

VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY: MARIA CUNITIA AND ELIAS VON LÖWEN AND THE ASTRONOMY OF THE 17TH CENTURY

The correspondence of Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687) comprises a set of 22 letters written in the years 1648–1654 and exchanged with Maria Cunitia (1610–1664) and her husband, Elias von Löwen (Crätschmair, c. 1602–1661), a couple based in Silesia. The letters can be seen as an extraordinary example of the exchange of thoughts involving, on the one hand, a representatives of the mainstream European astronomy of the 17th century (Hevelius) based in an acknowledged scientific center (Gdańsk) and, on the other, astronomers working in the periphery of then scientific Europe. The correspondence features several significant astronomical themes, which cast new light on the activities of astronomers in the first half of the 17th century, and even on the chronology of discoveries. These include telescopic observations of the positions of the planets made to verify the accuracy of astronomical tables, studies of the optical libration of the Moon in the period preceding Galileo Galilei and Hevelius, discussion of the usefulness of various observational tools such as the telescope, the ways of purchasing telescopes in the first half of the 17th century and their dissemination outside major scientific centers. The correspondence proves unique because it describes the activities of astronomers who work independently and far away from the major academic centers. Furthermore, the fact that it is a woman who seems to be the major vehicle of the 17th century scientific inquiries, makes the letters a particularly interesting source for researches of social history and history of science, including those with feminist agenda.