Beyond Goody and Grundmann

Michael Richter

In 1963, Jack Goody and Ian Watt published a paper entitled "The Consequences of Literacy."[1] It deals with the invention of the Greek alphabet in the eighth century BC and its contribution to Greek culture, the basis of Western culture *tout court*. This paper has received very broad attention, much of which was highly critical. The essence of the article may be given as follows:

> The present argument must ... confine itself to suggesting that some crucial features of Western culture came into being in Greece soon after the existence, for the first time, of a rich urban society in which a substantial portion of the population was able to read and write; and that, consequently, the overwhelming debt of the whole of contemporary civilisation to classical Greece must be regarded as in some measure the result not so much of the Greek genius, as of the intrinsic differences between non-literate (or proto-literate) and literate societies; the latter being mainly represented by those societies using the Greek alphabet and its derivatives.[2]

Here the reader is asked to see a close causal connection between literacy shared by a substantial section of the population and advance in culture, or, to use a term not found there but implied: progress. Goody and Watt more than once maintain that the majority of the Greek urban dwellers were able to read and write and that the infrastructure existed to maintain this level of education. Crucial to their argument is that the Greek achievements (which in this contribution remain rather vague) were attained *soon* after the creation of a largely literate society.[3]

The Greek paradigm for the scholar derives from another factor described in the following terms: "The writing down of some of the main elements in the cultural tradition in Greece ... brought about an awareness of two things: of the past as different from the present; and of the inherent inconsistencies in the picture of life as it was inherited by the individual from the cultural tradition in its recorded form. These two effects of widespread alphabetic writing, it may be surmised,

---

[1] *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5, (1962-63), pp. 304-345 (reprinted in Jack Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

[2] Ibid., p. 332.

[3] On this issue see further Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

have continued and multiplied themselves ever since, and at an increasing pace since the development of printing."[4]

Those medievalists who deal with literacy normally have a reference to this article without consideration of whether it may contribute to a better understanding of medieval societies. In this context it should be emphasized particularly that Goody refers to effects "of widespread alphabetic writing".[5] For this reason it is imperative to investigate pragmatically the social dimensions of writing in every given society. In any case, the medievalists who draw on Goody and Watt in a general manner conveniently fail to comment on another important statement in the same article which, admittedly, is not discussed in detail but would appear to be as crucial: "For, even within a literate culture, the oral tradition ... nevertheless remains the primary mode of cultural orientation, and, to varying degrees, is out of step with the various literate traditions."[6]

I suppose that this point was made rather casually because it was an obvious phenomenon for anthropologists that did not need any elaboration, but it certainly does place written culture into a wider social context. If the statement is valid for classical Greece, it is all the more relevant for the Middle Ages.

This article by Goody and Watt, like other scholarly contributions, should be taken for what it is, the presentation of a hypothesis that needs to be tested for its applicability in every case. Its main assumptions have found vehement critics from the discipline of classicists,[7] not, however, from medievalists. Here it seems advisable to make two points. In the first place, Goody and Watt were not historians, let alone medievalists, but anthropologists; secondly, in this article they nowhere referred to the Middle Ages, but confined themselves to antiquity and contemporary society. Since the appearance of this article, Jack Goody has published in the field of medieval studies and there apparently did not heed his own earlier evaluation of primary orality, but got caught, like so many others, in what I would like to call the 'texts trap'. But here this is just an aside.

Two points have to be separated: the article on its own merits, and the use of it made by medievalists who do not refer to the limits the authors themselves have drawn. Those medievalists who use Goody and Watt in support of their ideas about literacy in the medieval world, more often by way of tacit assumptions than in points specifically elaborated, do not discuss two essential features. First, the educational infrastructure in medieval societies everywhere was fundamentally different from what Goody and Watt posit for classical Greece, the medieval so-

---

[4] Goody and Watt, *Literacy*, p. 333. The same point is made elsewhere: "The present attempt to outline the possible relationships between the writing system and those cultural innovations of early Greece which are common to all alphabetically-literate societies" (p. 320).

[5] <Literacy> "seems to have been used in a very wide range of activities, intellectual as well as economic, and by a wide range of people" (ibidem, pp. 318 f.)

[6] Ibidem, p. 335.

[7] See, e.g., John Halverson, "Goody and the Implosion of the Literacy Thesis," *Man*, NS 27 (1992), pp. 301-317.

cieties were much less closely knit than classical Greece.[8] Second, the language situation was different in Greek antiquity and in modern times from the situation in the Middle Ages. In ancient Greece and in the modern world the primary language of the literates is a written variety of their vernacular. This was not so for most of the Middle Ages where the language written most widely was Latin, mostly a foreign language the acquisition of which was restricted to a small section of the population and only in special institutions and for restricted purposes.[9] For many of the medieval centuries we are dealing with élite literacy[10] par excellence, which was not what Goody and Watt presented from Greece.

