

PRESS RELEASE

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The Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities to receive extensive collection of hand-written documents from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation

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The gift of a manuscript collection from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation will significantly increase the Academy's archive holdings. The collection includes hitherto unknown documents, a manuscript that was believed to be lost, and letters that were previously unknown to researchers: The collection contains 98 letters written by or to Alexander von Humboldt during the years 1798 to 1858, two scientific manuscripts and two letters between third parties.

Comparatively few hand-written documents from Humboldt's years in Paris (1807 to 1827) still exist. The collection's letters from this period that are addressed to French statesmen, famous members of the European aristocracy and foreign natural scientists who visited Paris, a major centre for science, reveal Humboldt to be part of the city's multifaceted social life. The collection's highlights include a diplomatic dispatch – once believed to have been lost – that Humboldt sent from Paris to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia in 1841 and a previously unknown letter from the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauß to Humboldt. The probably largest set of documents in this collection comprises 55 letters Humboldt wrote to the historian, politician and jurist for administrative law Friedrich von Raumer during the time from 1832 to 1858. These letters contain comments on promoting science and scholarship, particularly through the Prussian Academy of Sciences, which counted both scholars as members, and provide insights into the political situation in Berlin and Prussia during that age. Of particular scholarly interest is a more than 50-page manuscript that Humboldt sent to Helen Maria Williams, the English translator of his American travel journal. In this manuscript he sought to illustrate his view of things using lists with geological terminology and drawings of natural objects and artefacts and, in the process, correct misconceptions.

The collection covers a broad period and a wide range of topics and consequently offers not only new points of departure for further research into Alexander von Humboldt in a strict sense. It also offers valuable contributions to the history of European science and scholarship in the 19th century.

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