

# A theft, three auctions and a digital reunion: the unfinished story of Isaac Newton's wandering Swedish autograph album inscription

## A very small collection of the smallest kind of Newton manuscript

As part of my work for the Newton Project, since the late 1990s, I along with other colleagues have tracked auctions of Newton manuscripts.\* The bulk of Newton's non-scientific papers flooded the market after they were sold in 1936 at a Sotheby's auction in London. Since then, almost all the large and even medium-size manuscripts have safely settled in university and other professional repositories or are otherwise known through photographs and transcriptions. The Newton Project<sup>1</sup> and The Chymistry of Isaac Newton Project<sup>2</sup> have transcribed most of the theological, prophetic and alchemical texts. The Newton Project has also begun working on Newton's Mint Papers. We now have access to almost everything Newton wrote that has survived the test of time.

So these days we are left with monitoring small fragments that occasionally appear in the auction trade. But even a tiny scrap of Newton's writing can sometimes reveal important information. An ever-active eagle eye can reap scholarly dividends as we continue to sharpen our understanding of Newton's thought. The 1936 Sotheby's auction catalogue provides an impressively detailed listing of the manuscripts offered at that sale. This allows us to identify manuscripts and portions of manuscripts that appear today in auctions with what was dispersed at the 1936 sale. By convention, Newton scholars refer to these manuscripts by their 1936 Sotheby lot numbers.

Occasionally, however, we are surprised by small Newton manuscripts that do not descend from the 1936 sale and whose existence is therefore previously unknown. What I want to tell here is a story—as yet incomplete—that relates to a very small collection of Newton's smallest manuscripts that, moreover, were technically never in his possession. Small though they be and few in number, they offer value in shining light on Newton's sense of who he was and how he wanted to be remembered. They have hitherto escaped scrutiny by Newton scholars.

In September 2012 I came across the auction record of a handwritten Newton epigram dated London, 13 July 1716 (Old Style). The epigram is a paraphrase of a line from the Apocrypha's Book of Wisdom that speaks of God creating everything with number, weight and measure.

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\*See also my shorter, earlier account, "A stolen Newton inscription (virtually) restored to a Swedish autograph album": <https://royalsociety.org/blog/2020/07/a-stolen-newton-inscription/> (The Royal Society Blog, 10 August 2020).

This inscription had been sold on 31 March 1998 at Sotheby's London as part of the George Cosmatos sale. Had I known about the sale, I could have attended it. On that day I was working on a paper (on Newton's theology, as it happens) a mere 49-minute train journey from London. But as a lowly student I would have left the bidding to others. Offered as lot 318 with an estimate of £4000–5000,<sup>3</sup> it was purchased by an unknown buyer for £32,200 / \$46,000 (including buyer's premium).<sup>4</sup> Almost a year later, in August 2013, I stumbled over another record of the same Sotheby's auction. I also found at that time a mention in what may at first glance appear to be an unlikely source: Frank P. Ryan's book, *Darwin's Blind Spot: Evolution Beyond Natural Selection* (2002)—a work that argues that Darwin had overlooked the importance of symbiosis in the natural world.

At neither time in 2012 or 2013 did the fragment relate immediately to my research. So I filed the records away and did not return to them until the Spring of 2017 when I was surveying the various statements Isaac Newton made about the relationship between God and the study of Nature. The epigram was an obvious choice to include in this paper. But a little online sleuthing to look for any other information about the epigram led to two discoveries.

First, many Internet sources were treating the epigram as a composition *by* Newton. It has become a Newton meme, shorn of its original context.<sup>5</sup> Second, I found another example of Newton using the same epigram, in this case mentioned in a 1989 article on symmetry features of bookbinding. This new example is dated 11 September 1722 and is found in the autograph book of the Transylvanian-Hungarian student Ferenc Páriz Pápai, *fiis* (1687/1689–1737/1740).<sup>6</sup> Some additional searching revealed that images of Pápai's entire autograph book are online, complete with transcriptions, translations and commentary.<sup>7</sup> It was at this moment that I, having studied Newton for over a quarter century, became aware for the first time that Newton had on more than one occasion signed the *alba amicorum* of young students from the Continent.

These wonderful little volumes have been called the Facebook of their day.<sup>8</sup> While one wouldn't want to push the analogy to the extent of anachronism, they certainly do constitute a form of 'social media'. They were deployed by men and somewhat differently by some women to preserve memories of encounters and to establish social prestige. In a tradition that dates back to the sixteenth century, many young students, mostly German Protestants, would take an autograph book on a *peregrinatio academica* after completing their undergraduate or master's degrees. The young scholars would consult libraries, visit universities and connect with learned men. In places where they stayed long enough, they also acquired proficiency in the local tongue. It was a rounding out of their education.

The *album amicorum* a student carried with him would be filled with the epigrams and dedications of librarians, academics and fellow travellers. Concerns similar to those that critics of social media today are raising, such as the pretentiousness of representing a carefully curated image of oneself and of accumulating a high volume of 'likes', were already being raised in the

era of the friendship album. Nevertheless, the volumes came home with the students as treasured testimonies of their travels and scholarly contacts. A large number of these students focussed their peregrinations on Central Europe and thus never left the Continent. But some came to England.

Armed with the knowledge that Newton had been scrawling epigrams in student autograph albums, I went on the hunt for more. Using various online search engines and databases, I soon came up with an additional two inscriptions, one of which also had the text from Wisdom 11:20. Furthermore, I recalled an inscription Newton made in Englishman William Stukeley's album. I had viewed and transcribed that one long ago in 1994 at Oxford's Bodleian Library when a graduate student, but had not then released that it fit into a wider pattern. So, I had five.