It would appear that the second statement of Goody and Watt quoted earlier is highly pertinent to the medieval situation; "The oral tradition remained the primary mode of cultural orientation." Here the anthropologists come into their own again. It is a great challenge to medievalists to come to terms with this situation, and all the more so since oral tradition must necessarily be investigated by way of written sources.[11] This implies that the medium in which one works is qualitatively different in several respects from the medium to be investigated. There are indications that often, even though not throughout, those who produced our written sources were not neutral towards the representatives of the oral culture. It may be pointed out that the conviction that the oral tradition was the primary mode of cultural orientation has been branded recently, by a Celticist, as "romantic".[12] Celticists should know better since Celtic societies have been carriers of vital oral culture to the twentieth century more visibly that other Western societies.[13]

Here the medievalists would be well served to heed the article by Herbert Grundmann, 'Litteratus – Illitteratus', published in 1958.[14] Its reception would appear to have been restricted to the world of Germanophone scholarship. There, however, it has not been subjected to any substantial criticism since its appearance almost half a century ago. Grundmann was a highly respected medievalist, from

---

[8] Detlev Illmer, *Formen der Erziehung und Wissensvermittlung im frühen Mittelalter* (München: Arbeo-Gesellschaft, 1971); M. M. Hildebrandt, *The External School in Carolingian Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

[9] Michael Richter, "Latein als Schlüssel zur Welt des früheren Mittelaters?" *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 27 (1993), pp. 15-26, reprinted in id., *Studies in Medieval Language and Culture* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995) pp. 198-204.

[10] For this aspect see below, the discussion of Herbert Grundmann, "Litteratus – Illitteratus."

[11] In detail see Michael Richter, *The Formation of the Medieval West. Studies in the Oral Culture of the Barbarians* (Dublin and New York: Four Courts Press, 1994). See further Hermann Moisl, *Lordship and Tradition in Barbarian Europe* (Lampeter: Mellen, 1999) (Studies in Classics, vol. 10).

[12] Patrick Sims-Williams, "The Uses of Writing in Early Medieval Wales," in: Huw Pryce, ed., *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 15-38, at p. 16.

[13] See Wolfgang Meid, *Dichter und Dichtkunst im alten Irland* (Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaften der Universität Innsbruck, 1971).

[14] *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 40, pp. 1-65.

1957 to 1970 president of the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, and in charge of the edition of mainly Latin material concerning medieval *Germania*, whatever that term may stand for. It is not so much that Grundmann is wrong in what he writes, but rather is misleading because of what he leaves out. We may add that since Grundmann's article appeared there has been some progress in medieval studies which is relevant for us.

While there has been ample work on the phenomenon of writing and its consequences, it would appear significant that the German language lacks a single equivalent for the English terms 'literacy' or 'literate'.[15] What discussion there has been of written culture in Germany failed to place it alongside the phenomenon that "the oral tradition .... remained the primary mode of cultural orientation."[16] This despite the fact that Grundmann referred to the culture that remained outside the written sphere more than once and even made it explicit that this other culture was not inferior to written culture but simply represented another world.[17]

Grundmann deals only with alphabetic writing, and he does not give any indication that he is aware of either runic writing or *ogam*. He has three main points to make:

1. *litteratus* in the Middle Ages has different connotations from that term in Roman antiquity and simply refers to the ability to read and write;[18]
2. the ability to write in the Middle Ages was largely the domain of clerics, to the extent that *litteratus / clericus* almost became synonyms, at least before the twelfth century;[19]
3. the application of the Latin alphabet to non-Latin languages was carried out early only exceptionally and only for the English language.[20]

Crucial in his argument is the evaluation of Latin vis-à-vis the other Western European languages. Here the *Romania* has to be singled out as the area with an important continuity from the Latin past. The role of Latin in the early Middle

---

[15] Goody and Watt's article was translated as "Konsequenzen der Literalität," in *Literalität in traditionalen Gesellschaften*, trans. Friedhelm Herborth and Thomas Lindquist (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981). The two crucial terms are German neologisms.

[16] A ten year project of the University of Freiburg on "Übergänge und Spannungsfelder zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit" did not explore orality in a new manner, see, in the series ScriptOralia, e. g. Christine Ehler, Ursula Schaefer, ed., *Verschriftung und Verschriftlichung* (Tübingen: Narr, 1998) (ScriptOralia 94).

