FROM ARISTOCRATIC SUPPORT TO ACADEMIC OFFICE: PATRONAGE AND UNIVERSITY IN THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

Iris Fleßenkämper

Although international research on the Scottish Enlightenment today still readily draws on methods and questions from the early history of biography and ideas, recent scientific approaches have proven themselves by merging these perspectives and enhancing them from a social-historical point of view. Consistent with a new “social history of knowledge”,1 most research on the specific historical conditions of the production and dissemination of enlightened knowledge focuses on the literary and publishing culture of eighteenth-century Scotland.2 However, the role that social networks played in the rise and legitimation of knowledge and the sciences has only recently begun to be studied extensively.3 The present article aims to elucidate the transition in forms of scholarly patronage that finally led to the establishment of professional autonomy in eighteenth-century Scotland.

Enlightenment historians still tend to assume that the social backbone of this movement included members of a “free intelligentsia” (Karl Mannheim) who were “beholden to none but themselves, the public who bought their writings or subscribed to their lectures, and such cultural middlemen as publishers.”4 However, authors such as David Hume, who received a substantial income from his publications, most notably for his History of England,5 and who was able to live on his writings even in the longer term, remained an exception. The majority of eighteenth-century Scottish scholars were still dependent on the support of mostly aristocratic patrons to finance their research. Compared with previous

1 Peter Burke, A Social History of Knowledge. From Gutenberg to Diderot (Cambridge 2000).
centuries, however, academic patronage in the Age of Enlightenment changed its traditional form: While in most cases a single patron still paid for the personal support of a scholar and his projects at the beginning of the eighteenth century, patrons increasingly lobbied for official positions for their scholars in the course of the century. Thus, with the patronage of office behind them, scholars were supported first and foremost in their professional career, which in the long run offered them the necessary financial and social independence to act as researchers and authors.

This article deals with the question of the extent to which patronage helped Scottish Enlightenment scholars to position themselves institutionally in order to consolidate as an intellectual elite and thus to contribute to the implementation and dissemination of innovative knowledge. On the basis of several prominent examples, it will investigate the function and etiquette of patronage as an institution that promoted university careers. A further aim is to examine the significance of patronage in the promotion and legitimation of innovative knowledge.6

**The Scottish Patronage System in the Eighteenth Century**

Numerous studies on patronage within hereditary monarchies, republics and principalities of the early modern period have proven that patronage never existed “as a pan-European single institution”,7 but that it appeared in various forms depending on the political culture, social structure and temporal context. Within Scotland the mechanism of patronage in the eighteenth century was also subject to specific domestic rules which were themselves political consequences of the Anglo-Scottish Union in 1707. The Scottish were excluded from participating in governmental policies, at least formally, after the new Westminster parliament had abolished both the Privy Council and the ministry of the Scottish Secretary of State in 1708–1709.8 After the union, Scotland no longer had a recognised minister

---

