

Russian Students at Leyden University: The Case of the Kurakin Brothers

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On the fourteenth of July 1770, Prince Alexander Kurakin was matriculated at Leyden university. The fact that this Prince Kurakin was not only the nephew and ward of Nikita Panin, the famous president of the Russian College of Foreign Affairs, but that he was to play his own role at the court of Catherine the Great as well as to become a leader of the Russian freemasonry, give his memoirs and correspondence great value for the study of Russian intellectual and political history.

Moreover, Kurakin was not exactly a solitary figure. All in all some 120 Russian students studied in Leyden in the eighteenth century, some of them persons of influence in government administration, others of great interest in scientific and cultural matters. But there is another reason to consult the diaries and letters of this Russian Prince (and I wish he was Japanese). Because of their abundance of detail, because of the fact that we have an almost daily account of student life, its internal organization, its social surroundings, its function and purpose, these documents form one of the finest sources of student life of the European nobility at the end of the eighteenth century.

Alexander Kurakin left two reports of his stay at Leyden university, both descriptive accounts of a stay that lasted from July 1770 till August 1771. Regarding the purpose of his visit to Leyden Kurakin is quite specific. He wanted to become an enlightened man and a useful citizen of his country. What he was looking for was a quiet place, a place of learning where wisdom was put to use and enlightenment was a variety of religion. He chose Leyden. He could not have chosen better.

During the seventeenth and a large part of the eighteenth century the student population of Leyden university had a predominantly international character. In the second part of the seventeenth century for instance almost fifty per cent of the Leyden students were foreign, coming mainly from German speaking countries, but also from France, England and Scotland, the Scandinavian countries, Poland and Hungary and even from Italy and Spain. Originally the main reasons for studying here were religious or political. Over the years, however, Leiden acquired its own renown as an international centre of learning, a recommended halting-place during academic travel or grand tour. The university itself became a solid member of the Republic of Letters.

(fig.1)

Among this international company, the Russian students were a special case. First there was Peter the Great, who visited Leyden university in order to talk to Boerhaave and who started a tradition of sending young intelligent boys to England and Holland to learn navigation and shipbuilding through apprenticeship. In 1719, however, Peter sent four students to Leyden to study mathematics. A few others followed in their wake, to study either law or medicine. After Peter's death in 1725 the government policy of sending students to study abroad came to a halt. Nevertheless some 20 odd students then came on their own, mainly to study medicine.

In 1761 the government policy of sending students abroad was resumed. During the decade 1761-1770 sixteen students of medicine and five students of theology were sent to Leyden. On return they entered government service as military doctors or civil servants. In 1774 three students were sent to Leyden to study chemistry.

There were other than governmental incentives as well. In 1776 Catherine II sent five theologians from Orthodox seminaries to study Calvinist theology and thereby broaden their intellectual outlook with the help of the rational and enlightened message taught in Leyden. And then there was the Russian nobility seeking an enlightened education to be able to better serve their country and their class. Between 1770 and 1785 thirty Russian students came to Leyden to study law and subjects in the arts faculty, and these thirty students included fourteen princes, six counts, and ten from the gentry. They came on their own account, accompanied by tutors and servants.

It all illustrates one of Catherine's constant preoccupations with culture in general and with education in particular. In many ways Catherine the Great was a truly enlightened ruler, who tried to provide the Russia with institutions more able to bear the weight of this huge empire. Nevertheless, the French and Italian Enlightenment theorists she so ardently studied, Montesquieu, Beccaria, were writing about countries with old established institutions whose legal rights were assured as well as effective. In Russia law was weak and there hardly were any intermediate institutions. To strengthen the law, Catherine had to strengthen the monarchy.

And in her absolutist endeavour she had to work with and against a nobility that was as reckless as it was conservative and a civil service that was corrupt as well as ineffective. The rampant favouritism at her noisy court was an apt illustration of the limits of her power. The clash between two of those favourites, Potemkin and Panin, had great consequences for Russia's foreign policy. The choice between Austria (Potemkin) and Prussia (Panin) split the whole court and had grave repercussions in Catherine's relations with her son, Grand Duke Paul, who opted for the Prussian solution. This all was taking place in 1774, the year the younger Kurakin brother, Alexis came, on precise orders of Panin, to Leyden university.

