reading through all of them would be a tremendous task. Instead of doing so, a sample has been analysed. This sample was made by only adding the name and signing method found on every fifth receipt to the database, unless the information was identical to an earlier receipt. In that case, it was skipped and the next fifth receipt was selected. An exact description of how this data was gathered can be found in the Appendix 1. A problem with taking samples is that it decreases the chance of finding multiple receipts signed by the same person – which as we have seen in the first chapter – is a vital means of identifying literate people who signed with a mark. To counteract this, a separate dataset was collected with photographs of all receipts that were signed using a mark. The names from these receipts were then compared to that of the people in the main database who signed using their name, in order to increase the chance of finding someone who switched between signing methods. The results of the analysis were used to create Table 3 and is made up of data from 50 women and 162 men. This data was combined with that of Table 1 to create Table 4, which compares the information of both tables.

Table 3. *Rentenier* signing behaviour categories, 1600

Signing behaviour of the presumably illiterate	No.	%
Cross	2	10,5
Marking sign	15	79
Initial	2	10,5
By proxy	0	0
Total	19	

Signing behaviour of the presumably literate	No.	%
Name	190	98,5
Name & marking sign	3	1,5
Literate but used marking sign	0	0
Total	193	

Source: ELO, SA II, inv.nr. 7837-7839.

Comparing the results from 1600 with those from the beginning of the century shows that a true landslide has taken place in Leiden signing culture. Amongst presumably illiterate *renteniers*, one type of signing behaviour seems to have disappeared entirely whilst other forms appear to be on the rise. As written in chapter one, these people are presumed to be illiterate since there is no evidence to prove that they were able to write. Despite its popularity at the beginning of the century, the practice of letting someone else sign for you – *By proxy* – seems to have fallen into disuse by the year 1600. This drop is remarkable, but perhaps also quite logical as allowing people to sign on behalf of others is extremely susceptible to fraud. This method's disappearance might very well reflect a change in thinking about signing. Signing using a *Marking sign* seems to have become the new dominant signing method, whilst the *Initial* and *Cross* established themselves as alternative signing methods. Equally great changes took place in the signing culture of those who were able to write their name or more, who we presume to be literate. Within a little less than a century, Leiden's *renteniers* who were *Literate but used marking signs* seem to have stopped signing using marks completely, whilst only few continued to sign using their *Name & marking sign*. Signing with a written *Name* had become the norm.

A similar transition of signing culture must have taken place in Leiden society at large, although we can assume this change took place earlier or later for different social groups. The first chapter showed that in the early 1500's, officers from the County's central government were the only social group to (almost) exclusively sign using a name. About a century later, this had become an established practice amongst *renteniers*. This seems to indicate that the practice of signing with only your name spread downwards from the highest social classes to the lower. That it had become normalised amongst *renteniers* by the year 1600 should not surprise us per se. As mentioned in chapter one, *renteniers* belonged to the higher social classes since they had enough capital to buy their *rente* in the first place. This high status seems to be reflected by the group's incredibly high literacy rate. It would have probably taken longer for the practice to become normalized amongst the middle and lower social classes.

Table 4. *Rentenier* signing behaviour categories compared, 1498-1508 – 1600

Signing behaviour of the presumably illiterate	Total	By proxy	Initial	Marking sign	Cross
<b>1498-1508</b>					
No.	54	38	0	16	0
%		70,4	0	29,6	0
<b>1600</b>					
No.	19	0	2	15	2
%		0	10,5	79	10,5
<b>Changes</b>					
No.	-35	-38	+2	-1	+2
<b>Signing behaviour of the presumably literate</b>					
Total	Name	Name & marking sign	Literate but used marking sign		
<b>1498-1508</b>					
No.	185	123	44	18	
%		66,5	23,8	9,7	
<b>1600</b>					
No.	193	190	3	0	
%		98,5	1,5	0	
<b>Changes</b>					
No.	+8	+67	-41	-18	

Source: Table 1 and Table 3.

The analysis of Leiden *renteniers'* signing behaviour has granted us a unique and fascinating insight into the development of sixteenth-century signing culture. The results provide us with an exact overview of how this culture changed throughout this century, which is vital to understand if we want to correctly interpret how our previous findings results may be used the re-evaluate of literacy rates calculated for towns and villages throughout Europe.

At the same time, we must question whether these results, extracted from a very specific source type in a single city, accurately reflect changes in signing on documents other than receipts or on a greater geographical scale. To look into this question and broaden our understanding of sixteenth-century signing culture, results gathered from Leiden receipts will be compared to those gathered from the Amsterdam wedding registers. This city is particularly fit for comparison due to its available source material as well as the fact that it

experienced a not entirely dissimilar demographic development caused by a large migration of Hollanders and foreigners to the city in the latter half of the sixteenth century.<sup>145</sup>

### Comparing signing cultures

Within the Netherlands, there is no source better suited for the study of early modern literacy than the Amsterdam wedding registers.<sup>146</sup> It has long attracted attention from social historians as it provides enormous amounts of information on the majority of the city's male and female inhabitants and their ability to write. Only the unmarried, those who had been married elsewhere and perhaps dissenters who married in secret are excluded from this source.<sup>147</sup> These registers were founded in the year 1578 as part of an effort to increase the urban government's control over marriages within the city. Between 1578 and 1810, all people who wished to be married had to have their intent registered in these books before the urban government, together with their age, place of birth, address and the men's profession.<sup>148</sup> The bride and groom to-be then had to confirm all of this using a signature. Historians interested in literacy have used this source since the 1970's to learn about the literacy rate of the Amsterdam population.<sup>149</sup> Most recently, this was done by Erika Kuijpers. She took samples from the registers to create a database of signatories and their personal information in order to calculate not just literacy rates for Amsterdam as a whole, but also for specific occupational and migrant groups. This allowed her to better understand the spread of literacy throughout the city's history.<sup>150</sup> Whilst creating this database, Kuijpers used a simple distinction between people who signed using their name and those who used a 'mark', meaning that it does not teach us anything about what specific kinds of 'literate' and 'illiterate' signing methods were used. By revisiting the registers, the database has been expanded to catalogue these signing methods using our previously established system.