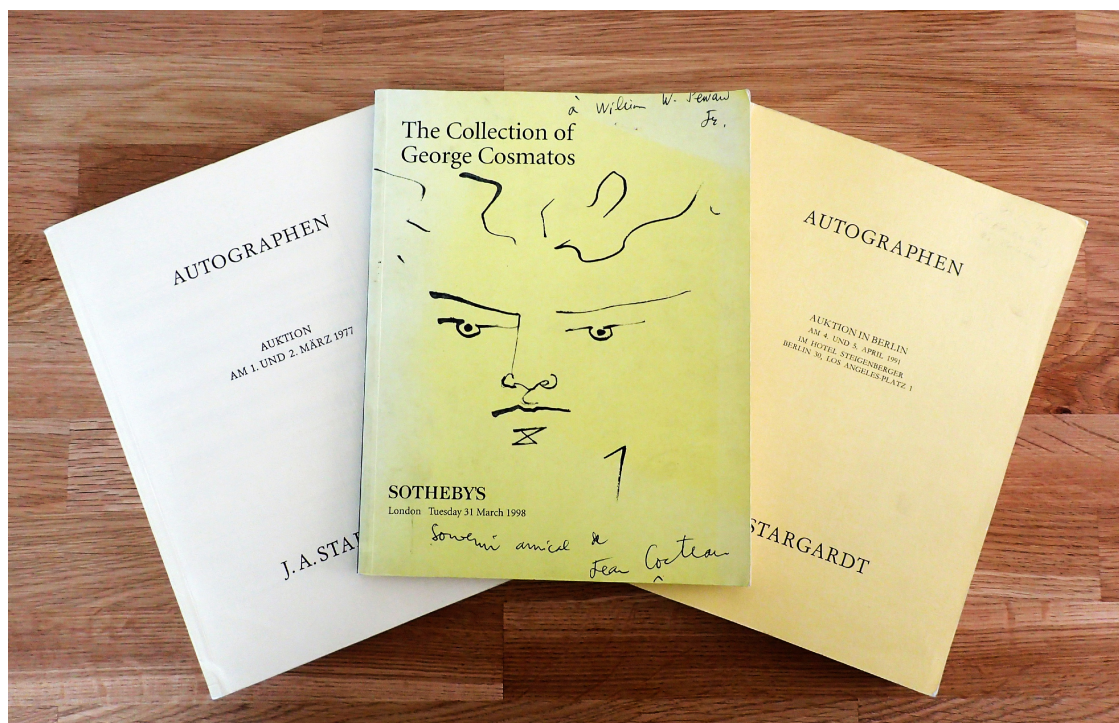
After writing up a draft paper on Newton's album inscriptions, I brought the matter to the attention of my Newton Project colleague Scott Mandelbrote (Peterhouse, Cambridge). Given how obscure I knew the topic to be, you can imagine my astonishment when my colleague told me that another scholar was also researching Newton epigrams in *alba amicorum*. I am grateful to Scott for bringing George Gömöri and me together in what has become a very fruitful and rewarding collaboration between a Newton researcher and an expert in Early Modern autograph books. George, too, had written up a paper on Newton's album inscription. Like me, he had also found five Newton album inscriptions, but we each had a unique one, giving us a combined total of six.

After removing my material on Newton's use of Wisdom 11:20 (which had taken on a life of its own and will be published separately),<sup>9</sup> George and I stitched together our papers. In the end, we were able to trace eight Newton inscriptions, seven of which survive and four of which use the epigram from Wisdom 11:20. The results can be found in our co-authored paper published in the September 2020 issue of *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science*.<sup>10</sup> An online supplement released by *Notes and Records* at the same time details the interesting lives and travels of Newton's autograph seekers.<sup>11</sup>

Despite what we both believed to be a successful research project, there was some residual dissatisfaction in not knowing the name of the owner of the album in which Newton wrote his 1716 inscription. We had resigned ourselves to the unhappy but then seemingly realistic conclusion that the album owner might never be identified. The best we could do was carefully examine the auction history of the leaf. This, and the popularity of what they called the *Stammbuch*, suggested to us on circumstantial and probabilistic grounds that the owner was likely a German. With that in mind, let's return to the artefact of Newton's epigram of 13 July 1716.

## Marburg, Berlin and London: three auctions

Although the purchaser of the epigram at the 1998 Sotheby's auction is unknown, we do have some insight into the motivations of one person who attended the sale in hopes of acquiring the item. This is the aforementioned Irish-born Frank P. Ryan, a respected physician and theoretical evolutionary biologist whose work has stressed symbiosis (for him, Darwin's 'blind spot') and the role of viruses in evolution. A Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal Society of Medicine and the Linnaean Society of London, he taught at the University of Sheffield before his recent retirement. He is also a best-selling author who has penned both popular science books and Celtic-themed teen fantasy fiction. Dr Ryan's highly-regarded book *Virusphere: From Common Colds to Ebola Epidemics* (2019) is currently receiving additional interest in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>



*The 1977 and 1991 Stargardt and 1998 Sotheby's catalogues offering Isaac Newton's album amicorum inscription of 13 July 1716 (private collection).*

Ryan attended the Sotheby's sale on 31 March 1998, and although he came away with a letter by J.R.R. Tolkien,<sup>13</sup> he later said: "What I was really after was a small piece of paper, about the size of a paperback novel, on which were hand-written 22 words in Latin"<sup>14</sup>—the Newton epigram. The comparison of the size to that of a paperback novel confirms the auction catalogues' descriptions of the page as being that of an octavo volume. Ryan was however forestalled when the bidding quickly went beyond his reach (this fits into the general trends of a dramatic inflation in the value of Newton manuscripts dating to the 1990s). As he recorded



in his online blog, the epigram by Newton and the letter from Tolkien helped inspire him when writing a “key chapter in the second book” of his Three Powers fantasy series, *The Tower of Bones* (2012).<sup>15</sup> In his 2002 book *Darwin’s Blind Spot*, Ryan also refers to his interest in the Newton item and his amazement at the sale price of \$42,000 U.S., which he also records came to \$46,000 with the buyer’s premium.<sup>16</sup>

The inscribed leaf from 1716 does not seem to have surfaced since—on the auction market or otherwise. George Pan Cosmatos (1941–2005) was an Italian-born Greek film director who passed away at his home in Victoria, British Columbia (my own hometown, as it happens). Cosmatos was an avid rare book and manuscript collector and the 1998 Sotheby’s sale included many other autographs including signed letters, documents and photographs from the worlds of literature, science, politics, music, the arts and popular culture.

