



Concordia res parvae crescunt.

**Cooperation in the fields of book and library history
in the Nordic and Baltic countries**

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Abstract:

The paper describes the work of the Nordic-Baltic-Russian Research Network on the History of Books, Libraries and Reading (HIBOLIRE) that has been active for five years (funded by NordForsk). The goal of the network is to enhance the cooperation of these small disciplines over the geographical, disciplinary and linguistic barriers. The rich research traditions in the area have become more visible for the scholarly world at large. Even library historians have found new strength in the cooperation. In 2009 the network produced a book containing articles about the development of public libraries in the Nordic and Baltic countries. Even the autonomous regions, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland have their own presentation in the book, as well as the area inhabited by the Sápmi people. The book is titled "Library Spirit in the Nordic and Baltic countries: historical perspectives".

Introduction

There is a small but tenacious group of scholars and librarians all over the world, who are studying the history of libraries. In economic terms libraries as such are not a big thing in the society. In my own country, Finland, the expenses of the municipal public libraries represent less than one per cent of the total expenses of the municipalities. Still public libraries are visible and part of the daily life of the majority of the people, much

more so than their share of the money spent on municipal services would make one expect. One could say that the study of library history is in the same way marginal in the library world, produced with meagre resources by a handful of scholars and enthusiasts, but its visibility and value is much greater than the money spent would allow to expect. History brings legitimacy to present day work and, at its best, gives a broader temporal perspective and shows that this work is not only routine but also has had and still has a mission. We serve people in the library spirit as our predecessors have done. At the same time we must be critical about what has been done in the past and what we are doing right now.

Even in my own part of the world, the northern Europe, library historians are few and far between. The same applies to a couple of neighboring disciplines, such as book history and history of reading. The smallness of our disciplines has made it necessary to work together. One of the means to achieve cooperation is the Nordic-Baltic-Russian Network on the History of Books, Libraries and Reading, known by its acronym HIBOLIRE. It is a multinational and multidisciplinary network of scholars in the fields of book history, history of libraries and history of reading (in the web: <http://www.helsinki.fi/historia/hibolire/>). The participants are members of various academic and professional institutions, doctoral students or otherwise interested members of the academic and library community in the Nordic and Baltic countries and, hopefully in the future even more than now in St. Petersburg.

The aim of the network is to enhance cooperation between the individual members and their organizations, disseminate information, organize seminars, summer schools and conferences, and support doctoral students. The network even encourages its members to make the results of their research available to a larger audience both at home and abroad, among the academic people as well as a larger audience. In this article I am going to briefly tell about the background and the activities of the network HIBOLIRE and present one of its products in the field of popularization, the book “Library Spirit in the Nordic and Baltic countries: historical perspectives” (2009).

Background of the network HIBOLIRE

The HIBOLIRE network is a direct continuation of a Nordic research network in the history of books, libraries and reading with members from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden that was active since the 1990's. In connection with a project application the network was named "Modernitetens kunskapsorganisering" or "the organization of knowledge in modernity". Its activities consisted of exchange of information, meetings, seminars and writing project applications. In 2001 some of the members participated in publishing articles in a special issue on book and library history in Norsk tidsskrift for bibliotekforskning. Larger project applications were, however, not successful, and the activities seemed to wither away. In 2003 the members of the network decided to widen the geographical scope of membership and started to invite new members also from the Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and even from the Russian St. Petersburg, the greatest metropole in the region. New members, especially book historians, were even invited from the Nordic countries. The first seminar in the enlarged conception was organized in Tampere (Finland) in March 2003. The network succeeded in getting financing from the Nordic organ for research funding, NordForsk (<http://www.nordforsk.org>), for the years 2006-2008, and later for an extension of two years 2009-2010.

Three disciplines, one whole

The three disciplines named in the title of the network, book history, library history and history of reading, have long traditions, but today all of them are under a process of renewal. The changes in the media and society in general caused by the digital revolution and globalization pose challenges to these traditional branches of research as well.

On the negative side are the structural changes in the academic curricula that have created a context for the disciplines. The position of book and library history in the library and information science education has weakened during the last decades.

On the positive side are the new expanding views that the rapid historical turns create: not since the invention of printing have new technological inventions and social and

professional changes literally demanded new interpretations of the history of books, libraries and reading. In this way the work of the network is related to the present day, even if the periods studied may go back hundreds or even thousands of years. It has been said that people hunger for a context in the everchanging media world. The work of this network can create a piece of that context.

