

The Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities

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Historical background

Like most other occidental countries, Sweden saw a spontaneous growth of learned societies, particularly in the 18th century. English and French models exercised great influence on the structure and methods of work of these bodies, which came into existence both on a national and local level. The oldest still existent learned society in Sweden would seem to be the Royal Society of Sciences in Uppsala founded in 1710. Oldest of the national academies is the Royal Academy of Sciences which was founded in 1739.

The Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, which is today the national academy responsible for the humanities and social sciences, was established in 1753. In addition, there are academies for arts, music, technology, forestry and agriculture, and for military sciences. In some provincial university towns there are also quite important learned societies, dating from the 18th to the 20th century.

Most of the academies in Sweden are independent bodies, not state authorities. Therefore the attribute "Royal" in the name of a learned society does not indicate that the body is a public institution. It simply means that the Sovereign had consented to act as its patron. By tradition the statutes of Royal Academies are subject to the King's assent. In some cases, academies receive state grants and subsidies, but on the whole they are financed essentially by the income from their own funds, created in the course of time through gifts and legacies. In spite of their independence in principle, the national Swedish academies enjoy official recognition and a high official status, and act to a great extent as recognized spokesmen of science, arts, and letters in international contacts.

The "Vitterhetsakademien" (The Academy of Letters) was founded in 1753 by Queen Lovisa Ulrika – wife of King Adolf Fredrik of Sweden, mother of Gustav III and sister of Frederick the Great of Prussia. The aim was originally to promote "letters" in the broad sense of the language of the time, i.e. literature, history, criticism, and scholarship over a wide range of subjects corresponding on the whole to the "humanities" and "social sciences" according to modern concepts. Special attention was to be given to the study and supervision of inscriptions, coins and medals.

The Queen's Academy of Letters flourished for only a short time. She became increasingly engaged in the political dissension of the period; the small circle of grands seigneurs who had formed the core of the Academy was dispersed and for decades the Academy languished. In 1786 King Gustav III, anxious to have a truly literary Academy of his own, created the Swedish Academy, to which he entrusted the task of promoting – and supervising, according to the normative aesthetics of the period – the development of language and literature in a narrower sense. At the same time the King re-established and reformed his mother's academy and it was

now given its present name “Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien” (The Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities), which was meant to stress its learned rather than literary character.

The Academy thus became a forum for humanistic learning, initially with heavy emphasis on archaeology, inscriptions, coins, medals, and the preservation of national antiquities. In fact, through an unusual arrangement, the head of what is today the National Heritage Board (Riksantikvarieämbetet) was made Perpetual Secretary to the Academy ex officio. The National Heritage Board was an office created by Gustavus Adolphus II in the early years of the 17th century. This original symbiosis, which made the Academy a kind of public agency in some of its doings and which also tended to strengthen the position of Nordic archaeology within the Academy, lasted until 1975. In that year, the National Heritage Board was organized on the same pattern as other public agencies at the national level. The Academy, relieved of its official responsibilities, could concentrate wholly upon its tasks as a fully independent learned society.

Aims and members

The principal aims of the Academy as set out in its statutes are:

- to promote research in the field of the humanities, theology, and social sciences and to work for the preservation of the cultural heritage of Sweden;
- to co-operate with other Swedish bodies and associations in the humanities;
- to promote international cooperation in the same fields and by so doing maintain contact with foreign academies and international scholarly organizations;
- to publish scholarly works within its field of activity;
- to give economic support and rewards to scholars and others who have promoted the objects of the Academy;
- to make statements and express opinions when called upon to do so by the Government or other public bodies, or when the interests of the Academy require it.

According to its statutes, the Academy’s responsibilities are for the humanities in the broadest sense of the term, and should thus be understood to include theology as well as the social sciences, law not excepted. The Academy’s jurisdiction thus corresponds to that of the Scientific Council for Humanities and Social Sciences within the Swedish Research Council.

This field of competence is reflected in the numerous academic disciplines by the Swedish working members of the Academy, totally about 130 in all. Following a recently established practice a maximum of 60 are below the age of 70. However, only those under the age of 60 are eligible for election as a member. On reaching 70 members retain, of course, their rights and privileges, but the seat is considered to be vacant. The Academy is

organised in two classes, one historical-antiquarian and one philosophical-philological, each with thirty members under 70 years of age. The traditional division of the Academy into these two main branches does not, however, prevent the election of members representing other disciplines covered by the statutes.

The Academy's patron is His Majesty the King of Sweden. Her Majesty the Queen and Her Royal Highness the Crown Princess are both First Honorary Members. Beside the working members there are a small number of Honorary Members and a larger number of Foreign Members, Swedish Corresponding Members and Foreign Corresponding Members. The Academy meets for plenary sessions once a month from September to June. The anniversary of its foundation is solemnly celebrated on the 20th of March each year.

Organization

The governing body of the Academy (The Board) consists of the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary-General, the Vice Secretary-General and five members, who are elected annually by the Academy, but usually re-elected for an extended period. Five permanent committees have been created by the Academy to initiate and monitor scholarly activities: one for antiquities and archaeology, one for history in a wide sense, one for linguistics, one for philosophy and one for other human and social sciences including jurisprudence. In addition the Academy has a considerable number of permanent and ad hoc committees and working groups for the management of its property and for different research and publication projects.

The permanent staff of the Academy consists of the Secretary-General, one head of the secretariat, one finance manager, two editors, three assistant secretaries for different administrative functions and finally the staff, who is supervising the estates of the Academy.