A sampling of the 488 lots offered on 31 March 1998 includes letters from Johannes Brahms, Catherine de Médicis, Agatha Christie, Winston Churchill, Marie Curie, Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, Albert Einstein, Grandma Moses, William Herschel, Andrew Jackson, John F. Kennedy, Rudyard Kipling, Claude Monet, Napoleon, Horatio Nelson, Louis Pasteur, Leo Tolstoy and Jules Verne. There were autographs of Frederick Douglass, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Edison, Grigori Rasputin, Albert Schweitzer, Pete Seeger, Robert Louis Stevenson, Richard Strauss and Vincent Van Gogh. Also, offered were signed photographs of Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Vivien Leigh, Field-Marshal Montgomery and Shirley Temple. Amongst the musical manuscripts were examples from George Gershwin, Franz Liszt and Peter Tchaikovsky. There were two letters from J. R. R. Tolkien (including the one bought by Ryan) and a document signed by Peter the Great (who *may* have met Newton at the Royal Mint in 1698). Clearly, Newton kept illustrious company that day in London.

But not just on that day. Further searching determined that the 1716 leaf can be traced back two further steps in earlier auctions.

Prior to the 1998 sale in London, the Newton inscription was offered on 4 April 1991 as lot 766 at Hotel Steigenberger in Berlin by the German auction house J. A. Stargardt for 6000 DM. This would have been around \$3565 U.S. on that day. It sold for 9500 DM (then approximately \$5645 U.S.).<sup>17</sup> The catalogue provides a transcription and a black and white photograph. It is unclear when and how Cosmatos acquired the Newton inscription, which was purchased at the 1991 Stargardt auction by a dealer.<sup>18</sup>

Before this, the sheet was offered on 1 March 1977 as lot 559 at Marburg’s Kurhotel Ortenburg by Stargardt with an estimate of 4000 DM (roughly \$1675 U.S. on that day). It sold for 6,600 DM (then approximately \$2760). The lot entry in the 1977 catalogue is similar to the entry in the 1991 Stargardt catalogue. The photograph published in 1977 shows the leaf on a darker background, so it is likely not the same photograph used in the 1991 catalogue.<sup>19</sup> It is notable how the estimates and realised prices of the leaf climbed over time.

That said, when we scrutinise the figures with greater care we see a slightly more complicated picture. It's one thing to track absolute figures precisely tied to historical exchange rates. But when the figures are adjusted to inflation, the 1991 sale looks rather flat:

	Sale price	2020 value
1977	6600 DM	15,885 DM
1991	9500 DM	15,440 DM

When tracking all three sales in U.S. dollars and their 2020 equivalents, we see that the big jump in price came with the 1998 Sotheby's sale in London:

	Sale price	2020 value
1977	\$2760	\$11,677
1991	\$5645	\$10,636
1998	\$42,000	\$66,063

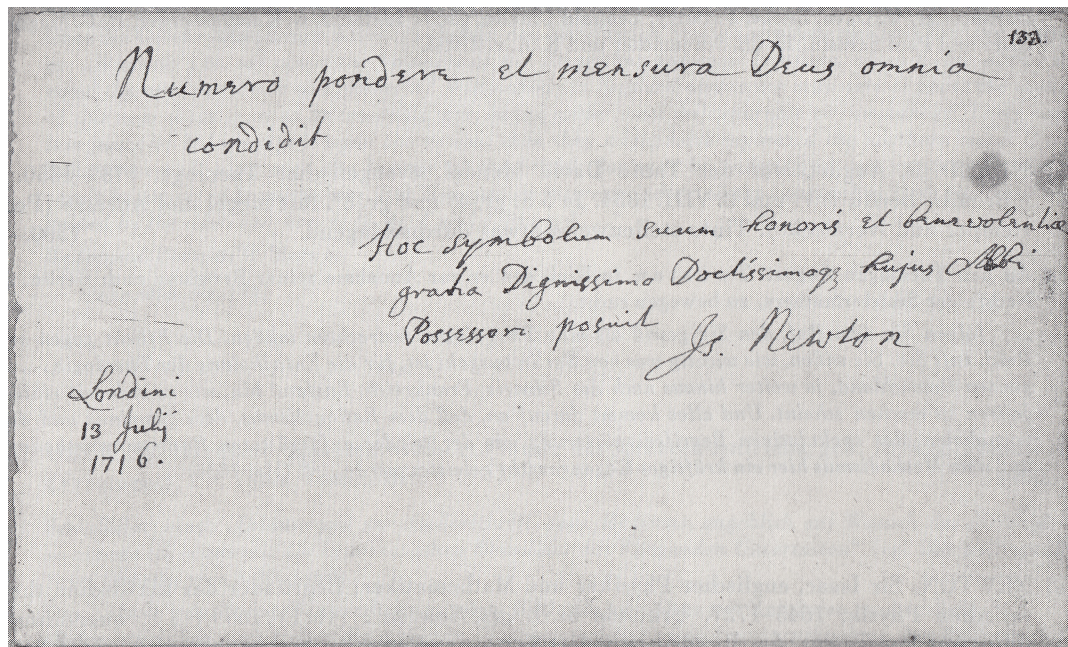
No doubt the sale in 1998 was facilitated by being conducted in the Internet Age and in the Anglosphere—as well as appearing along with other high-ticket items, as we have seen. There is also another kind of inflation at play here, however: the relative rise in prices for Newtoniana. Within the last generation, Newton signatures and other manuscripts have become good investments.

It may be relevant that both the 1977 and 1991 Stargardt auctions offered the same *Stammbuch* epigram by Gottfried Leibniz: an undated inscription with no album owner's name or page number. The epigram is Leibniz's motto, which also adorns his tomb: *Pars vitæ, quoties perditus hora, perit* ('A part of life is lost whenever an hour is wasted'). This is one rare thing about which these hard-working old nemeses could have agreed! The Leibniz leaf appears in the 1977 Stargardt catalogue as lot 536 with an estimate of 5000 DM. It sold for 5200 DM.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the photographs of the Leibniz and Newton leaves appear on the same page in the 1977 catalogue. The Leibniz inscription was offered in 1991 as lot 709, again with an estimate of 5000 DM. I have not been able to trace the sale price (or confirmation that it sold). Possibly the same person who bought the Newton leaf in 1977 also acquired the Leibniz leaf at the same sale and then offered both at the 1991 sale. The Leibniz leaf, however, did not appear in the 1998 Sotheby's sale.

