"Do not Shut Your Eyes if You Will See Musical Notes:" German Heroic Poetry ("*Nibelungenlied*"), Music, and Performance

Ulrich Müller and Margarete Springeth

Introduction

Heroic poetry is an important part of oral history: heroic poetry of all times and of all parts of the world was transmitted orally, at least originally. A singer, sometimes accompanied by one or several instrumentalists, tells his story singing in front of an audience. Nevertheless, many philologists still neglect the musical part of this poetry. A well-known medievalist (Helmut Lomnitzer, 1971) once said that many of his colleagues would react in the following manner: 'Shut your eyes, if there are musical notes.'[1]

Today we are used to *reading* texts and epics, not to *hearing* them. Therefore, it is difficult for us to imagine how oral transmittion of epics worked. At least, since Milman Parry's and Albert Lord's research, there can be no doubt how important music and singing was for epics. Not only Homer's epics were sung, which seems to be demonstrated in the beginning of the "Odyssey." But contemporary examples of epic singing, of the singing of ‚Heldenlieder,' still exist. For many years, we have collected such examples, nearly world-wide, and we have also exchanged tapes with Professor Lord whom I (U.M.) met approximately twenty years ago in his institute at Harvard University.

Firstly we would like to present three examples of contemporary epic singing, from the Faeroe Islands (Northem Europe), from Egypt (i.e., the Arab world), and from Senegal (i.e., from Central West Africa), as well as a reconstruction from Japan. Secondly, we want to show how a well-known specialist from Vienna sings the famous Middle High German heroic poem, the "*Nibelungenlied*."

1. Epic singing today

a. Faeroe Islands

The Faeroe Islands, situated between Norway, Iceland, and Scotland, are the only part in the Germanic world where epic singing still exists, but in a very

[1] See bibliography.

special way. The stories are not only sung by a group of people, but also danced (fig. 1). The duration of a performance of such ballads is from roughly 15 to 90 minutes. The Faeroe dancing ballads were used to save the island's cultural identity, while they were suppressed as a colony by the Kingdom of Denmark for many centuries.

The ballads are sung and danced when people meet for parties and festivities. One person leads the singing and dancing, and the others follow him or her. The oldest dance ballads are from the 13th century, and there are several hundred of ballads. Three ballads tell the story of Sigurd and the Niflungs, the performance of which needs roughly three hours.[2]

b. Egypt

Sometimes in Cairo during Ramadan there is still a chance to hear parts of the most popular Arab folk epic, the tale of the Banu Hilal clan and their hero, Abu Sayed (fig. 2). Everybody in Egypt knows something from these stories, which stem from the times when the Arabs tried to conquer the Maghreb. We were told that they are still sung in smaller villages. Normally, one musician does the singing and the playing of the typical epic instrument, the *rababa*.

The Arab *rababa* is a two-stringed fiddle that is played with a bow, you could call it the great-grandmother of all our European stringed instruments like the violin, viola, or cello. To sing the complete story of the Banu Hilali takes many days, and usually only parts are presented by the singer, who mostly travels from village to village; the audience comments on the story and sometimes also joins the singing.[3]

c. Senegal

In Senegal, Western Central Africa, epic singing is still well-known (fig. 3). I (U. M.) could buy many tapes at the markets in Dakar, the country's capital, and two years ago I also had the chance to rent (really: to rent!) three famous musicians in the old city of St. Louis, Northern Senegal. The most popular tale is the epic about Sunjata, a hero who founded the kingdom of Mali, Western Africa, in the 13th century. There are versions in several West African languages, above all in Mandinka; modern artists today also use French to tell the old stories. The singer is accompanied by a large stringed instrument, which is slightly similar to a harp and also played like a harp, called *Kora*.

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[2] Text and German translation: Fuss 1985/1987. – At the symposium we presented an excerpt from the ballad about „Regin, the Smith," which tells the story of Young Sigurd and that we recorded some years ago.

