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Nordin, Jonas; Sjökvist, Peter; Strenga, Gustavs

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# The Baltic Battle of Books

*Formation and Relocation of European Libraries in the  
Confessional Age (c. 1500–1650) and Their Afterlife*

*Edited by*

Jonas Nordin  
Gustavs Strenga  
Peter Sjökvist



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# A Battle of Books through Five Centuries

*Jonas Nordin, Peter Sjökvist and Gustavs Strenga*

*‘Habent sua fata libelli’* (Books have their destinies). This oft-repeated, even worn-out, phrase of Terentianus Maurus fits unusually well for opening this book. The chapters that follow do not study individual books as much as they study collections of books, and these have indeed had their different destinies and continue to have so today. This book is about the creation, relocation, and reconstruction of libraries between the late Middle Ages and the Age of Confessionalization, that is, the era of religious division and struggle in Northern Europe following the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was not only a time when different creeds clashed with each other, but also a period when the political and intellectual geography of Europe was redrawn. Centuries-old political, economic, and cultural networks fell apart and were replaced with new ones. The upheavals sundered old contacts and rendered established hierarchies and truths obsolete and unserviceable. A striking and forceful example of this is the destruction of monastic libraries and liturgical books in the new Protestant nations. What used to be revered objects and intellectual and spiritual tools of great value were suddenly reduced to binding materials for account books, tightening for organ pipes, or wadding for canons. Collections that had taken generations to assemble were dispersed, destroyed, or brought into new environments and made to serve new purposes. Were these relocations cultural disasters and abuses of international law, or were they part of a natural, although sometimes perhaps lamentable, lifecycle of book collections? The interpretations have shifted over time.

‘Libraries abandoned or dispersed, burned down or looted, could be regenerated with astonishing speed’, argues Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen in a recent study.<sup>1</sup> A more common problem than losses through looting was that book collections were scattered through neglect and lack of interest in succeeding generations, but destruction of that kind have rarely become emblematic events. The fate of the most symbolically charged of all libraries throughout history, that of ancient Alexandria, has captivated peoples’ imagination for centuries. The most widely held view among today’s scholars

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1 Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, *The Library: A Fragile History* (London: Profile Books, 2021), p. 100; see especially chapter 6, ‘Reformations’, for a discussion relevant to our subject.

is that this library slowly decayed due to lack of care, inadequate conservation techniques, and declining finances, yet stories of devastating fires or ravaging and culturally hostile conquerors, whether Romans or Muslims, live on in popular imagination.<sup>2</sup> The fact is that most libraries throughout history have dispersed or been destroyed one way or another, but generally it is only those whose demise was violent that has been regretted and lamented by posterity. Past disinterest, neglect, mismanagement or gradual decay has rarely entered the pages of the history books let alone attracted headlines in the newspapers.

Where does this argument put us with respect to the present book? Although four centuries or more have passed since the wars of religion, the plundering and abuses then committed by all sides occasionally stir up emotions among politicians and the public in many countries even today. The collections and books, once forcefully relocated during the seventeenth century wars, emerge in passionate political discussions and emotional social media disputes on restitution of the plundered cultural artefacts.

A rather tragicomic example unfolded in 2011. After many years of pressure from the national radical Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the national libraries of Sweden and Denmark entered a bartered deal concerning a manuscript of Danish laws from the thirteenth century. In various contexts, this law code had been described both as a treasure of national importance for Denmark and Danish identity, and as a spoil of war that needed to be restored to correct an historical injustice. Until these claims were raised in the 1990s, no one had really investigated the provenance of the manuscript, but closer examination revealed that it was still owned by a Danish private collector in the early 1700s, several decades after the Swedes would have had the opportunity to snatch it. Most likely it was purchased legally by the Swedish Antiquities Archive later in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In spite of these discoveries a barter was made in early 2011, with the Royal Danish Library receiving the volume, Codex Holmiensis C 37, in exchange for a copy of the Swedish Law of Södermanland from 1327. The exchange was officially termed a mutual deposit of indefinite duration.

