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WAS VALENTINUS OTHO A MATHEMATICS PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HEIDELBERG?

In his exhaustive bio-bibliography of George Joachim Rheticus (1514—1574),¹ Karl Heinz Burmeister remarks that the meeting between Copernicus and his only discipline Rheticus that took place in the latter part of May 1539 is perceived by historians as “the most important moment in his [i.e. Rheticus’] life” (“der bedeutendste Augenblick in seinem Leben”)². Yet, while the Copernicus—Rheticus encounter was undisputedly of greatest importance to Rheticus, as it resulted in his enthusiastic conversion to heliostatic system of astronomy and the subsequent writing of the famous treatise *Narratio prima* (*First Report*)³ describing this system, thirty five years later took place a similar meeting, this time between Rheticus and Lucius Valentinus Otho, a meeting of an equally great significance to Rheticus.

Rheticus himself was struck by the similarity between these two events. He did not write his own account of this fateful encounter, but Otho, in his preface to *Opus palatinum de trianqulis*, recalls that upon his arrival at Rheticus’ residence in Košice (German Kaschau), Hungary, the latter exclaimed: “Truly, you came to me at the same age that I came to Copernicus” (“Profecto, in eadem aetate ad me venis, qua ego ad Copernicus veni”)⁴. But the similarity does not end there: as Rheticus was instrumental in editing and publishing his master’s monumental treatise *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*⁵ so Otho finished and published Rheticus’ greatest, and next to *Narratio prima* most important work, namely the above mentioned *Opus palatinum de triaqlis*. This work, and his association with Rheticus represents Otho’s claim to fame.

¹ K. H. Burmeister, *Georg Joachim Rheticus, 1514—1574*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Guido Pressler Verlag, 1967—1968).

² *Ibid.*, I, 43.

³ G. J. Rheticus, *Narratio prima* (Gdańsk, 1540; 2nd ed. Basel, 1541).

⁴ G. J. Rheticus and V. Otho, *Opus palatinum de trianqulis* (Neustadt, 1596), fol. b4v.

⁵ N. Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (Nuremberg, 1543).

The exact date of Otho's birth is not known, but in the literature it is estimated to have occurred at about the year 1500. This estimation is based on Rheticus' exclamation cited above. Rheticus was 25 years old when he arrived in 1539 in Frombork; since Otho upon arrival in Košice was likewise 25 years old, and since it was assumed that he came to Rheticus at the end of 1573 or early in 1574, then, by a simple subtraction, historians, Burmeister among them, arrived at the date 1500. Here it must be added that the date of Rheticus' arrival in Košice was likewise believed to be the year 1573 or 1574. However, in Starowolski's Biographies of Copernicus I established a much earlier date of Rheticus' move from Kraków to Košice.⁶ This, coupled with the fact that "Valentinus Otto Magdeburgensis" matriculated at the University of Wittenberg on 1 April 1561,⁷ pushes his birthdate back to 1545 or 1546 (it is more probable that he enrolled at the university at 16 than at the tender age of 11) and, similarly, it pushes his arrival in Košice back by the same number of years.

In the preface to *Opus palatinum* Otho states that the reading of "Dialogus" appended to Rheticus' *Canon doctrinae trianqulorum* (*Canon of the Doctrine of Triangles*; Leipzig, 1551) excited him to such an extent that he decided to pay its author a visit. Burmeister, however, repeats the statement found in numerous works that the reason for Otho's seeking out Rheticus was the excitement created by his conversations with a Wittenberg professor of mathematics Johannes Praetorius (1537–1616) ("durch die Gespräche mit Praetorius [...] angeregt").⁸ Burmeister tries to strengthen this conjecture by stating that in August 1573 Praetorius discussed the Canon of the *Doctrine of Triangles* with certain Johannes Otto, court mathematician of the Landgrave of Hesse and that "Valentinus Otto may be identical with this Johannes Otto" ("Valentin Otho konnte einmal identisch sein mit jenem Johannes Otto").⁹ Since, however, Rheticus arrived in Košice in 1571 or perhaps even in 1570, and since it is most probable that Otho found him there soon thereafter, it is most unlikely that Otho went to Rheticus on account of his conversations with Praetorius.