[3] We have collected several examples of epic singing in Egypt. At the symposium a video was presented that was taken in February 2001.

d. Japan

There is no longer epic singing in modern Japan, unlike other countries of the Far East (i.e., Mongolia, China). The only surviving oral poetry of the Japanese Middle Ages is the Noh drama, which is still performed and sung today, part of the national heritage about which nearly all people in Japan still know at least something. But the performances of Noh dramas, often lasting for half a day, are attended by only a few people nowadays. When we were at the University of Hiroshima in February, 2000, a colleague specializing in Ancient Japanese Literature, presented to us a modern reconstruction of singing a medieval heroic poem from Japan, the "Tales of the Heike Clan" (*Heike monogatari*), from the 13th century. The performance, sung by a woman, was published on Compact Disc.[4]

What use do these and other recordings of contemporary epic singing have? Firstly, they demonstrate *that* heroic poetry can be and was sung. Secondly, they show us *how* it was sung: usually by one singer, accompanied by a stringed instrument that is played like a fiddle or a harp, by the singer himself or by a another musician. If we would present more of our recordings, for example from Serbia, Cyprus, India or Central Asia, one would easily realize that they sound alike, but of course there are many national differences. Thirdly, we can learn from contempory performances how listeners may have reacted. And fourthly, we can realize that such epic singing usually took hours and hours, even many days or evenings; its style combined rather monotonous singing (at least for average listeners in modern Europe) with only a few modifications; you need time to get to it and to listen to it distinctively.

2. "*Das Nibelungenlied*"

In Middle High German times there were quite a number of heroic poems ("Heldendichtung"/"Heldenlieder"). These poems, of which the most famous is the "*Nibelungenlied*" (c. 1200), were written in stanzas and each type of heroic stanza had its own melody. We know that there were fifteen different types of German heroic stanzas, and melodies have been transmitted for eight of them: They could still be used to perform some of the strophic epics (which rarely is done – see introduction). Several musicians, together with us (in Salzburg), have been trying to reconstruct medieval performances of epic singing. An important example is the performance of the Middle High German "*Nibelungenlied*", sung by the Viennese Eberhard Kummer, a specialist in medieval music (fig. 4). The compact disc was recorded two years ago, the two of us being the research advisers.[5]

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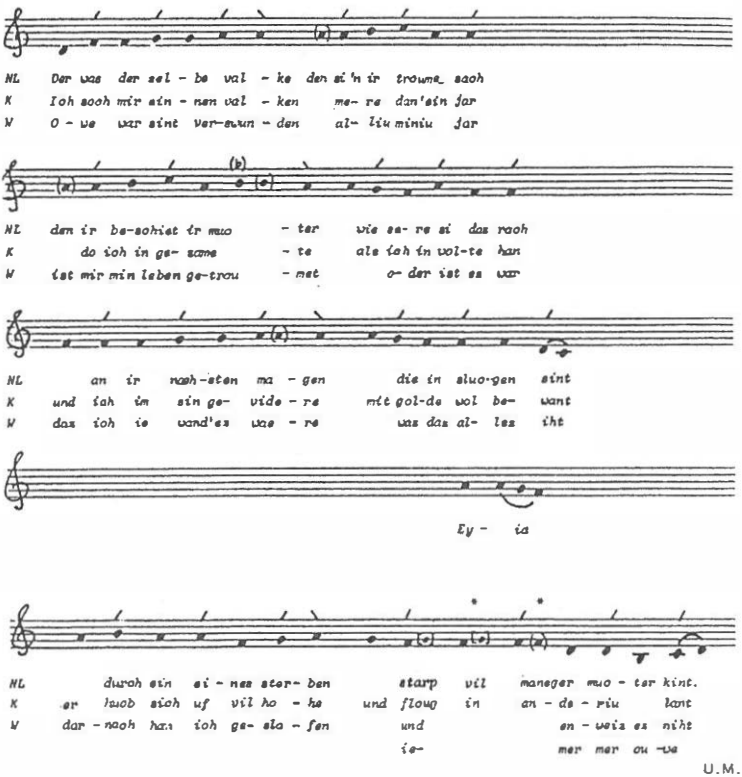
[4] Compact disc: *The Tale of the Heike.* Music and Biwa Accompaniment by Mari Uehara. Tokyo, 1990: Victor Musical Industries, VICG-5. – Translation: Helen Craig McCullough, 1988.

[5] Compact disc: *Das Nibelungenlied; Walther von der Vogelweide: Alterslied; Kürenberger: Fünf Strophen. Gesungen von Eberhard Kummer im Hildebrandston,* research advisors Ulrich Müller and Margarete Springeth (Wien: Preiser Records, Stereo 93415, 1999).

