

The History of the Academy – now and then

MARITA AKHØJ NIELSEN

The first attempts

The first account of the Academy's founding and its early years was written by Hans Gram, who himself played a central role in the events. His account is found in a letter of September 15th 1747 to the Academy's first president, Johan Ludvig Holstein. The text is clearly an internal document which was not intended for publication. Nonetheless, Gram's account is carefully composed, clear, and precise.

He emphasizes that the first phase in the process which resulted in the Academy's founding was a commission tasked with categorizing and cataloguing the royal collection of coins and medals. When this work was nearing its conclusion in the summer of 1742, King Christian VI expressed his desire for the commission to concern itself with a broader spectrum of topics, and Gram was asked to work out a plan. In November 1742, it was decided to realize the King's conception, and in 1743, a royal rescript was issued which set out the framework for the Academy's activities. Gram concludes his account on the establishment of the Academy with these words: "And this was the true and actual starting point of the Society". The royal rescript is dated January 11th 1743, so according to Gram's account, celebrating the Academy's 275th anniversary on November 13th 2017 is a bit premature.

Gram died a few months after writing his account, and nothing more was written about the Academy's early years for a long time. Although in 1775 Holstein had proposed that the Academy should publish its history, as other learned societies had done, no one took up the challenge. As far as can be determined from the sources, the subject was not discussed again until 1815, when a committee was established to work out the concept of the Academy's annual report, *Oversigt over Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Forhandlinger og dets Medlemmers Arbejder* (Annual report on the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters' debates and the works of its members). The committee proposed that the history of the Academy should be included when the annual report was published for the first time in Latin. The proposal was rejected.

A coherent account of the Academy's first twenty years

was not to be published until 1833. It was written by the church historian Jens Møller, a cultural figure with wideranging interests, typical of Copenhagen in the Golden Age. He had worked on an account of the history of Christian VI, but died before completing it. He did manage to publish a few sections of the text in a small periodical, *Mnemosyne*, which he edited and to a large extent also composed. The subject of the last of these sections is the history of the Academy from 1743 to 1763, and it concludes with a short biography of Holstein (Møller 1833). Before its publication, Møller had read a manuscript version of it at the Academy's meeting on January 11th 1833, "precisely 90 years after the day of the Academy's founding". Like Gram, he thus equates the royal rescript with the founding of the Academy, although he is well aware that November 13th 1742 had already been selected as the crucial date in 1749.

Møller found his sources in the archives of the Danish chancery and the Academy's minute books. He provides a general account of the Academy's founding and its immediate prehistory, with long quotations from and summaries of his sources, as well as his own assessments, often elegantly phrased, for example his description of the earliest members: "The Academy's first circle of members was very small in extent, although strong in intent".

The most prominent members and their relationships to one another are treated in considerable detail, and regarding the election of Ludvig Holberg, he puts forward the plausible hypothesis that Holberg had felt insulted by being made an honorary member rather than an ordinary member. The Academy's practice was to elect important persons of rank as honorary members, while scientists and scholars became members – the apparent honor was in fact a refined disparagement of Holberg as a researcher.

The Academy's publications are treated exhaustively by Møller, both those which were realized and those which had to be abandoned. He devotes particular attention to the decision to publish the Academy's publication series *Skrifterne* (Writings) exclusively in Danish, which he finds problematic on the grounds that the Academy's writings had very few readers out-

side of learned circles, in addition to which these publications did not contribute to the enrichment of imaginative literature. On the contrary, they may have been of interest to learned men abroad.

Møller's account has received less attention than it deserves because of the publication of Christian Molbech's much more exhaustive history ten years later.

