

Preface

The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters was founded on November 13th 1742 as a “learned Academy”, with the approval of King Christian VI. This publication marks the 275th anniversary of the founding of the Academy. Despite its advanced age, the Academy is still very much alive and kicking under the protection of Her Majesty Queen Margrethe II, and constantly working to advance its mission: to strengthen the position of science and scholarship in Denmark by promoting basic research and interdisciplinary understanding.

The Academy was founded during the Enlightenment, when it was believed that increased knowledge would bring progress and happiness to humanity. Learned academies were established in a number of European countries, and the context for the foundation of the Danish academy was international competition to provide the best possible conditions for the advancement of knowledge. Groups of researchers had been organizing learned academies ever since the Renaissance, inspired by the example of Classical Antiquity – such as Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum – to provide a forum for advanced teaching and learned debate.

And it was Aristotle who was responsible for the famous words: “All men naturally desire knowledge”. Today, research is carried out not only at large research institutions, but also by smaller groups of researchers brought together by a shared interest, as well as in the quiet study of the individual researcher. In the complex landscape of contemporary research, the Academy represents an academic oasis where researchers from all fields can share ideas and results with col-

leagues from disciplines they do not encounter in their daily lives. The Academy’s meetings bring new knowledge to every participating researcher and they inspire members in their pursuit of knowledge – the joy of gaining even a tiny insight into the methods and results of other disciplines is unmistakable.

Communicating its members’ knowledge – and its limitations – to the general public in all its breadth and diversity is a task the Academy considers to be central. The Academy holds many public lectures at which prominent Danish researchers and international stars of Nobel Prize caliber explain their work in accessible terms. In recent years, the Festival of Research and the Golden Days festivals have also become important events for the Academy.

If we look into the future from the vantage point of this anniversary, challenges are visible on the horizon. Research is advancing at a swifter pace than ever before – fortunately! Our knowledge about the development of the universe, the significance of genes, the origins of language, the backgrounds and intentions of our writers is continually expanding. The good stories the Academy has to tell are becoming more and more fantastic. Often, great stories from the world of research emerge out of unexpected, random observations – the right person at the right time puts two and two together, and the result is a scientific breakthrough. Will it ever end? No, of course not. Because the very essence of research is a constant questioning of accepted knowledge.

Mogens Høgh Jensen
President of the *Royal Danish Academy
of Sciences and Letters*