The 1998 Sotheby's catalogue entry for lot 318 includes a small, low-resolution black and white photograph of the leaf, along with a brief description. The entry also provides a transcription and translation of the epigram and dedication, but not of the date and place of signing. The catalogue entry suggests that it was "originally attached (presumably) to one of his books" and gives the following physical description: "*1 page, oblong 8vo, minor spotting*". It is not clear whether the Sotheby's lot entry is meant to give the impression that the epigram is a dedication written in a book authored by Newton and given to a friend or fellow natural philosopher, or

that it was written in one of the books in his personal library. The entry for lot 318 concludes with the statement: “Autograph inscriptions relating to any of Newton’s books are RARE”.<sup>21</sup> Whilst this is true, by implying that the leaf came from a printed book, the Sotheby’s entry is mistaken. Moreover, there would be no financial motivation for removing a Newton inscription from a book, which would be much more valuable with it. The Sotheby’s catalogue does not refer to the earlier Stargardt sales of the same sheet.

As for the 1991 Stargardt catalogue, like the entry from 1977, it correctly identifies the leaf as coming from a “*Stammbuchblatt*”,<sup>22</sup> that is, a sheet from an *album amicorum*. In any case, the form of the text, the word *Albi* (genitive of *album*) and the number ‘133’ in the upper right-hand corner all serve to confirm this, as does the epigram (described as *Newtons Wahlspruch*: “Newton’s motto”) and the detail in both Stargardt catalogues that the sheet is “*dreiseitiger Goldschnitt*”, that is, three-sided gold leaf.<sup>23</sup> Neither the Stargardt nor Sotheby’s catalogue entries provide measurements of the size of the sheet, but all three catalogues agree that it is from an octavo volume.



*Isaac Newton’s album amicorum inscription of 13 July 1716 (O.S.).  
Image of J. A. Stargardt Katalog 611 (1–2 March 1977) lot 559 (used with permission).*

The black and white photographs of the sheet in the 1977 and 1991 Stargardt catalogues are larger and somewhat clearer than the image provided in the Sotheby’s catalogue.<sup>24</sup> Unlike the Sotheby’s photograph, it shows the entire sheet including all four edges. The left edge is torn and shows three indentations from the volume’s stitching. Neither photograph shows any evidence of ink bleed-through from the verso and thus, as is common with album entries, the other side of the sheet is likely blank.

### Isaac Newton's *album amicorum* inscription of 13 July 1716

So, what was the message Newton chose to inscribe on 13 July 1716? In English, the epigram says: "God has established all things by number, weight and measure". As alluded to above, this is a paraphrase from a passage in Wisdom 11:20. The Latin Vulgate numbers the verse as 11:21 and renders it:

*sed et sine his uno spiritu occidi poterant  
persecutionen passi ab ipsis factis suis  
et dispersi per spiritum virtutis tuae  
sed omnia mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti*

The 1611 King James Version Newton was familiar with gives the following translation:

Yea, and without these might they have fallen down with one blast, being persecuted of vengeance, and scattered abroad through the breath of thy power, but thou hast ordered all things in measure and number and weight.

Now it may seem strange that a radical Protestant like Newton who did not believe the Apocrypha to be inspired would use a passage from the Wisdom of Solomon as his motto. But Wisdom 11:20d was an exceptionally popular line amongst theologians and natural philosophers in both the Middle Ages and Early Modern period.<sup>25</sup> It had through widespread usage become detached from its original literary context and was deployed as an affirmation that God created everything using the precise tools of mathematics. In terms of the implied epistemology, this affirms that the world could in turn be understood using geometry, ratio and formulae. As the astrophysicist Paul Davies puts it, the world is "algorithmically compressible".<sup>26</sup>

It is in this abstracted theistic sense that Newton is taking ownership of the statement, the three linked nouns of which are sometimes referred to today as 'the Sapiential Triad'. What helps confirm this is the fact that Newton's epigram inserts the word God, uses a different verb and has the three nouns in a different order than the version in the Vulgate. That, and Newton did not provide a verse reference. There was no need to because it's unlikely this was a quotation for Newton.

As a side note, in the early stages of my search for additional examples of Newton's use of Wisdom 11:20, I found that the epigram has become disassociated from its use in autograph books and is now commonly attributed to Newton as his own composition in either Latin or English, despite it being a paraphrase from the Apocrypha. This is likely because of the 1998 Sotheby's sale of the 1716 inscription and the 1989 publication of Newton's 1722 use of the same epigram in a Transylvanian student's album. This is far from the first time a quotation has been misattributed to Newton. Perhaps George Gömöri and my published studies on Newton's album inscriptions will help correct this misattribution, although it is very hard to correct a false meme once it becomes endemic online.



Newton's dedication under the epigram doesn't tell us much, but it does confirm that the inscription is being made in an *album amicorum* and that the owner is learned and male: "Isaac Newton has placed this his sign of honour and benevolence on account of the most Worthy and most Learned Owner of this Album" (the word for owner is *possessor*, which is masculine). With only this information to go on, as already noted, George and I could only speculate that the album owner was probably a young German university graduate. By this point, we had uncovered three albums with Newton inscriptions owned by young German Lutheran theology students (we would also find a fourth).

It was not even possible to confirm that the owner had personally met with Newton (as sometimes albums were forwarded to eminent men for their signatures). And so my co-author and I had come to accept that we would be publishing our study of Newton's epigrams without identifying the owner of the 1716 inscription. Perhaps, we thought, a reader of our study would be able to provide the name of the album owner. Or perhaps the album and the name of its owner were forever lost to time. I grumbled more than once about the low morals of the greedy individual who tore an album apart to sell its pages off piecemeal for profit—and thus simultaneously rob historians of an intact artefact.

In retrospect it doesn't make sense that an entire album be disbound, irrespective of the morals of a manuscript speculator. After all, while these albums sometimes contain the epigrams of high-profile people still famous today, like Newton, almost all the other inscribers are to a modern person complete unknowns. It now seems obvious that there is a better strategy for an unscrupulous person more interested in the financial than the scholarly value of a historical volume. This is to tear out the high-ticket item and sell that on its own bereft of contextual information including original ownership and provenance. A single album leaf would be hard to trace and there are thousands of such Early Modern albums in archives and in private collections. But who would mutilate their own historical treasure? Well, one might not do *that*. But one might consider doing it to an artefact not their own.

