

# Monthly Letter October 2011

## Heinrich Rode's captured ship

The letters which Heinrich Rode sent in October and November of the year 1666 to his boss Arnout van der Beke and his friend Joan Reijnmarter are intriguing in many ways. Firstly, the letters are special because Heinrich wrote them in England, where he was waiting for the High Court of Admiralty to decide on the fate of his captured ship. While Arnout and Joan are following the case from up close in London, Heinrich watches over the ship in the port of Plymouth. The three men will have to remain patient for a while still, because Heinrich's letter informs us of the fact that the courts in London are closed for the holidays and that the meetings will only be resumed in February. Heinrich fears it will be March before the court will have reached a decision.



Two ships lying at anchor, by Andries van Eertvelt

## Storm!

In the meantime, Heinrich busies himself with taking care of the ship; he is especially busy when the coast of England is struck by a storm at the end of November. Heinrich lets Joan know how much effort it took to preserve the ship from a disaster. When the wind got up on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, Heinrich dropped the sheet anchor, an anchor which always lies ready for use at the stern of a ship in case of an emergency situation. However, the anchor broke and Heinrich had to hoist it again. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, the wind was so powerful that the ship was going adrift and was on its way to hit rock. Heinrich had to appeal to an Englishman for new rope and an anchor in the middle of the night. Luckily the favourable direction of the wind saved the ship from being wrecked, but it was heavily damaged nonetheless. Heinrich writes:

*“My ship is in pieces with this weather. The stern is gone. I have to have it fixed.”*

## Foul play

A second intriguing element about these letters is that they tell a thrilling story. The case of the captured ship is not just like any other. Heinrich writes that he suspects foul play and that he has an important witness. A certain English captain Weer has told Heinrich that ship owner Hobs is trying to get Heinrich's ship as a prize (this is the term for a captured ship which the High Court of Admiralty has judged to be captured correctly). Heinrich's ship is probably sailing under the Swedish flag, as notes on the back of the letter show. The name of the ship can be identified as 'Lycka', which is Swedish for "Good luck". Since the English were not at war with Sweden in 1666, the ship could not be declared a prize. But Hobs is so keen to have the ship and its cargo that he is even willing to hide flags of hostile nations and false papers in the ship which have to prove that it belongs to the enemy. Heinrich writes indignantly:

*“I have also been warned that they are planning to plant false papers in the ship and that it will then be*

searched so that it can be made a prize. I will keep an eye on the matter, but who has ever in all his life heard of such a mean piece of roguery.”

### ‘When crooks and thieves get angry...’



First page of a German dictionary of proverbs by Sebastian Franck

Since captain Weer has taken an oath on it in the presence of three other men and since he is also willing to testify for a commission, Heinrich believes his story. He urges his friend Joan to call the captain as a witness in the process on the capture of the ship. Maybe this can help them to keep the ship and the cargo. According to our letter writer, there might still be some hope, because their opponents seem to be bickering amongst themselves. This creates opportunities:

*“I hope that it will come to what the common figure of speech says: when crooks and thieves get angry, an honest man can get his property back.”*

Heinrich’s figure of speech does not seem to exist in Dutch, but it does strongly resemble the German saying “Wenn sich zwei Diebe schelten, so kriegt ein ehrlicher Mann seine Kuh wieder” (‘When two thieves are arguing, an honest man gets his cow back.’) And this brings us to the third point of interest in Heinrich’s letters: the language use.

### Dutch with a touch of German

Dutch readers immediately notice that the Dutch in Heinrich’s letters is special. It reminds one of German. For instance: Heinrich uses the short *ei* more often in words in which Dutch would use the *ij* (*mein* ‘my’, *sein* ‘his’). He writes *u* where we would expect *oe* (*gult* instead of *goed* ‘goods’). He writes *wan* instead of *als* or *wanneer* ‘when’. And as if this is not enough, he also uses a saying which has a German background. Taking all this evidence into account, we have to conclude that Heinrich’s area of origin was probably a German-speaking region.

It happens more often that we encounter letters with a touch of German in our corpus. This can be explained by the fact that in the seventeenth century a great number of immigrants, a lot of them from German-speaking regions, flocked towards the Dutch Republic. The Republic was flourishing and this attracted people looking for work. The population of the city of Amsterdam for instance grew from 50.000 to 200.000 people between 1600 and 1650. Half of these new residents were probably immigrants. Whether Heinrich as well had settled permanently in the Netherlands is unclear. It is also possible that he lived somewhere else, but that he had learned Dutch to be able to communicate with business partners. After all, Dutch was an important language in trading in the seventeenth century because of the strong position of the Republic.

In any case, Heinrich was able to make himself understood in his second language. At least he spoke Dutch well enough to get across his indignation over a patent low-down trick.

The figure of speech in Heinrich's letter

Heinrich Rode's letters were found in box HCA 30-783. The first transcriptions of the letters were provided by Hetty Krol. The comment on this monthly letter was written by Judith Nobels.