

## C H R O N I C L E S

THE DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENCE OF GRAND PENSIONARY  
JOHAN DE WITT (1625–1672) ONLINE*Ineke Huysman*

At a seminar held on 14 March 2019 in the British ambassador's residence in The Hague, the Johan de Witt Correspondence Project marked the release of the first instalment of the Grand Pensionary's catalogue of 7,465 mostly diplomatic letters sent to the Grand Pensionary in Early Modern Letters Online (EMLO), a project of Oxford's Cultures of Knowledge, which promotes pan-European scholarly and technical collaboration.

## JOHAN DE WITT

Johan de Witt was born in Dordrecht on 24 September 1625 as the son of Jacob de Witt (1589–1674) and Anna van den Corput (1599–1645), and the brother of Cornelis de Witt (1623–1672). After attending the Latin school in Dordrecht, he studied law at Leiden University and received a doctorate in law in France, before practising law from 1647 on in The Hague. In 1650, he became Pensionary



of Dordrecht, and in 1653 he was elected Grand Pensionary (*raadpensionaris*) of Holland. As Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt was the highest-ranking official of the province of Holland, as well as chairman of the States of Holland and West-Friesland and the leading member of Holland's delegation in the States-General. Johan de Witt was responsible for both domestic and foreign policy and thus was effectively the most influential person in the Republic for almost twenty years.

Officially, in the days of the Republic of the United Netherlands, foreign affairs were committed to the charge of the States-General. This body received the foreign representatives, conducted the correspondence with them, and their commissioners negotiated with them. At De Witt's time at home or abroad, there was no prince of Orange in office to give leadership to the state. Hence he was given the right to correspond with envoys of the Republic abroad and to meet in The Hague with diplomats of other states. In our modern terms, we can essentially consider him as 'minister of foreign affairs', although officially it was not a formal function at the time. The management of Dutch diplomacy belonged to De Witt's agency, as long as he retained the confidence of the States of Holland. In order to stay well informed, he developed an archive of foreign

affairs: treaties, dispatches, letters, espionage reports, etc. So on foreign affairs, De Witt was usually best informed and therefore an influential member of both the States of Holland and the States-General. Most importantly, he became a master negotiator, using in his diplomacy the method of ‘persuasion’, where he liked to negotiate by open and unfeigned discussion, as ‘between friends’. This informality and straightforwardness sometimes took foreigners aback.

## CORRESPONDENCE



De Witt himself never went abroad on diplomatic missions. He preferred to have foreign rulers to correspond with him through their ambassadors, either the Dutch abroad or their own at The Hague. He was not only interested in affairs of state, but he also instructed his envoys to send him small talk and give him in all frankness their personal judgment upon events. Also, the diplomats complained to him: about themselves, about their homes, about their surroundings, about their illnesses, about their homesickness, etc., etc. This human element is also why these correspondences are so very informative and lively for us nowadays.

As Grand Pensionary, Johan de Witt wrote and received an extraordinarily large number of letters. In consequence, his correspondence is particularly varied and includes letters from statesmen, foreign office-bearers, army commanders, scientists, artists, and family members, as well as countless requests for a recommendation from a diverse range of individuals. Most of the surviving letters date from between 1653 and 1672, while a smaller number of letters belong to the period before 1653.

In 1672, when the Dutch Republic suffered numerous defeats as French forces invaded the country, De Witt was blamed for neglect of the army.

In the hysteria that followed, Johan and his brother Cornelis were lynched by a mob. On 23 August 1672, three days after their murder, it was decided at the meeting of the States of Holland and West-Friesland that De Witt's papers should be confiscated. Because of this horrific event and the immediate seizure of the paper legacy of Johan de Witt, the National Archives of the Netherlands (Nationaal Archief) now holds an almost complete archive of the documents of the Grand Pensionary.

In the early modern period, the boundary between public and private was vaguer than today. Many of De Witt's correspondents were (distant) family members, who raised both business and personal matters in one letter. Other than that, De Witt was aware that when the information he received from his envoys became known in the States of Holland, and even more in the States-General, it would quickly become in possession of foreign diplomats and statesmen. So he asked his envoys to put matters that could safely be made public into letters addressed to the States of Holland. Matters of 'mutual confidence not suited for others' were sent to De Witt alone. That is the reason why, in most cases, the envoys always sent two letters to De Witt on the same day. Sometimes even four, as there are also letters of an even higher level of secrecy, in his private correspondence and then there were the letters the envoys sent to the clerk of the States-General. Other than that, to ensure some form of secrecy, De Witt obviously used cyphers in his correspondence. A system De Witt probably developed himself with his mathematical insights, according to one of his letters, used a circular device, based upon the principle of shifting replacements.