[17] Art. cit., pp. 8, 13, 32.

[18] Ibid., pp. 15, 17. For the generally positive connotations of the term *idiota* in the early Middle Ages, legitimized by Acts 4:13: *Videntes autem Petri constantiam, et Joannis, comperto quod homines essent sine litteris, et idiotae, admirabantur* ..., see Johannes Schneider, "Das Wort idiota im mittelalterlichen Latein," in E. C. Welskopf, ed., *Untersuchungen ausgewählter altgriechischer sozialer Typenbegriffe und ihr Fortleben in Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1981), pp. 132-57 (Soziale Typenbegriffe im alten Griechenland und ihr Fortleben in den Sprachen der Welt, Bd. 4).

[19] Ibid., p. 43.

[20] Ibid., pp. 34, 35, 40.

ages has always been a controversial subject among scholars of the Romance languages. For twenty years or so there has been a growing argument from various sides to suggest that Latin in the *Romania*, long past the end of the Western empire, was accessible to people not specially educated, and with considerable regional variation. As with concentric circles, Latin was accessible longest in Italy, less so in Spain and least in Gaul, where one could differentiate even further between north and south, the *langue d'oil* and the *langue d'oc*, respectively.[21] In this respect Grundmann, not without some ambivalence, holds the conservative position. This is the view that from the beginning of the Middle Ages, even in the *Romania*, Latin was as foreign a language[22] as it was in the central Middle Ages, and its acquisition required a formal education.

The more recent positions outlined above have many consequences for the topic. As far as I can see, no attention has been paid by early medieval historians to the fact that in the Roman world of late antiquity, the use of Latin in the Christian religion had meant the use of the *lingua vulgaris*, as is so evident in Jerome's Vulgate. This situation must now be extended to the Romance areas of the early medieval centuries. Sermons preached in Latin were accessible without any linguistic barrier to the uneducated Romance population, and if the liturgy may have used a more arcane register of that language, the Vulgate for these people was nevertheless not a book with seven seals, as it were.

The situation where uneducated people could partake in Latin church services is clear in the sermons of Caesarius of Arles from the first half of the sixth century. In bringing the message of the Gospel to his flock Caesarius encountered an attitude of indifference that he found alarming. It is from his writings that we hear of the arguments which he appears to have encountered frequently: "we cannot read and therefore we cannot know the Christian commands." Caesarius did not accept this argument, which he regarded as a poor excuse. He countered with the example of merchants, who, should they themselves not be able to write, employed others who possessed this skill, and thus even though themselves illiterate could make use of written culture for their benefit. If this was done for worldly gain, said Caesarius, all the more should it be worth pursuing for the salvation of one's soul.[23] He further argued that the laity had the capacity to retain a large repertoire of secular verse and thus could as well open themselves to Christian Latin verse. Caesarius bundled the predicament in which he found himself in the words

---

[21] See in particular Roger Wright, *Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France* (Liverpool: Cairns, 1982), which was even translated into Spanish, and more publications by him thereafter. Michel Banniard, *Viva voce. Communication écrite et communication orale du ive au ixe siècle en Occident Latin* (Paris: Institut des Etudes Augustiniennes, 1992).

[22] See esp. art. cit., pp. 24-26.

[23] *Sancti Caesarii episcopi Arelatensis opera omnia*, ed. G. Morin (Maretioli, 1937), vol. I, sermo 6 and 8.

Incipe velle.[24] It was only a question of motivation, not of formal education. It is believed that this language situation continued in Gaul into the eighth century.

Turning to other areas of Western Europe, an entirely different picture emerges. Here the focus must be first on Ireland, the society that received Catholic Christianity a century earlier than the Franks. The horizon of Grundmann did not extend that far, and, one may add, this is still the case with German medievalists. Ireland is special for several reasons. In the first place, around 400, it received Catholic Christianity from Britain and Gaul, two areas where Catholic Christianity had just become the official religion of the state, tied, of course, to the Latin language.[25] In Ireland, this language of the new religion was retained. Here it was, from the beginning, a sacral language accessible only to people who had received a formal education and was thus inaccessible to the majority of Christians.

This was to be the situation thereafter in all other parts of Western Europe outside the *Romania*, a situation that Grundmann posited from the very beginning. In the seventh century Ireland emerged as the society with the most dynamic cultivation of the Latin language.[26] And from the late sixth century onwards, Irish Christians, the famous Irish *peregrini*, went forth into other societies to live their Christianity abroad. It cannot be doubted that the Irish contributed substantially to the spread and acceptance of the Latin Church in the West, with the central use of the *lingua sacra*. This implies the subsequent division of society into *litterati* and *illitterati*, where one should take note that the Christian religion could not tolerate the belief systems of not-Christian as equal. The qualitative difference between *litterati* and the rest emerged in this context, at least in the minds of the zealous Christians.

