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# **Specimens from the Second Collection of Albertus Seba in Poland: the Natural History Cabinet of Anna Jabłonowska (1728-1800)**

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# Specimens from the Second Collection of Albertus Seba in Poland: the Natural History Cabinet of Anna Jabłonowska (1728-1800)

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Albertus Seba (1665–1736) was a Dutch apothecary and businessman, who assembled perhaps the greatest natural history cabinet of his time. In 1717 Seba sold his first collection to Peter the Great of Russia (Engel 1961). A few parts of this collection, which served as the foundation of Peter's Kunstkammer, have survived and are present in the Zoological Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences (Juriev 1981). Seba rebuilt an even larger second collection, which formed the basis for his sumptuously illustrated four volume work, the so-called *Thesaurus* (Seba, 1734-1765), and was eventually sold in 1752, 16 years after Seba's death (Anonymous 1752). Although much of the material was purchased by natural history dealers or the agents of private collectors, a substantial portion of it eventually reached national or royal natural history museums across Europe. Material from this second sale survives today in the collections of the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, the Zoological Museum in Amsterdam, the Natural History Museum (formerly British Museum of Natural History) in London, Naturalis, the Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum (formerly Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie) in Leiden, and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, amongst others (Boeseman 1970; Juriev 1981; Adler 1989; Thireau et al. 1998). Engel (1961) and Boeseman (1970) traced the dispersal of Seba's second collection to these and other destinations, but they did not record the eventual movement of any of the collection to Poland. We here present hitherto overlooked information that substantiates that

some of Seba's collection, including herpetological specimens, was held in the natural history cabinet of Princess Anna Jabłonowska (1728-1800) during the late 18th century.

Princess Anna Jabłonowska (Fig. 1) was one of the most powerful and influential women of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe. She was a member of one of the larger and richer families of the powerful Polish state and is remembered chiefly for her political and economic activities. Following the death of her husband, Voivode Jan Kajetan Jabłonowski of Braclaw, in 1764 she served (1768-1772) as an unofficial member of the political and military union of Polish nobility, The Confederation of Bar. Later she supported the insurrection of Tadeusz Kościuszko and in 1794-95 she was active in military opposition to Russian control in Poland. On the economic front, she was progressive, implementing various social and health care reforms on her extensive properties (Jabłonowska 1786-87; Misztachorobińska 1978). Jabłonowska was also influential with respect to agriculture and forestry and she translated a number of works on the practical aspects of nature from English and French to Polish (Wójcik 1987; Wołek and Wójcik 2001).

Jabłonowska's interests extended broadly to the natural sciences and, like many wealthy nobles of the time, she amassed a private cabinet of natural curiosities. This cabinet was considered one of more important natural history collections in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It was undoubtedly the largest such collection in Poland during this period (Dubois de Jancigny

1778) and only the collection of Jakob Theodor Klein (1685-1759), originator of the term herpetology, in Gdansk may have been comparable in scope and quality (Wójcik 1970).

Despite the fact that several naturalists, including Aleksander Sapieha (1773-1812), Jan Krzysztof Kluk (1739-1796), and Stanisław Ładowski (1738-1798), worked in Jabłonowska's collection and library (Wójcik 1970) and that it was visited by King Stanisław August Poniatowski (Wołek and Wójcik 2001), relatively little is known about the composition of her cabinet. This is due mainly to the lack of primary sources, such as a first-hand description or a catalogue. Virtually all information about this collection comes from secondary sources, especially memoirs of the time, family correspondence, and particularly the writings of travellers such as Johann Bernouilli (1779-1780, *vide* Fedorowicz 1968 and Wójcik 1970) or of naturalists, such as Wasyl Siewergin (Wójcik 1970; Wołek and Wójcik 2001), who later took part in the purchase of the collection.



