Pietism came late to the university town of Jena. Whereas many other German towns had vibrant Pietist movements since at least the final decade of the seventeenth century, the political and theological climate of Jena prevented the emergence of a significant Pietist movement until the mid 1720s. The university’s unpleasant experience in the syncretism controversies from the 1650s through the 1680s left both the professors and the university chancellors with a strong aversion to controversy. Consequently, the chancellors forbade the university from getting involved in academic quarrels with other universities, a prohibition that the faculties by and large followed.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Pietism never established a firm foothold in Jena. In fact, the most pressing problem for the authorities in Jena was not troublesome conventicles or heterodox teachings, but groups and ideologies of an entirely secular nature. To deal with those problems, the chancellors commissioned a visitation to the university in 1696 to take stock of the state of affairs at the university and make suggestions for improvements.  

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1 The term “chancellor” is being used for the German term Rektor. The term refers to the rulers under whose authority the university stood. The University of Jena stood under the authority of four different “protector” states simultaneously, Saxe-Weimar, Saxe-Eisenach, Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, and Saxe-Meiningen. The daily administration of the university was in the hands of a “Prorektor” (vice-chancellor), an office which was held by an elected university professor. A new vice-chancellor was elected each semester.

The population of Jena in the first quarter of the eighteenth century is estimated to have been between 3,800 and 4,000 people, excluding the student body, which amounted to an additional 1,200 to 1,300 young men or roughly one-quarter of the total population. The University of Jena had the highest enrollment of any German university. The student body in Jena was comprised of young men from all over Germany and German-speaking Europe. A majority of them came from less well-off families. The visitation of 1696 found that the students in general were ill-bred and kept together in fraternities based upon their common homeland. The following excerpt illustrates the dismay of the visitors with the Jena students:

"[The students are] without morals, piety or studiosity. They revel in their freedom, and refuse to subject themselves to any authority. They hang out in the corner pubs, and dine with disreputable and distrustful companions. They treat professors and other honorable persons with disrespect. They are always looking for trouble and jump at every chance to duel. They wander the streets at night and visit neighboring villages with no good in mind. They don't attend classes, instead wasting their tuition money on beer and carousing. In the end they disappoint their families, who have sent them off in the hope of their betterment. Instead of growing in the good, as their families hope, they grow in vices and develop bad habits from the freedoms they enjoy."