But let us go back there, to the year 1770, when Alexander was studying there. Leyden was, as Kurakin so aptly described it, a "home of the Muses." There was no noise, there were no distractions. Science was the only thing there was to apply one's enthusiasm to, without being distracted by anything else. One day mirrored another. "My life was as uniform as possible," Kurakin wrote about his situation in Leyden, which was also his ideal, "because it was a uniformity due to perseverance and dedication."

Kurakin's professors were the German Pestel, the Frenchman Allamand, and the very Dutch lecturer Fas. Friedrich Wilhelm Pestel (1724-1805; **fig.2**) came from a well known German family of law scholars. He had already acquired a name for himself in constitutional law when he came to Leyden in 1763. His courses must have caused a stir in Leyden and were frequented by old and young alike, from all faculties. His ideas faithfully followed those of the German public law tradition, reflecting a modern, enlightened and pragmatic attitude towards politics and codification. In an eclectic mixture of history and moral philosophy Pestel outlined an optimistic vision, the existence of a "moral sentiment."

Pestel was to take the central position in the education, first of Alexander Kurakin, later of his brother Alexis. It is worthwhile to look somewhat closer into his educational ideas. Enlightenment for Pestel was in the first place moral philosophy, "a science of manners," putting the methods of the natural sciences to the use of the study of man, his character, his behaviour. It was a mixture of psychology and epistemology, politics and the study of law, an eclectic whole in which harmony and happiness, virtue and duty acquired at the same time personal and political meaning.

Pestel was sure everybody possessed a "moral sentiment," but in a child this was governed by "natural passions." Only through education and experience a boy could gradually learn to see the consequences of his actions. By imitation and observation he could purify his moral sense into a faultless instrument. It was just a matter of changing the one passion (natural, irrational), for the other (rational, moral).

And from philosophical reflection Pestel went on to practical politics, to the study of jurisprudence and natural law. It was there that he analysed the state as a juridical construction, natural law as a practical system, that prevented conflicts by its unmistakable discrimination between right or wrong. The only problem was the application on the enlightened constitutional state. "Natural law," he once wrote, "is the confirmation of civil law. It adds what is missing, it procures the right explanation."

It was Pestel who selected the other teachers. He chose Allamand and Fas, thereby creating what he considered an ideal propaedeutics for his own teaching. His elder colleague, Jean Nicolas Sebastien Allamand (1713-1787; **fig.3**) was a bit of an

eccentric. He tried to follow in the steps of 's-Gravesande and Musschenbroek, but his courses in experimental physics were in fact more entertaining than instructive. He was better in natural history, but there his strange ideas also came to the fore. He kept a lot of animals in his house, parrots (called "inseparables") and turtles (called "geometrics") and even a monkey, that he allowed to drink alcohol, so that the animal ended up in a house of correction. Allamand was a little, chummy man who saw the hand of God in everything. And Johannes Arent Fas (1742-1817) was just an ordinary lecturer, doggedly rising in ranks. After almost fifty years of lecturing he finally reached a well earned extraordinary professorship. But when the Russian boys came to Leyden he was just a lecturer in what was called Dutch arithmetic (Duytsche mathematique), applied mathematics and civil engineering. But Fas taught pure mathematics as well.

They provided so called *privatissima*, private lectures for the boy and his tutor. Pestel taught them two courses, natural law and history. Allamand taught one course, a mixture of experimental physics and natural history. These courses were extremely expensive, one hundred ducats or more than 500 guilders each. Pestel and Allamand earned a good income from these private courses, but the wages the university paid them did not amount to much more than 2000 guilders a year. Fas, a simple lecturer, earned much less. Consequently the Russian students also paid him less, 250 guilders.

Apart from the official university teachers, Kurakin hired himself a teacher for Latin and French (a certain M. Kerroux, who charged eight guilders for twenty Latin lessons and seven for the same number of French lessons), a teacher for horse riding (Tielman, who charged forty guilders the first month, and twenty for every other month), a dancing master (Bagge, twelve guilders for twenty lessons), a teacher for shooting (Clermont, "*pour une pistole par semaine*") and a teacher for Italian (Collici, ten guilders for twenty lessons)

Kurakin's program was impressive and looked more like that of an old-fashioned gymnasium than that of a university. He rose at six and prepared lessons between six thirty and eight. At eight the lecturer Fas came by to give his mathematics. At nine Kurakin went to Pestel for his natural law. At ten, three times a week, he went to fencing lessons or he worked up his notes from the Pestel course. From eleven to twelve it was Latin, from twelve to one it was philosophy from Allamand. Then dinner and digestion.