There can be no doubt at all that the "*Nibelungenlied*" originally was sung or – at least – could be sung. Nevertheless, most philologists ignore the musical side of it. If one has the chance to listen to a lengthy part of such heroic poetry and if one is able to catch the meaning of the words, one will better comprehend the style, for example, why there are such frequent repetitions of verses or words, why such frequent remarks on how the story began and, above all, how it will be continued and end. One can also learn that epic singing means a kind of telling a story that combines "longue durée" with powerful and highly dramatical parts, and, furthermore, that it is not nececessary for the singer to modify his style of singing very much.



Please note that the melody of the "*Nibelungenlied*" has not been transmitted. But it can convincingly be reconstructed from a stanza that was often used to sing Nibelungean tales in the late Middle Ages, the so-called "Hildebrandston," the metrical structure of which is nearly identical with the structure of

the Nibelungen stanza. That means that the melody of the "Hildebrandston" must be very similar to the "*Nibelungenlied*"'s tune. Fortunately the melody of the "Hildebrandston" was printed in the 15th century; you have to add just one or two notes to use it for singing the *Nibelungen*-stanza.

We would like to present three excerpts from the "*Nibelungenlied*," sung by Eberhard Kummer, who accompanies himself playing a small harp or a hurdy-gurdy, both of them used for epic singing in the German Middle Ages. It would be much better if one had enough time to listen, let us say three or four hours, because only in that way one would get an appropriate impression, the real flavour of epic singing. During the last years, at two festivals, Eberhard Kummer twice sang the whole "Nibelungenlied" that took altogether roughly 33 hours.

Conclusion

In former times, singing was the common way to present heroic tales and epics to an audience, and in some parts of the world this tradition is still alive. If and how long it will survive under the influence of books (for private reading), and above all of radio, film, video and other modern media, is not clear.

Modern examples still show the "Sitz im Leben", the "raisons vivantes" of that part of oral history. There was problably no big difference between the singing of these tales and epics to a courtly audience or to an average public. Living examples of traditional epic singing can teach us how performances in former centuries might have been.[6]

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[6] We would like to thank: Dr. Sayed Hassanin Fath, Mag. Muhammad Khalifa and their families (Cairo), prof. Uta and Anadoü Sadji (Dakar), and prof. So Shitanda (Hiroshima).

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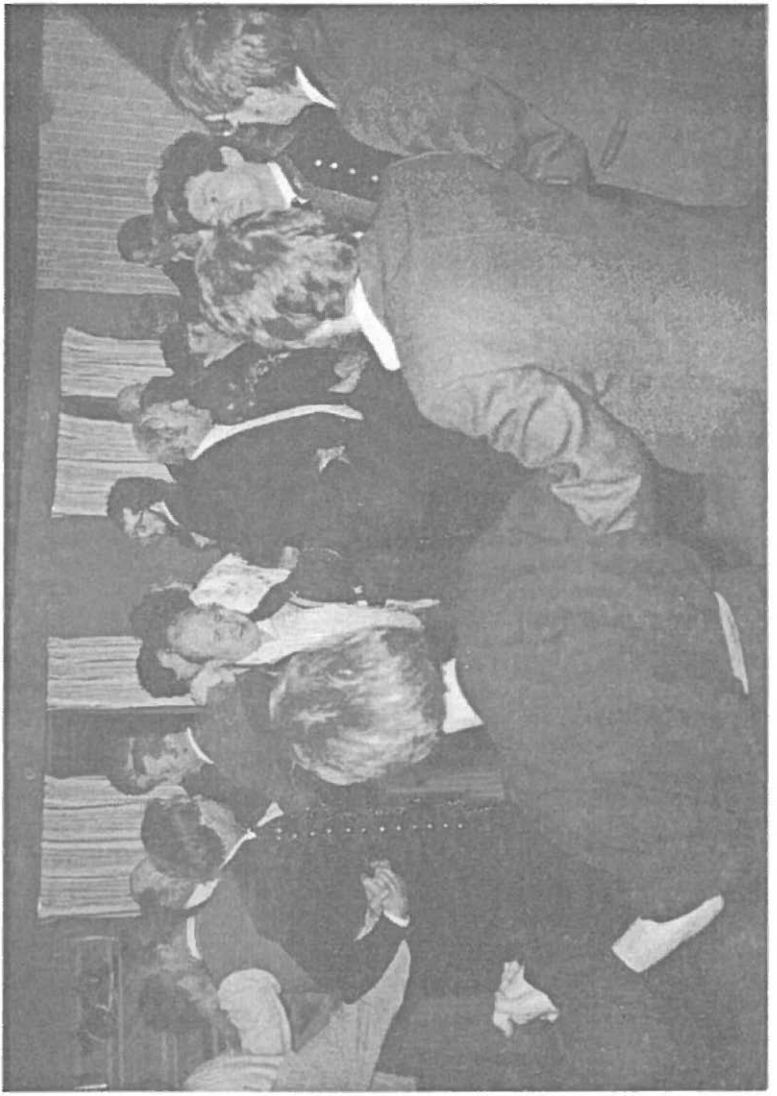