What makes this example especially bothersome is that even though new research could disprove the false historical claim, the authorities in both

2 Myrto Hatzimichali, 'Ashes to Ashes? The Library of Alexandria after 48 BC', pp. 167–182, and Michael W. Handis, 'Myth and History: Galen and the Alexandrian library', pp. 373–4, both in Jason König, Katerina Oikonomopoulou and Greg Woolf (eds.), *Ancient Libraries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3 Cf. the thorough investigation made by Erland Kolding Nielsen, "'Jyske Lov" som krigsbytte: En mytes opståen, udnyttelse og fald', *Fund og forskning i det Kongelige Biblioteks samlinger*, 49 (2010), pp. 437–510.

countries chose to ignore both the research and the objections from the scholarly community to carry out the exchange, thus disregarding established principles on cooperation in the cultural heritage sector. For certain, the exchange took place with the expressed hope that the demand for both manuscripts would thereby increase. 'However, this was a subterfuge', as explained by professor in international law Ove Bring. 'It is largely the same group of legal history researchers who are studying both laws. The manuscripts have also long been digitised and freely available online.'<sup>4</sup> In other words, there was little historical and scientific reason for the exchange; what remains are the national symbolic ones.

In recent decades in Central Europe, from which many book collections had been taken as war booty during the wars of the seventeenth century, the public has on several occasions been reminded about the cultural artefacts removed in the distant past. In 2007, after centuries of absence, a Bohemian thirteenth-century manuscript, Codex Gigas, better known as the Devil's Bible, returned to Prague, the city from which it was taken to Sweden in 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War. The importance of the event, involving great uncertainty, was felt on both sides.<sup>5</sup> The owner of the book, the National Library of Sweden (or rather Royal Library) that had hosted this, the world's largest, manuscript for several hundred years, was concerned about the four-month loan and its return to Stockholm. The exhibitor, the Czech National Library, in order to host the book in Prague, had even involved the country's prime minister who approached his Swedish counterpart in the loan negotiation process.<sup>6</sup> Most likely in reaction to the public sentiment during the exhibition, the librarians of the Czech National Library emphasised that the return of the codex to Prague was impossible and that the Czech library itself has looted books in its collections.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition was an event of national importance, widely reported in the media and attracting great interest from the public; the spectators had to buy time-allotted tickets and were allowed to spend no

4 'Detta var emellertid ett svepskäl. Det är i stort sett samma grupp av rätthistoriska forskare som efterfrågar båda lagarna. Handskrifterna är dessutom sedan länge digitaliserade och fritt tillgängliga på nätet.' Ove Bring, *Parthenonsyndromet: Kampen om kulturskatterna* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2015), p. 27.

5 Kamil Boldan (ed.), *Codex Gigas – the Devil's Bible: The Secrets of the World's Largest Book; Publication Issued on the Occasion of the Exhibition of the Same Name in the Klementinum Gallery* (Prague: National Library of the Czech Republic, 2007).

6 [www.english.radio.cz/devils-bible-goes-display-prague-after-three-century-absence-8604007](http://www.english.radio.cz/devils-bible-goes-display-prague-after-three-century-absence-8604007) (last accessed 20 November 2022), see Gunnar Sahlin's preface in the exhibition catalogue, *Codex Gigas – the Devil's Bible*, 13.

7 Brandon Swanson, 'Codex Gigas. The Devil's Bible', *The Prague Post*, 19 October 2022, [www.praguepost.com/culture/codex-gigas](http://www.praguepost.com/culture/codex-gigas) (last accessed 1 November 2022).



more than ten minutes in front of the book. Before the departure to Prague, the manuscript had been digitised and made accessible over the Internet and the director of the National Library of Sweden, Gunnar Sahlin, in his preface of the exhibition catalogue emphasised the importance of a digital version by stating that:

War booty taken during the 17th century will be readily appreciable not only in certain libraries or museums but almost everywhere. The original Codex will still be of great importance, but it now will be complemented by the digital version. This will enable us to better acquaint ourselves and identify with our common European heritage.<sup>8</sup>

Digital copies certainly make historical sources more easily accessible to users globally, and they may ease some of the tensions and complexities caused by claims for restoration. Yet they do not seem to alleviate the phantom pains of those who harbour essentialist notions about the 'true' homes of the books, whatever these are considered to be.

