

## An Unpublished Letter by Lagrange Concerning the Turin Academy of Science

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presentata dal socio nazionale residente Dionigi GALLETTO  
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**Abstract.** *A previously unknown letter from Joseph-Louis Lagrange (1736-1813) to Giovanni Francesco Cigna (1734-1790) on the then newly-founded Turin Academy of Science (1783) offers a glimpse of his thoughts on this occasion.*

Keywords: history of mathematics, Joseph-Louis Lagrange, Academy of Science, Turin.

**Riassunto.** *Una lettera finora sconosciuta di Joseph-Louis Lagrange (1736-1813) a Giovanni Francesco Cigna (1734-1790) sulla fondazione dell'Accademia delle Scienze di Torino (1783) ci permette di conoscere i suoi pensieri in questa occasione.*

Parole chiave: storia della matematica, Joseph-Louis Lagrange, Accademia delle Scienze, Torino.

The original of the letter reproduced here is in the possession of the library of the Museo del Risorgimento of Turin<sup>1</sup>. It was brought to my attention four years ago by Prof. Livia Giacardi (Department of Mathematics, University of Turin), whose courtesy I have the pleasure of acknowledging.

The letter is three pages in length and written with black ink on both sides of two sheets of white paper. I have been unable to discover anything about its previous history.

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<sup>1</sup> MNRT, Archivio Museo, D 159/14. The transcription repeats Lagrange's mistakes, follows his orthography and carefully reproduces his punctuation. Permission to publish the letter has been granted by the library of the Museo del Risorgimento of Turin, for which I am grateful to Director Roberto Sandri-Giachino and Librarian Francesca Rocci. The present paper was written during a one-year fellowship at the *Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology* in Cambridge, MA. I wish to thank Prof. Bruno Belhoste for his help with the transcription of the letter, Kim Williams (Nexus Network Journal) for her translation from the French and Prof. Dionigi Galletto for his critical reading of the text.

The text is as follows:

La Grange  
A Monsieur  
Monsieur le Docteur Cigna  
Professeur d'Anatomie  
Secrétaire de l'Académie des  
Sciences &c. &c.  
à Turin

*Monsieur*

*Recevez, mon cher Confrère, mes compliments sur l'établissement de l'Académie, et sur la place que vous y occupez. j'y prends autant de part que si j'étais sur les lieux; aussi bien en quittant ma patrie j'y suis resté attaché par le coeur, et la distinction dont on vient de m'honorer augmente encore cet attachement. J'ai prié M. le Comte de Saluces de m'acquiescer envers Sa Majesté et envers le Ministre; ayez la bonté de vous charger du même soin envers tous ceux qui ont pris à cette occasion quelque intérêt à moi, et d'assurer mes nouveaux Confrères de mes devoirs et de mes respects. M. Achard étant absent, je n'ai pu encore lui rendre la lettre que vous m'avez envoyée pour lui; je ne doute pas qu'il ne soit flatté de l'honneur que l'Académie lui fait; et je vous ferai passer son remerciement. Croyez-vous que Frisi et Fontana soient indifférents sur la préférence donnée à Boscovich, Lorgna et Spalanzani? mais il est impossible de contenter tout le monde, et je ne doute pas que le choix qu'on a fait ne soit fondé sur des bonnes raisons. si le mérite seul avoit pu le régler on eût substitué Scheel à Spielman &c. peut être même eût il mieux valu diminuer le nombre de ces places pour en augmenter l'honneur? quoiqu'il en soit puisque ce nombre est fixé, il sera toujours fort honorable d'en être.*

*Il n'est rien dit dans le règlement, de la langue de l'Académie. en a-t-on adoptée une, puisque nous n'en avons aucune; continuera-t-on à donner les Mémoires en latin et en français? y aura-t-il une histoire &c.*

*Adieu, mon cher Ami, vous connaissez depuis longtemps mes sentiments pour vous; je vous prie de n'en douter jamais comme je ne doute point des vôtres à mon égard.  
je vous embrasse de tout mon coeur.*

*Monsieur*

à Berlin ce 25 Aout 1783

*Votre très humble et très  
obéissant serviteur  
de la Grange*



différence par la profession d'université, l'usage &  
l'usage? mais il est ~~différent~~ de nature tout le même  
et je vois par quelle raison on ne peut pas en faire  
de bons usages. je le sais par ce que le roy a dit  
publiquement à l'académie de Paris; que ce n'est pas  
pour enlever le nombre de ces gens qui ont  
mérité l'honneur? puisqu'il ne peut y en avoir  
qu'un seul, il faut toujours les honorer d'un autre.  
Il est bien dit dans le discours de l'académie  
de Paris de l'usage, puisqu'on n'en a jamais  
continuellement adonné à l'usage en latin et en  
françois? y a-t-il une autre raison?

Adieu, mon cher Ami, vous enverrez de plus long temps  
sans doute que vous, je vous prie de m'en dire  
ce que je ne doute point de voir à mon regard.  
je vous en prie de tout mon cœur.

Monsieur

à Paris le 25 de  
1745.