The results of this effort provide a snapshot of Amsterdam signing culture, which seems to align quite well with that of Leiden. When comparing its largely male-dominated *rentenier* data with that of Amsterdam grooms, many similarities can be found. Just as in Leiden, Table 5 shows that the marking sign was the most popular signing method amongst people who were, presumably, unable to write their name. *Initial(s)* and *Crosses*, here too, are more uncommon alternatives, just as *Stroke marks*, *Circles* and *Marking signs & initial(s)*, which were all not found in Leiden. This can likely be explained as a difference in class rather than local cultural difference. The Leiden analysis of signing culture amongst specific social

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<sup>145</sup> For the demographic changes that took place in Leiden, see: D.J. Noordam, 'Demografische ontwikkelingen' in: R.C.J. van Maanen and S. Groenveld eds., *De geschiedenis van een Hollandse stad, Deel 2 1574-1795* (Leiden 2003) 43-53. For the origin of these migrants, see: D.J. Noordam, 'Nieuwkomers in Leiden, 1574-1795' in: J. Moes, C. Smit, E. van der Vlist en Ijme Woensdregt eds., *In de nieuwe stad. Nieuwkomers in Leiden, 1200-2000* (Leiden 1996) 39-85, 52. For information on the population growth in Amsterdam, see: H. Kaptein, 'Poort van Holland. De economische ontwikkeling 1200-1578' in: M. Carosso-Kok, *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam. Een stad uit het niets: tot 1578* (Amsterdam 2004) 109-174, 172. For more information on the demographic composition, see: E. Kuijpers and M. Prak, 'Gevestigden en buitenstaanders' in: W. Frijhoff and M. Prak eds., *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam. Centrum van de Wereld: 1578-1650* (Amsterdam 2004) 189-240, 191.

<sup>146</sup> The starting point of the register series can be found at: Stadsarchief Amsterdam (SA), Archief van de Burgerlijke Stand: doop-, trouw- en begraafboeken van Amsterdam (ABS), inv.nr. 401.

<sup>147</sup> Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven', 503.

<sup>148</sup> Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven', 504.

<sup>149</sup> S. Hart, 'Geschrift en getal'.

<sup>150</sup> Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven'.

groups from 1498-1508 showed that such methods were also used by the Leiden middle class, but rarely by those higher in the social hierarchy, like *renteniers*.<sup>151</sup> Most remarkable about the distribution of all different Amsterdam signing methods is that it is surprisingly even across the different social and migrant groups. The marking sign dominates on all fronts and is followed by a selection of the much less popular signing methods, which do show small variations differing from group to group.

Table 5. Signing behaviour categories amongst Amsterdam grooms organized along the lines of social groups and origins, in percentage of total per category, 1600

Groom social groups and origins	Total sample size (No.)	Name (%)	Name & marking sign (%)	Marking sign & initial(s) (%)	Initial(s) (%)	Marking sign (%)	Circles (%)	Crosses (%)	Stroke marks (%)
All grooms	272	57,4	0,7	0,7	2,6	29,4	1,1	3,7	4,4
Social groups									
Unskilled labourer	103	39,8	0,9	0,9	3,9	44,8	0	5,8	3,9
Artisanal/ educated	169	68,0	0,6	0,6	1,8	20,2	1,8	2,3	4,7
Place of origin									
Amsterdam	81	72,8	0	1,2	2,5	19,8	0	0	3,7
Netherlands (excl. Amst.)	81	45,7	0	0	2,5	39,4	2,5	3,7	6,2
All Foreign countries	110	54,5	1,8	0,9	2,7	29,2	0,9	6,4	3,6
Belgium specifically	45	71,1	0	0	0	20	2,2	4,5	2,2
Germany specifically	44	47,7	4,5	2,3	2,3	29,6	0	9,1	4,5

<sup>1</sup> A term used to denote professions that required little training or education following: A. Knotter and J.L. van Zanden, 'Immigratie en arbeidsmarkt in Amsterdam in de 17e eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis* 13 (1987) 403-430, 413-414; Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven', 519. This group is mainly made up of labourers and sawyers.

<sup>2</sup> People with professions that required education or long training following: Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven', 519. This group includes professions ranging from carpenters and thatchers to glassmakers.

Source: SA, ABS, inv.nr. 409, 665.

Just as in Leiden, the Amsterdam results show that signing with your *Name & marking sign* combined was not widely practiced in the early 1600's, once again indicating that a similar cultural change in signing might have taken place. Ideally, we would also like to know what percentage of the literate Amsterdam population signed using just their marking sign around this time, but unlike receipts, wedding registers do not allow us to make such measurements. The downside to this source is that people often signed only once within these registers and never wrote anything else in it themselves. This makes our previously used methods for identifying this group of people useless here. Looking at the Leiden results, it would be tempting to assume this group of people to have disappeared entirely. The *rentenier* data seems to suggest that there is some kind of correlation between this group and that of people who signed using their name and mark together, and that the decline of the latter signals the disappearance of the former. Seeing as few people signed using their mark and name in Amsterdam, we could assume the other group to have disappeared. We do however have to remember that the changes observed in Leiden took place amongst a high social class which might have very well reached the lower classes with some delay, meaning that some literate

<sup>151</sup> See: Table 2.

people might still have been signing using marking signs. An analysis of the signatures themselves seems to confirm this.

Whilst looking through the wedding registers with its poorly drawn marking signs, circles and stroke marks, every once in a while, a mark shows up so neatly drawn that one cannot help but think its maker to be capable writer. Many other historians who conducted some kind of signature study must have experienced something similar, but thanks to the Leiden receipts we are only now been able to grant some credibility to these suspicions. Curious examples from the Amsterdam wedding registers seem to confirm that, here too, some literate people signed not using their name, but with a marking sign. Take the case of Jan Anthonisz. for instance (fig. 21). He signed the register using his mark surrounded by his initials, which are written so fluently that there can almost be no doubt about this ability to write.<sup>152</sup> The same holds true for other grooms like Olivier Fransz., Joost de Bruyn and Cornelis Jacobsz. Examples like these show that there continued to be people who were very well able to write, but chose to sign using their mark (fig. 21).<sup>153</sup> Only in these very specific cases are we able to identify these people. Many other capable writers that signed using just their mark and no initials will forever be remembered as being illiterate.

