Scribes and Soldiers: A Brief Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Military Manuscripts

Lucian Staiano-Daniels  
*Tel Aviv University, luciasdan@gmail.com*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims)

Part of the [European History Commons](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims), [Military History Commons](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims)

**Recommended Citation**

Staiano-Daniels, Lucian () "Scribes and Soldiers: A Brief Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Military Manuscripts," *Manuscript Studies*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol5/iss1/5](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol5/iss1/5)

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol5/iss1/5](https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol5/iss1/5)  
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Scribes and Soldiers: A Brief Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Military Manuscripts

Abstract
The history of early-modern European manuscripts has rarely focused on the use of manuscripts in armies. Some historians have even presented early-modern armies as unconcerned with daily records of the common soldiers under their command. Others have used early-modern handwritten documents as sources of information, without examining them as artifacts. But these documents are interesting works of vernacular art, created under difficult circumstances. They also provide clues to things like the literacy rate of some common soldiers. This article introduces early-modern military manuscripts. The focus is on the army of Electoral Saxony during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).

Keywords
Thirty Years' War, Electoral Saxony, History of daily life, Ephemeral documents, Military records, Seventeenth-century paleography, Seventeenth-century literacy rates, Military literacy rates, Manuscript Studies

This article is available in Manuscript Studies: https://repository.upenn.edu/mss_sims/vol5/iss1/5
Staiano-Daniels: A Brief Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Military Manuscripts
Manuscript Studies brings together scholarship from around the world and across disciplines related to the study of premodern manuscript books and documents, with a special emphasis on the role of digital technologies in advancing manuscript research. Articles for submission should be prepared according to the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition, and follow the style guidelines found at http://mss.pennpress.org.

None of the contents of this journal may be reproduced without prior written consent of the University of Pennsylvania Press. Authorization to photocopy is granted by the University of Pennsylvania Press for libraries or other users registered with Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) Transaction Reporting Service, provided that all required fees are verified with CCC and paid directly to CCC, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923. This consent does not extend to other kinds of copying for general distribution, for advertising or promotional purposes, for creating new collective works, for database retrieval, or for resale.

2020 Subscription Information:
Single issues: $30
Print and online subscriptions: Individuals: $40; Institutions: $94; Full-time Students: $30
International subscribers, please add $19 per year for shipping.
Online-only subscriptions: Individuals: $32; Institutions: $82

Please direct all subscription orders, inquiries, requests for single issues, address changes, and other business communications to Penn Press Journals, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Phone: 215-573-1295. Fax: 215-746-3636. Email: journals@pobox.upenn.edu. Prepayment is required. Orders may be charged to MasterCard, Visa, and American Express credit cards. Checks and money orders should be made payable to “University of Pennsylvania Press” and sent to the address printed directly above.

One-year subscriptions are valid January 1 through December 31. Subscriptions received after October 31 in any year become effective the following January 1. Subscribers joining midyear receive immediately copies of all issues of Manuscript Studies already in print for that year.

Postmaster: send address changes to Penn Press Journals, 3905 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.

Visit Manuscript Studies on the web at mss.pennpress.org.
Yemeni Manuscripts Online: Digitization in an Age of War and Loss
Nancy Um 1

Opening the Text in the Floreffe Bible (London, BL Add. MS 17738): From Ways of Seeing to Ways of Touching
Dominic Marner 45

Litterae florissae in English Manuscripts in the Late Twelfth/Early Thirteenth Century
Sara Charles 79

The Durham Latin Prose “Brut” to 1347 with a Continuation to 1348: A Nationalistic Chronicle of England and Its Manuscripts
Trevor Russell Smith 120

A Brief Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Military Manuscripts and Military Literacy
Lucian Staiano-Daniels 142

Annotations

How Many Glyphs and How Many Scribes? Digital Paleography and the Voynich Manuscript
Lisa Fagin Davis 164

In the Orbit of the Sphere: Sacrobosco’s De sphaera mundi in UPenn MS Codex 1881
Aylin Malcolm 181
Reviews

Erik Kwakkel and Rodney Thompson, eds. *The European Book in the Twelfth Century*.

JOANNA FRONSKA 203


AMANDA PROPST 206

Jeffrey F. Hamburger, Robert Suckalé, and Gude Suckalé-Redlefsen, eds. *Painting the Page in the Age of Print: Central European Manuscript Illumination of the Fifteenth Century*.

GREGORY CLARK 210

Erik Kwakkel, ed. *Vernacular Manuscript Culture, 1000–1500*.

HANNAH MORCOS 214

Gaudenz Freuler. *The McCarthy Collection, Volume I: Italian and Byzantine Miniatures*.

BRYAN C. KEENE 218

List of Manuscripts Cited 223
Armed forces produce a lot of handwriting. Since they move people around and separate them from one another, they also induce people to write to one another, whether to communicate with absent relatives or friends, or for administrative reasons. Yet the history of early modern European manuscripts has rarely focused on the use of manuscripts in armies. Although military manuscripts were an essential part of regimental and company life, military historians use military manuscripts as sources of information but rarely study them as artifacts in their own right. But these manuscripts are not only evidence of things like soldiers’ literacy rates, they are also finely produced craft objects. This article introduces early modern military manuscripts by focusing on the army of Electoral Saxony during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48). This conflict consumed central Europe, catalyzing the formation of large armies, which produced a large amount of written material. Electoral Saxon military records from this war are unusually numerous, especially those from the 1620s. The ones I have examined are housed in the collections of the Saxon Privy Council and the Council of War in the Saxon State Archives in Dresden.

Printed military materials like manuals and treatises proliferated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thanks to increased literacy and more efficient and inexpensive means of book production. Some historians have claimed these books are evidence of greater literacy among the officers who implemented them because advancements like drilling would have required well-educated supervisors. Yet the extent to which ideas in manuals trickled down to real practice in the daily lives of common soldiers was probably minimal. One historian of literacy has argued that the limited practical importance of early seventeenth-century military manuals for common soldiers means that military literacy was restricted to officers. His argument implies that interaction with written materials in general was also confined to the higher ranks. This conclusion overlooks the vast number of handwritten documents circulating in early modern armies that suggest otherwise. Whether or not seventeenth-century soldiers could read and write, they routinely used and interacted with documents, including muster rolls, pay books, housing records, permission slips for soldiers to travel from their companies, and passes of safe conduct sold to civilians at extortionate rates. Further, secretaries recorded every military trial, and the officers and soldiers serving on the tribunals signed their names to the verdict in their own hands.

By the seventeenth century, administrative practice in western European armies had become increasingly organized. As early as the end of the fourteenth century, military records like lists of soldiers, identification papers, or passes for soldiers began appearing, and their use increased in the fifteenth century.

---


5 Houston, Literacy in Early Modern Europe, 110.
century.\textsuperscript{6} But surviving military manuscripts from the early seventeenth century are rare. We could argue that Electoral Saxon units were unusually good at recording information, and that the absence of extensive surviving records elsewhere means record keeping during the Thirty Years’ War was rudimentary or perfunctory for most armies. However, studies of other contemporary armies also rely on detailed handwritten evidence.\textsuperscript{7} When Jürgen Pohl analyzed the account the Imperial high command took of their resources immediately after Wallenstein’s assassination, he examined documents in the Kriegsarchiv and the Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, transcribing some in detail.\textsuperscript{8} Cordula Kapser’s analysis of the structure and funding of the Bavarian army in the last half of the war used letters, diplomatic documents, financial and ration statements, muster rolls, and strength returns as sources.\textsuperscript{9} That so many military manuscripts survived in Dresden is a stroke of good fortune, but most handwritten military documents probably did not survive. For instance, the Saxon army during the Thirty Years’ War peaked in September 1635 at about 37,000 troops, but only nine company muster rolls from the entire 1630s survive in the Saxon State Archives. What we can see are fragments. They allow us to make inferences about what we will never see.

An early-seventeenth century army was a paper-producing organization. To give a sense of how much paper was produced, it is helpful to understand how an army was constructed. An army was composed of several regiments, led by powerful colonels. In the 1620s, full-strength infantry companies were 314 men, and infantry regiments often had ten companies. Thus, on paper an infantry regiment exceeded three thousand men. Full-strength Saxon cavalry squadrons numbered a hundred horses, which meant around

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{7} Early modern military printing—printing carried out by or on behalf of military personnel for military aims—is an interesting topic that I intend to analyze in the future, but it is outside the scope of this article.
\textsuperscript{8} Jürgen Pohl, “\textit{Die Proflantierung der Keyserlichen Armaden Ahnbelangendt}”: \textit{Studien zur Versorgung der Kaiserlichen Armee, 1634/1635} (Horn, Austria: F. Berger & Söhne, 1994).
\end{flushright}
thirty fighting cavalrymen plus attendants. Cavalry regiments comprised more than one squadron, often around ten. One list of regimental staff at the beginning of a company muster roll has nineteen officers and functionaries in it.\textsuperscript{10} Although not recorded and difficult to track, high officers were also followed by large entourages, which may have also required paperwork. Altogether these were big forces, which is borne out by the surviving material evidence. One Saxon infantry regiment produced at least four muster rolls per company per year in 1620: these counted the troops, noted whether each soldier was present or absent, and noted their rates of pay. Companies kept provisioning accounts: records of the food, drink, and fodder they obtained and consumed. The Saxon Hoffahne (court company; the Elector of Saxony’s personal cavalry company) produced one payroll a month in the early 1620s. But it is difficult to tell exactly how much paperwork early seventeenth-century regiments produced not only because much has not survived, but because many daily operations were ad hoc and decentralized. Colonels, quartermasters, and other high officers probably kept their own financial records.

From the historian’s point of view, the Musterschreiber (muster-writer) is the most important man in the company. He not only kept the muster rolls, he often handled the rest of the company’s paperwork: we see the units through his eyes. Company-level muster-writers were officers, and so were regimental secretaries. They were central to the operation of their units. Paul Jahn was the muster-writer of the Saxon Hoffahne. He bound three of his payrolls into a single volume himself and signed the front cover. A piece of paper stuck between the pages says this volume was found in Jahn’s papers in 1651. Two of these rolls date from consecutive months in the late winter and early spring of 1624 and the third a month and a half later; they were labeled Months 43, 44, and 45, implying the original existence of at least forty-two other monthly paybooks.\textsuperscript{11} Jahn also kept some financial notes in this volume. For instance, in addition to pay, he also noted that he doled out Vertheil (money for distribution) to some officers, one trace of the

\textsuperscript{10} Saxon Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (SHStADr) 11237 10841/20 doc 1.

\textsuperscript{11} SHStADr 11237 10840/11 doc 2.
elusive informal entourages that surrounded them. Jahn was not just a record-keeper, he helped keep the Hoffähne running. According to his notes, he ended up lending the Elector of Saxony a large sum of money to cover his cavalrymen’s pay. During 1623 Jahn paid them a total of 663 gulden, one groschen, and six cents to escort convoys and river traffic, which the Elector should have eventually covered. When the Hoffähne toted up their pay in June 1624, the money from the Elector fell short by 930 gulden, thirteen groschen, and three cents, which Jahn made good. The total amount the Elector of Saxony owed him came to 1,596 gulden, three groschen, and nine cents: more than a hundred times what an average pikeman could make in a month.12

In the German-speaking world, muster-writers made muster rolls at least once in a company’s lifetime, when it was mustered in for the first time, but they could be made up to several times a year. Most were updated every time the company was paid. Contemporary French armies’ paths were mapped out beforehand with stopping-places along the route, and civic officials in these places made lists of how many soldiers were to be fed. This was directed by the French government.13 Warmaking in the contemporary Holy Roman Empire was not this centralized; muster rolls from Electoral Saxony were made at such irregular intervals that their creation was probably up to the individual. The words muster-writers used for different ranks also varied and were probably up to personal preference. But all Saxon muster rolls list soldiers’ full names, often their place of origin. Cavalry rolls list each trooper’s number of horses. Infantry rolls in the 1620s also list pay. In the early seventeenth century, Saxon rolls did not list soldiers’ partners or children, their ages, their civilian occupations, or their religions. Some other armies’ rolls did, and Saxon rolls did by the 1680s.

As the muster-writer was to a company, the secretary was to a regiment. Mattheus Steiner was the bailiff and secretary of a regiment belonging to the Saxon colonel Wolf von Mansfeld between 1625 and 1627. He presided

12 SHStADr 11237 10840/11 doc 2, 190.
over trials, investigated crimes, and acted as a notary. He kept the regimental legal records and copied them into three large volumes, two for the infantry and one for the cavalry. Steiner was well organized: he put a tabbed index at the beginning of the first volume that listed every soldier who appeared in the legal records alphabetically by first name. Steiner was proud: on the cover of every volume, in display script beneath his colonel’s sonorous titles, he wrote that everything that happened in the regiment was “logged and described with special diligence, by me: Mattheus Steiner, Regimental Bailiff and Secretary over the Regiment.” Figure 1 shows the kind of diligence Steiner meant, and his desire to leave a record of his presence. This is the cover of his third volume, the cavalry’s legal records. His handwriting on the cover is brave and flourishing, and the contents are a mistake-free fair copy. But the paper is rough, and the edges of the pages are grimed with mud. The cover is bound in plain, undyed leather, and the book ties shut with pink silk ribbons.

Mattheus Steiner was not always a secretary, which implies common soldiers may have been more literate than historians think. He first appeared in Saxon records in 1620 as a common soldier: a pikeman, making ten gulden a month. He was from Römerstaddt (modern Rýmařov) in Moravia. By 1621 he had moved to another company in the same regiment and made fourteen gulden a month, which means he had probably been promoted. How he made the jump from pikeman to regimental bailiff and secretary is unclear, but this social mobility may not have been uncommon. Hans Leopold from Ziegenrück in Saxony began his career in the same company Steiner did: he was a musketeer in February 1620 and became his company’s muster-writer on 10 January 1621. If at least two common soldiers could eventually become professional scribes, then a larger number of literate men may have been common soldiers than historians have considered. But when scribes rose, they rarely became colonels; they became legal officials, like Gottfried Reichbrodt, one of the Mansfeld Regiment’s provosts and a

14 SHStADr 11237 10840/3 doc 8.
15 SHStADr 11237 10840/4 doc 1.
16 SHStADr 11237 10840/3 doc 8.
Figure 1. Original cover of Wolf von Mansfeld’s regiment’s third legal book with the regimental secretary’s message below Mansfeld’s titles, 1625–1627. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 10024 Geheimer Rat (Geheimes Archiv), Nr 9739/5.
former muster-writer. This may indicate some clerical training, formal or informal.

Documents like Steiner’s legal books may have been kept by every regiment, but they are rare now. Some of the most common military manuscripts that still survive from the Thirty Years’ War in the Saxon State Archive are company muster rolls. Muster rolls are large, flat booklets made of at least fifteen sheets of paper, folded over and sewn down the spine with coarse twine in two or three big stitches, like basting stitches. The paper is coarse, usually creamy to golden brown, with brown flecks. It was cheap, and sometimes bad. Many military records were stitched together but unbound, thin and floppy; some still bear the marks of an officer folding them in half or in fourths to carry in his purse. When record-keepers bound their own documents, they used undyed untooled leather and labeled them on the front in pen (fig. 2).

Many muster rolls from the 1620s in the Saxon State Archive were bound after they were filed, in parchment-covered cardboard inscribed in ink or painted cardboard with the title written on a slip of paper and glued onto the front cover. Some of these rebound rolls were stamped with the arms of the Elector of Saxony in gold leaf, and some tie shut with black silk ribbons: ornate jackets over humble interiors. Black is difficult to dye, especially using natural pigments. One method of making black dye used a source of tannin plus an iron mordant, but this was chemically corrosive. Other methods involved dying the fabric multiple times with different colors that combined to produce black. These processes were hard on fabric, and these ribbons crumble to dust in the hands now.

Both cavalry and infantry kept rolls, but in the 1620s infantry muster rolls were more formal than cavalry muster rolls. Another word for infantry

17 SHStADr 11237 10840/4 doc 4.
Figure 2. Original cover of the provisioning account (Proviant-Rechnung) for Wolf von Mansfeld’s general staff, his personal cavalry squadron, and two other squadrons in his personal cavalry regiment, 10 October 1623–19 January 1624. This account tracks provisions by housing unit, not by squadron: these three squadrons and the general staff lived together in the Hauptquartier, commander’s quarters. The original binding is undyed leather and ties shut with leather thongs. Inscribed with ink by Hans Ebhardt, interim provisions-master, and generations of archivists in the Chancery of War and Saxon State Archives. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 11237 Geheimes Kriegsratskollegium, Nr 10940/20.
officers was \textit{prima plana}, first page, which comes from the fact that infantry rolls in this decade listed the officers on the literal first page, ordered by the honor of their office. The common soldiers followed at five names to a page, which left room to write new information beneath each name if someone died, left, or was cashiered. In most infantry rolls from the 1620s the pikemen come first, then the halberdiers, then the musketeers. This order reflected the order of honor and precedence. In general, common infantrymen were listed roughly in order of seniority—“rough” because the names were probably written according to the order the soldiers stood in line to be mustered in, which varied slightly from roll to roll.

Cavalry rolls, in contrast, are more casual. Cavalry officers never appear all together on the front page: \textit{prima plana} was metonymic for infantry officers because listing the officers on the first page was an infantry practice. Rather, these officers appear throughout the rolls, separated by small blocks of common troopers’ names: the captain and the flag-bearer, then about twelve troopers, then another officer, then another twelve troopers. The trumpeters either go last of all or before all the rest. Whereas infantrymen were probably listed in the order they stood in line, cavalrymen were likely listed in the order they formed up for combat, with one officer per ten or so men.

Like other seventeenth-century written cultures, central European military writers still made the old distinction among levels of formality in script: scripts that were more upright, less round, or had more defined feet where the scribe stopped the pen to square off the line were more formal, and more cursive scripts were less formal. The first pages of infantry muster rolls from the 1620s were formally written with the officers’ names in elevated script; generous white space set off these names and gave a sense of dignity and power to the composition, as shown in figure 3. The cover pages are frequently elaborately decorated (fig. 4). If the roll distinguishes the two or three most senior pikemen or the senior squad leaders (\textit{Gefreyter Corporals}) from the other enlisted men, their names are also written in a more elevated style.

Rolls were working documents, but a lot of effort went into preparing them. Military record-keepers knew when they should use formal script and when they should use informal script. They were familiar with standard
Latin abbreviations, like a line above an omitted M or N, and used some of them when writing in German: they knew something about the craft of writing and its history. Infantry record-keepers were conscious of hierarchy and status and how to express them in writing.20 They were aware of their

honorable status as soldiers. Their flourishing, knowledgeable script, the big sheets of paper, and a muster roll’s generous white space all signified elevated social standing. But this was out of keeping with the coarse, rough paper and untooled undyed leather bindings they used: these rolls were written equivalents of the grimy finery soldiers wore when they could scrounge it.

The cavalry was more honorable than the infantry, yet cavalry rolls from the 1620s were not only less formally organized than infantry rolls but also in most cases less formally written. But they were not poorly written: it takes as much technical expertise, as much control over the swift, small turns of hand and wrist, to produce casual slanted cursive script as it does to produce the self-conscious archaic textura of infantry first pages. This

Figure 4. Original infantry roll cover pages with upright textura, elaborate display script on the right. Captain Friedrich von Reppichau and Captain Friedrich Venus, Carl von Goldstein’s regiment, early 1620. The original covers of muster rolls varied. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 11237 Geheimes Kriegsratskollegium, Nr 10841 docs 9 and 10.
script spread out, leaned around; like cavalrymen themselves it sprawled and swaggered, as we can see in figure 5. While infantry scribes expressed their conception of their own status with stiff, formal writing, cavalry records have a deliberate dishabille. Perhaps this casualness was a power move: cavalry scribes already knew they belonged to the senior service.

There are fewer surviving rolls from the 1630s and 1640s in the Saxon State Archives. Both cavalry and infantry rolls from these decades are often less carefully prepared than rolls from the 1620s. There are more names per page, less room for notes. The handwriting on both infantry and cavalry rolls is less formal. Many of these documents may be copies of original rolls.
that no longer survive, but after decades of draining conflict the muster-writers could also have been trying to save paper or save time.

Surviving muster rolls have come down to us folded, smudged, covered with inky fingerprints, blobbed with ink, and crammed with notes in ink and pencil. Sometimes corrections were written on slips of paper, trimmed to size, and glued over the mistake with red sealing wax. The writing on some rolls is crusted with coarse, glittering sand: at the end of a long day you rake sand out of your hair with your nails. These physical traces of use and exposure as well as a number of paratextual features supply us with a vivid portrait of soldiers’ lives. Tick marks, little Os, or little Cs counted soldiers; tiny crosses go beside the names of the dead. When a soldier left the company, the muster-writer inscribed a line under his name with a rule, thick and straight, and wrote his replacement’s name underneath. A tiny gallows sketched beside a name indicates the soldier was executed.

Common infantrymen were listed five to a page, and the pages were big. In this case the white space was for notes under each name. Some of the most extensive notes were kept by companies active in the 1630s. These notes offer glimpses of the daily activities of common soldiers. Paul Schreiter, common soldier in an infantry company belonging to Dam Vitzthum von Eckstädt in 1635, was stabbed by his captain-lieutenant and died.21 Nicholas Möller enrolled in Hans Ernst König’s infantry company early in 1636. He should have conveyed a horse to Eisenach, but on 5 July 1636 he deserted with it instead.22 Some muster-writers kept regular working notes in their margins, which we can see in the muster roll of one of the companies in Carl von Goldstein’s regiment, early in the war. Between 7 August 1619 and 24 October 1620, this company mustered in six times. The muster-writer designated each muster with a capital letter in the white space in the margin, A through F: when a soldier appeared at that muster the relevant letter was written beside his name. These muster-writers and lower officers kept track of the movements of their men to the day.

21 SHStADr 11237 10841/3 doc 1.
22 SHStADr 11237 10841/3 doc 3.
Figure 6. Excerpt from muster records of Dietrich von Starschedel the Elder’s company, Carl von Goldstein’s regiment, 1619–1620. Lorentz Naumann from Leipzig was absent for Muster C, 9 October 1619. He came back later. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 11237 Geheimes Kriegsratskollegium, Nr 10841/7 doc 2.
Strength tables compiled information like that in muster rolls in a simplified form. Most military strength tables in the Saxon archives from the Thirty Years’ War date from the 1640s; I have found two from the 1630s. These list by company or regiment categories like sick, wounded, dead, mounted, unmounted, prisoners, women, and children. Regiments used the largest tables as wrappers for collections of other documents. If a regiment’s records have not been broken up and all the company documents are still together, sometimes a strength table is still wrapped around a stack of company rolls, just as the company muster-writers handed the bundle to the regimental secretary. The strength table protected the rolls, kept them together, and when unfolded, provided a large amount of information from the entire regiment at a glance. Strength tables became more common in the late seventeenth century; in the 1630s and 1640s the graphic display of information in a table is ultra modern. But the handwriting in these tables is only sometimes as modern as the tables themselves; often it is as stiffly archaic as infantry primae planae (fig. 7).

Before photos, fingerprints, or ID, soldiers carried passports. These little documents were single small sheets of paper. If a soldier wanted to leave his company legitimately, his captain or lieutenant wrote a passport for him stating this and sealed it with red wax. Deserters sometimes forged passports, and mutinous soldiers forced their officers to write them. They must have carried their papers with them, folded in a thick, messy wad in their purses or satchels: by 1681 and 1682, just before the formation of the Electoral Saxon standing army, Saxon muster rolls list the prior service of all soldiers in little paragraphs under their names, broken down precisely by month. These lists contain so much detail that they were probably based on written documentation: soldiers also received records of their service when

24 The two from the 1630s are in SHStADr 11237 10831/2, Jaroslav Hoffman’s regiment and a tabbed casualty report from several regiments. Some tables from the 1640s are in the collection SHStADr 11237 10841/13.
their companies were disbanded, which showed whom they had served and for how long. Some lists of prior service date back decades, like the personal history of squad leader Hans Bothfaldt, sixty years old in 1681. He served His Imperial Majesty for 360 months under four different colonels and then the Elector of Saxony for seventy-three months in the Life Regiment, for a total of thirty-six years and one month. He had been twenty-four years old when he joined the Imperial army in 1645.25

25 SHStADr 11241 000001 doc 4.
Early modern European soldiers carried identifying papers like passports or personal service histories with them because they were highly mobile, but their subculture valued reputation. Companies and regiments spent the fighting season on the move, and soldiers shuttled from unit to unit in the same army, or from one army to another. Soldiers deserted casually, and at any moment one could die. Civilians moved around frequently in this period as well: records from villages in England show high rates of population turnover. Both civilians and soldiers interacted with others at a distance as well as face to face, and frequently met strangers who needed to be identified. But soldiers were more mobile than civilians, and they or their female partners carried most of their possessions on their bodies: the papers that identified them, verified their credit, or recorded the outcomes of their lawsuits were probably small. Most have not survived, only their copies in Mattheus Steiner’s legal books. When two officers went to court over a complaint, Steiner wrote out a legal ticket (Gerichtlicher schein) stating one had complained against the other, like a receipt. Soldiers who owed one another money appeared before Steiner, and he gave them tickets certifying the debt and its amount. These documents recorded honor, dishonor, and reputation, allowing soldiers to calibrate their relationships to other soldiers whether or not they happened to end up in the same location during their travels.

Although during the 1620s infantry muster rolls listed soldiers’ pay, it seems that no Saxon cavalry rolls from any decade of the Thirty Years’ War did. Cavalry pay was probably kept in separate books, like the Saxon Hoffahne records. The Hoffahne rolls contain signatures, which allow us to adumbrate military literacy during the Thirty Years’ War using this unit as


27 SHStADr 10024 9539/6, 28.
28 SHStADr 10024 9119/38, 201–7.
a sample. Each cavalryman and officer in the Hoffahne was supposed to sign for his pay in these rolls, just under his name and the amount of money he received (fig. 8). A sign-off once a month, every time cash changes hands, implies a relatively sophisticated record-keeping procedure. We can see only fragments of it now.

Of the 212 officers and troopers who signed these payrolls over three months, 165 signed for themselves with relative facility and five did so poorly, for a total of 170: just over 80 percent. Thirty-nine entries were either blank or signed by someone other than the subject of the entry, the phrase hat nicht schreiben konnten (“he can’t write”) appears beside the names of two troopers, and one man—Abraham Parietzsch, nicknamed Tatar—left only his mark. That is a total of forty-two, slightly under 20 percent.

