

## PRACTICAL VIEWPOINT

# COMBINING ARCHIVAL AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN DISSIDENT MANUSCRIPTS: THE OSTROBOTHNIAN MYSTICS PROJECT (FINLAND)

***Päivi Mehtonen***

*Independent Researcher*

*Finland*

*paivi@mehtonenpost.fi*

***Tarja Soiniola***

*Senior Archivist*

*Finnish Literature Society, Finland*

*tarja.soiniola@finlit.fi*

**Abstract:** This article describes an interdisciplinary project set up for the collection of manuscripts produced during the period of ca. 1780–1830 by craftsmen and peasants along the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia in Finland (Ostrobothnian Mystics, literature and cultural history collection, the Finnish Literature Society). We briefly describe the nature of the material, discuss the specific aspects of the manuscript project which connected two fields of expertise – that of an archive researcher and a user of the particular collection – and conclude by arguing for the urgency of finding new ways and resources to preserve fragile items – both texts and material artefacts – in a specific field.

**Keywords:** archives, craftsmen, Jacob Böhme, manuscripts

Around the period of ca. 1780–1830, communities of literate craftsmen and peasants along the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia in Finland translated, disseminated and read a variety of popular genres (e.g., legends, apocrypha) not available in print – but also something quite different: works of protestant mysticism based on the legacy of a German nature philosopher and shoemaker Jacob Böhme (1575–1624). His cosmology, supported by the notion of the subject's inner freedom, had easily transcended national, linguistic and social borders in war-ridden Europe since the seventeenth century. The Finnish scribes of the so-called Ostrobothnian mysticism in the eastern province of Sweden and,

after the Finnish War in 1808–1809, the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland within the Russian Empire, left remarkable textual traces of the local reception of transnational literature, as well as the practical and professional pursuits of themselves in their local communities. Due to suppressive Lutheran state censorship, the early Finnish translations of Boehmenist tracts were never published.

In this article we describe a manuscript project in the largest of these collections: about 17,000 unique manuscript pages and hundreds of titles, preserved in the literature and cultural history collections of the Finnish Literature Society (est. in 1831). The unforeseen opportunities of the digital age have not eliminated the arduous part of archival work, namely the manpower for arranging, identifying and describing the contents before they can be digitized in a meaningful and permanent way. At the same time, funding for basic research has been reduced both in the archives and in academia. Thus, old and new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration are needed in knowledge production, including reliable metadata and the facilitation of access to underexplored collections. It goes without saying that providing a historical context for the manuscripts, such as information relating to their production, reception and provenance, is a key requirement.

In order to chart, identify and describe properly the vast collection of Ostrobothnian mysticism, a research-driven research squad was planned, funded by Kone Foundation (two researchers for six months), and launched in 2017. The basic idea was to connect two fields of expertise and different angles for a single collection: a researcher and user of the particular collection (Mehtonen) and an archive researcher (Soiniola). Issues of archives management of the older Finnish literature shook hands with probing the contexts and contents of a particular collection.

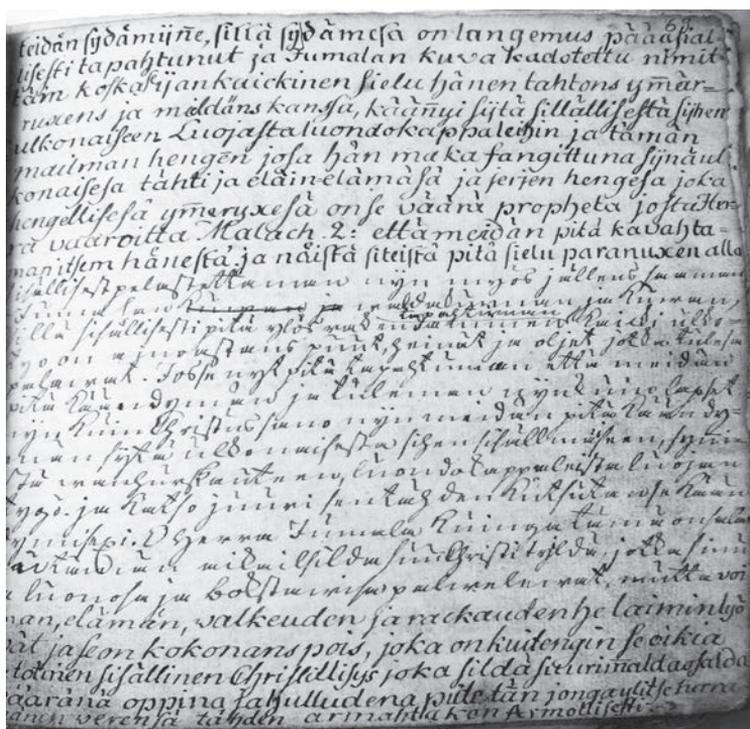
What kind of knowledge hub was this collaboration? In what follows, we briefly describe the nature of the material, discuss the specific aspects of the manuscript project, and conclude by arguing for the benefits of interdisciplinary exploration and double-checking the processes of documenting work.