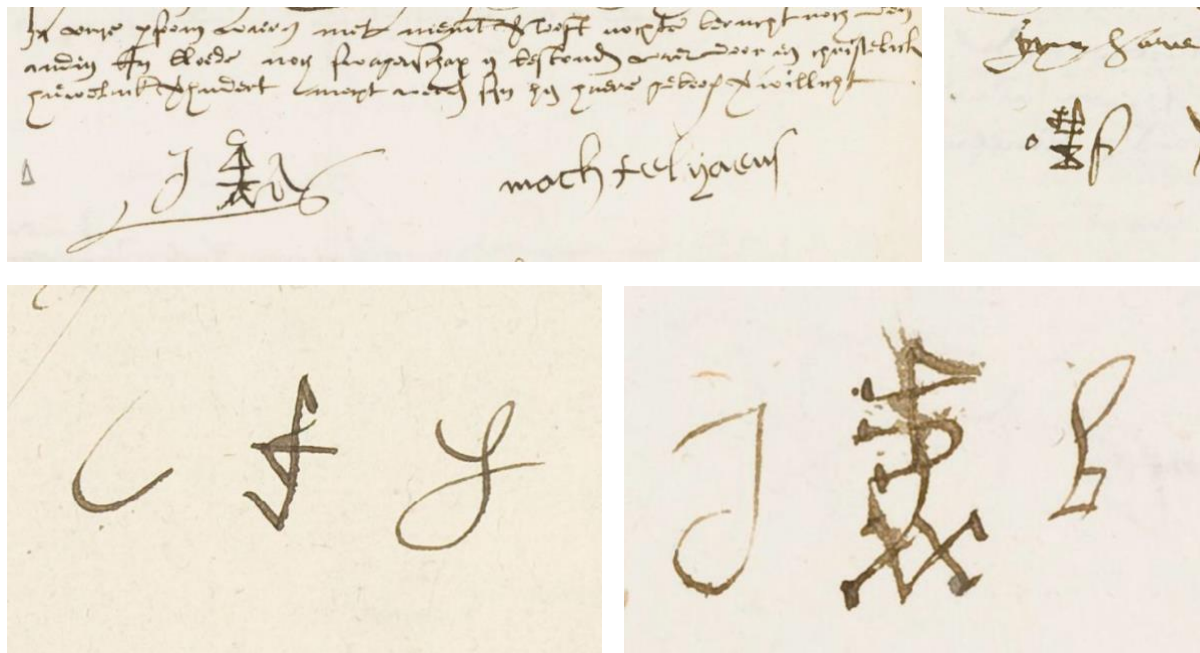


Fig. 21: Signatures of the Amsterdam grooms Jan Anthonisz., Olivier Fransz., Joost de Bruyn and Cornelis Jacobsz. who wrote their initials with such ease or skill that it seems almost impossible for them to have been illiterate. SA, ABS, inv.nr. 403, f. 43v; SA, ABS, inv.nr. 404, f. 161v; SA, ABS, inv.nr. 404, f. 174r; SA, ABS, inv.nr. 405, f. 6r.

Having put the data from Leiden and Amsterdam together, it seems that we can speak of there being a common signing culture within the County of Holland. Despite differences in source type, social groups and location, the distribution of signing methods used across both populations is surprisingly similar. For people who were able to write in the year 1600, it appears to have been common practice to sign using their name, although there also was a very small group who signed with their name and a marking sign or using this sign alone. Those who were unable to write most often signed using their marking sign, whilst small groups of others used a selection of symbols like, crosses, circles, initials and stroke marks. Interestingly,

<sup>152</sup> SAA, ABS, inv.nr. 403, f. 43v.

<sup>153</sup> SAA, ABS, inv.nr. 404, f. 161v; SAA, ABS, inv.nr. 404, f. 174r; SAA, ABS, inv.nr. 405, f. 6r.

the Amsterdam statistics also point to the fact there was not too great of a difference in the signing culture of natives and migrants who moved to the city later in their lives. This perhaps excludes the possibility that this cultural change was caused by the arrival of people with a completely different signing culture to that of Holland. The most interesting conclusion to draw from all of these similarities between the two cities is that they might very well suggest that the changes observed in Leiden between 1500 and 1600 also took place in Amsterdam. This helps rule out the possibility that the signing culture of Leiden and its receipts was unique to this city, meaning that our findings on the role meaning in signing, the sixteenth century changes in signing culture and its implications for signature study results may apply elsewhere. This might greatly change the way we think about the increase of early modern literacy. Some signature studies have characterized the sixteenth century as one of starkly increasing literacy rates, by which is really meant that more and more people signed using their name.<sup>154</sup> It used to be thought that simply more and more people learned to write during this period, but the results from this chapter show that this idea might need to be nuanced. A great change in signing culture also took place within this period, causing more and more literate people to abandon signing with a mark, which may have created the impression that literacy was on the rise.

### Theories on change

With a clear impression of this change in signing culture and having confirmed that it was not unique to Leiden, it is now time to try and look beyond this change, to find out what developments caused this shift to happen in the first place. This is essential to gain insight into why a change similar to that of Leiden might have taken place elsewhere. ‘Indicators’ of this change in signing culture might help us understand when these changes took place in other areas, which would be very useful for re-interpreting their signature study results. Ideally, these would help us identify when most literate people of a city or village stopped signing using marks, but more studies of signing culture and its underlying developments will have to be conducted before we can make impactful conclusions on this. The following analysis is a starting point. Here, two European developments will be discussed that can be seen as the key to understanding this change in signing. Both elements will teach us more about aspects of sixteenth century signing that we know little about; the symbolic value of handwritten signatures and thought on how legal documents should be signed in order to be considered legally authentic. Our ‘lead’ into the first development comes from an interesting passage in an early seventeenth century witness testimony.

On the first of November 1622, Pieter Laurensz. Timmerman and Arjen Jansz. Post came before the aldermen of the city of Schiedam to testify on a certain event which they had witnessed.<sup>155</sup> Earlier that year, they had been present at the signing of a contract between Jacob van Cleeff and Nanning Aelbrechtsz., which had become a central event in a court case between the two parties. Van Cleeff accused Aelbrechtsz. of having defaulted on the stipulations of their contract, but Aelbrechtsz. claimed that the contract that Van Cleeff had

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<sup>154</sup> Cressy, *Literacy and the social order*, 142-174; Hailwood, ‘Rethinking Literacy in Rural England, 1550–1700’, 59.

<sup>155</sup> This case was originally discovered by: M.A. Struijs, ‘Het handmerk en analfabetisme’, *Mededelingen Werkgroep Dokumentatie Handmerken* 3 (1985) 8. The original testimony can be found here: Gemeentearchief Schiedam (GS), Archief van de gerechten van Schiedam, 1386 – 1811, inv.nr. 577, f. 258r-v.

brought to court was not the same as the one he had signed.<sup>156</sup> To solve this dispute, the two witnesses present at the signing were summoned to provide their testimony. After inspecting the contract brought in by Van Cleeff, Pieter Laurensz. swore on his oath as a member of the *schutterij* or civic militia that it was indeed not the same as the one signed by Aelbrechtsz. He knew this because he remembered that Aelbrechtsz. had written his marking sign between his first and last name on the original.<sup>157</sup> Arjen Jansz. told a similar story and also explained why he remembered this so well. According to him, when Aelbrechtsz. signed the contract, he did so by drawing his marking sign, which caused Van Cleeff to react. He mocked Aelbrechtsz. for the fact that he, such an influential man, could only sign using a mark. Aelbrechtsz. took exception to that. He angrily responded that he was not done yet and wrote his first name before the mark and his last name behind it.<sup>158</sup> This recorded interaction is an important indicator of the changing cultural attitude towards signing practices. It clearly shows that people began to look down on people who signed using a mark instead of a name and forms important evidence for explaining why literate people stopped signing using marks. Even if this testimony is pure fiction, created to support Aelbrechtsz.’ case, it still shows that this interaction must have been plausible in the eyes of these early seventeenth century men, reflecting cultural attitudes of the time. Findings such as these are quite rare however and make it difficult to conclude whether this must be regarded as a single incident or whether it is part of a larger development. Another, better documented cultural development might lead us to believe the latter.