Je suis très humble & très  
dévotement  
votre  
Jules Goussier

Le 9 Mars

A Monsieur

Monsieur le Docteur Cigna

Professeur d'Anatomie

Secrétaire de l'Académie des

Sciences de Turin

à Turin

Here is the English translation of the letter:

Lagrange  
to Monsieur Doctor Cigna  
Professor of Anatomy  
Secretary of the Academy of Sciences etc., etc.  
Turin

*My dear fellow member, I send you my felicitations on the establishment of the Academy, and on the place that you occupy there. I take as much a part in it as if I were there. Although I have left my homeland, I have remained attached to it in my heart, and the distinction with which I have just been honoured makes this attachment even stronger. I asked the Count of Saluzzo to acquit me to His Majesty and to the Minister; have the goodness to discharge this same duty with regards to all who have taken an interest in me on this occasion, and assure my new colleagues of my devotion and respect. Monsieur Achard being absent, I have not yet been able to give him the letter that you sent me for him; I have no doubt that he will be flattered by the honour that the Academy does him; and I will convey to you his gratitude. Do you believe that Frisi and Fontana can be indifferent to the preference given to Boscovich, Lorgna and Spalanzani? However, it is impossible to satisfy everybody, and I have no doubt that the choice that was made was founded on good reasons. If merit had governed, Scheel would have been chosen in place of Spielman and so on. Might it have been better to decrease the number of these places in order to increase their prestige? In any case, since this number is fixed, being a part of it will always be a great honour.*

*Nothing is said in the Academy statute regarding the language. Has a language been adopted, since we don't have one? Will the Memoirs continue to be given in both Latin and French? Will there be a histoire? Etc.*

*Farewell, my dear Friend. You have known of my feelings for you for a long time; I beg you never to doubt them, as I don't question yours in my regard.*

*I embrace you wholeheartedly,*

*Monsieur*

in Berlin, this 25 August 1783

*Your very humble and very  
obedient servant,  
de la Grange*

The Lagrange scholar will immediately note two significant points. First, this is the only letter exchanged between Lagrange and the physician and physicist Giovanni Francesco Cigna (1734–1790) known to have survived<sup>2</sup>. The loss of their correspondence is to be regretted, for Cigna had been a close friend of his and thus, presumably, Lagrange confided in him. This letter is in effect further proof of the good feeling that existed between the two scientists. Second, we have here a very clear answer to the question of Lagrange's nationality, for he explicitly states that Piedmont is his country (*ma patrie*). While this unfortunate debate should have been settled long ago, it is useful to have an unequivocal statement from Lagrange himself<sup>3</sup>.

The tone of the letter is quite warm, at least for a man of Lagrange's temperament (as a matter of fact, these bursts of spontaneity in Lagrange's writings are rare indeed). Evidently, he was very pleased to see the Academy he had helped to found properly recognized<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the fate of the *Società privata* seems to have been in danger for quite a long time, as can be seen from Lagrange's correspondence.

On 24 February 1774, for example, he wrote to Condorcet that

I have heard from Turin that the establishment of the Society is no longer spoken of there, perhaps because the King has more important business on his

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<sup>2</sup> See BORGATO & PEPE 1989, § 10. For Cigna's biography see BALDINI 1981. Cigna had been elected secretary of the Academy on 25 July 1783, but he resigned on 21 December. This explains LAGRANGE's congratulations at the beginning of the letter.

<sup>3</sup> As is well known, the somewhat vexed question of LAGRANGE's nationality was raised in Jean-Baptiste Joseph Delambre's *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages de m. le comte Lagrange* (1816), where it is plainly said that he was French. Even today, he is usually considered a French mathematician. For a complete review of the question, see BORGATO & PEPE 1989, § 12; see also SARTON 1944, § III.

<sup>4</sup> The Academy was founded in 1757 by Lagrange, Cigna and Count Angelo Saluzzo di Monesioglio (1734–1810). To this initial group were added, in the years which followed, a few kindred spirits. At first, this was an informal institution, devoted essentially to discussing the works and readings of its own members, and was thus called *Società privata* ("Private society"). The members met at the house of Count of Saluzzo. In 1759 the Society began the publication of a scientific journal, originally entitled *Miscellanea philosophico-mathematica Societatis Privatae Taurinensis*. Five volumes had been completed fourteen years later; these initiated the long series of *Mélanges*, *Mémoires* and *Atti* that have spread the fame of the earlier Society and later Academy throughout the world of science. Among the contributors to these early volumes were some of the leading scientists of the time: Jean Le Rond d'Alembert (1717–1783), Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794), Leonhard Euler (1707–1783), Albrecht Haller (1708–1777), Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827), Gaspard Monge (1746–1818) and, of course, Lagrange. Shortly after the publication of the *Miscellanea*, the Society obtained the permission to add the adjective *reale* ("royal") to its name. Finally, the creation of a formal Academy under royal patronage was suggested to the King. The actual establishment of the same occurred on 25 July 1783. Lagrange, then in Berlin, was elected honorary president. For a history of the Academy, see GORRESIO 1883; see also PEPE 2005, chap. X, § 1.