All these fields of study can, in the present professional, scholarly and technological circumstances, be seen from the same angle that may be called "information history". This term is, however, under debate and needs to be further discussed in the academic and library community.

One thing is certain: those who conduct this kind of research need one another. Their research communities in their own countries are too small to obtain respect from the greater academic community. Cooperation is needed internationally to create a stronger and more effective group.

Book history as an umbrella?

One of the developments during the recent decades that has changed the position of these disciplines is the rise of book history as a serious field of historical study. Book history is more and more seen as an umbrella covering all disciplines in the field of history of books, of reading, of libraries, of publishing, of bookselling etc.

International cooperation in the field of book history, especially under the auspices of SHARP, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, has opened new ways of cooperation and helped lower disciplinary boundaries. The conferences of SHARP, where many of the members of the HIBOLIRE network have presented their papers, gather researchers from all over the world and from many disciplines.

The rise of book history has also brought together the historical research done in the library and information science (or information studies) community and research done in the academic historical community. Several members of the HIBOLIRE network originate from university departments of history.

Out of the shadow!

Moreover, there is a growing interest in the international book and library historical community towards research done in the Nordic countries, around the Baltic Sea and in Russia. These areas have a flourishing research with long traditions in all the fields named in the title of the network. Their problem has been, so far, that there has been very little cooperation over the geographical, disciplinary and linguistic boundaries. For a long time there was no effective international academic community in these fields, not even in the Scandinavian countries where language is no real barrier.

One of the problems of the Nordic research in these fields is that there are not many academic chairs in book history, library history or history of reading, except the chair in book and library history at the University of Lund, Sweden. It is no wonder, then, that research is rhapsodical and without formal academic structures, too much dependent on individual persons and with no continuity from a generation to another (although the volume and quality of the research literature on the subjects is not negligible, see the review articles (in English) on recent research in Nordic book history in the special issue of *Nordisk Tidskrift för bok- och bibliotekshistoria* 2002, vol 86, no. 2). An important step will be taken in 2010, when the 5-year chair in Book History at the University of Helsinki will be filled. It is the first ever chair in book history in Finland.

In this respect the situation in the Baltic countries is different. There the academic traditions and organizational structures are on a high level with chairs in book history and the more general book science at universities in Vilnius and Tallinn.

Breaking language barriers

Most of the rich original research is, naturally, published in the domestic languages both in the Nordic countries and the Baltic area. Even if publishing in one's own language is important, these circumstances create a multiplicity of language barriers that have prevented the international academic community, be it English, French or German-speaking, from getting acquainted with the valuable research that is done around the Baltic sea and in the Nordic countries. What is even more alarming is that even

neighbouring countries, across the Baltic sea, do not know what is happening on the other side.

By establishing the HIBOLIRE network it was possible to aim at several principal goals: getting to know one another better in our own region, and creating a firm basis for a better international visibility for our fields of research. There also is a third aim that is connected with the cultural aspect of the history of books. National literature in each country and the international contacts of the literary world in the region form a fundamental part of the national and regional cultures, they are part of the national and regional identity.

Popularization

The topics that the network's researcher represent are not only academically interesting. A large part of them are interesting from a broad cultural viewpoint and the general public is likely to be interested in them, if they are presented in a proper way without heavy academic formalities. The history, e.g., of the universal reading habit, is so recent that many people have their own memories of big changes in the reading behavior.

Our rural grandmothers and fathers did not read much, except for the hymnal and the Bible, but since then all of us have become part of the great reading culture. It is the spread of mass education and modern media revolution that has made all of us witness to history and that is why it interests the great public. As stated earlier, people hunger for new interpretations of the history, even cultural history, and interpreting history is our business.

***Concordia res parvae crescunt* or “harmony makes small things grow”**

It seems evident that even with modest funds one can make a difference. Opening doors and finding people interested in the same things as oneself is often the crucial thing. Several members of the network have mentioned the HIBOLIRE network (or its predecessor) among the sources of support that have helped them in their work (see, e.g.,

prefaces in the doctoral dissertations of Arne Apelsest [2004], Lis Byberg [2007], Roger Jacobsson [2009] and Ineta Sibrian [2009]).