As it turns out, this is precisely what happened.

## A theft in Linköping

In May 2019, when surveying available records for people who met with Newton during his London years and who thus might be people who asked Newton to sign their autograph book, we landed on the name Matthias Asp (1696–1763). This was a young Swedish student who is said to have had conversations with both Newton and Astronomer Royal John Flamsteed during his 1716 visit to London. The reference to these meetings came in a now obscure but surely valuable nineteenth-century British biographical dictionary that in turn was based on German and Swedish sources.<sup>27</sup>

Now we had a name and with this we searched the various online databases of *alba amicorum*. In reasonably short order, we found through Uppsala University's Alvin portal that Asp's autograph album (called an *Album itineris*) is held at the Linköping City Library in Sweden. I should reiterate that the discovery of a record indicating that a certain Matthias Asp visited Newton was a part of our effort to find *additional* Newton inscriptions. We were not looking specifically for the owner of the album Newton signed on 13 July 1716. We had more or less given up on that.

With this information in hand, on 23 May 2019 I contacted the Linköping City Library to ask if the Asp album had been digitised and if there was any information to indicate that it contained a Newton inscription. I was hopeful that a man who is said to have visited Newton and who kept an *album amicorum* just might have obtained an inscription from the great man.

The following day, I received a very helpful e-mail from librarian Stina Brodin. She confirmed that the library possessed the Asp album, but said she was afraid to say that the news about a Newton inscription was not good. After examining the album, she discovered that it apparently once had a Newton inscription, but that it was now *missing*. That was a completely unexpected turn of events. Within a couple hours of receiving this reply, I returned to the Alvin portal and read a fuller entry of the Asp album. There I encountered a note indicating not only that leaf 133–134 was missing, but that the missing leaf had contained a Newton inscription.

It was only at this point that I realised that the thrice-auctioned 13 July 1716 Newton leaf had come from Matthias Asp's autograph book. Any disappointment that this Swedish album did not yield a totally *new* inscription not yet known to us was dissipated by the sense of closure we had with the leaf of 13 July 1716. It was now Ms Brodin's turn to be surprised when I replied that day with a black and white auction catalogue photograph of this leaf.



*The inside front cover of Matthias Asp's album amicorum showing the reference to the Newton leaf and Brita Wastenson's 25 July 1969 note. Stiftsbibliotek, Linköping, MS B49 (used with permission).*

In further discussions I had with both Stina Brodin of Linköping and Per Cullhed of the Uppsala University Library, we pieced together the available information. A pencil note written in the inside front cover of the Asp album includes the following: ‘S. 133–134 saknas 25/7 1969 B.W.’. Ms Brodin explained that the ‘S.’ could stand for *sida* (‘page’), that *saknas* means ‘missing’ and that ‘B.W.’ are the initials of Brita Wastenson, who during that period was a librarian at the Linköping Stiftsbibliotek.

In his survey of *alba amicorum* at Linköping City Library published in 1969, Åke Davidsson also notes that leaf 133–134 was missing (using the same word *saknas*).<sup>28</sup> The ink annotation in the centre of the inside front cover indicates that Matthias Floderus (1766–1822), Matthias Asp’s grandson through his daughter Ulrika, had donated the album in 1795 to the Linköping High School Library (one of the founding libraries of present-day Linköping City Library).

As Davidsson also correctly observes, the inside front cover has another note. This one, too, is in pencil, but in a more archaic writing style. It reads: ‘Newton 133 Vid. 133’ (‘Vid.’ is short for the Latin imperative verb *vide*, ‘see’). Although more archaic, I take this other pencil annotation to have been written after the album came to the Linköping High School Library in 1795. It would not make sense for the album to be donated with both the note and the leaf already missing. So, it seems reasonable to conclude that the leaf went missing after it came to the library.

Now the leaf didn’t fall out on its own. And since it is the only leaf missing, its removal is almost certainly deliberate and targeted. Here is another thought: might this very note have been the signal to the thief that the album contained an illustrious and potentially valuable signature? I say ‘thief’ because the gentle word *saknas* belies the fact that the leaf was taken—forcibly if you will—without permission. A robbery in plain sight.