There is another reason why Ireland must be singled out in this field. Grundmann was no exception in not knowing that medieval Ireland has the richest corpus of vernacular literature outside Latin.[27] In fact, in seventh-century Ireland one can observe, almost as in a laboratory, the stages in writing the vernacular with the help of the Latin alphabet, from earliest glosses to continuous prose. This, furthermore, happened in the sphere of the Christian religion[28] as well as in the secular sphere. Here we must refer to the vast corpus of Irish law, compiled

---

[24] Ibid., sermo 6, p. 34.

[25] For the most recent and highly competent account see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), with an extensive bibiography.

[26] Michael Richter, *Ireland and Her Neighbours in the Seventh Century* (Dublin and New York: Four Courts Press, 1999).

[27] The best modern account is J. E. Caerwyn Williams, Patrick Ford, *The Irish Literary Tradition* (Cardiff and Belmont/Mass: The University of Wales Press, 1992). It is significant that the Celtic countries are not included in standard works like Karl Langosch, *Geschichte der Textüberlieferung der antiken und mittelalterlichen Literatur*, vol. 2 (Zürich: Atlantis Verlag, 1964).

[28] The most convenient collection of material is found in Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, eds., *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), reprinted Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975.

around 700 and written almost completely in Irish.[29] The Irish language as it emerged in the early stages was a cultivated *Hochsprache*, but it would appear to have been accessible to people not trained to read when it was recited to them. In this way the written material in non-Latin languages was not inaccessible to illiterates. The question of why a similar constellation apparently did not exist in Wales, which had a great influence on early Ireland, has no simple answer. This is a substantial area where Grundmann is unreliable due to lack of information. It has considerable consequences for the overall validity of his argument.

The spread of alphabetic writing along with the spread of Christianity created the precondition for writing the vernacular languages as well. The early glosses in many language areas show that this became possible at an early stage. The fact that there is not more vernacular writing available from the early medieval centuries shows that traditional methods of passing on the cultural heritage – the oral method – were considered as adequate and continually satisfactory. This is indeed conceded by Grundmann and can be considered as a confirmation of sorts for the medieval period of Goody and Watt's ideas of primary orality.

This position may be illustrated by a brief consideration of the Old Saxon *Heliand* poem with its over six thousand verses. Grundmann refers to it in passing but makes only a reference to the person who initiated the composition, a *Ludowicus* who could be either Louis the Pious (unlikely in my view) or his son Louis.[30] The Latin preface to this work also relates, however, that the poem was the work of a native eminent poet who was highly respected by his fellow countrymen:

> Praecepit namque cuidam viro de gente Saxonum, qui apud suos non ignobilis vates habebatur, ut vetus ac novum Testamentum in Germanicam linguam poetice transferre studeret, quatenus non solum literatis, verum etiam illiteratis sacra divinorum praeceptorum lectio panderetur. Qui iussis imperialibus libenter obtemperans nimirum eo facilius, quo desuper admonitus est prius, ad tam difficile tanque arduum se statim contulit opus, potius tamen confidens de adiutorio obtemperantiae, quam de suae ingenio parvitatis. ... Quod opus tam lucide tamque eleganter iuxta idioma illius linguae composuit, ut audientibus ac intelligentibus non minimam sui decoris dulcedinem praestet.[31]

In this way, the poem shows that in case of need the Church could draw on an elaborate *Dichtersprache*, which existed independent of writing and in the *Heliand* has left a record of its qualities more clearly than in other instances. High

---

[29] D. A Binchy, ed., *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* , 6 vols. (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies,
1978); Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988) (Early Irish Law Series vol. 3).

[30] Art. cit., p. 41.

[31] *Heliand und Genesis*, ed. Otto Behaghel, 9th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984), p. 1 (Altdeutsche Textbibliothek, 4).

quality of language before its wide use in writing is a concept which literature people find unpalatable, yet writing per se is no precondition for an improvement in language.

Thus, we should note two phenomena pointing in different ways. Oral culture existed on a very high level as far as the quality of the language is concerned; it was so firmly established and functioned so well that there was no need to resort to writing even though the technical preconditions existed. From this perspective the people of Latin learning, comprising their skills to read and write Latin in societies where Latin was not the *lingua vulgaris*, must be considered as a socially marginal group who were in no way responsible for the functioning of their society. It is understandable that their view of themselves and the evaluation of their skills would be different, yet their own high regard for their learning must not be taken at face value but instead as their subjective interpretations.

