Research on parchment fragments

In March 2012, the National Library of Finland launched a research database of its collection of medieval parchment fragments. This internationally important collection includes more than 9,300 parchment leaves from the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries to the 16th century. The database and related research work have taken knowledge of early Finnish literary culture to a whole new level and expanded future research opportunities.

International literary culture

Until recently, little was known of early Finnish literary culture. In the 19th century, the nationalist spirit of historical research resulted in an inaccurate simplification, whereby books and literary culture failed to gain a foothold in Finland before the Reformation and the emergence of vernacular literature in the 16th century. This false notion proved difficult to shake off, but it is precisely these kinds of key issues and misunderstandings in Finnish history that the Fragmenta membranae collection aims to resolve and clarify.

Only through studying parchment fragments can we gain a broad overview of early Finnish literary culture as well as the northern dimension of the Latin cultural sphere and the transnationality of medieval literary culture. The fragments also reveal interesting details: for example, their reconstruction has put scholars on the trail of medieval Finnish scriptoria, or writing workshops.

The Fragmenta membranae database comprises 9,319 digitised parchment leaves, that is, 18,638 medieval manuscript pages from some 1,500 handwritten books. The figures are high in Nordic terms and demonstrate the importance of books and their use for centuries before the Reformation. Sixty-four per cent of the manuscript leaves come from various liturgical manuscripts, while 16% represent law and 14% theology in various forms. The Bible and hagiographies account for some 3% each. Because of the background of the Fragmenta membranae manuscripts, the vast majority of them are in Latin.

Among the fragments are remains of the first books written in the area of present-day Finland and a large number of leaves from books produced elsewhere in the Swedish realm. On the whole, however, the collection is markedly international: remains of manuscripts of English, German and French origin abound, particularly among the oldest fragments, which date back to the 11th to the 14th centuries. This diversity is precisely what makes the collection a treasure trove to scholars: it sheds light not only on the spread of the Latin cultural sphere to the North in the medieval period, but also on the international book trade as well as the beginnings of local book production.

Formation and history of the collection

The National Library's collection and the online research database contain a large part of the literature circulated in the area of present-day Finland in the early 16th century. As a result of the Reformation, which began in the Swedish empire in the 1520s, earlier ecclesiastical and Latin-language literature lost much of its significance. However, as most books were made of valuable and durable leather, their leaves were recycled and put to new use. In practice, the Crown seized a large number of the medieval liturgical books – both handwritten and printed – owned by churches, monasteries and convents, and cut the books apart. Most of the resulting double leaves were used from the 1530s to the 1630s as covers for account books in the expanding administration of the Crown. The covers ended up in the central administration archives in Stockholm together with the annual account books.

The Treaty of Fredrikshamn, which concluded the Finnish War in 1809, altered the course of history for the mediaeval parchment leaves. Having conquered Finland, Russia dictated in the treaty that the defeated Sweden had to return all topical and historical documents relevant to Finland to territory...
east of the Gulf of Bothnia. As a result, most of the account books produced in Finland in the 16th and 17th centuries were also returned. Although the provisions of the treaty did not apply to the remains of mediaeval books, thousands of fragment leaves were shipped to Finland, still in the form of account book covers.

The material first arrived in Turku, from where it was transferred to the Senate Archives (later the State Archives and currently the National Archives) in Helsinki. In the 1840s and 1850s, the parchment covers were cut apart from the account books. The collection of thousands of mediaeval book leaves thus created was moved to the Helsinki University Library, now the National Library of Finland.

**From pioneering scholarship to a research database**

The current *Fragmenta membranea* collection is divided thematically into seven groups. Its cataloguing and study began in the 1840s, when Edward Grönblad, an archivist, organised the parchment leaves that he had cut apart from bailiffs' account books. Systematic cataloguing did not begin, however, until the 1910s when musicologist Toivo Haapanen took over. Over the following decades, Haapanen catalogued most of the liturgical material in the collection. Around the same time, Aarno Maliniiemi, a church historian, studied the calendar fragments in the collection.

Although the importance of the collection for research on early Finnish literary culture was understood at the time, the fragment leaves were little used for decades because they were difficult to interpret and were only partly catalogued. In the 1970s, however, Anja Inkeri Lehtinen began the cataloguing of theological and legal material, which is still ongoing. In the 1980s, Jyrki Knuutila examined the manuale material among the fragments, while a catalogue of the collection's *antiphonarium*, drawn up by musicologist Ilkka Taitto, was published in 2001.