The centennial anniversary

When the Academy's 100th anniversary was approaching, settling the precise date of establishment became an urgent question: was this the meeting of November 13th 1742 or the royal rescript of January 11th 1743? The matter was discussed by the anniversary committee, which favored the first date. But to be on the safe side, the question was presented to the president, who decreed:

As We see in the minutes from that time which have been presented Us that the Academy's first members gathered on that day [November 13th] with the approval of His Majesty the King to form a learned society for the antiquities and history of the fatherland, We find this the most appropriate day on which to celebrate the anniversary of this Academy.

The problem was thus solved for all time, and by none other than the absolutist monarch, Christian VIII, who was president of the Academy. His letter is dated March 6th 1842, a date so close to the day of the anniversary celebration that all the later anniversary committees would have been on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

And they were doubtless also behind on their preparations. The most time-consuming task was then – and is now – the anniversary publication. Christian Molbech – historian, linguist, lexicographer, author, and more – offered to take on the task of writing the history of the Academy's first 100 years (Molbech 1843). He only had nine or ten months for the arduous project of familiarizing himself with the sources, organizing his material and writing the account. The first part of the work was published immediately after the anniversary, followed by the remainder a few months later. The date of publication is indicated as 1843 on the title page, and the important preface is dated April 15th 1843. The work occupies a total of 634 pages long; the Academy's history accounts for 514 pages, while the rest consists of appendices containing lists of members, officials, writings, and prize treatises,

in addition to statutes and by-laws. While a detailed table of contents and a thorough index add to the work's usefulness, the erratum is a necessary but deplorable consequence of the haste with which it had been necessary to produce the work.

To structure the history, Molbech divides it into periods defined by the successive series or "Collections" of the Writings – a rather eccentric decision which he himself explains by arguing that the collections reflect the changing character of the Academy's activities: the first period (1742-1780) is dominated by history, the second (1780-1801) by the natural sciences and mathematics, the third (1801-1815) by "the spiritual and scientific revolutions of the 19th century", while the fourth and last (1815-1842) is characterized by "fresh and vital forces" in the natural sciences, physics-chemistry, and anatomy-physiology – the Academy's activities within the subjects history and philosophy having "rather shown themselves to be in decline". He points out that these four periods are also more or less congruent with the terms of office of the consecutive secretaries.

While naturally the validity of this periodization can be debated, it functions reasonably well. Like all chronological organization, it has unfortunate consequences for the cohesiveness of the account of conditions which cannot be confined to a single period; for example, the reader who is interested in the Academy's work on the Danish dictionary is forced to seek out the relevant sections in all four chapters.

His approach to the material varies considerably throughout the book. There is no doubt in the reader's mind as to where Molbech's own interests and expertise lie, and he is a gripping and engaged storyteller in the passages dealing with topics he found truly absorbing. His accounts of subjects in which he was not really at home are thinner, and in the preface he expresses regret that he failed to receive the promised help from members who were experts in subjects about which he lacked the qualifications to write convincingly.

On the other hand, he does not apologize for his subjective evaluations; rather he considers it his duty to present matters as he sees them. The Academy had given him unconditional authority to write its history, and it would be contrary to the spirit of the Academy, he claims, if he had failed both to let facts speak for themselves and present his own opinions.

Several prominent members took issue with this approach. A rather bitter polemic against Molbech was launched after the publication of the first section

of the book. In particular, some members objected that he had a predilection for dwelling on less flattering topics; the election procedure and fund management were the most controversial topics, and his assessment of individuals provoked contradiction as well. While this polemic was expressed in a few periodicals, it was primarily an internal affair. H. C. Ørsted, the Academy's powerful secretary, was Molbech's toughest critic, and it is certainly the case that he was the member who had most cause to feel personally attacked. After some heated discussions in the Academy with written statements from both sides, the case was closed down and its documents archived. Molbech was never officially thanked for the colossal job of writing the history of the Academy.

The bicentennial anniversary and what came afterwards

After Molbech's tour de force, 100 years would pass before the Academy's history would be described again. Of course, individual persons and events were described in various publications but no coherent treatment was produced. The 150th anniversary gave rise to a catalogue of all of the Academy's publications and at the meeting which marked the occasion, two members held lectures on the Academy's history and founding which were published in the *Annual Report*. The next anniversary 25 years later took place under the shadow of World War I, and no festivities were held.