A substantial part of the property of the Academy is formed by the estates received by the Academy by way of bequests from private donors. Most important of these is the Rettig Cultural Foundation, which includes the Academy's present headquarters, the Rettig Villa in central Stockholm built in 1877, and the Castle of Skånelaholm, 30 kilometres north of Stockholm and erected in the 1640's. Other important properties are the Castle of Stjernerund in the province of Närke, owned by the Royal Family in the early 19th century, the Stensjö hamlet in the province of Småland and the Borg hamlet on the island of Öland. The buildings of Stensjö have retained their appearance from the 19th century, and the hamlet of Borg includes a large pre-historic fortification and the ruins of an early chapel. In both hamlets the farming is carried on in the same way as in the 19th century, and the cattle is of traditional Swedish kind.

These activities are financed and administered by the Academy, and the staff of the estates is employed by the Academy. The main objectives are to maintain this part of the Swedish cultural heritage, to safeguard and develop the cultural environment and to enable the estates to become a link between the Academy and the public.

The main source of the Academy's income is the yield from its own funds, created principally through donations and bequests from individuals interested in the aims of the Academy. Many funds are subject to conditions that restrict the use of the income to certain well-defined purposes. The most important function of the Academy is to administer and distribute the revenues. The funds are now and then incremented by donations from individuals and institutions interested in the activities of the Academy.

The library of the Academy

The library of the Academy was founded in 1786 when a small collection of books was transferred from the Archives of Antiquities to the Academy. Important early additions were Queen Lovisa Ulrika's numismatic book collection at Drottningholm Palace and the bequest of an 18th century member, Baron Shering Rosenhane, who was the last head of this ancient family of collectors and patrons of arts and learning.

From 1886 the library published annual lists of foreign books acquired by the library. At the end of the 19th century Hans Hildebrand together with Oscar Montelius, his colleague and successor as Secretary-General of the Academy, started and expanded the library's exchange programme and laid the foundation for a library which came to be widely known for its collections in the areas of archaeology, antiquities, medieval art and numismatics.

The library comprises 7 000 linear meters of shelving with an annual accession of some 60 meters. The majority of these works originates among 700 permanent exchange partners. The yearly media circulation includes about 35 000 book loans, most of them in the form of local circulation. The section of the library's book collection containing numismatic literature is housed in the Royal Coin Cabinet and the collection of classical archaeology is kept by the Museum of Mediterranean Antiquities, both situated in central Stockholm. The main part of the library together with the historical archives is kept in the premises of the National Heritage Board, who nowadays also answers for the main part of the funding.

Scientific support

The Academy's promotion of scholarly work has increasingly been assuming the character of initiating and stimulating endeavours in the form of conferences, symposia, working groups and also supporting research projects initiated by the Academy. The purpose can be to identify important and neglected problem areas or to stimulate innovative thinking. Many efforts are measured in terms of their long range impact, also with regard to future allocation of resources. Special consideration is given to projects which can strengthen the infrastructure for future research. The Academy works in close co-operation with other academies as well as different agencies such as The Swedish Research Council, The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Wallenberg Foundations, the National Heritage Board, archives, libraries, museums and local bodies in the field of promoting preservation and access to cultural heritage.

Direct economic support of research activities and the publication of scholarly writing remains an important part of the activity of the Academy. Such support is often granted in co-operation with other institutions. The bulk of the Academy's support is targeted for universities and university colleges, but it is also meant to benefit other bodies within the cultural sector. It includes travelling grants for junior scholars and support to guest lectures at the universities. The Academy has a generous attitude to member's publications and travels, and to conferences and meetings organized by them.

The Academy is also supporting a great number of temporary academic posts at most Swedish Universities and at Archives, Libraries and Museums. Normally they have the form of five year postdoc scholarships. The posts within the cultural heritage sector are intended to promote scientific activities within these institutions and to strengthen the links between the institutions and universities.

Rewards

Each year the Academy awards a number of medals, prizes and grants to scholars and others who have contributed to the aims of the Academy. The major prizes are the Gad Rausing prize, awarded to a Nordic scholar for an outstanding and lasting achievement in the fields of the humanities in a narrower sense; the Ann-Kersti and Carl-Hakon Swenson's prize for research in the humanities and social sciences, awarded to a currently active Swedish scholar as a reward for outstanding achievements; the Rettig prize to an outstanding or promising scholar within the Academy's fields of interest.

Among several other annual prizes for scientific achievement, there are a number of prizes for young scholars recently awarded their Ph.D. degree and not the least the teacher's prize, whose aim is to emphasize the important role of teachers in society. Between two and four separate prizes of this kind are awarded annually for meritorious pedagogic contributions in the upper secondary school in either classic or modern European languages, the humanities or social sciences.

Publications

Since 1906, the Academy, in co-operation with the National Historical Museum, has published the periodical *Fornvännen*, which is the leading review of Swedish antiquarian research. The Academy's Yearbook publishes articles, including inauguration lectures by new Academy members, as well as biographical notes on deceased members and obituaries. It also lists the Academy members and gives statistical and financial information concerning the Academy.

To this should be added the continuous publication of learned works, monographs, biographies, conference Acta or issues in long-established scholarly series. Most titles are published in Swedish, but other languages are frequent.

International Co-operation

The Academy is a member of ALLEA and the Union Académique Internationale (UAI). In the latter case this involves participation in publication projects based on co-operation between learned societies in a number of countries. The Academy is also a member of the European Science Foundation (ESF). Within the framework of ESF the Academy is involved in several projects.

The main part of the international cooperation is based upon the contacts and activities of the members of the Academy. Of natural reasons the Nordic cooperation is particularly well established. The Academy has bilateral agreements with Australia, Austria, China and Great Britain and with most countries in Central and Eastern Europe. These agreements support individual research visits for periods of weeks agreed on between the sending and receiving academies. There are also reciprocal symposia and publishing projects within the co-operation programme.