The network has acted as an information channel, organized summer schools and seminars, as well as supported financially and through members' activities larger events, such as the SHARP regional conference in Copenhagen in September 2008, where two of the members participated in the planning committee, and especially the SHARP Helsinki Conference in August 2010 (<http://www.helsinki.fi/sharp2010/press.htm>), where the younger Finnish members of the network are in leading roles (Jyrki Hakapää as chair of the organizing committee). Our network had for many years a fruitful cooperation with prof. Alistair Black of the Leeds Metropolitan University. The conference "Making connections" was organized by Prof. Black in cooperation with our network in Leeds in 2007, and in 2009 he was the keynote speaker and commentator of doctoral students' papers at our summer school in Tampere. We hope to maintain the contact with him, even if he in 2009 moved to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

The annual conferences organized by the Faculty of Communication of the Vilnius University gather every year many members of the network. The papers are published in the Lithuanian book historical journal *Knygotyra*, which has become a sort of unofficial publication channel for the network. It is a multilingual refereed journal. Articles in the English language contain thorough Lithuanian and Russian summaries (and vice versa). Russian is still a lingua franca among the older generation of the Baltic book historians.

Library Spirit in the Nordic and Baltic countries: the book

Popularization of knowledge is one of the goals of the HIBOLIRE network. This is natural because many among our members have a background or a continuing engagement in librarianship, where a natural element of the work is making knowledge available to as many people as possible. On the other hand, most of our members come from small countries and small language areas, where literature and books in the vernacular have been important in the formation of the national identity. History of books and libraries has a national role in the positive meaning of the term. Popularization means that we should not only publish in formal academic journals, often in foreign languages.

We should each of us publish in our own language, or languages, as in the case of Finland where there are two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. But furthermore, we should extend our popularization effort to major languages as well, because our small languages live behind the language barrier. Last year members of the HIBOLIRE network published in English a book about the library histories of our area. The book got the title: "Library Spirit in the Nordic and Baltic Countries. Historical perspectives" (the book can be ordered from the net book shop Granum:

<http://granum.uta.fi/english/index.php>.

This may be the first time, when the development of the public libraries in all these countries is so extensively described, critically analyzed and presented side by side. There are, of course, reference works that contain short articles on the history of libraries all over the world (such as the Encyclopedia of library history. Edited by Wayne A. Wiegand and Donald G. Davis, Jr. New York : Garland, 1994.), as well as older books that tell about libraries in several countries, such as "The chance to read. Public libraries in the world today" by Lionel R. McColvin (London : Phoenix House, 1956), where a number of Scandinavian countries are mentioned. Especially important has been K. C. Harrison's "Libraries in Scandinavia" (2. ed., London : Deutsch, 1969), but its presentations of library history are not as extensive as in our book.

Are the Nordic public libraries alike as berries?

Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden are a well-known family of countries, called the Nordic countries. Some autonomous regions also belong to this family and have their own articles in the book: Greenland, world's greatest island, and small island regions, the Faroe Islands and Åland. Even the area inhabited by the Sápmi people in Norway, Sweden and Finland has a distinct cultural and linguistic image and that is why the library services to the Sápmi people have their own article in the book.

Especially the four Scandinavian (Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland) countries may seem for foreign eye rather like berries, so much they have in common. One factor that binds them together are the Scandinavian languages, which reach even to Finland that has a significant Swedish-speaking minority, even if the Finnish language itself

belongs to another language group. Through history these countries have been in a close, though not always peaceful, contact. But since a hundred years there has not been even a threat of war between them and it is 200 years since an open war. Denmark and Sweden have historically been the dominating countries. Denmark governed hundreds of years Iceland and Norway, and still it is the mother country to Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Sweden had Finland as its undivisible part for six hundred years until 1809, when Finland became a Grand Duchy in the Russian empire for 108 years. In 1812-1905 there was a union of Sweden and Norway

For historical reasons the area that our book covers is vast, ranging from Greenland in the west to Finland in the east. During summertime, it is, in fact, true that the sun doesn't set in this "empire". Large parts of our area belong to the arctic region of the Nordic countries, which we ourselves call "the Northern Calotte", north of the Polar Circle. For a superficial eye the present day Scandinavian library systems seem rather similar, but when you look closer, you'll find amazing differences in library ideology and practical organization.

The title of the book, *Library Spirit*, has a historical background. One of the things the book celebrates is the 100th anniversary of the first Danish general library meeting in Aarhus in 1909. As Martin Dyrbye tells in his article, the head of the Royal Library Hans O. Lange presented at the meeting his vision for the organization of the Danish libraries. His views were inspired by the example of the library development in the USA and Britain, but he went further: all types of libraries should be part of a unified library system and all libraries should be free to all citizens. He summed up his vision in the concept of 'Library Spirit', which combined a professional with a vocational view on librarianship. For the present times we may perhaps interpret *Library Spirit* meaning that the public library is not only a professional sphere of the librarian but also something that needs the engagement of the general public and politicians as well.