Fig. 1: A dance accompanying Faeroese ballad singing. Photo: Ulrich Müller.

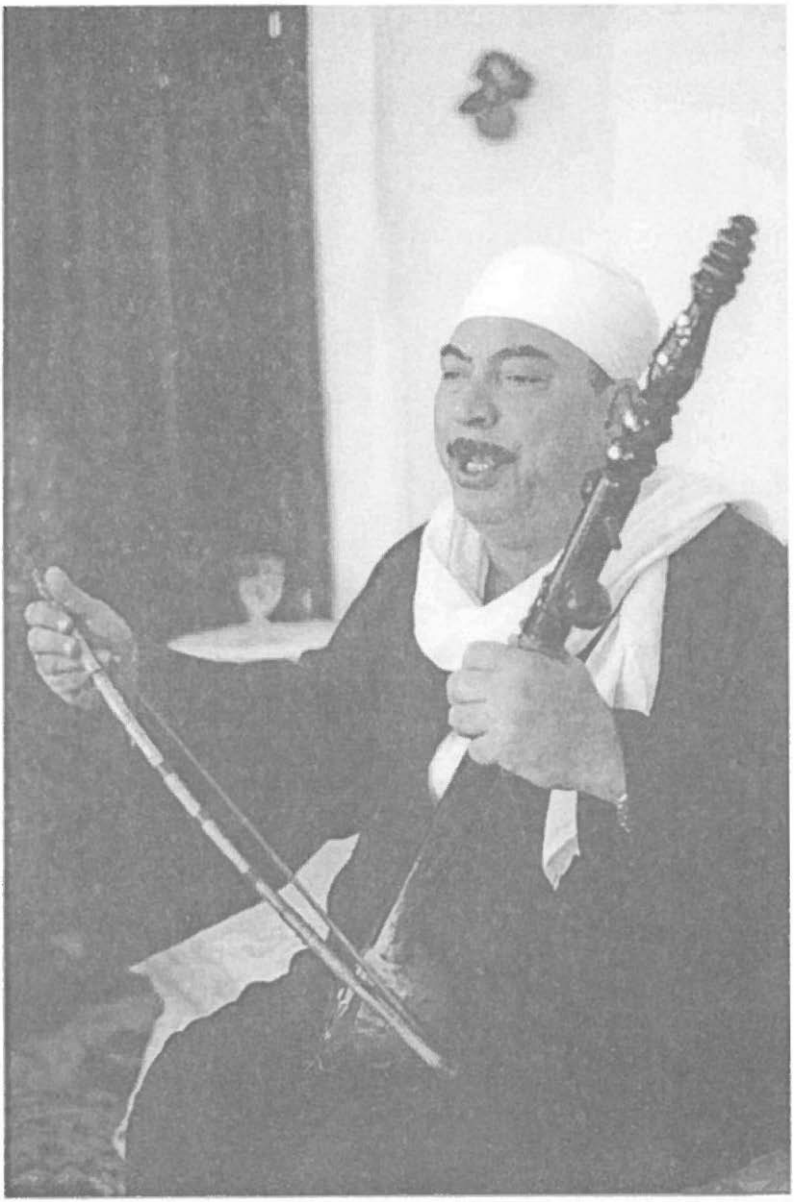

Fig. 2: Singing and playing the tale of the Banu Hilali (Egypt). Photo: Hubert Auer.