In the year 1514, Sigismondo Fanti’s *Trattato di scrittura* appeared on the Venetian market as the first printed, European ‘writing manual’ – a book of instructions on how to write in specific scripts.<sup>159</sup> In the decades following, more and more writing manuals began to be published across the European continent as the genre and handwriting itself gained popularity.<sup>160</sup> This growing interest in calligraphy has been tied to two intertwined developments, the proliferation of literacy throughout society and the disappearance of the professional writer.<sup>161</sup> Writing manuals allowed people to fill the gap left by the professional writer as they increasingly could, and did, teach themselves how to neatly write in various European scripts.<sup>162</sup> Within the Low Countries, the first writing manual to be published was Gerard Mercator’s *Literarum latinarum* from 1540, which would be followed by reprints of Italian writing manuals later in the decade, revealing a kind of trend.<sup>163</sup> From the 1560’s

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<sup>156</sup> GS, Archief van de gerechten van Schiedam, 1386 – 1811, inv.nr. 577, f. 258r.

<sup>157</sup> Ibidem

<sup>158</sup> A complete transcription of the interaction: ‘Arijen Jansz. out omtrent L jaren verclaert ut supra Ende daer bij vougende voor redenen van wetenschappe dat hij wel perfect gesien heeft dat Nanning onder d’obligatie bij Jacob van Cleeff geschreven, eerst teijckende sijn hantmerck alleen, dat doen hij deposant seijde ‘ghij sijt een groot sprecker (denoterende Nanning) ende comt veel bijde luijden, kent gij noch maer u merck setten’, daer op Nanning seijde ‘beijt aen siet het eijnde’, ende dat hij doen aen d’een sijde offe voor van’t merck schreeff Nanning ende achter Aelbrechtsz.: GS, Archief van de gerechten van Schiedam, 1386 – 1811, inv.nr. 577, f. 258r-v.

<sup>159</sup> H. Murphy, ‘From Scribal Marks to Calligraphic Signatures? Print, Scribe, and Script in Early Modern European Writing Manuals’ in: C.D. Bahl and S. Hanß eds., *Scribal Practice and the Global Cultures of Colophons, 1400-1800* (Cham 2022) 155-175, 156, 158.

<sup>160</sup> Murphy, ‘From Scribal Marks to Calligraphic Signatures’, 156.

<sup>161</sup> Murphy, ‘From Scribal Marks to Calligraphic Signatures’, 158.

<sup>162</sup> Croiset van Uchelen, *Vive la Plume*, 3-5.

<sup>163</sup> A.R.A. Croiset van Uchelen, ‘Willem Silvius as writing-master’ in: A.R.A. Croiset van Uchelen, K. van der Horst and G. Schilder eds., *Theatrum Orbis Librorum: Liber amicorum Presented to Nico Israel on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Utrecht 1989) 158-178, 159.

onwards, more and more authors from the Low Countries began publishing writing manuals, although they were exclusively written in Latin.<sup>164</sup> These publications indicate a growing interest in calligraphy within the Low Countries, which seems to be confirmed by the hosting of a ‘feather fight’ or calligraphy contest in the Northern Low Countries within the city of Rotterdam in 1590.<sup>165</sup> These sixteenth-century developments might very well be seen as a run-up to the early seventeenth century ‘golden age of Dutch calligraphy’.<sup>166</sup> The fact that the Low Countries writing manuals were written in Latin seems to suggest that it was mainly the social elite who took interest in this, indicating that writing indeed became increasingly important amongst the higher social classes. Calligraphy must then probably be seen as a tool of social distinction, which could be used to separate yourself from the increasing number of ‘ordinary’ writers. This idea seems to be reflected in the beautiful, elaborate signatures that can sometimes be found penned onto receipts (fig. 22). These were written not just to show that you agreed with the contents of a documents, but also to express refinement and status. In future research, the growing importance of writing manual scripts might be confirmed by analysing its use in elite correspondence. It can, for example, be found in preserved letters sent to the influential merchant Daniël van der Meulen who lived the latter part of his life in Leiden.<sup>167</sup>

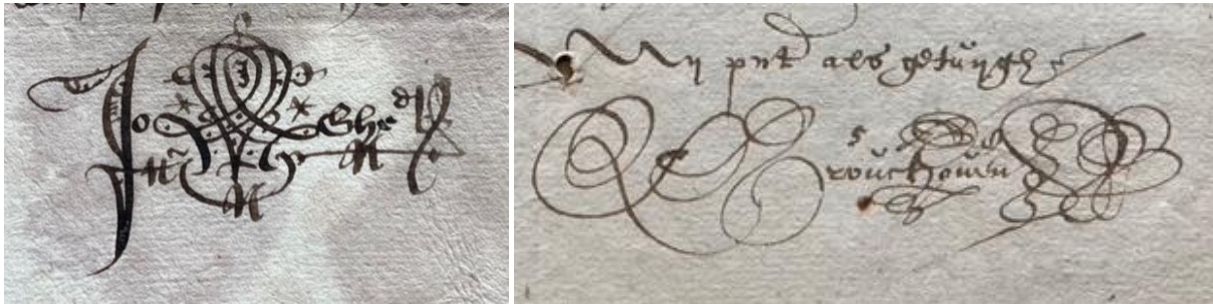


Fig. 22: Two examples of elaborate early- and late-sixteenth-century signatures signed onto receipts confirming the payment of *rente*. The first was signed on the first of April 1502 by Master Jan Gherytsz. The second by a certain ‘Brouchoven’ on the 28 of July 1600. ELO, SAI, inv.nr. 647; ELO, SA II, inv.nr. 7837.

The other factor that contributed to these changes in signing behaviour is a change in thinking about signing. Subtle differences between early- and late-sixteenth-century signing indicate that it was not just the increasing cultural value of writing, but also the development of new ideas on the legal value of signatures that changed the way people signed. These ideas and practices seem to have spread across society in quite a ‘subtle’ way, as the historical record show no clear attempts to regulate the way people signed. Neither the sixteenth-century Counts of Holland nor the government that followed them ever issued an ordinance on how people should sign and even professional notaries, to whom signatures were of great importance, never publicly formulated any ideas on what types of signatures were preferable for their work.<sup>168</sup> Popular notarial handbooks from the Low Countries do not mention anything

<sup>164</sup> Croiset van Uchelen, ‘Willem Silvius as writing-master’, 162.

<sup>165</sup> A.R.A. Croiset van Uchelen, ‘Dutch writing-masters and the ‘Prix de la Plume Couronnée’’, *Quaerendo* 6:4 (1976) 319-346, 320-323.

