

**Tagung des Arbeitskreises Astronomiegeschichte
in der Astronomischen Gesellschaft**

***Kometen, Sterne, Galaxien -
Astronomie in der Hamburger Sternwarte***

Hamburg, 23.-24. September 2012

**Der erste südafrikanische Astronom
kam aus Hamburg**

The first South African astronomer was a native of Hamburg

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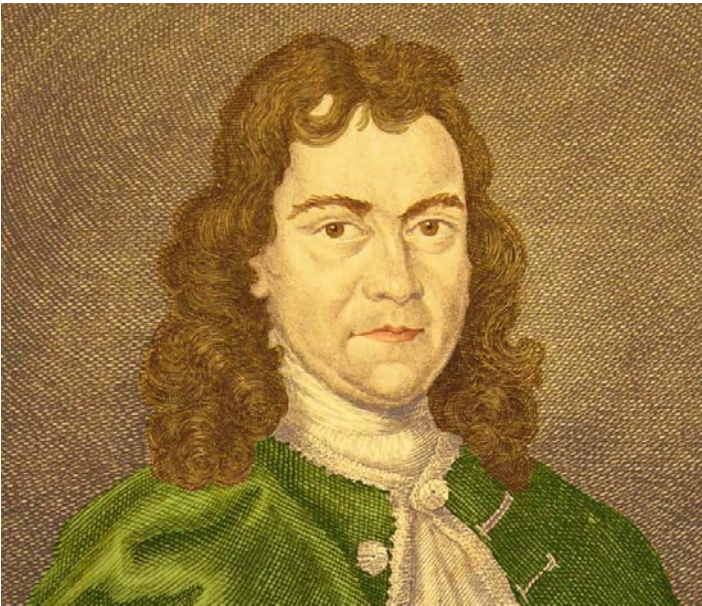
Berlin

The rich history of modern astronomy in South Africa begins with astronomical activities for navigation and for curiosity by passing ships. When the first Europeans settled at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, within the area of the inner city of modern Cape Town, the southern tip of Africa soon became popular for research in astronomy and other natural sciences. Already in 1652, a comet was noted by Jan Anthoniszoon van Riebeeck (1619-1677), the founder of the small trading outpost of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) at the Cape.

The next time that astronomical observations from the Cape are known today, was in 1685. A group of French Jesuits had passed the Cape, while on their way to Siam (today: Thailand). They spent a few days ashore, set up their instruments and conducted astronomical observations, in order to, for instance, determine the latitude and longitude of the Cape. It took roughly three more decades, however, before an European settler of the VOC did astronomical observations at the Cape. This 'astronomer' was paid to do the observations and he did so for several years, before he became a free burgher of the Cape colony. For further analysis and publication, his observational data were sent to astronomers in Berlin, which is located in Germany today but was the capital of the state Prussia in those days.

The astronomical career of this particular person began in 1704, when the astronomer Peter Johann Kolb (1675-1726) was on his way to South Africa. Kolb planned the erection of a small observatory at the Cape. He wanted to collect astronomical data, but he didn't mean to do this alone. Neither did he intend to spend a lot of time at the Cape. Instead, he

was ordered to find someone else who could proceed with the observations and the correspondence from the Cape to Berlin, once Kolb would have gone back to Prussia.



Portrait of Peter Kolb (1675–1726)
Kolb 1719 (edited by the author).

Kolb had found someone for this position: Adolf Reusch (died 1705), a previous student from the University of Halle, where Kolb had studied, too. Unfortunately, Adolf Reusch died on the voyage to Africa in 1705. Kolb had to look for someone else and he decided in favour of Nikolaus von Willich (1682-1743) from Hamburg. Thus, the young von Willich became Kolb's assistant, although he had left Amsterdam without any proper education in astronomy, natural sciences or even mathematics. He almost certainly did not know about his future at the Cape until he spoke to Kolb, his later mentor and supervisor, on the ship *Unie* on its way to South Africa.

This talk (in German) will give a short overview about the ideas that formed the basis of this project, about the objectives, about the people that were involved and thus about this interesting person, about whom little is known and who - in a way - became the first South African astronomer.

Literature:

Markus, Karsten: Peter Kolb (1675–1726), ein fränkischer Astronom in Afrika.

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