

Creating the database of the Correspondence of Early Modern Vilnius University professors



Vilnius University Library is launching a project that will aim to describe and digitize the letters of the university professors from the Early Modern period. The idea of this work is closely linked to the COST Action IS1310 “Reassembling the Republic of Letters”, drawing inspiration from the ideas and tools applied in this project. The aim of our work is to create an online database that later could be integrated into the European digital space of knowledge.

The letters are being described using the CERL Thesaurus; completed descriptions are being added to the general electronic catalogue of Vilnius University Library. It is planned to digitize all of the letters selected for the project and upload the digital images online; this way a multifunctional database will be created. Approximately 2,000 letters to Martin Poczobutt are being revised in the first phase of this project, further collections of Vilnius professors can be supplemented successively.

Major aims and tasks:

- Cataloguing and biographical evaluation of handwritten letter collections of Vilnius university professors
- Implementation of CERL Thesaurus and other resources for biographical identification of the correspondents
- Reconstruction and visualization of social and scientific networks at the turn of the 19th century
- Creation of an online resource with catalogued and digitized letters and with easy search options

The first stage of our project consists of thorough description of the collection of letters addressed to Martin Odlianicki Poczobutt (1728-1810), professor of astronomy, Director of Vilnius Astronomical Observatory and Rector of Vilnius University. The majority of letters addressed to him were written between 1770 and 1800, in multiple languages (Polish, French, English, and Latin). Currently most of them are stored in bundles, with the descriptions concerning only the whole bundle. Therefore, whereas a single bundle may consist of up to 100 letters, written by dozens of correspondents in a long period of time, precise information about the professor's correspondences is utterly limited and can only be acquired by working through the manuscripts in the reading room. This project will clarify a large amount of historically, culturally, biographically and linguistically valuable information, previously



Martynas Počobutas

(Marcin Odlianicki Poczobutt, 1728–1810) – mathematician, astronomer, poet, head of Vilnius University Astronomical Observatory (1765–1807), Rector of Vilnius University

Studied in Vilnius, Prague, Marseilles, Avignon, Naples and other cities. Doctor of philosophy and theology. Travelled to France and England in

order to acquire modern, precise instruments for Vilnius Astronomical Observatory (most were purchased in London). Fellow of Royal Society (1770), member of French Academy of Sciences (1778). For 39 years Počobutas observed the celestial bodies and published the results of his observations in international scientific journals. Authored several books on astronomy and geometry.

hidden in the undescribed bundles of letters. The connections between Vilnius University (the easternmost university in enlightened Europe) and the science centers of Early Modern Europe come to light, through letters that arrived to Vilnius from Warsaw, Krakow, Vienna, Padua, Paris, London and other cities. Among the correspondents of Martynas Počobutas are such famous scholars as Joseph Laland, Johann Elert Bode, Maximilian Hell, Nevil Maskelyne, Georg Forster and such scientific instrument makers as Jesse Ramsden and Peter Dollond.

The results of the project will be available via a dedicated website. The descriptions will be presented both in Lithuanian and English languages.