In the summer of 2022, Swedish Member of Parliament Björn Söder posed a written question to Foreign Minister Ann Linde about returning to Poland a copy of *Commune incliti Polonie Regni privilegium*, or Łaski's Statute, a collection of Polish laws, as an 'act of goodwill' in recognition of the country's ratification of Sweden's NATO application and of 'how quickly Poland acted for our country's security'. According to Söder only two copies remain of the original twelve printed on parchment in 1505. 'One copy is in The Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw. The second copy is found in Sweden after it was looted by the Swedes in the seventeenth century along with other priceless items treasures of Polish culture.'<sup>9</sup>

In actual fact there are eight copies printed on vellum and no fewer than 59 printed on paper preserved in Polish public collections.<sup>10</sup> It is certainly an important book, but there is nothing particularly unique about the Swedish copy. Furthermore, Söder's claim that Łaski's Statutes were registered on

8 *Codex Gigas – the Devil's Bible*, 13.

9 Written question 2021/22:1800 by Björn Söder (Sweden Democrats), 12 July 2022; Foreign Minister Ann Linde's (Social Democrats) answer, Foreign Ministry UD2022/10742, 26 July 2022: [www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/aterlamnande-av-laskis-stadgar-till-polen\\_H911800](http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/aterlamnande-av-laskis-stadgar-till-polen_H911800) (last accessed 21 November 2022).

10 Information provided by Fryderyk Rozen at the National Library of Poland. The relevant entries of the national union catalogue of Polish sixteenth-century prints can be accessed here: [www.polona.pl/item/centralny-katalog-polonikow-xvi-w-las-mad,NjlyODg3MjQ/69/#item](http://www.polona.pl/item/centralny-katalog-polonikow-xvi-w-las-mad,NjlyODg3MjQ/69/#item) (last accessed 23 November 2022).

‘UNESCO’s World Heritage List’ (probably a mix-up with UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register, which lists documentary heritage) in 2016 is incorrect. It is, however, included on the *national* list established by the Polish committee for the memory of the world program, which is not sanctioned by UNESCO in Paris.<sup>11</sup> In this case it is the specific copy, which once belonged to the Polish King Alexander (1461–1506), that is considered significant, not the print as such.

No less incorrect was Söder’s contention that the copy in Uppsala was looted by the Swedes during their wars of aggression in Poland. A quick examination by librarians at Uppsala University Library revealed that the book carried the signature of Gustavus Adolphus (1594–1632) and the year 1616, that is half a decade before Sweden’s earliest book plunder.<sup>12</sup> The year might nevertheless be significant for other reasons. In 1615–1616 the deposed Swedish King Sigismund (1566–1632), now king of Poland as Zygmunt III, made a last serious attempt to regain the Swedish crown through negotiations and sabre-rattling. In this context it made sense for Gustavus Adolphus to keep himself informed on Polish laws and politics.

What Björn Söder thus proposed is that cultural objects, based on incorrect information, false claims and an unfounded narrative, should be used as tokens in international security policy. Foreign Minister Ann Linde rejected the request with reference to established international law and practice. Söder nevertheless repeated his question to the new foreign minister, Tobias Billström, in November 2022. This time he claimed that the new information that the book was *not* war booty should make return even less complicated, adding that the book was kept in ‘the library’s secured stacks underground and is consequently not an easily accessible document for the Swedish people, but must be specially ordered to the special collections reading room on the entrance floor’. As his predecessor, Billström remained unconvinced by Söder’s arguments, stating that it is ‘hardly appropriate in diplomatic contexts to thank for a ratification with a gift’.<sup>13</sup>

11 Pamięć Polski, ‘Pierwszy w Polsce wydany drukiem urzędowy zbiór prawa’: [www.pamiecpolski.archiwa.gov.pl/statut-laskiego-z-1506-r/](http://www.pamiecpolski.archiwa.gov.pl/statut-laskiego-z-1506-r/) (last accessed 23 November 2022).

