

LOCALISED KNOWLEDGE: NORDIC STUDIES AT EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES BETWEEN 1850 AND 1950



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Why did interest in Northern languages and literature increase at European universities in the mid 19th century? What did the research landscape look like? What ideas and images of the North were produced and conveyed in this process? And most of all: how was study and knowledge content at national universities shaped and influenced at that time?

These are the questions addressed by Scandinavian studies scholars Prof. Dr Joachim Grage (Freiburg) and Dr Thomas Mohnike (Strasbourg) in their research project “Building the North with Words. Geographies of Scientific Knowledge in European Philologies 1850-1950”, which is funded by a joint fellowship from FRIAS and the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study (USIAS). Dr Michael Rießler, linguist and expert in Sami studies at the University of Freiburg, will also be involved in the project for six months (March 2014 to August 2014). This particular collaboration has been ongoing since October 2013, though the researchers have a far longer history of working together.

Scandinavian studies as we know them today constitute a relatively new university discipline that developed in the mid 19th century as a subset of the German studies that were then becoming established.

The emerging interest in Germanic antiquity during the 19th century advanced research in Nordic literature. Lectures were increasingly offered on subjects such as Germanic mythology and ancient Norse languages. “To begin with, Scandinavian studies were primarily Old Scandinavian studies that looked almost exclusively at medieval sources,” explains Grage. “It was only towards the end of the 19th century that interest was awakened in more recent Scandinavian literature.”

The research project centres on the period between 1850 and 1950, an eventful 100 years that were marked by deep-rooted political, economic and social upheaval. The project concept is unique, however, in its geographical focus. The central facet is to discover how the discipline was treated at individual universities, chiefly in German-speaking countries, France and Scandinavia. Which people were influential, what networks formed, what literature was studied?

The interest in considering this topic from a geographic perspective stems, in part, from the specific experiences of the researchers. “Thanks to close collaboration across country borders within the European Confederation of Upper Rhine Universities (EUCOR) programme, we noticed how differently the same subject developed and is now taught in each individual location,” says Thomas Mohnike. There are, for example, major differences in the literature that is studied. As a consequence, this means that fundamentally different images of the North are conveyed. “And this is precisely what our project is about. We want to show how the location in which you find yourself influences how images are formed.”

While locations and geographic areas form the overriding area of interest for the entire project, the Scandinavian studies scholars are basing their sub-studies on different research questions.

Thomas Mohnike, who has directed the Institute for Scandinavian Studies in Strasbourg since 2009, is focusing on Germanic antiquity. He is investigating how Old Norse sources were used to explore ‘Germanicness’ in academic settings, and more recently, served to construct identities, affiliations and ideas of foreignness. Activities at universities in border regions that often changed their national allegiances as a result of historic events are particularly fascinating, and Strasbourg is currently at the centre of his analysis. Continual national and ideological changes at the university in Alsace had a direct effect on the field of Nordic philology and the concept behind the discipline. “The question of whether people belonged to Germanic society or not, and therefore whether or not Scandinavian sources could be used to explain their own history, was absolutely crucial to the formation of identities at this time,” states Mohnike.

In contrast, Joachim Grage, Director of Scandinavian Studies in Freiburg, is looking at the emergence of New Scandinavian studies. “I ask myself how they developed from Old Scandinavian studies. How did modern Scandinavian literature arrive in universities?” The impetus here was sometimes given by other subject areas, such as philosophy or religious studies, and other times it were individual academics and personal contacts that played a key role. But where exactly were the works of modern authors, such as those of the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, made the subject of study? Research and teaching are key to Grage’s investigations here. Publications and research work that emerged during this period are

therefore not the sole source materials, but course catalogues, teaching programmes and library holdings are also of interest.

The project is finally given special focus by the sub-study conducted by Michael Rießler. His research is on Sami studies, i.e. the study of indigenous people in the North. During recent years in Freiburg, a working group founded by Rießler has established a centre for research in this field that is unique within Germany. As a linguist, Rießler’s interest primarily lies in analysing Sami languages. Within the FRIAS/USIAS project, however, he is now also investigating the research history surrounding Sami culture and is examining the question as to which images were produced or constructed of the indigenous people in a European context, as well as how these have changed throughout history.

The collaboration is scheduled to end in October 2015. While the academics spent the first year of their collaboration working in Strasbourg, the group is now set to continue its research in Freiburg. “Collaborating so directly in the same location is particularly beneficial to advancing our work,” summarises Mohnike. “The fellowship offers us a unique opportunity to work on the project. Our direct academic exchange is extremely effective and, thanks to the different methodical approaches and perspectives that we adopt, we are able to complement and enrich one another’s work to wonderful effect.”
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