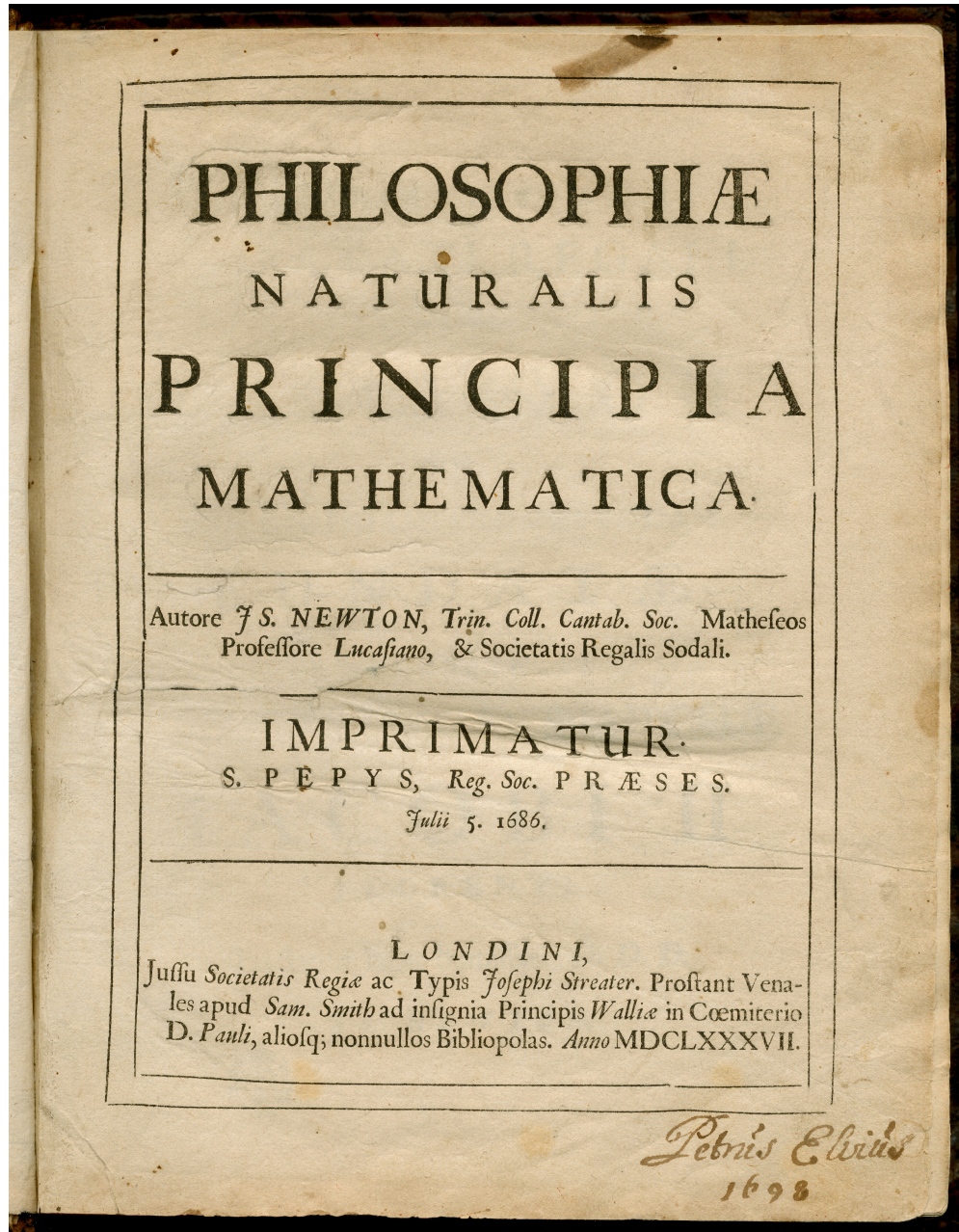
Was it a malicious ‘inside job’, with a librarian with knowledge of the collections taking it to supplement his or her income? This is not impossible, but there is no record of anything like this happening at the library. Was it a more benign ‘inside job’ with the leaf being removed perhaps for an exhibition, after which it was misplaced? That seems unlikely. What librarian would mutilate an artefact? Instead, the best evidence, albeit circumstantial and probabilistic, is that this was a theft by a library outsider.

The theft of a Newton leaf from a Swedish library in the 1960s raises an intriguing possibility. It was in 1968 that a person absconded with Uppsala University Library’s copy of the first edition of Newton’s *Principia* (library security in those days was very informal). This prized copy bears on its title page the name of its onetime owner, the Swedish astronomer Petrus Elvius (1660–1718), along with the date ‘1698’.

Might the two thefts be linked? The Elvius *Principia* was sold in 1981 at auction by Dorotheum in Vienna and then again in 2004 by Christie’s in New York. The American who bought it in



2004 agreed to return it to Uppsala after being informed that it had been stolen from their library. The transfer took place in late 2008. In January 2009 its repatriation was celebrated in a ceremony at Uppsala University—complete with speeches and a proud display of the Elvius *Principia*.<sup>29</sup> That story had a happy ending.



*Swedish astronomer Petrus Elvius' copy of Newton's Principia (1687), which was absent from the Uppsala University Library for around forty years from 1968–2009. Uppsala universitetsbibliotek (used with permission).*



In later years, two other copies of the first edition of Newton's *Principia* held in Swedish libraries were also stolen. The culprit in these two cases is Ragnar Engeström (1946–2008). Engeström was a Swedish antiquarian and archaeologist of some note. He is confirmed to have stolen the copy of the first edition of the *Principia* held by the library at Säveskolan in Visby, Sweden. This was sold at Sotheby's in London in 1996 to a Swedish collector (who under Swedish law was not required to return it to the library in Visby after it became apparent it had been stolen). It soon became clear that this copy was the one from Visby and it was this case that exposed Engeström.

On 6 October 1997, Engeström also took a copy of the 1687 *Principia* from the Sjögrenbibliotek at Stockholm's Kungl. Ingenjörsvetenskapsakademien (The Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences). The next day he sauntered into the Sotheby's sales office in the capital and attempted to cash in on the book. But by then his number was up and this *Principia* was returned to its rightful home in the IVA's Sjögren Library.<sup>30</sup> When the authorities came to discover that through Engeström's charm and status he had been able to plunder a good deal of his country's antiquities, it created a sensation in Sweden. An entire book was written about Engeström's decades-long campaign of 'acquisitions' from Swedish libraries and archives.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of the Elvius *Principia* taken from the Uppsala University Library in 1968, there is no unequivocal evidence tying Engeström to the theft. But since by his own admission he had been using the Uppsala University Library since 1966 and as it is evident that he had passion for things Newtonian, he must be seen as the most likely suspect.<sup>32</sup> These same factors also make him a *possible* suspect for the theft of the Newton leaf from Linköping City Library. It is true that there is no record of Engeström visiting the Linköping Library, but that's not surprising since there are only records from those days of inter-library loan borrowings. Engeström's name is not in that record, but the theft would not have involved an inter-library loan patron, but rather someone visiting the library in person. That's probably as far as we can take this unless new information emerges.

In terms of a motive, although manuscript prices in the 1960s were nothing like they are in the 2020s, Newton was Newton then as now. Even in the sixties, an album leaf with Newton's name would attract some interest at an auction. That it was written in Latin and did not contain the name of the album owner, would make it difficult to trace it to a library or even a European country of origin. Germany would be the obvious choice for a sale, since *Stammbücher* are well known there. In Germany, many would assume it was from a German album, as George and I had done. The leaf was not completely untraceable, however. In addition to the date that corresponds to the record of Asp's meeting with Newton, there is the all-important page number '133'. If we find a record of the leaf appearing at an auction earlier than the summer of 1969, this would of course push back the date of the theft. Again, unless more information comes to hand, this is all we can say.

In the meantime, we can be happy that the identification of the leaf has been made. Just over

a half century since notice was first taken of its removal, we still do not have the stolen leaf, but we do have the text written upon it. With this, there is once again a complete record of the inscriptions in Matthias Asp's autograph book.

