Medieval Urban Literacy:
Questions and Possibilities[1]

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An important topic in recent research on literacy is the growth of the so-called literate mentality. Different from other social scientists, such as, e.g. anthropologists, historians usually try to keep their distance from the fuzzy term 'mentality'. Students of medieval literacy avoid exclusive definitions, and prefer to enumerate factors contributing to the development of 'literate mentalities'. Among the most important factors are the realisation that, once writing has become an option in any medieval society, it is a 'natural' thing to preserve human actions through writing, and that written records can be used to reconstruct the past. Writing gradually becomes trusted as an instrument for fixing, and thereby defining, events. A quantitative factor is progress in alphabetisation: the spread of the elementary skills of reading and writing among ever more social groups. The development of literate mentalities can be

measured by the growth (or decline) in the prestige of those individuals who can read and write.[2]

In the Middle Ages, in towns one seems to have had more chance of being confronted with writing than elsewhere. Certain urban milieus participating in written culture, however, have caught the scholars' attention more than others. Studies of the urban communes of northern Italy have suggested a direct link between the reception of the written word in daily life and the emergence of literate mentalities. From the late twelfth century onwards, these communes seemed oriented towards the production and use written records (*Schriftorientierung*); they seemed to possess a collective will to develop literacy. They also preserved written records. This readiness to engage in written culture could be considered as an important sign of changes in thinking and the perception of the world. It showed an increasing growth of the use of the reasoning faculties.[3]

The results of this research, which was mainly carried out in the 1980s and 1990s, seem to have been taken for granted in most studies of urban written culture carried out over the last ten years.[4] Many publications on urban literacy deal with two related topics. First, they consider the different types of written records produced in the towns. Secondly, they study the history of the institutions producing, using and keeping these records.[5] However, there have been other currents of research as well. Recently, there have been studies of such phenomena as the use of public space in towns, secular and religious ceremonies, and the forms of expressing the town's identity (so-called urban *memoria*). This type of study has been an important stimulus for renewed discussions of the nature of urban literacy.

[2]   M.T. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066-1307*, 2nd edn., (Oxford, 1993), p. 186. A. ADAMSKA, "The study of medieval literacy: Old sources, new ideas", in: *The Development of Literate Mentalities in East Central Europe*, ed. A. ADAMSKA and M. MOSTERT (Turnhout 2004: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 9), p. 37.

[3]   Th. BEHRMANN, "Einleitung: Ein neuer Zugang zum Schriftgut der oberitalienischen Kommunen", in: *Kommunales Schriftgut in Oberitalien: Formen, Funktionen, Überlieferung*, ed. H. KELLER and Th. BEHRMANN (München, 1995: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 68), pp. 1-16, *passim*.

[4]   Among the many studies published so far, see especially: W. PREVENIER, "La production et la conservation des actes urbains dans l'Europe médiévale", in: *La diplomatique urbaine en Europe au Moyen Âge*, ed. W. PREVENIER and Th. DE HEMPTINNE (Leuven and Apeldoorn, 2000), pp. 559 ff.; V. HONEMANN, "Stadt, Kanzlei und Kultur: Einführung in das Tagungsthema", in: *Stadt, Kanzlei und Kultur im Übergang zur Frühen Neuzeit – City Culture and Urban Chanceries in an Era of Change*, ed. R. SUNTRUP and J.R. VEENSTRA (Frankfurt a.M,, 2004), p. XI.

[5]   The two volumes, quoted *supra*, n. 3, are representative in this respect.

Research on Urban Literacy

The interest in 'urban' literacy is, however, much older. Already in 1956, at the Freie Universität in Berlin H. Skrzypczak defended a dissertation on the relation between 'town' and 'literacy' (*Schriftlichkeit*) in the German Middle Ages. The work was seen as a contribution to the social history of writing.[6] This thesis is, to my knowledge, the first work in which the role of literacy in medieval towns is investigated. Three years earlier, in a posthumous publication Fritz Rörig had been the first to clearly distinguish between *Schriftwesen*, the technical term for the conditions of the production of the written word in document or book form,[7] and *Schriftlichkeit*, the degree to which the written word was used in any period.[8] The distinction has proven a useful one, and is nowadays no longer in need of explanation.[9]

In English, the term 'literacy' is used in connection with the phenomenon urban literacy for the first time in 1985 by B. Krekić, in a study of the attitude of fourteenth-century Ragusans towards literacy.[10] Considering the appeal of 'medieval literacy' as a topic, this first appearance of the term is rather late: the first medievalists to use the English word 'literacy' in the title of a publication after the thinking of the social scientists and classicists had sunk in, had been F.H. Bäuml and E. Spielmann in their 1974 study of the *Niebelungenlied*.[11]

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[6] H. Skrzypczak, *Stadt und Schriftlichkeit im deutschen Mittelalter: Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte des Schreibens* (diss. Berlin, Freie Universität, 1956).

[7] See W. Wattenbach, *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter*, 3rd edn. (Leipzig, 1896), dealing with the production of written texts and its conditions.

[8] F. Rörig, "Mittelalter und Schriftlichkeit", *Welt als Geschichte* 13 (1953), pp. 29-41.

[9] The word *Schriftlichkeit*, however, is used only rarely in the titles of German language publications on medieval urban literacy. An exception is Mihm's study of late medieval urban legislation (A. Mihm, "Funktionen der Schriftlichkeit in der städtischen Gesetzgebung des Spätmittelalters", *Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik* 27 (1999), pp. 13-37).

[10] B. Krekić, "The attitude of fifteenth-century Ragusans towards literacy", in: *Byzantine Studies in Honor of Milton V. Anastos*, ed. S. Vryonis jr. (Malibu, 1985), pp. 225-232; repr. in: id., *Dubrovnik: A Mediterranean Urban Society, 1300-1600* (Aldershot, 1997: *Variorum Collected Studies Series* 581), Essay viii, pp. 225-232.. Cf. for the use of the term 'literacy' also the survey of J. Barrow in the first volume of the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* (J. Barrow, "Churches, education and literacy in towns 600-1300", in: *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, 1: *600-1540*, ed. D.M. Palliser (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 127-152). This work, however, was published in 2000, long after 'literacy' had become a standard topic in medieval studies.

[11] F.H. Bäuml and E. Spielmann, "From illiteracy to literacy: Prolegomena to a study of the *Niebelungenlied*", *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 10 (1974), pp. 248-259.

Several adjectives have come in use to denote the type of literacy an author wishes to study. 'Pragmatic literacy' is a translation of the German *pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*. Suggested by Brigitte Schlieben-Lange in 1979,[12] *pragmatische Schriftlichkeit* was taken up in Münster. There, in 1986, the German research project 231 ("*Sonderforschungsbereich 231*") started with the aim of studying "all forms of literacy which directly serve functional actions, or which were meant to teach human actions and behaviour by making available knowledge".[13] Written texts were studied which were demanded by the practice of daily life (*Lebenspraxis*), such as charters and statutes. The Münster project ended in 1999. In the fifteen years of its existence the concept of *pragmatische Schriftlichkeit* has exerted a profound influence on German scholarship.[14] In the context of urban literacy, the English expression 'pragmatic literacy' was first used by a historian from Münster, