

Letter from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to Daniel Ernst Jablonski regarding the Plan to Establish an Academy in Berlin (March 12, 1700)

Abstract

In 1697, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) learned that Sophie Charlotte of Hanover (1668–1705) was planning to found an observatory in Berlin. Leibniz was opposed to limiting any such undertaking to astronomy and hoped instead for the establishment of an academy dedicated to the natural sciences more generally. In March 1698, the princess asked court chaplain Daniel Ernst Jablonski (1660–1741) to correspond with Leibniz about the project. Over the next two years, the two developed plans for a scientific academy in Berlin similar to ones in London and Paris. In this letter to Jablonski, Leibniz outlines his thoughts on realizing such an academy. Again, he urges against limiting the project to an observatory. He is in favor of proceeding step by step but wants to include medicine and mathematics from the start. He also wants to name a director and secretary right from the beginning. At the end of the letter, Leibniz alludes to a major threat to the project, the Great Northern War, which had started a month earlier, in February 1700.

Source

To Mr. Jablonski, Court Chaplain in Electoral Brandenburg
Wolfenbüttel, March 12, 1700

Most worthy, especially highly honored sir and valued benefactor,

When I received the letter and enclosures from my highly honored court chaplain, I was about to travel from Wolfenbüttel to Hanover, but because I was forced to hurry back here again, this and other matters prevented me from answering. But I am doing that now, and I beg your pardon for the delay.

From the letter, I see the abundant zeal of my highly honored court chaplain for God's honor and the public good, as well as his kindness toward me. However, so that I answer everything properly, I would like, first and foremost, for the planned reply to be repeated. For fundamental agreement of its position with our *unpresuming thoughts* can enable us to overcome the difficulties on this side in others.

It cannot hurt that the earlier discussion has abated because it can only serve as a pretext, but the journey of my highly honored sir, from which I expect great results, will be very useful. I am pleased to hear that it is shaping up so well in Switzerland, as my highly honored sir reports, but I did not find the enclosure referred to in this case with his letter; he will have forgotten in his haste to enclose it.

I am also glad to hear that my idea regarding the calendar has met with approval and has provided opportunity to put into practice the earlier idea for an electoral society to thus improve rigorous sciences and generally useful arts. And I shall, for my humble part, gladly contribute in every way and will also, as is my wont, look more to honor and fame than to my private affairs, but will at the same time have to consider one thing or another, which

will not present any hindrance. The most important thing to remember, however, is this: that the focus is not to be first and foremost on the observatory nor to be limited to the *Proventus Calendarios* [outcome of the calendar], because that does not seem fitting enough. I would like to expect something over time that has a real benefit and not just curiosities. The observatory, even if very well equipped, will lack a great deal in the beginning, and it will have little significant benefit for a long time. It takes many years to be able to expect something substantial from it, to exceed what has already been discovered in France, England, and elsewhere. The observatory is thus to be considered a pretty accessory, not the main thing; consequently, in my humble opinion, the project should be expanded immediately at the beginning and the focus should be on something more important and bigger. Some suggestions occur to me for its future conduct; they would, in addition to the calendar, in themselves satisfy the need for the public good in an adequate manner. For that reason, I am of the opinion that the society, under electoral protection (for I would rather call it an academy, in keeping with the example of the Regia and Leopoldina [Academies]), should consist of several full professors, a director, and many honorary professors, who have as their main subject all of the mathesis and latitudinal physics, but also take into consideration generally useful applications. These would include attention to astronomy, mechanics, architecture, chemistry, botany, and anatomy, thus, in addition to the observatory, a laboratory, as well as all sorts of masterworks, to say nothing of the other physical apparatus which cannot be lacking at the court of such a great potentate. If the matter cannot be carried out immediately at the beginning of the expansion, the concept must, for the sake of reputation, be defined such that a goal worthy of the greatness and glory of the founder continues to be sought. However, if I could rightly entrust my thoughts to my pen, to maintain adequate authority, I imagine that my highly honored sir and the master of requests would very much approve and would not hesitate to think about continuation, especially in this manner also to further his great aims regarding Moscow and China, to spread Evangelical truth. If, however, full completion is not initially possible, it would be enough for the meantime to arrange for completion in stages after the work had at least been suitably established, and to start first with the observatory and the calendar matter, given the danger of delay for these two. For if they are not undertaken now, they may well remain undone. However, if possible, it would be good if, in addition to the astronomer or observatory expert, a physicist and a mathematician well versed in architecture and mechanics were appointed at the very beginning, not to mention the director and secretary.

God grant only that our good ideas regarding this, as well as other important matters, will not be changed by a new storm wind from the north. For after Denmark and in effect the Poles in Livonia broke with Sweden, and the same was brought about by Holstein, in Saxony a fetial, so to speak, was sent. Thus, a serious war could develop, and the protesters might completely destroy themselves and put on a gladiatorial spectacle for their enemies, if His Serene Highness, the Elector of Brandenburg, does not step into the middle of it. Everything depends on him; he is the arbiter of war and peace, and his great wisdom will make him and his excellent ministers consider what great things, both good and evil, could result from events in order to reach a decision. Come what may, at least the Electoral Serene Highness has nothing to fear for his land, and our ideas can thus perhaps make some progress, even if not implemented completely right away. As he is present, my highly honored court chaplain will be able to judge everything best of all, especially for the ongoing journey to Prussia. If the planned project for a society were to be communicated to me, I would gladly do my part. I almost forgot the enclosures sent for which I give grateful thanks; I find the *Confessione Polonica* quite beautiful, and it is a good plan to inquire by whom and under what circumstances it was written. Dr. [Johann Friedrich] Mayer does not instruct badly and does not take the matter far. However, what my highly honored sir writes to him further is the right means to get from compliments to realities. Like my highly honorable sir, I believe that Mr. [Joachim Justus] Breithaupt does not mean ill, indeed, usefulness can be found in his error, namely: a living example shows how things went in the primitive church, that originally “holy collection” did not have the same meaning as afterwards, until finally it deteriorated, sliding down

a slippery slope to superstition. I remain, etc.

Source: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, edited by the Berlin Brandenburg Academy of Science and the Academy of Science in Göttingen. First edition: *Allgemeiner politischer und historischer Briefwechsel*, vol. 18. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005, pp. 447–50.

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Recommended Citation: Letter from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to Daniel Ernst Jablonski regarding the Plan to Establish an Academy in Berlin (March 12, 1700), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-175>> [July 12, 2025].