Although the 200th anniversary also took place in wartime, it was celebrated, not least with a substantial historical publication. The prehistory of this publication can be traced back to 1926, when Asger Lomholt, who had a Master's degree in theology, joined the staff of the Academy's secretariat and took it upon himself to organize the many archival materials which lay unaccounted for, wrapped in brown paper. Over a number of years, he brought order to this inaccessible material, which was organized rationally and chronologically, and then carefully stored in shelves, cabinets, and card indexes.

By reorganizing the archive, Lomholt created the conditions which would make a true historical account possible. The Academy's editor, the philologist William Norvin, was very interested in the history of knowledge and had planned to write such a work – but died in 1940 without leaving behind material which could be taken over by others. In this situation, the

Academy decided to ask Lomholt to write a “reasoned presentation of materials”, ‘Collections illustrating the Academy's history’, which could be published in connection with the anniversary. In less than a year, Lomholt managed to complete the first volume of *Det kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab 1742-1942. Samlinger til Selskabets Historie* (The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters. Collections illustrating the Academy's history). Unlike Molbech 100 years earlier, Lomholt received every possible support, from staff, members of the Academy, collaborators from the publishing world, and the Carlsberg Foundation, which financed the whole project.

The book was conceived as a two-volume work, the first of which was completed for the anniversary, while the second was not published until 1950. Volume 1 covers the founding and structure of the Academy in twelve chapters, each on a separate topic, including the successive names of the Academy, by-laws, members, and scholarships. The chapters are chronological. Sources are carefully cited and long quotations from the archival documents alternate with summaries. The book is a demanding read, because the material is so extensive and treated so exhaustively that it is difficult to gain a sense of its overall structure. Naturally, this has something to do with the genre of the work, but a more helpful typographical design would have helped: the margins are narrow and section headings of rare occurrence.

The latter problem is addressed to some extent in volume 2, in which each chapter begins with a table of contents. The main topic of this volume is the Academy's activities, with publications as the central focus. The book also covers the Academy's involvement in international scientific and scholarly collaboration, its role as patron, financial-administrative conditions, meetings, and the physical framework. The detailed subject and name indices for both volumes are extremely useful.

With volume 2, the original plan was realized, but in the preface Lomholt explains that the book only contains part of his manuscript. Considerable amounts of the unprinted material were published ten years later as volume 3 of the Collections. This material covers the large (and somewhat smaller) projects in the Academy's history until 1942. The 22 chapters are structured and presented in precisely the same way as in the first two volumes. The exactly delimited topics and the shorter chapters make it easier for the reader to get a grasp on the heterogeneous contents of the book, which in its totality provides an excellent

illustration of the changes in the Academy's conditions under absolutism and democracy.

But one topic was deliberately omitted from volume 3 because it was worthy of an independent publication: surveying and the production of maps. The Academy's extremely extensive activities in this area were described in volume 4, published in 1961. This publication commemorated the 200th anniversary of Frederik V's resolution of June 26th 1761, which gave the Academy responsibility for mapping Denmark and the duchies. The volume is embellished by numerous plates with beautiful facsimiles of the old maps.

In the introduction to volume 4, Lomholt declares that the work is hereby concluded. This turned out not to be the case: he published volume 5 many years later, in 1973, and this contains a generous selection of manuscripts and drawings from the Academy's archive. The book is richly illustrated, a delight to the eyes, with fascinating glimpses into the workshops of science and scholarship.