### THE JOHAN DE WITT CATALOGUE IN EARLY MODERN LETTERS ONLINE (EMLO)

Until recently, the letters of Johan de Witt have received little attention, largely as a result of the inaccessibility of the archive. However, with the creation by the National Archive of a new inventory and the provision of full access for research, the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands started a project in 2016 supported by a large team of interns and guest researchers to make the correspondence of Johan de Witt available online. When complete, this digital inventory, which is in the process of being collated in EMLO, will contain not only the letters that have been published previously in the six-part source edition of Robert Fruin, Nicolaas Japikse, and Gerhard Wilhelm Kernkamp (*Brieven aan en Brieven van Johan de Witt (1906–1919)*) and in the so-called 'Scheurleer' publication – an eighteenth-century six-volume edition with diplomatic letters from De Witt to and from envoys in England, France, Denmark, Poland, and Sweden – but also the hitherto unpublished letters from the archive.

154 results (50 results per page)

EMLO is an active, collaborative project in continual development, and as such may contain errors/typos. We rely on feedback from the scholarly community if you spot an error, please get in touch.

Search

Find your search

Your current search

Recipient:  Wtt, Johan de Witt  
Locations:  Poland  
Author:  grandwitt  
Refine your results

Author

Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 154  
Click to show more...

Recipient

Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672 154  
Click to show more...

Origins of letter

Etten, Rotterdam de W. 148  
 New, Oude, The Hague, Poland 5  
 Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672 1

	Date	Author	Origin	Addressed to	Destination	Repositories & Versions
1	24 July 1655	Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1658	Etten, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1672	Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672	The Hague, South Holland, Rotterdam de W. 3.91.17.164	National Archives Universiteit Utrecht
2	27 July 1655	Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1658	Etten, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1672	Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672	The Hague, South Holland, Rotterdam de W. 3.91.17.165	National Archives Universiteit Utrecht
3	27 July 1655	Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1658	Etten, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1672	Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672	The Hague, South Holland, Rotterdam de W. 3.91.17.166	National Archives Universiteit Utrecht
4	1 August 1655	Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1658	Etten, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1672	Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672	The Hague, South Holland, Rotterdam de W. 3.91.17.167	National Archives Universiteit Utrecht
5	7 August 1655	Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1658	Etten, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1672	Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672	The Hague, South Holland, Rotterdam de W. 3.91.17.168	National Archives Universiteit Utrecht
6	10 August 1655	Grand Wikon, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1658	Etten, Rotterdam de W. 1625-1672	Wtt, Johan de Witt, 1625-1672	The Hague, South Holland, Rotterdam de W. 3.91.17.169	National Archives Universiteit Utrecht

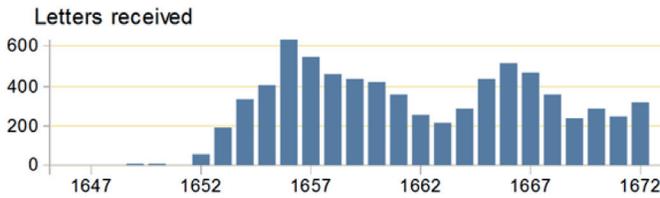
De Witt archived his letters in chronological order, but nowadays the National Archive preserves them in folders at correspondent-level. In our database, the original order of the letters is reconstructed, and the correspondence is disclosed on an individual letter-level, which makes the correspondence more accessible.

The Johan de Witt archive covers 37.4 meters of shelving at the National Archive in The Hague. An estimate indicates that the total number of letters addressed to or sent by De Witt will amount to approximately 35,000. These may be divided roughly into four categories:

- Letters from Johan de Witt (originals, drafts): *c.* 6,000 letters (to be published);
- Letters from regents and institutions sent to De Witt: *c.* 13,000 letters (to be published);
- (Mostly) diplomatic letters sent to De Witt: *c.* 7,465 letters (now available online);
- Letters from private persons sent to De Witt: *c.* 9,000 letters (to be published).