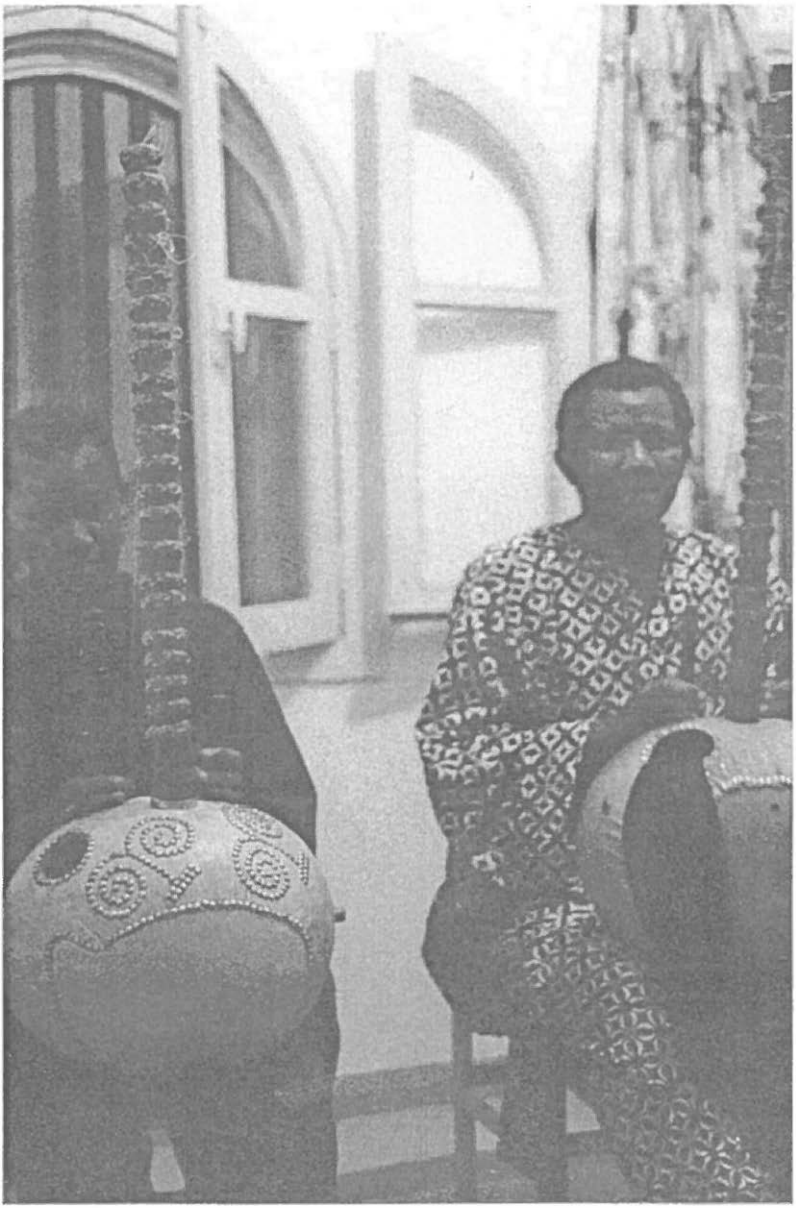

Fig. 3: Epic singing in Senegal. Photo: Ulrich Müller.

Fig. 4: Eberhard Kummer performing the "*Nibelungenlied*." Photo: Ulrich Müller.

ORAL HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE AGES
THE SPOKEN WORD IN CONTEXT

Edited by Gerhard Jaritz and Michael Richter

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VOLUME 3

Oral History of the Middle Ages
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Krems and Budapest 2001

GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER ABTEILUNG KULTUR UND WISSENSCHAFT DES AMTES DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

niederösterreichkultur

copy editor: Judith Rasson

Cover illustration: The wife of Potiphar covets Joseph: "... erat autem Joseph pulchra facie et decorus apectu: post multos itaque dies iecit domina oculos suis in Ioseph et ait dormi mecum." ("... And Joseph was [a] goodly [person], and well favoured. And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me."), Gen. 39: 6-7 (KJV). Concordantiae Caritatis, c. 1350. Cistercian abbey of Lilienfeld (Lower Austria), ms 151, fol. 244v (detail). Photo: Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit (Krems an der Donau).

