

A Eulogy in Honour of Anders Johan Lexell, an 18th Century Finnish Mathematician

Bridges 2016

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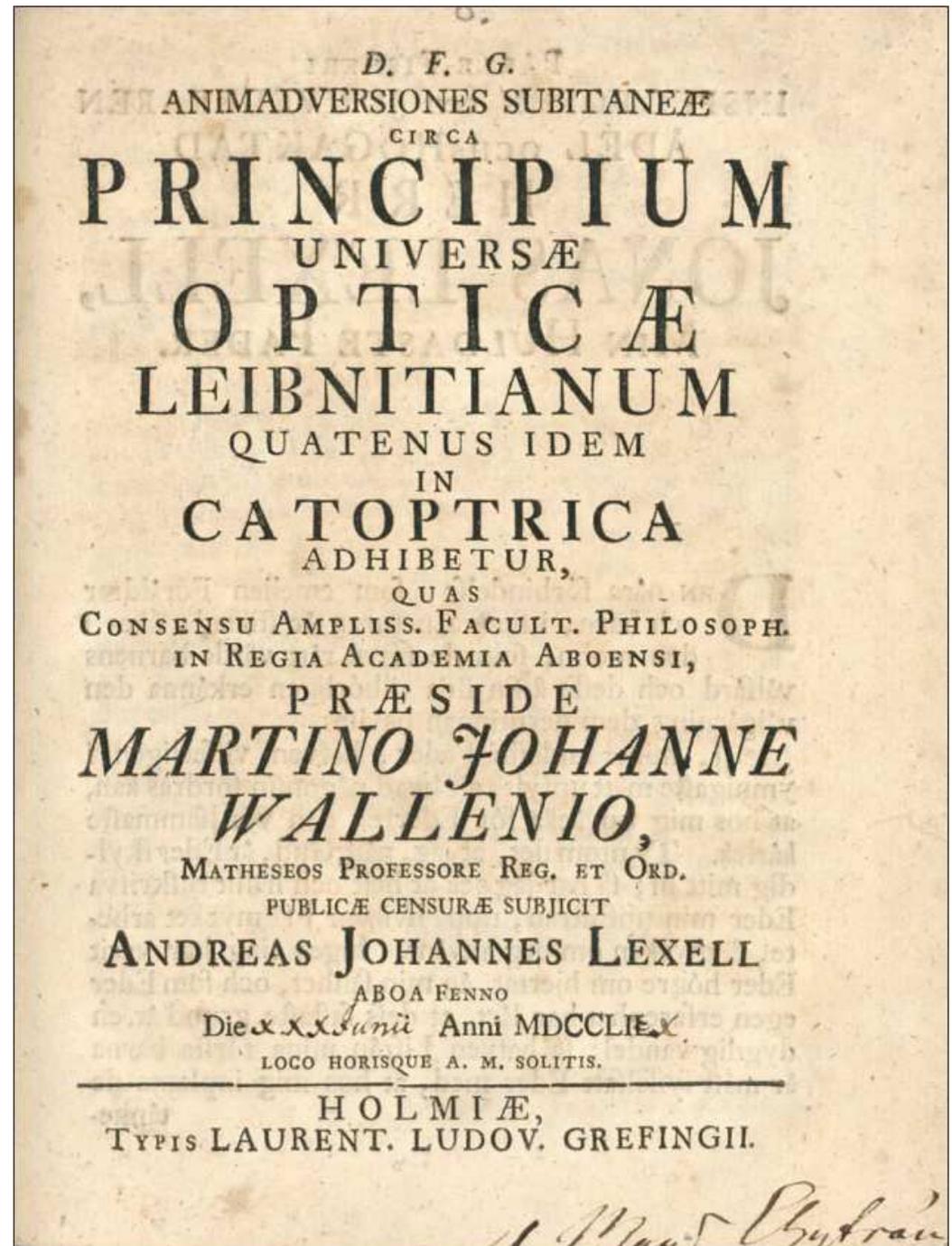
Anders Johan Lexell (1740–1784)

- Born in Turku (Åbo), Finland
- Worked with Leonhard Euler in St. Petersburg 1768–1783
- Recognized Uranus as a planet
- Worked mainly in mathematics and celestial mechanics



Dissertation and poem 1759

- About Leibniz's principle in optics
- Included a gratulation from his classmate, Fredrik Pryss (1741–1767)



When shadows were thrown out from the sky by sweet red Aurora
and her purple face brought a new morning on Earth,
and when Flora filled fields by the sweetest smells of the flowers
and when a bird by her nest sang happy songs to us all,
I travelled Castilian woods, holy meadows and surroundings
and by surprise in the cloud voice of Apollo declared:
“I was the king of the world with indisputable power,
by many people below always revered as a god.
Now when I let my light shine upon those people of these days,
they dare say I have birthmarks all over my skin!
They say my sacred rays follow man-written laws and obey them.
For their god of light slavery they have decreed!”
Tortured and agonized, Phoebus was unable to speak more.
Then he decided against lighting a light for the day.
But then Pallas Athena descended the hillside of Pindus
and criticized vain threats poured by Apollo the god:

“Leader of Muses, can you explain what madness has struck you?

Why does work of Lexell and his efforts bother you?

Lexell among all peers is worthy of deep admiration,

he who shines to us all for his ingenious work.

Should he attempt to explain the interior structure of light rays,

show him mercy, for his action is hardly a crime.

Insight and skill can unveil our father’s sublime creations

and it is smart young men whose job it is to research.”

Anger of Phoebus was gone; wise words of Athena convinced him.

Horses were then let run in the usual way.

My dear friend, it is now my duty to tell you about these

godly events that I saw, omens of great calibre.

Fama will skilfully add all rays of light to your glory,

rays that Thalia has bound as you have taught her to do.

Do carry on your work and bind your Muses to science.

You shall receive the rewards that you will rightly deserve.

The poem

- In Latin
- Elegiac couplet (hexameter and pentameter)
- Athena convinces Apollo that Lexell is good and studying light is not hubris
- Fredrik Pryss was an extremely skilled writer for a 17-year-old
- Pryss foresaw that Lexell would rise to fame, but not how

Thank you for your attention!

Questions?

Gratias pro attentione!

Quaestiones?