12 *Commune incliti Polonie Regni privilegium constitutionum et indultuum ...* (Kraków: Haller, [1506]), Uppsala University Library, Sv. Rar. fol. 10:31, The disputed copy has been digitised by the Uppsala University Library and can be accessed here: [urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:alvin:portal:record-481618](http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:alvin:portal:record-481618) (last accessed 22 November 2022).

13 Written question 2022/23:40 by Björn Söder, 4 November 2022; Foreign Minister Tobias Billström’s (Moderate Party) answer, Foreign Ministry UD2022/15984, 16 November 2022; [www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svar-pa-skriftlig-fraga/aterlamnande-av-laskis-stadgar-till-polen\\_HA1240](http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svar-pa-skriftlig-fraga/aterlamnande-av-laskis-stadgar-till-polen_HA1240) (last accessed 22 November 2022).

In her reply to the original request, Ann Linde had rightly pointed to the fact that 'issues relating to the return of cultural-historical objects can generally be complex and it can also in some cases be difficult to determine which state or natural person the object would be handed over to'. In fact, in most instances the institutions from which books were looted four hundred years ago no longer exist, while the libraries that host the books today have continuity. Uppsala University Library, founded by Gustavus Adolphus in 1620/1621, stores numerous looted collections. Some of them are of high cultural significance in the countries they were taken from, and are frequently on loan for exhibitions. In 2023 the 550th anniversary of the birth of the well-known astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) will be celebrated. The major portion of the extant books from his personal library are today at Uppsala. They were kept in the Frombork Chapter library when Gustavus Adolphus and his armies took this as war spoils in 1626. Many items from this lot will be lent to Polish institutions, just as they were during the 500th anniversary in the 1970s. The loans are handled in trust and high confidence by librarians on both sides, while parties outside the cultural heritage sector sometimes use exhibitions of this kind to voice claims for the permanent restitution of the same collections without regard to either the legal and historical aspects involved or to how this would affect future cooperation between custodians of historical collections in different countries. When a catalogue of the books taken from the Jesuit College of Braniewo in 1626, and now kept at Uppsala, was published jointly by Uppsala University Library and the National Library of Poland after a collaborative project, the director of the Polish National Library, Tomasz Makowski, stated his view on the matter in the preface:

Can the cultural damage caused by the loss of such an intellectual centre be compensated today by the fact that the book collection escaped destruction and scattering, and has survived almost untouched in one place, like only few other historical items from similar time and representing similar value ever did on Polish soil? We will never be able to give a clear answer to this question. However, the fact that the library has survived in Sweden can now serve as evidence for the undeniable unity of European cultural and intellectual heritage.<sup>14</sup>

14 Tomasz Makowski, preface in Józef Trypućko, *The Catalogue of the Book Collection of the Jesuit College in Braniewo Held in the University Library in Uppsala = Katalog księgozbioru Kolegium Jezuitów w Braniewie zachowanego w Bibliotece Uniwersyteckiej w Uppsali*, eds. Michał Spandowski and Sławomir Szyller (3 vols., Uppsala/Warsaw: Uppsala universitetsbibliotek/Biblioteka Narodowa, 2007), 1, p. 11.

Since books looted in earlier centuries can today be found in library collections all over Europe, this now serves as a better incentive for international collaboration and exploration of a shared cultural heritage than as reasons for new and repeated conflicts. Several examples in the last decades have proven how fruitful such cooperative projects can be.