## **EXPLORING POST-PRINT SCRIBAL CULTURE**

No easily defined Ostrobothnian Mystics collection existed at any single point in time. The movement itself consisted of loosely structured scribal networks in different areas and over a long period of time. The mainly Finnish manuscripts from the Vaasa-Kokkola area near the west coast of Finland were later dispersed

to several private and national memory institutions (archives, libraries, museums, also private owners), each with its own curatorial traditions and practices.

In the present-day collection preserved at the Finnish Literature Society, three notable names emerge among the tens of Ostrobothnian hands. Jacob Norrgård (1750–1822) was a peasant and a scribe, who is mentioned in the extant correspondence between Anders Collin (1754–1830), one of the best-known mystics and Böhme readers in late eighteenth-century Stockholm, and distributor of literature to like-minded networks, and Beata Herrman (1753–1834), the leader of a mystics' network in Vaasa. Among younger important scribes were craftsmen: Samuel Rinta-Nikkola (1763–1818), a tailor from Ilmajoki, and Mikki Sauso (1793–1853), a carpenter and village scribe from Merikaarto (Vähäkyrö). Rinta-Nikkola and Sauso worked semi-professionally as scribes and wrote lists of the manuscripts they copied.



**Figure 1.** The manuscripts of the Ostrobothnian Mystics were produced at a turning point of the Finnish language (old book Finnish and early modern Finnish) and different scribal styles. The vocabulary and style varied from one scribe to another and even within one text.

It is not a coincidence that craftsmen were well represented among the early scribes of the works of Jacob Böhme in Sweden and Finland. Not only was their respected teacher Böhme a shoemaker, but also the mentor of the Ostrobothnian Mystics, Anders Collin in Stockholm, was originally a journeyman weaver and factory worker. Later he became the court librarian by the freemasonic circles of King Gustav III and his brother Duke Carl, in which Böhme's works were studied. Compared to the rest of Europe and the amazing extension of Böhme's influence (Kühlmann & Vollhardt 2012; Hessayon & Apetrei 2014; Brink & Martin 2017; Martin & Muratori & Brink forthcoming),<sup>1</sup> the greater awakening to Böhme's texts in Finland occurred later. The numbers of translations only peaked ca. 1780–1830. The scribes were very self-conscious regarding the suppressed nature of the material. This makes the Ostrobothnian Mystics collection a rich source of the vernacular popular forms in which international and inter-confessional European thoughts were received and modified in particular communities on the northernmost margins of Europe.

The expansion of minor literatures under censorship with alternative ideologies relied on scribal activity. An established manuscript culture continued to flourish in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, including Finland. Print and script served different purposes. In the case of suppressed literature, script as a medium spurred on resistance, “creating chains of communication, and fostering inner fraternalism” (Walsham 2004: 215). Important genres of antagonistic opinion formation among the laypeople were handwritten tracts, plays, pamphlets, circular letters, devotional manuals and songs (including hymns).<sup>2</sup> The networks of the Ostrobothnian scribes also belonged to such a realm of post-print scribal culture.

The collection of the Ostrobothnian Mystics thus witnesses a turning point in Finnish literature where also early literate and mobile social groups such as craftsmen and lower merchants were, from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, increasingly involved in the production and distribution of extra-organizational texts. Instead of the ambiguous term of individual ‘auto-didacts’, the Ostrobothnian Mystics collection testifies to the mobile activity of professional groups as well as spiritual networks (e.g., radical Pietism, the Moravian Brethren, masonic and journeyman circles) as long-established institutions of literacy, lay teaching and book production.

The Ostrobothnian Mystics collection today preserved at the Finnish Literature Society cumulated in several waves since the mid-nineteenth century. The work of the early collectors was inspired by the streams of national awakening promoting vernacular folklore and other popular literature. Among the early names who advanced the collection and the study of the mystics' manuscripts

was Matthias Akiander (1802–1871), a pioneer of folk education, teacher and professor of Russian. A younger important collector was J. Oskar I. Rancken (1824–1895), a lector of German in Vaasa Lyceum and the father of collecting the folklore of Swedish-speaking Ostrobothnia.<sup>3</sup> Both Akiander and Rancken had wide networks across the borders and were active in the emerging literary societies. Akiander was one of the founding members of the Finnish Literature Society in 1831 and Rancken was its member since 1845 as well as among the founders of the Swedish Literature Society in Finland (est. in 1885). In an article published in 1855, Rancken stressed the importance of the literature used by the Ostrobothnian Mystics. At a time that in general was “so disadvantageous to Finnish literature”, ordinary people translated and disseminated this important material. Rancken characterized the forbidden Boehmenist literature as a reaction against “the shallow, distant and egoistic” view of religion, which prevailed among the educated classes in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century (Rancken 1855: 226).<sup>4</sup> Among the later collectors was Kustaa Hallio (former Sjöroos, 1868–1936), a priest who had worked in Ostrobothnia in his youth. According to his own words, he knew some later mystics through personal contacts and their books (Hallio 1901: 347). The history of the Ostrobothnian Mystics collection is thus rich in manifesting both the transnational and national aspects of the early literary pursuits in Finnish.

## **THE COLLECTION, CATALOGUES AND METADATA**

In order to protect the original manuscripts preserved in the Finnish Literature Society, they were microfilmed (microfiched) in 1995 and 2000. However, the quality of the copies is often vague or unreadable, due to the fragile or soiled condition of the originals. The manuscripts were in heavy use already in the original networks of scribes and readers. The paratexts preserved in the manuscripts show that they were re-read and borrowed, often in order to make further copies. A large part of the scribal texts were thus user publications: interested readers copied a text and offered other readers the opportunity to make their own copy.<sup>5</sup>

Material evaluation of the manuscripts revealed an urgent need for conservation. Some of the bindings were so fragile that they could not be opened for the purposes of describing. In rescuing data from vanishing into dust, our digital age is slow to recognize the need for resources required at all levels of data gathering. The memory institutions often rely on the political will of the society in building its future on existing knowledge and data.

By using both archival and research literature, the focus of the project was on:

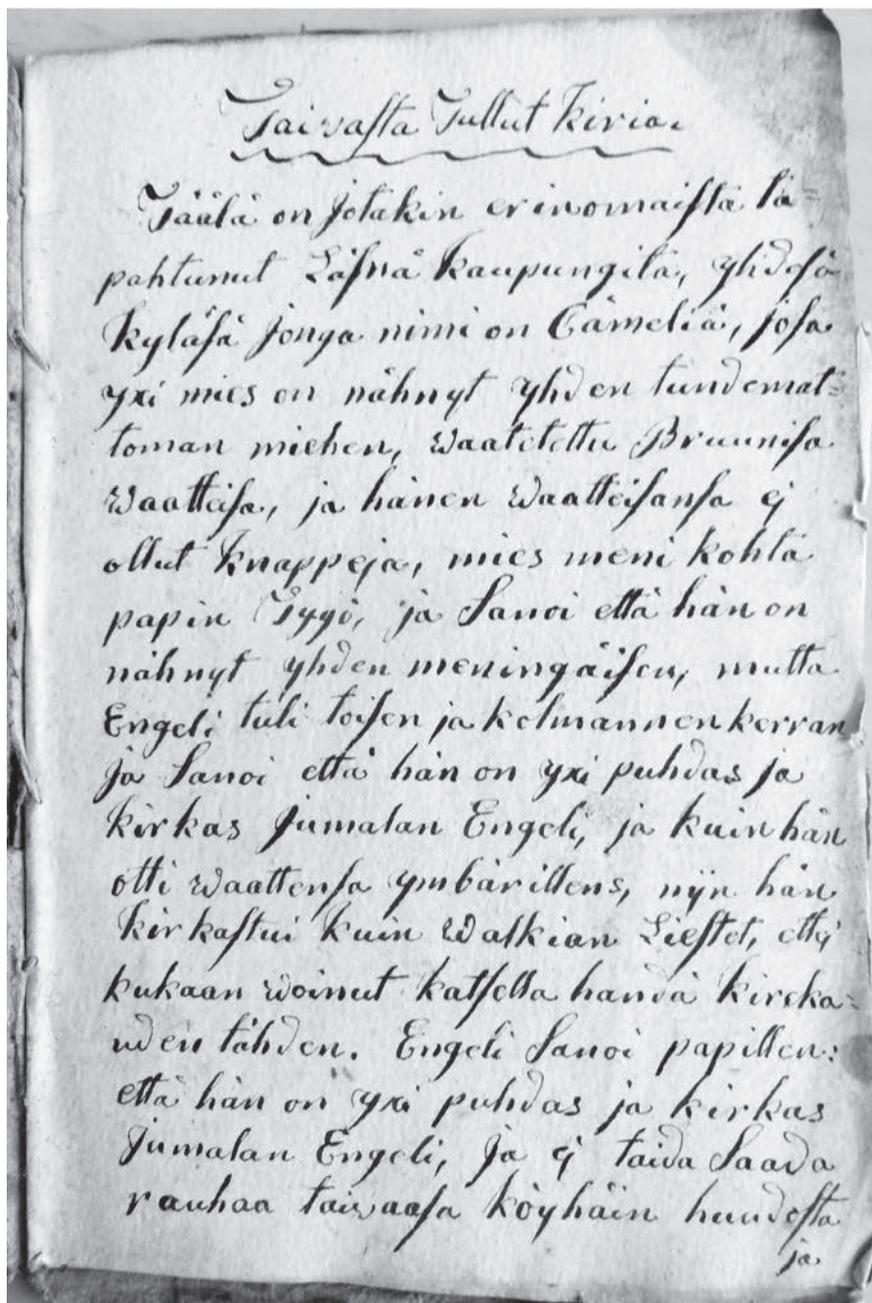
- *Texts and pictures* (the contents, authors, scribes).
- *Material evidence*: paratexts, the owners' markings, the collectors' remarks, bindings and materials of the physical items, decoration.
- *Other documents*: lists of acquisitions, old lists of copied texts by the scribes, etc.
- *Research*: a proper updated bibliography was produced.