The preconditions for the creation of a small group of people skilled to write Latin in the early medieval societies outside the *Romania* are in need of renewed investigation in order to be able to give an adequate evaluation of the place of the *litterati* in their contemporary context. This can best be done by approaching the problem with the anthropologist's evaluation of the role of oral culture. We may also quote the formulation of the phenomenon of *Dichtersprache* before writing, as expressed by the linguist Calvert Watkins: "A language necessarily implies a society, a speech community, and a culture."[32] We are asked to investigate more than has been done in the past the function of language as a social cohesive even before its written form emerges. This is by no means easy, but it would necessarily amount to a historicization of our available written sources, which would then assume a new and more limited value.

[32] Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon. Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 7.

ORAL HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE AGES
THE SPOKEN WORD IN CONTEXT

Edited by Gerhard Jaritz and Michael Richter

MEDIUM AEVUM QUOTIDIANUM

SONDERBAND XII

=

CEU MEDIEVALIA

VOLUME 3

Oral History of the Middle Ages
The Spoken Word in Context

Edited by Gerhard Jaritz and Michael Richter

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).

Alle Rechte vorbehalten
– ISBN 3-90 1094 15 6 (Krems)

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the permission of the Publishers.
– 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.

Table of Contents

Preface 7

Michael RICHTER, Beyond Goody and Grundmann 11

Tom PETTITT, Textual to Oral: the Impact of Transmission
on Narrative Word-Art 19

Előd NEMERKÉNYI, Fictive Audience. The Second Person Singular in the
Deliberatio of Bishop Gerard of Csanád 39

Katalin SZENDE, Testaments and Testimonies. Orality and Literacy
in Composing Last Wills in Late Medieval Hungary 49

Anna ADAMSKA, The Kingdom of Poland versus the Teutonic Knights:
Oral Traditions and Literate Behaviour in the Later Middle Ages 67

Giedrė MICKŪNAITĖ, Ruler, Protector, and a Fairy Prince:
the Everlasting Deeds of Grand Duke Vytautas
as Related by the Lithuanian Tatars and Karaites 79

Yurij Zazuliak, Oral Tradition, Land Disputes, and the Noble Community
in Galician Rus' from the 1440s to the 1460s 88

Nada ZEČEVIĆ, Λέξις γλυκεῖα. The Importance of the Spoken Word
in the Public Affairs of Carlo Tocco
(from the Anonymous *Chronaca dei Tocco di Cefalonia)* 108

John A. NICHOLS, A Heated Conversation:
Who was Isabel de Aubigny, Countess of Arundel? 117

Tracey L. BILADO, Rhetorical Strategies and Legal Arguments:
'Evil Customs' and Saint-Florent de Saumur, 979-1011 128

Detlev KRAACK, Traces of Orality in Written Contexts.
Legal Proceedings and Consultations at the Royal Court
as Reflected in Documentary Sources from 12th-century Germany 142

Maria DOBOZY, From Oral Custom to Written Law:
The German *Sachsenspiegel* 154

Martha KEIL, Rituals of Repentance and Testimonies
at Rabbinical Courts in the 15th Century 164

Michael GOODICH, The Use of Direct Quotation
from Canonization Hearing to Hagiographical *Vita et Miracula* 177

Sylvia SCHEIN, Bernard of Clairvaux's Preaching of the Third Crusade
and Orality 188

Michael BRAUER, Obstacles to Oral Communication in the Mission
of Friar William of Rubruck among the Mongols 196

Elena LEMENEVA, From Oral to Written and Back: A Sermon Case Study 203

Albrecht CLASSEN, Travel, Orality, and the Literary Discourse:
Travels in the Past and Literary Travels
at the Crossroad of the Oral and the Literary 217

Ulrich MÜLLER and Margarete SPRINGETH, "Do not Shut Your Eyes
if You Will See Musical Notes:" German Heroic Poetry
("*Nibelungenlied*"), Music, and Performance 236

Jolanta SZPILEWSKA, Evoking Auditory Imagination:
On the Poetics of Voice Production in
The Story of The Glorious Resurrection of Our Lord (c. 1580) 248

Jens T. WOLLESEN, Spoken Words and Images
in Late Medieval Italian Painting 257

Gerhard JARITZ, Images and the Power of the Spoken Word 277

List of Contributors 295

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

---

[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'

---

[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, sondern 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

---

[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

Gerhard Jaritz and Michael Richter