At three Pestel again for history, from four to five working up the notes, from five to six French, from six to seven working up notes again. Then there was some recreation, either walking or having fun indoors. Then souper from eight to eight thirty, then some desk work and at ten to bed. At Wednesdays and Saturdays the afternoon course of Pestel did not take place and was replaced by either riding or dancing, or

Italian or German. And so six of the seven days.

They were all private courses, *privatissima*. As advantages Kurakin mentions the fact that it is not the student who is commanded, but who is in command. Also the professor uses the language the student understands best, permits the student to interrupt the professor, to ask questions and to discuss the matter at hand.

Pestel was evidently not only consulted about matters of study. He also arranged for the prince where to live during his stay -- he rented a whole hotel, the Hof van Holland, for 1200 guilders a year, meals excluded -- and introduced him to a French *negociant*, a certain M. La Pierre, who helped him with domestic arrangements and local contacts. It was also M. La Pierre who showed him the *kermesse* of Rotterdam and the flower cultures of Haarlem.

The prince and his tutor were also introduced into the high bourgeoisie of Leyden and visited the social evenings of such families as Changuion and Lampsing, "Tuesdays for play, Wednesdays for souper," everything perfectly Dutch, "no pomp, no circumstance, only the pleasures of quiet social contact."

They of course also did take part in the social events of the Russian community in Holland. One thing is becoming clear by his descriptions: almost all contacts are arranged according to orders from Petersburg. When Kurakin is invited to come to Spa to a small troupe of touring Russians, he has to decline. Everything seems arranged "according to the will of Count Panin."

After his stay in Leyden, Kurakin remained in contact with Pestel, asking for "news from Leyden." Pestel procured them, not only the local news, but also the stay of Diderot at the house of the Russian ambassador, Prince Golitsin, and his meeting with Friedrich Melchior Grimm, the only real confidant of Catherine the Great. And of course the illness of the King of France, Louis XV. Pestel predicts a revolution when he dies and tells that the Republic probably is going to raise a million and a half for defence purposes.

And there are of course "American affairs." He wonders whether the Bostonians will go to Parliament. If they do, "they are worthy." says this courtier par excellence, "that they are bound in the chains of the most unworthy slavery." In the mean time the Pugachev revolt is raging in Russia.

And Kurakin kept sending Russian students, young Prince Nikolai Yusupov, the Rumyantsov brothers. And Pestel thanked, profusely, humbly, almost *serflike*, right from his obedient, German heart. Attention from a court so brilliant, from a mind so noble, how could he ever have earned it. In the meantime he aired his hope to receive the younger brother of Kurakin, Alexis, in Leyden.

Already a certain plan, a certain intelligence structure is emerging. Kurakin not

only asks Pestel for information, he does so from others as well. Nikolai Rummyantsov writes him about Pestel, Pestel about Yusupov and the Rummyantsov brothers, Yusupov about Pestel and his other professors, Serge Rummyantsov about Yusupov, everybody writes about everybody else and gives Kurakin the opportunity to put the pieces together. In the mean time Pestel is happy with the glorious peace between Russia and Turkey, a humiliation of the Turks, an eternal monument of the reign of Catherine the Great. And better still, Pugachev is caught and, to the great relief of this most humanitarian scholar and enlightened professor of law, is strangled.

With this intelligence structure in place, useful as it is in itself, the young, inexperienced, self-indulgent Alexis Kurakin arrives, in February 1775. Two essential informants are added. There is in the first place his governor, Alexandre Guillaume de Moissy. And there was the young uncle of the Kurakin brothers, Count Stepan Apraksin, the son of the field marshal. The letters of Pestel, Apraksin, Moissy and the young Kurakin himself provide an almost complete picture of the stay of Alexis Kurakin in Leyden, his social life, his study, the development of his character, the formation of a young Russian nobleman in these paradoxical times.

Some of the informants were quit specific about the function they were given. Pestel wrote he would obey all the orders given by His Excellency Count Panin and summarised by Kurakin. He would sent loyal and trustworthy information. Perhaps even more important was Moissy. He was always there, supervised the boy even at meals. It was his idea that the young Kurakin and Apraksin dined together with Yusupov and the Rummyantsov brothers. So, everybody had not only the right physical but also the right spiritual nourishment, some sort of "permanent education."