In the manuscript project, six months were spent identifying, re-cataloguing, describing the contents, and inspecting the current condition of these unique manuscripts. According to our project diary, the pace was on average three manuscripts per working day. The range was broad: an exploration of the slowest cases of hybrid bindings (often without pagination) of formerly unidentified material could take several days, whereas with 'fast' material we speeded to six to eight manuscripts per day. Many question marks were left for future research to supplement.

A quick way to take a closer look at the contents of the collection is to introduce the new order in which the items were organized in the catalogue. The pre-existing catalogue was divided according to the collection creators (Rancken, Hallio) and based mainly on the older catalogues and cards. As a consequence, even closely related manuscripts were dispersed in different sections. Moreover, lacunae in identifications and even mistakes tended to recur from one document to another. During the project, we identified over 40 items, which did not exist in the former catalogues.

The manuscript project went *ad fontes*, using the manuscript evidence as the basis of description. The material was arranged in the following terms:

- Anonymous manuscripts (e.g., Finnish translations of popular forms of medieval legends, narrative apocryphal 'novels', prophecy and vision literature).
- Authored texts of mysticism (e.g., Finnish translations of Jacob Böhme and later readers of Böhme: Jean de Bernières-Louvigny, Melchior Douzetemps, Johann Georg Gichtel, Jeanne Guyon, John Pordage. The collection also contains medieval mystics' texts – Angela of Foligny, John of the Cross, etc. – as edited by radical pietistic authors).
- Letters (e.g., Jacob Böhme, Anders Collin, Eric Tolstadius).
- Secular texts (Finnish translations of eighteenth-century Swedish travel literature and schoolbooks; wedding songs; also local receipts and documents written by the same scribes).
- Printed pictures.
- Other religious material (i.e., not directly related to, or copied among, the Ostrobothnian Mystics).



**Figure 2.** In addition to the Bohmenist literature, the collection contains a rich variety of genres popular among lay readers. “Taivaankirje” (Angel’s letter) represented magical-religious literature, which became popular in the Nordic countries after the Protestant reformation. The cult of angels merged with mystical movements. A late copy by Mikki Sauso (1823).

Within such a general frame, new searchable elements were added to the descriptions, including distinctive bindings as well as paratexts, such as old labels, numbers, and owners' marks, which often reveal several successive owners or borrowers. They may serve as a special type of provenance evidence in the further research of the collection, local text communities and later reception history. Also, relevant external data such as bibliographic information was added.

A new running signum system, based on alphabetical and chronological order, was allocated to the items divided in these sections. The data was saved in an Excel file, which contains a table of nearly 250 items and new searchable descriptions and identifiers. Already during the project, the cumulating electronic file became a handy configurable tool of identification.