One such example was the reconstruction of the former Riga Jesuit college library (1583–1621), undertaken by the bibliographers of the National Library of Latvia in cooperation with the Uppsala University Library where the collection is now located. The Riga Jesuit college was a Catholic outpost in a Protestant environment and the collection incorporated in itself books from late medieval Catholic institutions and added new titles for the mission amongst Lutherans.<sup>15</sup> As described in several chapters of this volume, it was the first book collection to be ransacked by the Swedish forces during the wars of the seventeenth century, thus becoming a case of ‘learning by doing’ for the looters.<sup>16</sup> Taken as a war booty to Sweden in 1621, the Jesuit books from the largest city in the Baltic became part of Uppsala University Library founded the year before and commencing its activities the same year as Riga’s conquest. The experience of bringing back a Catholic library as a war booty to the homeland was later perfected by the Swedish forces in Braniewo (Braunsberg), Frombork (Frauenburg), Würzburg, Mainz, Poznań, Olomouc, and Prague, just to mention the most important ones.<sup>17</sup> As the example of the Jesuit college in Riga shows, the looting of cultural artefacts cannot be seen only as acts of violence. In Riga the college and its book collection that represented pan-European learned culture like other Jesuit colleges in the north, were located in a hostile environment. The city had become Protestant already during the 1520s, and when Riga was conquered by Polish-Lithuanian forces in 1582, the Jesuit presence there was imposed on it, not chosen voluntarily. Most certainly the Riga Jesuit college library would have been destroyed by local protestants, who had revolted against the implementation of the Gregorian calendar by the Polish king Stephen Bathory (1533–1586) and the city council between 1584 and 1589,

15 Reinis Norkārklis, ‘The Riga Jesuit College and its Book Collection’, in *Catalogue of the Riga Jesuit College Book Collection (1583–1621): History and Reconstruction of the Collection = Rīgas Jeziūtu kolēģijas grāmatu krājuma (1583–1621) katalogs: Krājuma vēsture un rekonstrukcija*, eds. Andris Levāns and Gustavs Strenga (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2021), pp. 90–111.

16 See contributions of Jonas Nordin, Peter Sjökvist and Laura Kreigere-Liepiņa in this volume.

17 Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, ‘The Library as Totem: Building Ideology, Creating Targets’, in *Catalogue of the Riga Jesuit College Book Collection (1583–1621)*, pp. 28–37, 35; see Nordin’s contribution in this volume.

had it not been taken away by the Swedes.<sup>18</sup> In order to better understand the history of the collection and its fate, it has recently been reconstructed using a copy of the war booty list compiled by the chaplain of the Swedish court Johannes Bothvidi (1575–1635) and notes by the Swedish bibliographer Isak Collijn (1875–1949).<sup>19</sup> Without the relevant historical circumstances, which have given rise to later scholarly and bibliographical works, our knowledge of this collection would certainly have been much poorer if not altogether absent.

The collection taken from Riga to Uppsala also contained several books that were of great importance to Latvian culture. Uppsala University Library now holds a book with the oldest handwritten text in Latvian, the so-called Ghisbert's Lord's Prayer (c.1530), which was exhibited in Riga in 2017.<sup>20</sup> In 2021, the only full copy of the oldest surviving book printed in Latvian, the Catholic Catechism of Petrus Canisius (1521–1597), which used to be part of the college's books, was exhibited in the National Library of Latvia.<sup>21</sup> The exhibition gave rise to mixed reactions. While some visitors questioned why this national treasure should be returned to Uppsala and could not remain in Latvia, others argued that the catechism itself, a Jesuit product, symbolised colonial coercion. In the latter line of argument, the catechism embodied a culture and faith that had been imposed on Latvians by outsiders, namely German and Polish Jesuits who battled local Lutheran Baltic German pastors and noblemen.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of perspective, the reconstruction of the library allows posterity to grasp the value and importance of the former Jesuit collection not only for Latvian culture, but for the whole of Northern Europe.

18 Norkārklis, 'The Riga Jesuit College and its Book Collection', 92.

19 See contribution of Laura Kreigere-Liepīņa in this volume and *Catalogue of the Riga Jesuit College Book Collection (1583–1621)*.

20 Gustavs Strenga and Andris Levāns (eds.), *Luther: The Turn; Catalogue of the Exhibition, National Library of Latvia, Riga, 01.11.2017–04.02.2018* (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2017), p. 156; *Agenda sive benedictionale commune agendorum cuilibet pastori ecclesie necessarium* (Leipzig: Melchior Lotter, 1507), USTC 609610, Uppsala University Library, Riga 160; *Catalogue of the Riga Jesuit College Book Collection (1583–1621)*, no. 87.