And there was of course the town as an educational instrument. The boys were put together in a house right across the Hotel de Hollande, where Yusupov and the Rummyantsov brothers were living and could from their windows call to each other across the Breestraat.

Alexis went to Leyden with a very specific idea about the town. He expected a convent, streets packed with professors and pedants. He found it rather charming though. Nevertheless it must have been boring. "Nothing happens," writes the Latin teacher Kerroux; even the festivities celebrating the two-hundredth anniversary of the university were boring.

As for the people, young Kurakin found them rather handsome, but extremely slow and only out for financial gain. The women he even found positively beautiful, but "infected with horrible manners." Perhaps the worst thing was the climate. The perpetual northern wind gave them the shivers, the frost numbed their hands.

As far as their social surroundings are concerned, first of all there was the

ubiquitous Pestel. He not only took care of their lodgings, their furniture, the whole household, he also invited them with great regularity at his diner table, having Yusupov and the Rumyantsov brothers as well, and visiting them back with great assiduity. Apraksin found these long dinners, from nine to, sometimes, twelve o'clock, excruciatingly boring.

Besides Pestel, their Leyden social contacts were restricted to six or seven families, well known families like de Leyden, Changuion, Hubrecht, the mayor, the merchant La Pierre, a town secretary, a physician. Suppers were held, concerts were given, balls were organised. It was on one of those balls that young Kurakin fell in love for the first time. But the girl was removed and the Prince resumed his studies. The rest was bonhomie and boredom.

In the few leisure hours the boys also read. Asked to specify his reading adventures, young Kurakin told his brother that besides the reading done for his study -- Pufendorff, Grotius, Burlamaqui, Wolf, Cumberland -- he read mostly French books: Boileau, Voltaire, Rousseau. We also have a list of the books the boy bought. Buffon (*L'Histoire Naturelle*), 's-Gravesande (*Elements Physiques and Oeuvres Philosophiques*), Pufendorff and Grotius, the *Oeuvres de Fontenelle, de Boileau, de Voltaire, de Diderot, de Rousseau, de Montesquieu*, books by Nolet, Leibnitz, Tissot, Marmontel, La Fontaine, Sterne, Fenelon, Wolf, Locke. Classical authors such as Seneca, Theophrastus, Cornelius Nepos, Ovid, Plautus, Xenophon, Horace, but also several works by Erasmus. And books about travel and natural science, and law. In short a small but really enlightened library is sent over to Petersburg.

The program of study was the same as Alexander Kurakin, the same as all the Russians after him had followed. It was as precise as it was broad, as intense as it was varied, as enlightened as it was disciplinary.

At the basis of it were the courses given by Pestel, Allamand and Fas. Pestel was a little more essential than the other two. His method was twofold. In his philosophy lecture he dictated the matter and then gave an "rational explication." In his lectures on history he gave a verbal explication, which the students put to paper from memory. Afterwards Pestel checked these papers.

And then there were physics, mathematics, writing, Latin and mythology, German, fencing and shooting, and playing the mandolin. It kept them busy from seven o'clock in the morning till nine in the evening.

The courses went on slowly. In March 1775 young Kurakin wrote that Pestel had finished the introductory part in his law course and in history had finally reached the Egyptians. In physics simple mechanical instruments were explained and in mathematics the properties of triangles. Writing, that is calligraphy, proved an ordeal to

the boy as was horse riding. Shooting a gun he abhorred.

Moissy was not dissatisfied. May 1775 he wrote to Kurakin that his brother was able to make more or less orderly summaries of Pestel's lectures. True, his French was not exactly faultless, but in the other languages, Latin, German and Italian, he did rather well, which was something he could not say about mathematics, but that was the fault of Fas, who is always on vacation. In the lessons of Pestel and Allamand however the boy did quite well. In July he was halfway the principles of natural law and in history had reached the destruction of Greece. In physics he just had hydrostatics.

Compared to the quicksilver Apraksin, the young Kurakin was, in the beginning, easy to handle. "Nice and docile" he was, compared to his uncle. What Kurakin lacked was, Moissy wrote, easy urbanity that makes a winning man. The boy himself described it otherwise: he detested politics, he detested people who flattered you while you were there but who slandered you behind your back. He thought himself totally unfit for the life of a courtier. The only thing he wanted was freedom, was autonomy, but he knew that his heart was easy to inflame and that a woman in no time could enslave him. To prove it he fell madly in love with a little saleswoman at the fair. After the fair he was beyond consolation. Then he confessed everything to Pestel.