Otho, threatened by Rheticus in a very friendly manner, remained in Košice and helped to perfect the trigonometrical tables on which Rheticus and several

⁶ E. Hilfstein, *Starowolski's Biographies of Copernicus* (series: *Studia Copernicana*, XXI; Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1980), p. 27, n. 5: "A letter dated from Kraków on 25 March 1573 [...] shows that Rheticus left that city long before 1574: 'Rheticus iam tertium annum abest in Scepusio'" (MS Rhedigeriana 224). See also Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer's *Mikolaj Kopernik* (Kraków, 1900), p. 615, where Birkenmajer publishes a letter from that same correspondent, who about three weeks later writes that "Rheticus adhuc in Ungaria abest."

⁷ Harwig and Gotthold (eds.), *Album Academiae Vitebergensis* (Halle, 1894), II, 16, a, 6.

⁸ Burmeister, *op. cit.*, 175–176.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 160; Burmeister repeats this after Maximilian Curtze, *Zur Biographie des Rheticus*, "Altpreussische Monatschrift," XXXI (1894), 491–496, and *Die abgekürzte Multiplication*, "Zeitschrift Für Mathematik und Physik," XL (1895), L3.

of his assistants labored for nearly two decades. Since Rheticus left in Kraków, his former residence, part of these tables, he sent his new disciple to fetch them. Otho returned at the end of November 1574, and a few days later, on 4 December 1574, Rheticus died in his arms. But before he succumbed to the short yet fatal illness, Rheticus entrusted to Otho—whom he found to be reliable and well qualified for such an undertaking—the finishing and publication of his trigonometrical tables.

From 1574 until 1596 (that is the date of publication of the *Opus palatinum*) Otho managed to obtain sponsors for the expensive continuation of the laborious computations, performed by himself with the help of several mathematicians. Frequently his work was slowed down by the necessity to move from place to place. Thus, after his first sponsor Emperor Maximilian II died in 1576, Otho left for Wittenberg, where by the order of August, elector of Saxony, he received a professorship of mathematics. However, this position was doomed from the start, for we read in the "Visitationbericht" of the Wittenberg University, dated January 1577, that

M. Valentino Otho is appointed to a professorship of mathematics. He is to be well watched in order to prevent him from spreading a dangerous religious doctrine (M. Valentinus Otto ist an der einen Professoris Mathematum stelle gefordert. Auf diesem ist gute achtung zugeben, damit er nicht gefährliche Lahr in der Religion mitbringe).¹⁰

In his preface to the *Opus palatinum* Otho states that soon after the change in government ("paulo post mutatio") he and a few of his colleagues were forced to leave the university posts. Presumably he was relieved on account of his religious beliefs. "After I wasted several years in wandering," Otho continues, "I came to the most renown author and adviser Caspar Peucer in Palatinate" ("Inde cum annos aliquot peregrinando consumsissen autore et suasore clarissimo viro, D. D. Casparo Peucero in Palatinatum veni"). Otho does not say where his peregrination have taken him, but it is likely that one of those places was Wrocław (Breslau in German). For in perusing Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer's still useful study Mikołaj Kopernik¹¹ one comes across an excerpt from a letter of Andreas Dudith (1533—1589), dated 21 March 1583 in Wrocław. In this letter Dudith mentions that Otho was once in his employment. Birkenmajer conjectures that this employment must have taken place in Kraków, where Dudith stayed during the 1570s, but it is more likely that Otho was with Dudith after he left Wittenberg, and before he ended his peregrinations in Heidelberg.

On 24 May 1586, "Magister Valentinus Otho Magdeburgensis" inscribed his name in the Heidelberg University register, and a year later, on 24 August 1587, he received a grant from the Count Palatine, the Elector Frederick IV, and from Johann Kasimir, the Landgrave of Pfalz. Because in the document

¹⁰ W. Friedensburg (ed.), *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg*, Teil I, 1502—1611 (Magdeburg, 1926), 409.