The public library has, of course, not been invented in the Nordic countries. There are several sources of external influence to the public library development in these parts of the world. Traditionally, Germany was a very strong source of cultural impulses. Most of the pre-forms of public libraries, the reading societies and commercial lending libraries, have been adopted from the German cultural area (even if often originating, e.g., from

France). The great vogue of parish libraries during the 19th century was influenced from Britain as well. During the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century the most important influence came from the American Public Library Movement. A number of library people from all Scandinavian countries visited the USA, studied librarianship there and brought the new ideas home. During the course of the 20th century public libraries in the Scandinavian countries became more and more attached to the Nordic model of welfare state.

In the Scandinavian (including Finland) part of the area, one cannot say anything else than that the development of public libraries since the beginning of the 20th century has been phenomenal. The Library Spirit has been and still is strong. Public libraries do not function in a social vacuum, they are a part of a larger cultural and educational structure in the country. Alone the libraries can't change the general picture, but the full effect of public libraries is realized in combination with, e.g., school reforms, freedom of expression and a positive general attitude towards culture and education.

The Baltic countries seem destined to form a group of their own sharing similar experiences during the Soviet times which lay like a great burden on their shoulders, but even they are individuals. One might first think that the western impulses in librarianship have not been as strong in the Baltic countries as in Scandinavia, but this is an illusion caused by the Soviet era. During the early decades of the 20th century and the time between the world wars, they were in the library development on the same track as their western neighbors. They were building their public library systems with the ideals of the Public Library Movement in mind, even if from more modest starting points and hampered by political instability. The track forward was brutally broken by the Soviet occupation, which started a 50 years' parenthesis also in librarianship characterized by censorship and surveillance. The articles in the book tell a dramatic story about the period, when the portraits of Lenin and Stalin cast their watchful eye from the walls of the libraries and reading rooms on the readers and borrowers. After the fall of the wall, the libraries in the Baltic countries have gone through a dynamic period of development, even if there is still much to do to attain the same position for libraries in the society as in the Nordic countries.

Finding general patterns in the Nordic-Baltic area, Europe?

At the end of the book there is an article by Magnus Torstensson reviewing the features that may be characteristic of the library development in the area covered by the book. Furthermore, there is a folded table containing highlights of the development of public libraries in the countries described in the book. These elements have been produced to make it easier to compare the development in the countries.

Libraries do not grow by themselves as mushrooms, but through private initiative, through professional advocacy, through legislation and through municipal engagement. Since the early 20th century both in Denmark, Finland and Norway library legislation has been very important for library development providing both an organizational framework and financial support. In Sweden, on the other hand, the first library law was passed as late as in 1997. Before that the Swedish library development was to a great extent in the hands of the municipalities and library professionals.

In most of the countries some similar institutional steps were taken before the Second World War, such were, e.g., the establishment of a library association and a professional journal, passing of library legislation and founding a state library bureau (or other controlling, guiding and consulting authority). In many countries the state started to support municipal public libraries.

In the Nordic countries, along with the rise of the welfare society the state subsidies became important, but, on the other hand, in all of these countries the direct “earmarked” state subsidies to municipal public libraries were abolished before the end of the millennium and the support was given to the municipalities as part of a total subsidy. In Sweden, which in many ways has found its way in library matters, this happened already in the mid-1960s. State library authorities do not any more control in detail how the municipalities produce their library services. It is more in the hands of the municipal politicians, library professionals and the general public to ensure that libraries are taken well care of. Library advocacy is needed on all levels of the society — and even on the European Union level. In many European countries public libraries are not at all as important as in the Nordic and (to a growing extent) Baltic countries. That is why the library people of our region have to follow keenly what is happening in the corridors of

Brussels. Some European level decisions (e.g. concerning copyright) have not been favorable to the library concept familiar to us.

There is no determinism in library development, but a certain parallellism is evident. The influences from the American Public Library Movement in the birth of the modern public library were very strongly felt in all the countries present in the book. In fact, it is true even concerning Russia and later the Soviet Union, but of course there the free public library concept was turned upside down.

Future of history?

It is true that this book does not yet present a truly international library history in contrast to more familiar national library histories, because each article describes one country or region, but it is a step forward. Of course, we first have to have a well documented library histories of each country and region, which we at this point do not have. Then these library histories, such as the general history of Finnish public libraries published in 2009, should be translated into a more accessible language. After that it would be possible to write a Nordic-Baltic library history, a European library history and, eventually, a world library history.

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