<sup>166</sup> Murphy, ‘From Scribal Marks to Calligraphic Signatures’, 156; Croiset van Uchelen, ‘Dutch writing-masters and the ‘Prix de la Plume Couronnée’’, 323.

<sup>167</sup> ELO, Inventaris van het archief van Daniël van der Meulen en Hester de la Faille, 1550-1648, inv.nr. 266, 267, 275, 289, 294.

<sup>168</sup> No mention of rulings on how people should sign can be found in the Dutch Republic’s official publication of sixteenth-century Holland and Zeeland ordinances: Cornelis Cau, *Groot Placaet-boeck, vervattende de Placaten*,

on this subject.<sup>169</sup> It is only through conducting signature studies and analysing signatures individually that these changes come to light.

Changes in sixteenth-century signing strongly indicate that people began developing new ideas on the legal power of different signature types. Besides the increasing cultural value of handwriting, this may be seen as another reason why literate *renteniers* almost completely stopped using marking signs near the end of the sixteenth century. A handwritten name was much harder to forge than a marking sign due to its authenticity and was not publicly displayed, like marks. It must have been regarded as a much more 'secure' form of signing. Other developments illustrate this change in thinking more directly. The aforementioned disappearance of 'by proxy' signing is a great example of this. Table 4 shows that this was by far the most popular signing method amongst illiterate *renteniers* around the year 1500, but had been completely abandoned by the year 1600. The reason for this is likely that it is extremely susceptible to forgery. Using this method, it was incredibly easy to falsely sign on another's behalf as one did not even have to try to forge their mark or handwriting. The method's disappearance points to a clear change in thinking about signing, just as another development in signing that has not yet been discussed. A different, small innovation was that people began specifying to whom signed marks belonged. Whenever an illiterate person signed a receipt in the late sixteenth century using a marking sign, it was common for the person who wrote the receipt to write 'this is [name + surnames]'s mark' around it (fig. 23). It is not entirely clear why people did this. If multiple people had to sign the same receipt, this could be useful to distinguish people's marks, but it seems unnecessary when only one person signed. Whatever the exact motivation might have been, it does once again signal a change in sixteenth-century thinking about signing. All of these changes helped limit opportunities to forge signatures and avoid unclarity that could result in court cases. These efforts seem to be part of a greater, European development to reduce the role of memory in legal and judicial matters.

Throughout the early modern period, a tension between the role of records and human memory can be found running across society. In all places where literacy was introduced or the use of records expanded, we see it clash with an older form of authority completely separated from any bureaucratic form, based entirely on the minds of men. In societies without writing, 'truth' about what happened in the past was determined by witnesses present at certain events or old men who knew much about the history or customs of the area they lived in. When no other person or writing could rebuke their claims, truth was whatever these people thought to be true. Whenever there was a disagreement over what

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*Ordonnantien ende Edicten van de Doorluchtige, Hoogh Mo: Heeren Staten Generael der Vereenighde Nederlanden: ende Van de Ed: Groot Mog: Heeren Staten van Hollandt en West-Vrieslandt; mitsgaders vande Ed: Mo: Heeren Staten van Zeelandt Het tweede deel* (The Hague 1664).

<sup>169</sup> A. Pitlo discusses the popularity of the works in: A. Pitlo, *De zeventiende en achttiende eeuwsche notarisboeken en wat zij ons omtrent ons oude notariaat leeren* (Haarlem 1948), 23-24, 26; For the works themselves, see: Govaert Bac, *Ars notariatus* (Antwerp 1496); Jacques Thuys, *Ars notariatus, oft, Conste ende stijl van Notarischap: In twee deelen begrepen, waer van d'eerste de Theoryke ende t'fondament der selver consten leert: D'andere is het Prothocol, inhoudende de maniere, om te leeren by ghescrijfte stellen alderhande Contracten, Instrumenten, Enquesten, Informatien, Inventarisen, Procuratien, Testamenten, houwelijcsche ende andere Voorwaerden, Obligatien, Quytantien, Wisselbrieven, ende meer ander nootelijcke seacken* (Antwerp 1585).