– ISBN 3-90 1094 15 6 (Krems)

– ISBN 963 9241 64 4 (Budapest)
– ISSN 1587-6470 CEU MEDIEVALIA

Published by:

Medium Aevum Quotidianum. Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der materiellen Kultur des Mittelalters, Körnermarkt 13, A-3500 Krems. Austria,

and

Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Nádor utca 9, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary.

Printed by Printself, Budapest.

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Preface

Oral culture played an instrumental role in medieval society.[1] Due to the lack of any direct source evidence, however, research into the functions and importance of oral communication in the Middle Ages must confront a number of significant problems. Only indrect traces offer the opportunity to analyze phenomena that were based on or connected with the spoken word. The 'oral history' of the Middle Ages requires the application of different approaches than dealing with the 20th or 21st century.

For some decades Medieval Studies have been interested in questions of orality and literacy, their relationship and the substitution of the spoken by the written word.[2] Oral and literate culture were not exclusive and certainly not opposed to each other.[3] The 'art of writing' was part of the 'ars rhetorica' and writing makes no sense without speech.[4] Any existing written statement should also be seen as a spoken one, although, clearly, not every oral statement as a written one. Authors regularly wrote with oral delivery in mind. 'Speaking' and 'writing' are not antonyms.

It is also obvious that "the use of oral communication in medieval society should not be evaluated . . . as a function of *culture populaire* vis-à-vis *culture savante* but, rather, of the communication habits and the tendency of medieval man

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[1] For the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, cf. Willem Frijhoff, "Communication et vie quotidienne à la fin du moyen âge et à l'epoque moderne: réflexions de théorie et de méthode," in *Kommuniation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut Hundsbichler (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), p. 24: "La plupart de gens vivait encore pour l'essentiel dans une culture orale et les procédés d'appropriation des idées passaient de préférence par la parole dite et écoutée, quand bien même on était capable d'une lecture visuelle plus ou moins rudimentaire."

[2] See Marco Mostert, "New Approaches to Medieval Communication?" in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), pp. 15-37; Michael Richter, "Die Entdeckung der 'Oralität' der mittelalterlichen Gesellschaft durch die neuere Mediävistik," in *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz (Bochum: D. Winkler, 2000), pp. 273-287.

[3] Peter Burke calls the construct of "oral versus literate" useful but at the same time dangerous: idem, "Mündliche Kultur und >Druckkultur< im spätmittelalterlichen Italien," in *Volkskultur des europäischen Spätmittelalters*, eds. Peter Dinzelbacher and Hans-Dieter Mück (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1987), p. 60.

[4] Michael Clanchy, "Introduction," in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), p. 6.

to share his intellectual experiences in the corporate framework."[5] Oral delivery was not "the sole prerogative of any socioeconomic class."[6]

For all these reasons, it is important to analyze the extent of and context, in which 'speech acts,' auditive effects, and oral tradition occur in medieval sources .[7] Research into the use of the spoken word or references to it in texts and images provides new insight into various, mainly social, rules and patterns of the communication system. It opens up additional approaches to the organization and complexity of different, but indispensably related, media in medieval society, and their comparative analysis.[8]

The spoken word is connected with the physical presence of its 'sender.' Speech may represent the authenticity of the given message in a more obvious way than written texts or images. Therefore, the use of 'speech acts' in written or visual evidence also has to be seen in context with the attempt to create, construct, or prove authenticity. Moreover, spoken messages contribute to and increase the lifelikeness of their contents, which may influence their perception by the receiver, their efficacy and success. Being aware of such a situation will have led to the explicit and intended use and application of the spoken word in written texts and images – to increase their authenticity and importance, too.

If one operates with a model of 'closeness' and 'distance' of communication with regard to the level of relation of 'senders' and 'receivers,' then the 'speech acts' or their representation have to be seen as contributors to a 'closer' connection among the participants of the communication process.[9] At the same time, however, speech might be evaluated as less official. One regularly comes across 'oral space'

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[5] Sophia Menache, *The Vox Dei. Communication in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 19.