21 Petrus Canisius, *Catechismvs Catholicorum* (Vilnius: Daniel z Łęczycy, 1585), USTC 6911452, Uppsala University Library, Utl. Rar. 174; the exhibition 'The Return: The Oldest Surviving Book in Latvian' at the National Library of Latvia (21.09.2021–29.01.2022); Renāte Berga, 'Sv. Pētera Kanīzija "Catechismus catholicorum" (Viļņa, 1585) – senākā līdz mūsdienām saglabājusies grāmata latviešu valodā', in Viesturs Zanders (ed.), *Grāmata Latvijai ārpus Latvijas: Kolektīvā monogrāfija* (Riga: Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka, 2021), pp. 55–82; *Catalogue of the Riga Jesuit College Book Collection (1583–1621)*, no. 226.

22 See, Ilmārs Zvirgzds, 'Vecākā latviešu grāmata ir koloniālisma piemineklis' (The oldest Latvian book as monument of colonialism) [www.satori.lv/article/vecaka-latviesu-gramata-ir-koloniālisma-piemineklis](http://www.satori.lv/article/vecaka-latviesu-gramata-ir-koloniālisma-piemineklis) (last accessed 12 November 2022).

The phenomenon of book collections removed from their original locations and then reconstructed in modern times is recognized also in other parts of Europe. Probably the most well-known library taken as spoils of war in the seventeenth century is the Bibliotheca Palatina from Heidelberg. This Protestant library, containing around 5,000 printed books and 3,524 manuscripts, was taken by Maximilian of Bavaria (1573–1651) and his troops in 1622 and presented to the Pope. In the following centuries several attempts were made to restore the books to Heidelberg, and at the Congress of Vienna 847 German-language manuscripts were eventually handed over to the University of Heidelberg. The other books are still kept in the Vatican Library in Rome.<sup>23</sup> For the university's six hundredth anniversary in 1986, several items were lent from the Vatican for an exhibition in Heidelberg. In addition, since 2001 there ongoing work at the University Library of Heidelberg have aimed to reconstruct the Bibliotheca virtually.<sup>24</sup> We thus recognize yet another cooperation beneficial to several parties and of harm to no one.

Our goal with this book is in line with this idea. In the academic community and the cultural heritage sector, heated feelings have long since been replaced by mutual interests and cooperation across national borders to reconstruct and extract knowledge from the early collections. We believe that books and library collections are never static, but have long life cycles in which all aspects of the past belong to their historical narrative. We therefore study European libraries from three different aspects: their original creation in the late Middle Ages and after the Reformation; their later, often violent, relocation and first use in their new settings; and their reconstruction in modern times through cataloguing and re-assembling in physical and digital settings. Work of the latter kind has of course been substantially facilitated in later years by technological advances, although collaboration across borders started as early as the nineteenth century, and has been carried on continuously during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There are now many examples of successful transnational cooperation between librarians, bibliographers, and scholars of various backgrounds.<sup>25</sup> The violent past has created possibilities for fruitful

23 Karin Zimmermann and Maria Effinger, *Bibliotheca Palatina: The Story of a World-Famous Library* (2012), [www.digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/en/bpd/bibliotheca\\_palatina/geschichte.html](http://www.digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/en/bpd/bibliotheca_palatina/geschichte.html) (last accessed 14 November 2022).

24 *Bibliotheca Palatina Digital*: [www.digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/en/bpd/index.html](http://www.digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/en/bpd/index.html) (last accessed 14 November 2022).

25 See e.g. Beda Dudik, *Forschungen in Schweden für Mährens Geschichte* (Brünn: Carl Winiker, 1852); Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer and Isak Collijn, *Nova Copernicana: Vorläufige Mitteilung über jüngst in Schwedischen Archiven und Bibliotheken aufgefundene, bisher unbekannte Autographen des Copernicus* (Cracow: Imprimerie de l'Université,

international collaboration and exchange in our time. This work, however, needs to be fertilised by continuous discussions about means, methods, theoretical framing, comparative examples, research possibilities, accessibility and many other aspects. It is our hope that the following chapters can contribute to this end.

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