The structure of the first three volumes as a compendium of materials has a particularly strong effect on content; the works' organization hinders coherent narrative presentation and historical contextualization. While Lomholt acknowledged this, when he did gain an opportunity to write a historical account, it ended up reflecting the structure of the larger work quite closely. The occasion arose in connection with a very special anniversary: the 125th anniversary of the Academy's close collaboration with the printing house Bianco Lunos Bogtrykkeri in 1962. The work was given the evocative title *Lærdoms mosaik* (A mosaic of learning) (Lomholt 1962).

The 250th anniversary

When the Academy reached its first quarter millennium, the occasion was celebrated with pomp and circumstance, with scientific and scholarly symposia and prize treatise competitions – and with two very different presentations of the Academy's history.

An addition to Lomholt's *magnus opus* covering the Academy's history up to 1992 seemed like an obvious idea, and Mogens Blegvad took on the project. The structure of his account (Blegvad 1992) is radically different from Lomholt's: eight chapters, each on a different period, in chronological order. The periods are delimited by important events in society and the Academy, or by changes in the general conditions for science and scholarship. The strength of this account lies in the precise cross sections which provide an ex-

cellent impression of the Academy and contemporary society over quite short periods of time. On the other hand, this episodic structure weakens the cohesion of the description of the activities which took place over longer periods of time.

In the preface to volume 1 of Lomholt's *Collections*, the Academy's editor L. L. Hammerich points out that the work is not “a comprehensive account of the Academy's history and assessment of its importance to Danish and international science and scholarship – and this last point is actually the most important issue”. The historian of science Olaf Pedersen provides just such an account in his brief but excellent *Lovers of Learning* (Pedersen 1992), which unaccountably has never been published in Danish. Pedersen draws on his extensive learning and acute understanding of scientific and scholarly issues to perspectivize the Academy's activities. His account is set against the backdrop of the broader history of culture, the narrower history of learning, and the specific history of the natural sciences. This well-written account covers the Academy's history from the beginning to 1992, and is primarily chronologically organized, although there is room for longer presentations of individual topics.

The 275th anniversary

At the meeting on December 3rd 2015, the Academy's presidium decided to publish a *festschrift* on the occasion of the coming anniversary. The planning process began immediately afterwards, when an editorial group consisting of Kirsten Hastrup, Carl Henrik Koch, and Marita Akhøj Nielsen met to discuss the concept for the book. In January 2017, the broad outlines for the project were sketched out, and members with expertise in the humanities, the social sciences, biology, the geosciences, and mathematics-physics subjects were invited to a meeting at which the structure of the book was determined quite precisely – as is now realized in the form of this publication.

The aim of the book is to provide an account of the entire history of the Academy with a particular emphasis on the last 25 years. It is divided into two sections, the ‘long’ history and the history of the subjects treated in the Academy. The first section describes the origins and institutional development of the Academy as well as the relationship between the Academy and surrounding society. The second section consists of five chapters, each of which treats a separate subject area, written by active researchers in their respective areas. They have sought the assistance of other mem-

bers of the Academy to a great extent, while the entire first section was reviewed critically and constructively by Knud J. V. Jespersen.

The book's treatment of science and scholarship is intended for a popular audience. While some subjects are more difficult to communicate to a non-specialist audience than others, hopefully all readers with an interest in a particular subject or topic will benefit from reading it. The subjects are extremely diverse, and the same applies to the authors: this has been respected, and no attempt has been made to erase signs of individuality. On the contrary, they have been considered valuable, in the spirit of the Academy. The framework for the project was restrictive, both with respect to length and deadlines, but the authors have accepted the strict guidelines.

Sources of citations

- p. 8 Lomholt 1942, p. 29.
p. 8 Møller 1833 p. 5, note.
p. 8 Møller 1833, p. 29.
p. 9 Christian VIII's letter from March 6th 1842, quoted from Lomholt 1942, p. 26.
p. 9 Molbech 1843, p. XIII.
p. 9 Molbech 1843, p. XIV.

- p. 9 Molbech 1843, p. XIV.
p. 10 Lomholt 1942, p. [II].
p. 11 Lomholt 1942, p. [II].

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