From 2006 to 2012, historian Tuomas Heikkilä led a project exploring literary culture in mediaeval Finland. This project was the first to comprehensively use parchment fragments as sources and provided a detailed overview of early Finnish literary culture. As a by-product of the project, uncatalogued material in the *Fragmenta membranea* collection was preliminarily catalogued.

What is more, on the initiative of the above project, the National Library began in 2008 to plan the creation of a digital research database of its mediaeval parchment fragments. The *Helsingin Sanomat* Foundation provided generous funding and, later, the Ministry of Education and Culture also contributed. The parchment fragments were conserved and digitised in Mikkeli at the Centre for Preservation and Digitisation, and the database as well as a more comprehensive online publication on mediaeval literature were unveiled in March 2012.

The project for the digitisation and conservation of parchment fragments and the creation of a related database was exceptional in Finland due to its broad scope and the fragility of the material. It was a useful learning experience for everyone involved. The project gave new impetus to the digitisation and conservation of early literary resources and set a new standard for Finnish expertise in these areas. Crucially, the project led to the establishment of teamwork between scholars and conservators, which is expected to benefit both parties in future. Conservators' tacit knowledge about manuscript materials is invaluable to scholars, while the scholars' knowledge of manuscripts is useful to the conservators.

**From fragments towards a comprehensive overview**
Although the National Library’s fragment collection is large in international terms, it does not provide an entirely representative picture of the spectrum of the works produced and used during the mediaeval period in the eastern parts of the Swedish realm. The National Archives of Sweden in Stockholm currently preserves a fragment collection of some 22,500 parchment leaves, from which the Helsinki-based *Fragmenta membranae* was separated at the beginning of the 19th century. Separating the sections relevant to Finland alone from the collection of bailiffs’ account books proved difficult after the Fredrikshamn Treaty, and some such fragments still remain in Stockholm. On the other hand, plenty of material related not to mediaeval Finland, but to other parts of the Swedish realm, ended up in Helsinki.

The Helsinki collection consists entirely of the remains of the books seized for the Crown. Since it was church libraries in particular that had to relinquish their literary treasures to the Crown, religious and liturgical material may be overemphasised in *Fragmenta membranae*. However, estimates suggest that only about 50% of the book leaves originally used as covers for bailiffs’ account books have survived to our time. The number of parchment leaves reused after the Reformation was thus considerably higher than what we now know, as the passing centuries have taken their toll on a large part of our mediaeval literary heritage.

On the other hand, the Crown did not reuse all the mediaeval parchment books, most of which have been destroyed over the centuries. Almost nothing is now known of their content. The manuscript material also limits the scope of the fragment collection. As only parchment leaves were accepted as the covers of account books, the collection includes no remains of paper manuscripts. Although works written on paper are known to have circulated in Finland during the last centuries of the mediaeval period, most of them have since been destroyed.

Despite the above limitations, the *Fragmenta membranae* collection and database provide important scholarly source material, particularly on the emergence of literary culture in Finland as well as on pre-Reformation literature. The collection covers a chronological span from the arrival of literacy in the 11th and 12th centuries to the Reformation in the 16th century. As the area of present-day Finland had no indigenous literary culture before the arrival of Latin literature, *Fragmenta membranae* allows us to study, as in a laboratory, how literary culture developed and what its social implications were.

By all accounts, the collection also offers an exceptionally comprehensive picture of literature in one diocese – the Diocese of Turku, which encompassed all of Finland – on the eve of the Reformation. Firstly, the number of books in the area was relatively small compared to that of regions that had been shaped by literary culture earlier on. Secondly, with the benefit of several centuries of hindsight, the seizure of books by the Crown’s bailiffs in the 16th and 17th centuries and the recycling of parchments as the covers of account books turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We can reasonably assume that a far higher number of recycled parchment leaves have survived to our time and can now be used by scholars than if the books had remained in parish churches through the intervening centuries.

**Bibliography**


5. Haapanen 1922; Haapanen 1925; Haapanen 1932. See also Haapanen 1924.
7. See, e.g., Lehtinen 2005.


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