On this, his older brother must have rebuked him a bit, scolded him that he probably wanted to live the life of a hermit, but that the whole purpose of his being in Leyden was to learn to be useful to society. And that love was a terrible thing for a young man. And the boy relented, promised to do better, agreed that a woman was just "a thing that drivelled, dressed and undressed."

Problems were becoming bigger after the summer of 1775. Apraksin started to complain about Leyden. The city had made him lose all his natural merriment. It were first and foremost the women that bored him. They were cold as the climate and extinguished every possible enthusiasm. Besides that he felt himself totally surrounded by morals, something he found quite disheartening.

And young Kurakin was getting fatter every day. He had hardly any physical exercise, although he had, to please his brother, conquered his aversion against shooting and fencing. But he did not dance and he did not ride horses, either. Moissy had expressly advised against this last activity, because of the obesity of the boy. He also sent his tutor in calligraphy away.

For all this he was chided by his brother, who called him self-indulgent and full of "self-love." Young Kurakin defended himself. He wrote that there was a difference between the self-love that was egotistical and self-love that strove for self-perfection and followed good advice. And to follow the advice of his brother was all he wanted. And so he did take dancing lessons, and he did take riding lessons. It was during one of

those lessons that he was kicked off the horse and strained his wrist. After that, horse riding was done without.

Pestel intensified his lectures after this incident. He even took to other methods. He set the boys a thesis, which they had to discuss in his presence, the one defending, the other attacking it. And so they advanced. In October they had finished Pestel's natural history primer, and from now on it was Grotius and Pufendorff themselves they had to tackle. In history they were nearing the pinnacle of the Roman Empire, Allamand seemed to be halfway his course and Fas was treating the fluxional method.

It is about this time -- it was the end of October, 1775 -- that it came to an angry confrontation between the two brothers Kurakin. Alexander had called his younger brother a "sophist," because of his facile reasoning about liberty. Freedom for Alexander was to be the master of one's own phantasies and whims. Alexis had retorted that freedom for him was to act without being hindered by the phantasies and whims of others. Naive or not, here little Alexis' criticism was not only directed at the life at court his brother was leading, not only at the favouritism that was at the heart of the tsarist government, but even at her Majesty, the Empress Catherine the Great herself.

By then, Alexander Kurakin must have realised that the education of his brother, the very same that he had enjoyed, was producing unwanted results. Young Kurakin, naive, even slow-witted, and good natured though he was, proved a hard nut to crack. In spite of the rigorous curriculum, in spite of such disciplinary exercises as dancing and fencing, he kept cherishing a few ideas, no doubt conclusions he had drawn from the lectures of Pestel, that were in the end diametrically opposed to what his brother on the same basis had come to think.

In December 1775 Pestel wrote to Alexander Kurakin about the progress the boys were making. The method of disputing was bearing fruit, he was delighted to hear the boys discuss with precision and propriety about matters of history, philosophy and law. What was essential was to give a certain fold to the mind of young boys, that could be usefull in government and the world at large. To make their judgements sound and get them used to distinguish between what was real and what was merely glitter.

Here we have the problem in a nutshell. The inherent paradoxes of Russian and Western Enlignenment were embodied in the two brothers. The political ideas of Catherine the Great and the educational ideas of Pestel did not differ that much. It was just a question of discipline and freedom, which are difficult to combine and always a question of the right mixture. But for a good-natured professor at a small university in a quiet little town in a prosperous republic, the world was somewhat different from the same world seen from the point of view of a rather cynical monarch in a rivalry- ridden court located in the bustling capital of a tottering empire. It was their background that

differed like day and night. It demanded different mixtures.

And then there was love again, in April 1776, now for a "demoiselle d'Utrecht," the daughter of a physician, still under the tutelage of her parents. Please, see it as something inconsequential, Moissy wrote. Alexander did not. Whether or not this was the reason for Panin to call the boys back, whether or not Alexander was involved in it, we do not know. But three weeks later Apraksin could write: "We are allowed to go back. My pleasure is beyond description."