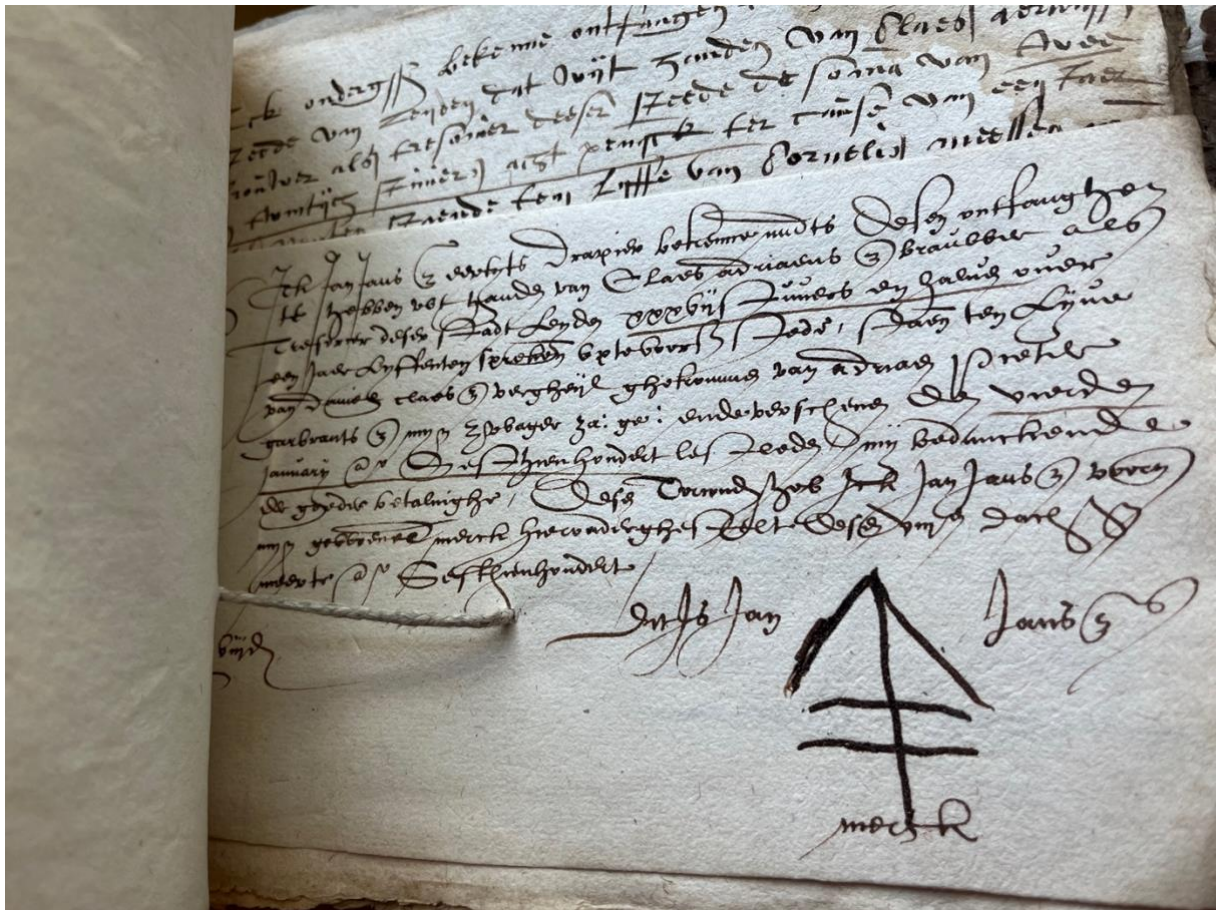


Fig. 23: Example of the common late sixteenth-century practice of writing 'this is [name + surname]'s mark' around the mark of a signatory. ELO, SA II, inv.nr. 7838.

happened in the past or what was customary, such people would be summoned to come to a verdict.<sup>170</sup> Studies show that this was common practice in Western Europe throughout the medieval and early modern period, although it became less common as more and more was recorded.<sup>171</sup> An increasing number of written evidence authenticated by seal or signature decreased the role of memory in determining what did or did not happen in the past. Witnesses were only summoned in case no written evidence was available – or if there were doubts about its authenticity. These could arise if it was suspected that a signature might have been forged. In that case, the signatories or other witnesses had to be summoned in order to testify whether it was indeed them who signed the document.<sup>172</sup> In areas with low literacy levels where people often signed using crosses, marking signs and other easily forgeable signature types, this seems to have been a common practice.<sup>173</sup> It was due to the authenticity of seals and handwritten signatures that the role of witnesses and memory could be reduced and was increasingly replaced by an artificial, paper memory much more permanent than that of the human mind.

<sup>170</sup> M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (Third edition; London 2013), 296-297; J. Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford 2017), 77-79.

<sup>171</sup> For the studies, see the footnote above. For more on the documentalisation in Europe specifically, see: Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 38-41, 44, 60-64; Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*, 79.

<sup>172</sup> See, the example on page 53-54 as well as: I.G. Tóth, *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Central Europe*, transl. T. Vadja and M. Bodóczy (Budapest-New York 2000), 66-67.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibidem*.

This underlying development may be seen as the key to explaining why signing practices changed in sixteenth-century Leiden. Reducing the need to summon witnesses to testify on the authenticity of signed documents seems to have served two larger sixteenth-century developments. The growing use of documents such as notarial acts or receipts mentioned in chapter one reflect one of these developments.<sup>174</sup> The sixteenth century saw an increase in the number of signed documents used in everyday life that could have been reflected in an equally increasing number of court cases and witnesses that had to be summoned in order to verify them. It was thanks to these new signing practices that this could be prevented, reducing reliance on witnesses. In trade too, this was a welcome change. The intensification of the Dutch Baltic trade as well as the expansion of trade networks towards the Mediterranean and Asia increased distances between merchants, making it more and more difficult to rely on contracts and notarial acts signed with marks that might have to be authenticated by far away witnesses at a later point in time.<sup>175</sup> The use of more conclusive forms of signing was a necessity.

This cultural change and shift in thinking about authenticity seem to be the driving forces behind an until now unknown shift in early modern signing practices. A study of sixteenth-century signing culture in the city of Leiden revealed that this changed remarkably throughout the period. Amongst the illiterate, certain signing methods completely fell out of use, whilst others were on the rise. Literate signatories at the end of the century almost exclusively signed using just their name, whilst it had been quite common to sign using a marking sign on its own or together with a name in the beginning of the century. Comparing the signing culture of Leiden around 1600 with that of Amsterdam furthermore showed great similarities between the two cities, suggesting that this change may not be unique to Leiden. This finding finally led us to look into what caused these changes to happen in Leiden signing culture. In an effort to understand these changes, fundamental developments in signing culture were identified, such as the growing cultural value of handwriting and the formation of new ideas on the legal authenticity of signatures. Ideally, these can act as indicators of this change in signing culture and help us understand whether it has taken place in specific areas or not. To be sure of this, more studies of signing culture will be needed.

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<sup>174</sup> For important indicators of the growing number of notaries and notarial acts, see: H. Callewier, 'Brugge, vijftiende-eeuws centrum van het notariaat in de Nederlanden', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 77:1 (2009) 73-102, 76-80; J. Reinders, 'De ontsluiting van het Amsterdamse notariële archief', *TSEG* 20:3 (2023) 189-200, 195.

<sup>175</sup> M. Bulut, 'Rethinking the Dutch Economy and Trade in the Early Modern Period, 1570-1680', *Journal of European Economic History* 32:2 (2003) 391-424, 406-417.

## Conclusion

Historians are often tempted to see too much of the present in our past. The urge to explain how we got to where we are today often has a blinding effect. The previous chapters have illustrated this. In an attempt to chart the increase of early modern literacy, the 'signature study' was devised to calculate what percentage of the population was able to read and write based on people's ability to sign their name. It was assumed that signing in the past was similar to current day practices, but this turned out to be a little more complex. Research on the culture of signing showed that it had a historical development of its own and was much less 'modern' than previously thought. It is often cultural history that guides our view from the recognizable to the odd, that looks past the façade of modernity that first jumps out at us to expose the unknown, the past, that 'foreign country'.<sup>176</sup> The reason for this has been excellently described by the renowned cultural historian Johan Huizinga.

With his good friend and literary scholar André Jolles, Johan Huizinga had great discussions on the relation between literature and history writing. Questions on the place of the author formed an important role in their discussion and it was on this point that Jolles once put Huizinga in a tight corner. One day in 1923 he argued – like a kind of proto-narrativist – that the historian would always be separated from past reality by a repertoire of literary genres in which all historical writing had to be cast, and that it was up to the historian to choose it.<sup>177</sup> Jolles called this the 'simple form', a set of elementary literary genres that are used to make complex reality understandable.<sup>178</sup> Huizinga parried this argument by stating that the historian's ability to shape history is ultimately limited by historical sources and corrective abilities of colleagues.<sup>179</sup> He could not do away the idea of the 'simple form' in its entirety however; it had long inspired him.<sup>180</sup> Many of his works express the idea that history is captured in schemas and forms, but he believed that unlike literature, this form was not decided by an author, but by the past itself.<sup>181</sup>

What Huizinga means by this, is best illustrated in his *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*. The work opens with the clear message that the medieval world is very different from our own, something that most historians who only worked with official records such as charters tended to forget. They turned to these sources in order to avoid what they considered the chroniclers' imagination, that shaped history into a chivalric romance, in order to get a clear view of the rational, modern heads of state from the Late Middle Ages. An image, Huizinga writes, they themselves had created.<sup>182</sup> When reading the chronicles and studying the action of princes through other sources, it would quickly become apparent that it was not just chroniclers who imagined them as heroes of chivalric romance, but that rulers viewed themselves this way and acted according to knightly ideals in matters of state and war.<sup>183</sup> This

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<sup>176</sup> 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' is the famous quote from L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953), which is a paraphrased quote from a lecture by a friend of his, Lord David Cecil.