[6] Ibidem, p. 21. Cf. also Jan-Dirk Müller, "Zwischen mündlicher Anweisung und schriftlicher Sicherung von Tradition. Zur Kommunikationsstruktur spätmittelalterlicher Fechtbücher," in *Kommunikation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut Hundsbichler (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), p. 400: "Offensichtlich sind schriftliche und nichtschriftliche Tradierung von Wissen weiterhin relativ unabhängig voneinander, nachdem die Schrift längst dazu angesetzt hat, Inseln der Mündlichkeit oder praktisch-enaktiver Wissensvermittlung zu erobern. Die Gedächtnisstütze kann die Erfahrung nicht ersetzen, sondem allenfalls reaktivieren. Sie ist sogar nur verständlich, wo sie auf anderweitig vermittelte Vorkenntnisse stößt."

[7] Cf. W.F.H. Nicolaisen, ed., *Oral Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1995).

[8] See, esp., Horst Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen, Schrift und Bild. Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995), passim.

[9] See also Stefan Sonderegger, ">Gesprochen oder nur geschrieben?< Mündlichkeit in mittelalterlichen Texten als direkter Zugang zum Menschen," in *Homo Medietas. Aufsätze zu Religiosität, Literatur und Denkformen des Menschen vom Mittelalter bis in die Neuzeit. Festschrift für Alois Maria Haas zum 65. Geburtstag,* eds. Claudia Brinker-von der Heyde and Niklaus Largier (Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 665: "Jedenfalls darf man sich bewußt bleiben, daß auch in den Texten des deutschen Mittelalters die Reflexe gesprochener Sprache eine bedeutende Schicht ausmachen, die besonders dann immer wieder hervortritt, wenn es um einen direkten Zugang zum Menschen geht, um einVerstehen aus unmittelbarer Partnerschaft heraus ..."

that has become institutionalized or more official by the application of 'written space.'[10] Simultanous employment of such different levels and qualities of messages must often have had considerable influence on their efficacy.[11]

The papers in this volume are the outcome of an international workshop that was held in February, 2001, at the Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University, Budapest. Participants concentrated on problems of the occurrence, usage, and patterns of the spoken word in written and visual sources of the Middle Ages. They dealt with the role and contents of direct and indirect speech in textual evidence or in relation to it, such as chronicles, travel descriptions, court and canonization protocols, sermons, testaments, law-books, literary sources, drama, etc. They also tried to analyze the function of oral expression in connection with late medieval images.

The audiovisuality of medieval communication processes[12] has proved to be evident and, thus, important for any kind of further comparative analysis of the various levels of the 'oral–visual–literate,' i.e. multimedia culture of the Middle Ages. Particular emphasis has to be put on methodological problems, such as the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches,[13] or the question of the extent to which we are, generally, able to comprehend and to decode the communication systems of the past.[14] Moreover, the medievalist does not come across any types of sources in which oral communication represents the main concern.[15] Instead, she or he is confronted, at first glance, with a great variety of 'casual' and 'marginal' evidence.

We would like to thank all the contributors to the workshop and to this volume. Their cooperation made it possible to publish the results of the meeting in the same year in which it took place. This can be seen as a rare exception, at least in the world of the historical disciplines. The head, faculty, staff, and students of the Department of Medieval Studies of Central European University offered various help and support. Special thanks go to Judith Rasson, the copy editor of

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[10] This, e.g., could be well shown in a case study on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela: Friederike Hassauer, "Schriftlichkeit und Mündlichkeit im Alltag des Pilgers am Beispiel der Wallfahrt nach Santiago de Compostela," in *Wallfahrt und Alltag in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, eds. Gerhard Jaritz and Barbara Schuh (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), pp. 277-316.

[11] Cf. Bob Scribner, "Mündliche Kommunikation und Strategien der Macht in Deutschland im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Kommunikation und Alltag in Spätmittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, ed. Helmut Hundsbichler (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), pp. 183-197.

[12] Wenzel, *Hören und Sehen*, p. 292.

[13] Cf. Ursula Schaefer, "Zum Problem der Mündlichkeit," in *Modernes Mittelalter. Neue Bilder einer populären Epoche*, ed. Joachim Heinzle (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1994), pp. 374 f.

[14] Frijhoff, "Communication et vie quotidienne," p. 25: "Sommes-nous encore en mesure de communiquer avec la communication de jadis?"

[15] Michael Richter, *Sprache und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Untersuchungen zur mündlichen Kommunikation in England von der Mitte des elften bis zu Beginn des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1979), p. 22.

this volume, who took particluar care with the texts of the many non-native speakers fighting with the pitfalls of the English language.

Budapest, Krems, and Constance
December 2001

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