Main Source:

Archiva Knisi Th.A. Kurakina (1896-1899)

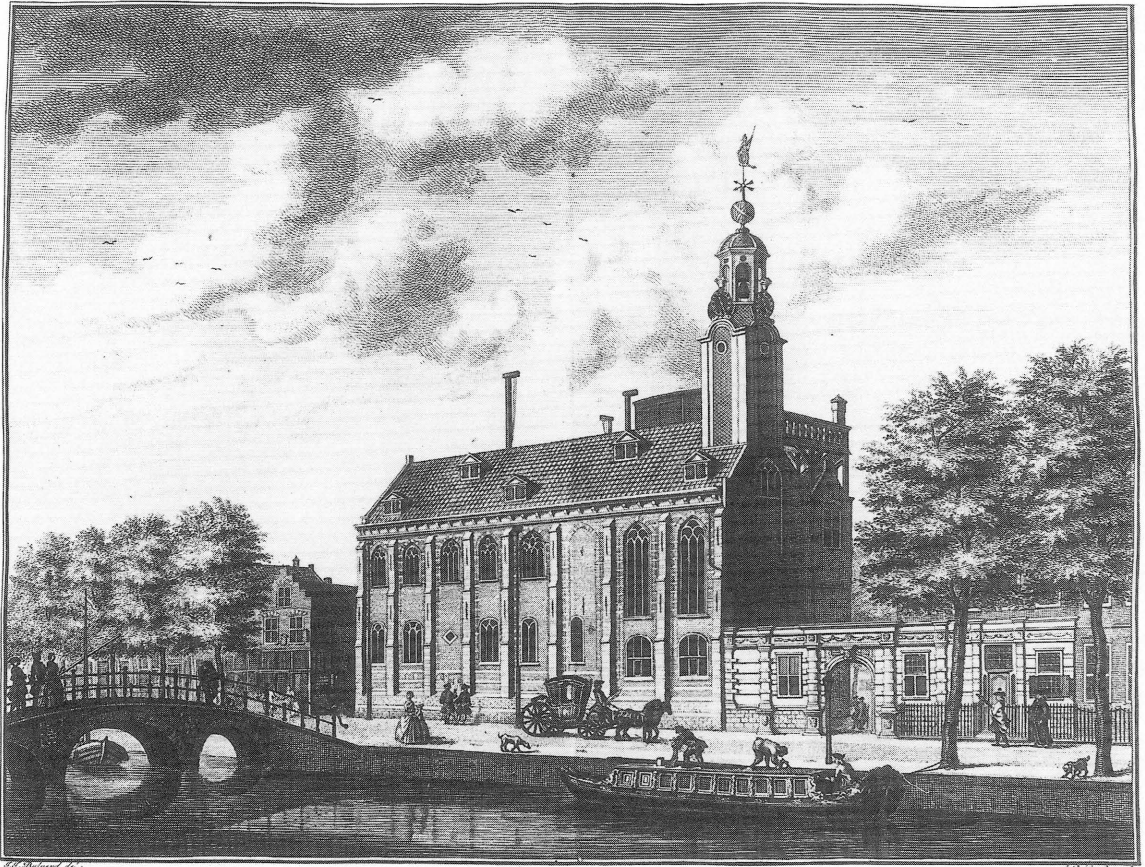
Suggestions for further reading:

G. Hosking, *Russia. People and Empire 1552-1917* (1997)

I. de Mandariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (1981)

N. Hans, "Russian Students at Leyden in the 18th Century," in: *The Slavonic and East European Review* 35 (1956-57), pp. 551-562.

I.J.H. Worst, "Staat, constitutie en politieke wil. Over F.W. Pestel en de varieteit van het achttiende-eeuwse orangisme," in: *Bijdragen en Mededelingen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 52 (1987), pp. 498-515.



Gezicht op de ACADEMIE, te Leyden.

De Wten. A. Koning & A. Kuller, 1780.

fig.1 Academy of Leyden (Leiden University)



fig.2 Friedrich Wilhelm Pestel (Leiden University)



IOHANNES NICOLAUS SEBASTIANUS ALLAMAND
A.L.M. & Philosophiae Doctor
Philosophia & Mathematicas Professor P.O.
in Academia Lugduno-Batava
Obiit II Mart. MDCCCLXXXVII. Æt. LXXIV.

fig.3 Jean Nicolas Sebastien Allamand (Leiden University)