### A digital reunion

After we traced the missing 1716 Newton leaf to Asp's album at Linköping, the library there went ahead with a full digitisation of the album. This allowed us to do virtually and digitally, what cannot at present be done physically and actually: restore the missing leaf to its original album. The German auction house Stargardt kindly offered permission for its black and white photo of the leaf to join the rest of the autograph book in Uppsala's Alvin digital database. The entire album can now be enjoyed complete with all of its interesting signatures.<sup>33</sup>

A leaf without its album owner's appellation is difficult to trace. But the name Isaac Newton does bring increasingly high returns at auction sales. Historians have a natural distaste for thefts of and vandalism to historical artefacts. On the other hand, the documentation provided by auction sales catalogues—which often includes photographs and transcriptions—is invaluable to those who want to study the past. These precious artefacts often reemerge only briefly in the public sphere around the time of a sale.

All of that said, the introduction of the 1716 leaf to the auction trade tends to show that this kind of crime does pay. The auction houses themselves are not to blame for this of course; the culpability lies with the original thief. The damage to this album has now been partly undone. But a full restoration is possible too.

For the scholar, a separated leaf has much less historical value than an intact album. On top of the vandalism of a historical artefact, without its album a leaf is decontextualised and while it may have minimal value when studied with other inscriptions from intact *alba*, the leaf with its inscription forms an integral part of the story of a student's journey to meet notable scholars during his grand tour. Studies of intact *alba* show how much information can be gleaned from these resources, including scholarly contacts, directions of travel itineraries and dates of visits to Continental and English intellectual hubs. Without its album, the leaf is only fractionally superior to a mere holy relic.

There is another consideration. The risk of theft, damage or loss through fires and other disasters reveals the wisdom in digitising and transcribing these collections for posterity. The physical artefact is certainly important and a worthy object of study. But the textual information it contains is invaluable.

In fact, the *album amicorum* is an underused source for intellectual and social history. These autograph books help fill out our knowledge of Early Modern scholarly networks and codes of

friendship within them. The *alba* provide the names, dates and locations of the inscribers. They offer hints as to individual inscriber's attempts at self-fashioning within the Republic of Letters. For instance, working with one of my former graduate students and using online databases, we managed to find several illuminating album inscriptions by the seventeenth-century Oxford mathematician John Wallis. This pious professor of geometry used a combination of biblical and classical quotations to portray himself as a spiritual sojourner on this Earth and a man directed by a mathematical mind.<sup>34</sup>

Much work has been done in recent years to use the tools of the digital age to catalogue and photograph the hundreds upon hundreds of extant Early Modern autograph books that reside in libraries on the Continent in particular. In addition to the records of these volumes, many can be viewed in their entirety in high-resolution colour scans. I have already referred to Uppsala's excellent Alvin manuscript database, which includes listings of *alba amicorum*.<sup>35</sup> Another is the Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg's REPERTORIUM ALBORVM AMICORVM.<sup>36</sup> Yet one more is the impressive archive of Hungarian *alba*, Inscriptiones Alborum Amicorum.<sup>37</sup>

### Three closing appeals

This need not be the end of the story. If I may be so bold, I would like to conclude this account with three appeals.

First, we appeal to the current owner of the leaf to consider making arrangements for its transfer back to its rightful and original place in Matthias Asp's album at Linköping. Library conservators are well able to reinsert the leaf and make its volume look almost as good as new.

Second, George Gömöri and I appeal to anyone who has information about additional Newton inscriptions in *alba amicorum*. These might be in archives, personal collections or even just mentioned in auction catalogues. We believe our searches have been as close as possible to exhaustive. Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that one or more Newton inscriptions have escaped our attention. Also, as archival material continues to be catalogued and digitised more inscriptions might come to light.

For the third and final appeal, I speak to my fellow historians, including historians of science, to recommend the addition of the *album amicorum* to your armoury of documentary sources. Intrinsically interesting, album inscriptions help fill out what we know about Early Modern scholars' sense of self-identity and their networks. Get to work!

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Please do not re-post this article without the permission of the author.



## Notes

1. See the website at: [www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk](http://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk).
2. See the website at: <https://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/newton/>.
3. *The Collection of George Cosmatos: Sotheby's London Tuesday 31 March 1998* (London: Sotheby's, 1998), p. 102.
4. *The Collection of George Cosmatos: Auction Results*, verso.
5. A notable exception is the Internet site TODAYINSCI®, which on its page “Measure Quotes” cites both the 1716 and 1722 inscriptions and note that the quotation is from Wisdom 11:20: [https://todayinsci.com/QuotationsCategories/M\\_Cat/Measure-Quotations.htm](https://todayinsci.com/QuotationsCategories/M_Cat/Measure-Quotations.htm).
6. M. Rozsondai and B. Rozsondai, “Symmetry Aspects of bookbindings”, *Computers and Mathematics with Applications* 17 (1989): 837–885, also released in Istvan Hargittai, ed., *Symmetry 2: Unifying Human Understanding* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989), pp. 837–85.
7. *Pápai Páriz Ferenc európai peregrinációjának emblékkönyve 1711–1726 / The Album Amicorum of the European Peregrination of Franciscus Pariz Papai 1711–1726*: <https://ppf.mtak.hu/index.htm>.
8. Kasper van Ommen and Hélène Cazes, *Facebook in the Sixteenth Century? The Humanist and Networker Bonaventura Vulcanus: Catalogue of an Exhibition in Leiden University Library* (Leiden: Leiden University Library, 2010); Ellen Peirson-Hagger, “‘Friendship Before Facebook’: Social Media and Its Antecedents”, *Town & Country* (5 February 2019): <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/uk/culture/arts/a26144639/friendship-before-facebook-british-library/>; “Autograph Albums (*alba amicorum*)”, Uppsala University Library: <https://www.ub.uu.se/finding-your-way-in-the-collections/selections-of-special-items-and->



collections/autograph-albums-alba-amicomum/.

9. Snobelen, “‘By number, weight and measure’: Isaac Newton and the Wisdom of Solomon 11:20”, forthcoming in *Lias*.

10. Gömöri and Snobelen, “What he may seem to the world: Isaac Newton’s autograph book epigrams”, *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science* 74 (2020): 409–452. Online: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/full/10.1098/rsnr.2020.0006>.