In the long term, the metadata will be available in Finna, the national web service for Finnish archives, libraries, and museums.<sup>6</sup>

## **THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE MYSTICS**

The significance of old archival materials is not limited to the walls or even open databases of a memory organization. An exchange of information and updated facts means working with the past as well as present communities as hubs of knowledge. During the six-month project, we made two trips to the home turfs of the manuscripts in the Vaasa-Vähäkyrö area of Ostrobothnia, charting material outside the Finnish Literature Society. It was interesting to learn also of the intellectual and emotional legacy left by the Ostrobothnian Mystics on site. When exchanging information with local historians, genealogists, and families who had old manuscripts in their ownership, we learned from many sources that some early collectors of the manuscripts were not held in very high esteem by the locals familiar with the tradition. At least one collector of the manuscripts had apparently used questionable means to "borrow", without never returning, material that later became part of the Ostrobothnian Mystics' collection. Even with old material, it may still be a delicate issue today to negotiate the place and means of preservation of cultural inheritance of local as well as global importance.

Collections and archives transit through changing political regimes. It is important to communicate the latest research to the public, regarding also the changing societal and ideological conditions of documents. This is particularly topical for the material that was banned practically for centuries with no other reason than suppressive legislation in the matters of the freedom of consciousness and tolerance.<sup>7</sup> This project approached for the first time the Ostrobothnian Mystics' collection in the context of literary history, as a unique resource of early

popular literature in Finland and the currents of the early Romantic era. These included the Boehmenist mysticism which influenced German Romanticism and idealism from Hegel to Schelling as well as lay religious literature. Many of these currents were suppressed by the conservative Lutheran theology and censorship. With this context in mind, Mehtonen produced a separate narrative document of the authors and texts, to supplement the detailed archive catalogue.

## CONCLUSION

We would argue that there is an intrinsic value in identifying this material and perhaps one day recombining it in a collaborative effort between the memory institutions by using available information and technology. Such large organizational issues, however, lay beyond the immediate reach of our research squad. In addition to solutions to problems, the project left some questions unanswered. How could co-operation between archives, museums, and libraries be developed when the items (in this case, original manuscripts) are both texts and material artefacts in a specific field? How can items and the best relevant experts be brought together – before even dreaming of any easy digital access by anybody?

It is one of the paradoxes of the digital age that open access to manuscript material naturally channels research into the digitized materials (still the top of an iceberg), while at the same time the resources for the basic work of arranging the material and producing metadata, and even the costs of digitization, become scarcer and scarcer.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Blank spaces still persist on the map of the international Böhme study. According to the introduction of Hessayon & Apetrei (2014: 11), “[t]here are also eighteenth-century Swedish translations from the German as well as Danish *and perhaps also Finnish versions* extant in manuscript” (italics added). The vast collection has not been properly charted. For recent studies of the reception of Böhme’s works in Finland, see, e.g., Kvist 1997; Luukkanen 2005; Mansikka 2016; Mehtonen 2016, 2017, 2022. The pioneer in the study of the Ostrobothnian manuscripts preserved in the National Library of Finland was librarian Henrik Grönroos, who published a series of short papers on the topic in *Bibliophilos* between 1971–1974.

<sup>2</sup> For Sweden, see Carlsson 1967 and Mattsson 2011, and for a more general European view McKitterick 2011: 12–15.

<sup>3</sup> See the contributions in Bregenhøj 2001.

<sup>4</sup> In 1858 Rancken visited, perhaps urged by Matthias Akiander, Kokkola in Ostrobothnia to interview an old mystic. His report gives valuable information of the leading women in

the former circles of the mystics (e.g., Beata Herrman, Margareta Skog): see, for example, a letter from Rancken to Akiander dated 2 August 1858, printed in Akiander 1858, vol. 2, pp. 119–121. For Rancken’s life and work, see Bregenhøj 2001; Andersson 2009.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to ‘user publications’, Love names two modes of scribal publications: author publication (where the original author is in charge of the duplication of his or her text) and entrepreneurial publication (where copies were made to be sold; Love 1993: 47, 73–79). Part of the manuscripts preserved in the Ostrobothnian Mystics collection were combinations of these. For instance, in some later manuscripts there are prices scribbled on the covers.

<sup>6</sup> Available at <https://www.finna.fi>, last accessed on 26 July 2023.

<sup>7</sup> During the project we kept a project blog, available at <https://pohjanmaanmystiikka.blog/> (in Finnish; last accessed on 19 September 2023) and presented the results of the project in Helsinki and Ostrobothnia to both academic and general audiences.

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**Päivi Mehtonen** (PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Tampere) is an independent scholar and writer.

paivi@mehtonenpost.fi

*Päivi Mehtonen, Tarja Soiniola*

**Tarja Soiniola** works as Senior Archivist at the Archives of the Finnish Literature Society. She is a cultural researcher who deals with the oldest manuscripts in the archive.

tarja.soiniola@finlit.fi