In the EMLO-system metadata is created for each letter sent or received and this is added into the union catalogue, thereby virtually reuniting letters that once formed part of an early modern individual's correspondence. EMLO now has almost 150,000 letters from 424 different international repositories online and has the intention to eventually be able to connect all preserved Early Modern letters ever written.

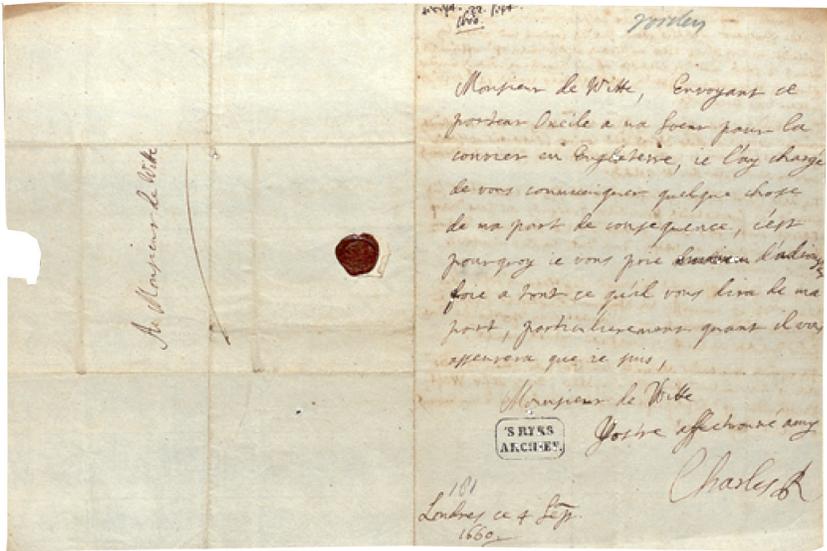
The main criterion for admission to this De Witt catalogue is that the letter has to be addressed to or written by Johan de Witt. Letters addressed to the States of Holland, of which there are tens of thousands in De Witt's archive, are not



included. However, the letters addressed to De Witt personally usually contain more information than the letters sent simultaneously to the States of Holland.

At present, the Johan de Witt online catalogue in EMLO contains metadata for 7,465 letters – about twenty per cent of De Witt’s entire correspondence – written mainly in Dutch, French, English, and Latin. These letters, dating between 1649 and 1672, were sent to Johan de Witt by a wide range of individuals, the majority of whom were engaged in diplomatic activity. In the process of digitising the diplomatic correspondence to De Witt, it has become evident how well informed the Grand Pensionary was on events and activities that took place in the international and public spheres as well as those behind the scenes.





About 4,250 of these 7,465 letters have never been published before, and the majority of these letters contain intelligence from Germany, Poland, the Spanish Netherlands, and Spain and Portugal. Metadata for letters from secretaries, agents and spies and other members of staff who worked for the official envoys to England, France, Poland, Sweden, and Denmark have been collated. Many handwritten newsletters that have been neglected in earlier editions have been added. For example, there are the 879 newsletters of the Dutch resident in Vienna Hamel Bruyninx sent to De Witt, of which only two were published before. Embassy-secretary Pieter Cunaeus sent De Witt from Westminster more than one hundred letters of intelligence, of which nothing was previously published. All 154 letters that the mysterious spy-agent Monsieur de la Grandmaison sent De Witt from Poland are new research material.

All geographical metadata is visualised on GoogleMaps [<https://bit.ly/31eGTGm>] in which way one can see at a glance how widely spread, and international the De Witt's diplomatic network actually was, reaching all corners of Europe and beyond. From Moscow to Aleppo and from Cadiz to Stockholm. After adding the remaining 28,000 letters, in due course, this map will indeed cover the whole world.

All letter records provide links to digitised copies of the original documents. Furthermore, many records contain links to more than one manifestation, and

these include links to digitised editions or the metadata of other printed editions, as well as links to the online catalogue at the National Archive in The Hague. It should be noted that the manuscript images available at present are provisional. As the project was not able to produce high-quality images in time for the launch of the catalogue, the decision was taken to include lower-quality images in the first instance in order to provide users with access to the manuscripts sooner rather than later; in due course, these preliminary images will be replaced by official high-quality versions.

The catalogue can be consulted at: <http://emlo-portal.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections/?catalogue=johan-de-witt>