<sup>177</sup> W. Otterspeer, *Orde en trouw. Over Johan Huizinga* (Amsterdam 2006), 171.

<sup>178</sup> For his definition, see: A. Jolles, *Einfache Formen. Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz* (Fourth press; Tübingen 1968), 45.

<sup>179</sup> Otterspeer, *Orde en trouw*, 172-173.

<sup>180</sup> It must be noted that Huizinga had a different view on what defined the 'simple form'. His use of the term is very different from the definition that Jolles gave, see: footnote 179.

<sup>181</sup> Otterspeer, *Orde en trouw*, 173-174.

<sup>182</sup> J. Huizinga, *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen. Studie over levens- en gedachtevormen der veertiende en vijftiende eeuw in Frankrijk en de Nederlanden* (Leiden 2018), 18

<sup>183</sup> Huizinga, *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen*, 18-21, 142-161.

imagination, this 'simple form' is according to Huizinga not one of literature, but of action.<sup>184</sup> It is a worldview that guides how people think and act. It materializes in all kinds of forms that we can study in order to make this view our own, taking the shape of paintings, artefacts, writings as well as decorated windows, bread stamps and signatures...

In the previous chapters, many different kinds of sources have been analysed in order to peer inside the head of sixteenth-century Leidenaars and understand one detail of their daily life: why did they sign the way they did? To many, pursuing this question can seem hardly relevant, but precisely this topic appears to be essential for the study of early modern literacy. For years, the literacy and writing ability of towns and villages has been studied using signatures with the belief that the way people signed was determined purely by skill and thus reflects their writing capabilities. Early-sixteenth-century evidence from Leiden complicated this idea. Within its city archive, many examples can be found of people who were clearly literate, but chose to sign using a symbol instead of their name. It illustrates that the way people signed was determined by more than their writing skill alone. Meaning must have played some role too. Our failure to recognise and integrate this in signature studies suggests that our current image of past people's literacy and writing ability may be a distorted one. At the same time, a quick glance at archival material from late-sixteenth-century Leiden also revealed that literate people seem to have largely stopped signing using symbols at the end of the century, suggesting that this role of meaning only affected the way people signed within a specific time frame. Understanding these findings was essential for thinking about how it may affect our current understanding of early modern literacy rates. The goal of this study was to explain what caused this change in signing culture to take place in sixteenth century Leiden. By understanding what underlying developments caused this change in Leiden, it might be possible to look for these developments in other places and estimate when a similar change took place elsewhere, allowing us to re-estimate its literacy rates. Three chapters helped us work our way towards the answer.

Literate people signing with marking signs, people who signed using both their name and mark or people who let someone else sign on their behalf... It was curiosities like these, found on many of the early-sixteenth-century receipts stored in the Leiden archive, that revealed a world of signing much more complex than what has been presented to us in any signature study. It had the potential to radically change our understanding of early modern signing and deserved careful study. To understand how common these signing practices were in Leiden and how this might affect signature study results, the total signing culture of its inhabitants had to be reconstructed. After a discussion on the reliability of receipts as a source and discussing our method, a new kind of signature study was conducted to study this culture. By analysing more than a thousand receipts and cross referencing their information with many other sources, it became possible to reconstruct the signing culture of various Leiden social groups. This revealed many fascinating aspects of the local signing culture and also showed the contours of cultural differences in signing between various social groups. Most importantly however, it showed that an average of around nine percent of the literate population constantly or occasionally signed using just a marking sign whilst many more signed using both their name and mark combined. This clearly debunked the classic signature study assumption that marking signs were only used by the illiterate, proved that meaning played a role in determining how people signed and showed that this could affect signature study outcomes. Now that this had been proven, focus shifted to answering why people in

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<sup>184</sup> Otterspeer, *Orde en trouw*, 180.

Leiden stopped signing using these symbols at the end of the century, so that we might understand when a similar change took place in other areas. One possible explanation for this change was that the functional and decorative use of marking signs in Leiden could have changed, leading people to abandon signing using these symbols. The next chapter looked into how marks were used in sixteenth-century Leiden society, whilst also addressing a different question that had come up as a result of our findings: why exactly did so many literate people sign using these symbols?

Following a discussion of why little research into the historical use of marking signs has been conducted and proposing a new theoretical and methodological framework for how they should be studied in the first place, the second chapter looked into the incredibly diverse history of marking signs. Through analysing lawbooks and charters, it was uncovered that marks played an important functional role in Leiden's late medieval and sixteenth century trade and industry. Here, they formed an essential tool in organizing trade and assuring product quality. In this manner, they essentially functioned as what economic historians would call 'institutions', although they have not (yet) been widely recognized as such. This 'economic' use however, was also strongly intertwined with marking signs' symbolic dimension. Through combining an interdisciplinary array of material and archival sources like paintings, administrative sources and artefacts, this chapter was also able to prove that marking signs were commonly used to express prestige and identity in sixteenth century Leiden. These symbols were beautifully displayed on decorative objects belonging to households, guilds and other associations to express that status of its owners or leaders. The relation between the mark's use as a personal, business and family symbol was also discussed in an effort to better understand to what extent marking signs can be viewed as a 'heraldry of the humble'. Our findings showed that just like a coat of arms, marks would indeed be used as a family symbol. These marks would also be slightly amended however – by adding stripes, integrating initials into it or otherwise changing it – to show that it belonged to one specific member of this family and the business associated with them. This family dimension, its beautiful public display as well as the fact that it was commonly presented in a shield show that marks indeed had a 'heraldic' dimension to them. It remains difficult to say however, whether this was also the case for the marks of the truly 'humble' parts of society, like the middle class and the poor. Taken together, this chapter also proved that marks played an important role in the symbolic competition for status in Low Countries that deserves further study. The mark's prestigious dimension also seems to be key to explaining why literate people signed using this symbol. This seems to have descended from the late medieval practice of sealing with a stamp displaying your mark, similar to how many others would seal using their family coat of arms. A final conclusion to draw from this chapter was that all of these different uses of marking signs showed little change throughout and even beyond the sixteenth century. This means that the reason for why people stopped signing using them must be sought in changes within signing culture itself.