*Fig. 1. Only known life portrait of Anna Jabłonowska from the II L.O. im księżnej Anny Jabłonowskiej (II Princess Anna Jabłonowska High School) in Białystok, Poland.*

Bernouilli did not visit Jabłonowska's cabinet himself but he obtained his information from a reliable source. Anna Jabłonowska maintained very good relations with the family of Daniel Gralath (1708-1767), a rich merchant from Gdansk and the son-in-law of Jakob Theodor Klein. Gralath, himself an amateur physicist, was one of the founders of the Societas Physico-Experimentalis, an important learned society that developed and thrived thanks to the financial assistance of Józef Jabłonowski, Anna's father. In a letter (September 29, 1779) to Bernouilli, Renata Wilhelmina Gralath stated that "the cabinet of the princess deserves the attention of a specialist. The princess spends much of her effort and money to supplement it.

Last year several cases of containers of natural history curiosities were sent from the Netherlands for her collection. The specimens sent this year are still at home. Our library resembles rather a museum since I decorated it with more than 180 jars with quadrupeds, fish and snakes in alcohol." (cited after Wójcik 1970).

Gdansk was probably used as a trans-shipment point for natural history specimens destined for Jabłonowska's properties at Kock (near Lublin) and especially Siemiatycze (near the present border with Belarus). As an important port, Gdansk at this time was one of more important commercial centers for natural history specimens. This is reflected by the cabinet of

Christophe Gottwald, which included one of the earliest collections of chelonians and was purchased by Peter the Great (Juriev 1976), and the Dresden collection of King August II (Eilenburger 1755), both of which originated in major part from this town, as well as by the cabinet of Klein.

In Siemiatycze Jabłonowska's collection occupied five large rooms (Wójcik 1970). Many contemporary scientists worked on this collection, including the two Polish naturalists Stanisław Ładowski and Jan Krzysztof Kluk. In 1799 Stanisław Staszic visited Jabłonowska's cabinet and was able to compare it with others he had seen during his travels in Germany, Italy and France. Staszic was one of the fathers of Polish geology, but was also broadly trained in zoology and botany by Buffon, Daubenton, Brisson, and Haüy in Paris. In his journal he said of the Siemiatycze collection: "a cabinet of natural history is in the palace. The collection, large and rare, was made by the famous Seba [*Saba* in the original] and bought by Jabłonowska. The collection of amphibians and reptiles of the world [in the original *amphibians of the world*, but at the time the term 'amphibian' frequently signified both amphibians and reptiles] is rather numerous" (Leśniewski 1931).

Unfortunately, Staszic's reference provides the only information about Seba specimens in Anna Jabłonowska's collection. Where or when these specimens were bought is unknown. It is obvious that the collection did not come from Seba himself, as Jabłonowska was only eight years old at the time of his death. It is probable that these specimens originated in the sale of Seba's cabinet on April 11, 1752 (when she was 24 years old). It is likely that Jabłonowska obtained the material indirectly, probably through one of the Dutch natural history retailers who attended the auction. However, if Seba's material was the same noted by Renata Gralath in his letter to Bernouilli in 1779, it is quite possible that it had passed through other hands before finding its way to Poland.

Following Jabłonowska's death, her heirs, who were in debt, sold her natural history cabinet to Tsar Alexander I for the sum of 50,000 guildens (approximately equivalent to 2006 values of \$454,000 or €355,000 in terms of purchasing power). The scientists W. Siewiergin and A. Sewastionow from St. Petersburg and a French curator, Richard, spent six weeks in Siemiatycze preparing 101 large packages for shipment. Siewiergin noticed among other specimens "the many amphibians and reptiles including vipers" (Wójcik 1970). The collection left Siemiatycze on April 15, 1802 and required 15 carriages with four horses each to transport it. The Tsar subsequently offered the collection to the University of Moscow, although a part of the collection was sent to St. Petersburg where, in 1875, the herbarium of Jan Krzysztof Kluk (1739-1796), which had originated in Siemiatycze was rediscovered (Rostafiński 1916). However, the majority of the collection is believed to have been destroyed during the burning of Moscow during the Napoleonic wars (Wójcik 1987) and it is highly unlikely that any of Seba's specimens that passed through Jabłonowska's collection have survived. Nonetheless, Poland may be added to the list of countries through which parts of Seba's natural history cabinet passed (Boeseman 1970), emphasizing the broad scale of influence of this great collector on natural history in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

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