Figure 8. Saxon Hoffahne payroll open to show signatures of troopers beneath their entries. Note Zdenko Sigmund Wallenstein, third down on the right, young cousin of the famous general and financier Albrecht Wallenstein. At the time, the armies the two cousins worked for were allies. Sächsisches Staatsarchiv, Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 11237 Geheimes Kriegsratskollegium, Nr 10840/11 doc 2.
This result does not necessarily indicate that 20 percent of this company was illiterate, but it does suggest a certain proportion of literate versus non-literate members of the Hoffahne.

How to assess early modern literacy is a complicated topic. Some historians argue that people who were familiar enough with letters to sign their own names with facility probably knew how to read fluently. The Hoffahne troopers who signed their payrolls did it in cursive. Some could barely scrawl, but most knew how to work the pen without spattering or skipping or spilling ink everywhere. This indicates not only the basic ability to write but some ease with the physical movements of writing, which takes practice. But if the criteria are signing your name with facility and reading fluently, this generates a minimum number of the literate. Early seventeenth-century armies also contained people who read and wrote but were bad at it—those whose writing was unpracticed, or who stumbled through their words. It is also possible that some troopers could read but not write, whether because they did not know how or some other reason: some Hoffahne troopers who did not sign may have been absent or sick, and one had hurt his hand in a fight. Therefore, the evidence presented in these payrolls indicates that the literacy rate for this company was at least 80 percent. This is high for 1624. David Cressy examined signatures in ecclesiastical court records, comparable to the signatures in the Hoffahne payrolls, and found that literacy rate by occupation increased roughly following the gradation from heavy outdoor labor up the scale to respectable specialist pursuits. At only 20 percent illiteracy at most, the members of the Saxon Hoffahne were comparable to skilled craftsmen and businessmen, people with a specialized trade—which is what mercenaries were.

Not only were the men who signed these payrolls mostly literate, but some also used different ink from the muster-writer who prepared the rolls,
indicating that they carried their own writing supplies. From classical Rome until the nineteenth century, ink in Europe was iron-based. It goes on gray-black and darkens to black or purple-black, but as it ages it turns brown, and different inks turn different shades as they age. This is one way to tell the difference between one batch of ink and another. The main text of the payrolls is now a deep coffee brown-black iced with frosted gray where the ink was thick and now has oxidized. So were many signatures: these men stood in front of Paul Jahn’s table, his open paybook, his pens, and the tiny horn vial of ink beside him, and when somebody dropped their pay into their open hands, the soldiers picked up one of his pens and signed their names. But some signatures were dark slate gray, burnt sienna, watery pale brown, or other shades. These signers used different ink. Most came earlier in the rolls: officers and troopers with higher social status were more likely to carry their own writing supplies. They probably carried their ink and pens in little cylindrical leather pen cases tied to their belts or the eyelets of their breeches with leather thongs; consider the priorities of a horseman who brings his pens and ink to war.

Records from the Saxon Hoffahne may not be representative of the entire Saxon army: it was, after all, an elite cavalry unit based in a major city. Yet this article argues that reading and writing mattered to at least some early seventeenth-century soldiers. Early modern central Europe was a partially literate society, with many gradations between complete illiteracy and great fluency in reading and writing. Literacy varied depending on gender, social standing, and occupation. So did the extent to which people cared about literacy. Members of the military community were more likely to read and write in their daily lives than some other people: if some professions were literate, so was the profession of arms.

This article examines a selection of the handwritten documentation of early seventeenth-century military units not only as a source of statistical

information about common soldiers but as a way to look closely at their daily actions. These documents were made of rough materials in difficult conditions. Their use and production give some insight into the harsh lives of the people who made and interacted with them. We began with military manuscripts as humble products of craft, but we end with the experience of ordinary soldiers in early seventeenth-century central Europe.