¹¹ Birkenmajer, *op. cit.*, p. 639, n. 3.

titled "Capitulation mit m. Valentino Othon eines astronomischen werks wegen" Johann Kasimir permitted Otho, who profferred to finish Rheticus' tables in four years, to eat at the table of the professors, it was generally believed that Otho never obtained a professorship in Heidelberg, on the assumption that a professor does not need a special permission to take his meals with his peers. This assumption was strengthened by the fact that Eduard Winkelmann's *Urkundenbuch der Universität Heidelberg*¹² does not cite any document showing Otho to be a Heidelberg professor. However, Winkelmann somehow failed to transcribe part of a document which he lists under no. 1459.¹³ Because of this accidental omission, it was not known that in fact Otho did receive a Heidelberg professorship; similarly, on account of this omission the exact date of Otho's death was also unknown.

The part of document no. 1459 that Winkelmann omitted reads (in translation) as follows:

About the same time [that is in December 1602] the most magnificent senate of the academy discussed with M. Valentinus Otho [the matter of] giving up the professorship of mathematics ["de reliquende professione mathematum"]. Furthermore, the illustrious count palatine granted him a stipend of an emeritus: hence it happened that M. Valentinus Otho resigned his professorship of mathematics ["mathematicam professionem resignaverit"], and had betaken himself to the house of a certain notary Henricus, no doubt [Henricus] Herkelius, and until the end of his days fully settled with him the necessary matters.

On 19 March [1603] our most magnificent faculty senate nominated for the vacant professorship of mathematics the most renown Wolfgang Loss, a medical doctor, and the likewise most renown Simon Petiscus, the palatine court physician and doctor of medicine practicing in this town. But after several weeks it was the latter who was chosen to the professorship of mathematics.

On 8 April Simon Petiscus began serving in the capacity of a professor of mathematics. On the same day, after four o'clock in the morning, died M. Valentinus Otho. He was buried on the next day, 9 April [1603] at four o'clock afternoon, on the Saint Peter cemetery ["Eodem die mane post quartam horam mortuus est M. Valentinus Otho: qui postridie 9 Aprilis, hora quarta pomeridiana sepultus est in coemeterio Divi Petri"].¹⁴

Otho's most valuable possession was the holograph of Copernicus' *De revolutionibus*. Shortly after his deats it was acquired by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Heidelberg University Jacob Christmann (1554—1613) for the use in the study of mathematics ("an usum studii mathematici").¹⁵ The instruments used by Otho for his astronomical observations were given to the university by the Count Palatine Frederici IV, with the stipulation that they may be returned to him on demand.¹⁶

Universitäts-Archiv-Heidelberg, UAH I, 3 nr. 52, fol. 2r. (1603)

Circa idem tempus [i.e. at the end of 1602] Senatus amplissimus Academiae tractavit cum M. Valentino Othon, de reliquende professione mathematum. Cui etiam Illustrissimus Princeps

¹² Eduard Winkelmann, *Urkundenbuch der Universität Heidelberg*, II (Heidelberg, 1886), 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ UAH I, 52, fol. 2r—v.

¹⁵ Nicholas Copernicus Complete Works, I Kraków: Polish Academy of Sciences and Macmillan of London, 1972), facsimile.

¹⁶ Winkelmann, *op. cit.*, 176, 1460.

Elector stipendium emeriti concessit: hinc factum est, ut M. Valentinus Otho mathematicam professionem resignaverit, et se in alicuius notarii domum, Henrici nempe Herkelii repererit, et cum eodem de rebus necessariis ad dies vitae suppeditandis transegerit.

[fol. 2v]

Die 19 Martii, ad vacantem Professionem mathematum Facultas nostra amplissimo senatus Academiae nominavit Clariss. Virum Wolfgangum Lossum, medicinae Doctorem, et aulae Palatinae medicum, item Clariss. Virum, Simonem Petiscum, medicinae Doctorem, in Urbe hac practicum. Sed posterior fuit post aliquot elapsas septimanas ad Professionem mathematum delectus.

Die 8 Aprilis auspicium Professionis mathematicae fecid S. Simon Petiscus. Eodem die mane post quartam horam mortuus est M. Valentinus Otho: qui postridie 9 Aprilis, hora quarta pomeridiana sepultus est in coemiterio Divi Petri.