11. Gömöri and Snobelen, “The peregrinations of Isaac Newton’s autograph seekers”, Supplement to *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science* 74 (2020): 1–48. Online: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/suppl/10.1098/rsnr.2020.0006>.

12. In early 2020, Ryan released an updated introduction to *Virusphere* to take into account COVID-19; see: <https://fprbooks.com/Introduction%232.pdf>.

13. *The Collection of George Cosmatos*, pp. 132–33 (lot 438).

14. Frank P. Ryan’s blog post for 28 December 2010, available online at AuthorsDen.com: <https://authorsden.com/visit/viewblog.asp?AuthorID=57433>.

15. Ryan’s blog post for 28 December 2010.

16. Ryan, *Darwin’s Blind Spot: Evolution Beyond Natural Selection* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), pp. 19–20. In both these sources, Ryan provides a transcription and translation of the entry (the latter being similar to that of the Sotheby’s sale catalogue).

17. *Autographen aus allen Gebieten. Auktion in Berlin am 4. und 5. April 1991. Katalog 649* (Marburg: J. A. Stargardt, 1991), p. 276 (the photograph is on p. 277). Reports of the auction of the Newton leaf and the sale price it achieved can be found in *American Book Prices Current 1991, Vol. 97. The auction season September 1990–August 1991* (Bancroft-Parkman, New York, 1991), part 1: Autographs & Manuscripts, p. 156 and James E. May, ‘Scribleriana transferred, 1990–early 1991’, *The Scriblerian and the Kit-Cats* 24, 227–239 (1992), at 230.

18. Information provided by J. A. Stargardt (23 August 2019).

19. *Autographen aus allen Gebieten: Auktion am 1. und 2. März 1977 in Marburg, Kurhotel Ortenberg Katalog 611* (Marburg: Stargardt, 1977), p. 161 (the photograph is on p. 159). Realised price give in catalogue insert “Katalog 611: List der in der Autographenversteigerung von J. A. Startgardt in Marburg am 1. und 2. März 1977 erzielten Preise”.

20. *Autographen aus allen Gebieten: Auktion am 1. und 2. März 1977 in Marburg, Kurhotel Ortenberg Katalog 611* (Marburg: Stargardt, 1977), p. 161 (the photograph is on p. 156); “Katalog 611: List der in der Autographenversteigerung von J. A. Startgardt in Marburg am 1.

und 2. März 1977 erzielten Preise”.

21. *The Collection of George Cosmatos*, p. 102.

22. *J. A. Stargardt Autographen aus allen Gebieten*: 649, p. 276.

23. *J. A. Stargardt Autographen aus allen Gebieten*: 649, p. 276.

24. In this blog I have used the photograph from the 1977 Stargardt catalogue, whereas in the *Notes and Records* paper we used the photograph given in the 1991 Stargardt catalogue. As the background in the 1977 reproduction is darker, it seems that they are different photographs of the same item.

25. For more detail, see Snobelen, “‘By number, weight and measure’: Isaac Newton and the Wisdom of Solomon 11:20”, forthcoming in *Lias*.

26. Davies, “Algorithmic compressibility, fundamental and phenomenological laws”, in *Laws of nature: essays on the philosophical, scientific and historical dimensions*, ed. Friedel Weinert (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 248–67.

27. [Thomas Watts], ‘Asp, Matthias’, *The Biographical Dictionary of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (London, 1844), vol. III, part II, pp. 792–93.

28. Åke Davidsson, “In peregrinatione litteraria”: Kring några stamböcker i Stifts- och landsbiblioteket i Linköping’, *Annales Academiae Regiae Scientiarum Upsaliensis* 13 (1969): 14–45 (reference on p. 36).

29. For Uppsala University’s press release, see: “Newton’s Book Back in Uppsala University Library”, available online at: <https://uu.se/en/news/news-document/?id=469&typ=pm>. A detailed account in Swedish of the Elvius *Principia* and how it came back to Uppsala can be found in Bo Sundqvist, ‘Petrus Elvius exemplar av Newtons Principia – en berest bok’, *Acta Bibliothecae R. Universitatis Upsaliensis* 46 (2012): 345–53. For photos of the repatriation ceremony held on 22 January 2009, see: <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:alvin:portal:record-93489>.

30. On these details, see Joakim Rådström, “En boktjuv i IVA-lokalerna!” (10 December 2019), <https://iva.se/publicerat/en-boktjuv-i-iva-lokalerna/>; “Den Sofistikerade Kulturarvsplundraren” (7 December 2018), [www.historiskkuriosa.se/den-sofistikerade-kulturarvsplundaren](http://www.historiskkuriosa.se/den-sofistikerade-kulturarvsplundaren).

31. An account of Engeström’s extensive antiquarian thefts is available in Swedish: Carl Johan Gardell and Stefan Simander, *Fallet Engeström: Mannen som plundrade det svenska kulturarvet* (Uppsala: Romlid Förlag AB, 2015).

32. See the chapter on the case of the Elvius *Principia* in Gardell and Simander, *Fallet Engeström*, pp. 366–70. The authors conclude quite plausibly that Engeström is a likely suspect. Per Cullhed confirmed to me that Engeström phoned him a week before his untimely death to offer Uppsala University Library a prized collection (which was wisely declined). Engeström also told Cullhed at this time that he had been a frequent user of the University Library since 1966 (Cullhed to Snobelen, personal correspondence, 27 April 2020).

33. To find Matthias Asp’s album and the Newton leaf, go to [www.alvin-portal.org](http://www.alvin-portal.org) and search for ‘Matthias Asp’. Asp’s autograph book is referred to as an *Album itineris*.

34. See the frontispiece to “Special issue: John Wallis at 400: Science, Mathematics, and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England”, *Notes and Records: The Royal Society Journal of the History of Science*, ed. Adam D. Richter and Stephen D. Snobelen, volume 72, December 2018.

35. Available online at: [www.alvin-portal.org](http://www.alvin-portal.org).

36. Available online at: <https://raa.gf-franken.de/de/startseite.html>.

37. Available online at: <https://iaa.bibl.u-szeged.hu/index.php?page=home>.