Following the conclusion of the previous chapter, an in-depth study on the changes of sixteenth century Leiden signing culture was conducted in the third chapter to finally answer what developments caused Leiden signing culture to change. In the first part, a signature study of Leiden receipts for the year 1600 was conducted similar to the one for the period 1498-1508, so that their results could be compared. The comparison confirmed our suspicions that a great change in signing culture had taken place within this period. Literate Leidenaars had almost completely stopped signing using marks by the year 1600. Other signing methods were also abandoned, whilst some new ones were on the rise. In the second part of the chapter,

our observations on Leiden signing culture from 1600 were compared to a similar study based on Amsterdam's signed wedding registers from the same year. This comparison showed the existence of a great similarity between the two signing cultures which likely proves that the signing culture of Leiden was not unique to this city, but instead might have been part of a shared, urban Holland signing culture. This was an important finding, as it allowed us to rule out the possibility that Leiden signing culture, its change and the reasons for this change were unique to the city and could not be found elsewhere. By analysing the exact changes in Leiden signing culture, combining its insights with other Holland archival material and literature on larger, European changes, answers were sought to explain what caused this change in sixteenth-century signing culture to happen. The increasing symbolic value of writing was identified as one of the developments promoting this change. Findings showed that signing documents with something other than your name was beginning to be looked down upon, providing us with an important clue for why literate people stopped signing using marking signs. Signing using a name was beginning to become the norm, which seems to be reflected in the fact that the social elite of the sixteenth century Low Countries became increasingly interested not just in being able to write, but also being able to do so neatly. This might have come forth out of the desire to distinguish themselves from the increasing class of 'ordinary' writers. It shows that the act of signing your name also had a social dimension to it that could be used to express status. The development of new ideas on how to 'durably' authenticate documents can be seen as the other reason for why this sixteenth century change occurred. The appearance of new signing practices, the complete abandonment of specific types of signing and other changes in signing culture suggests that people in Leiden were increasingly thinking about how unclarity on the authenticity of signatures could be avoided. It fits in with a larger European development that sought to reduce the role of witnesses in determining legal truth by increasingly recording information on authenticated legal documents. To do so, it was necessary to use personal, unique and hard to replicate signatures. For this purpose, a signed name offered a much more durable form of authentication than an easy to draw, sometimes even publicly known marking sign. Signing using a name helped avoid unclarity on the authenticity of documents, which could lead to court cases where witnesses present at the moment of signing had to be summoned in order to provide their testimony. In the sixteenth-century world that increasingly relied on written documents and where distances between people like traders increased massively, such time-consuming procedures could best be avoided. This research has taught us much about aspects of sixteenth century signing that have rarely been studied in the past and in doing so, uncovered two, broader societal developments that may be seen as indicators for when a similar change to Leiden signing culture took place elsewhere.

Changing attitudes on the symbolic value of writing, changing ideas on the authenticity of signatures – caused by the expansion of trade networks and use of documents in everyday life – and the reflection of these developments in the adoption and abandonment of specific signing methods seem to be the key indicators for understanding whether a change similar to sixteenth century Leiden signing culture might have taken place elsewhere. By analysing a town's place in trade networks, its inhabitant's use of documents, their attitudes on writing or by simply analysing the way they signed, it may be possible estimate in what period a part its literate population signed using just a marking sign and how this may affect the literacy rate once calculated for this place. Future studies will have to be the judge of these ideas. Comparative studies may be particularly useful for this. Conducting similar, thorough studies of signing culture for other cities in Holland, the Low Countries or beyond this region should

be able to show how common this change in signing culture was in urban Europe exactly. A similar study on the signing culture of rural villages may also provide some interesting perspectives. It may help us understand whether being connected to a large trade network or other urban phenomena did or did not help bringing about such a change. Other questions left partially answered or unanswered by this study could also be interesting to pursue. Knowing that some literate people signed using marking signs for symbolic reasons, it would be interesting to find out whether other literate people signed using a circle, cross or something else for different symbolic reasons. Looking further into the questions to what extent marks may be seen as a heraldry of the humble may also be worthwhile. This study has been able to provide some insights into the relation between the personal, business and family use of marks and its similarities to coats of arms, but was not able to study this question thoroughly, nor was it able to answer whether they were used in such a way by the truly 'humble' parts of society. Following studies may hopefully shed some light on these questions.

An intricate worldview lies behind every historical trace. Every object leaving its artisan's hand, every symbol carved and each stroke of the pen has left an imprint of the past on the present, reflecting aspects of this bygone world. The many pages leading up to this conclusion have hopefully, if nothing else, shown how much can be learned about the past from its most marginal traces. The receipt signed by Claes Woutersz. presented at the beginning, one paper slip packed in a stack of hundreds, sealed, signed and marked – in many ways an oddity – turned out to be illustrative of a great change of ages. Its confusing nature led to questions that made us realize how little we knew about signing in the first place, leading us to learn much more about this practice. The example of this receipt should teach us to keep our eyes open for these little oddities, these invitations. Invitations to look past the seemingly banal nature of phenomena, like that of the signature, and to seek traces of the past outside the archive, hidden in the everyday world around us, like marking signs. Behind every detail hides a historical phenomenon of great importance. Look out for them, as they have a story to tell.

## Appendix

Appendix 1. Description of the method used to create a sample from the *rentenier* receipts.

A note on how every fifth receipt from the *rentenier* receipt collection was selected is in order since confusion may arise over this because of the amorphous nature of the source material. When beginning to analyse the receipts stacks, the paper sheet in which they were wrapped was put down before the reader in a way so that the inventory number written on the sheet was correctly oriented towards the reader. Then, the data from every fifth receipt was added to the database, working from top to bottom.

A problem of using this method is that the receipt stacks are made up of sheets from two different sizes. Most of the times, this varies from a full-sheet to a half-sheet. If the stacks are made up of full-sheets, it is easy to determine what the fifth receipt is, but sometimes, the stacks splits up into two stacks of half-sheets. In case no sheet – even ever so slightly – overlapped the two stacks, the method for determining the fifth sheet was slightly changed.

Using the same orientation as described in the first paragraph, the half-sheet furthest from the reader – when looking at it from a bird's eye view, the sheet 'above' the other – was determined to be the 'next' sheet, followed by the sheet under it. In a hypothetical situation where we begin with two half stacks the order would be as follows: above (1); under (2); above (3); under (4); above (5). A continuation of this pattern would go: under (6); above (7); under (8); above (9); under (10).

This method was used to go through all *rente* receipts from the packets contained in inventory numbers 7837, 7838 and 7839. Because this resulted in too small of a database, below two-hundred individuals, the same method was used to go through the largest receipt package – 7838 – again using the same method, but this time starting from the third receipt.

Keep in mind that there is no guarantee that this sample can be exactly replicated. If a later researcher shifts the order of the receipts just slightly, it will become impossible to replicate the sample created here.

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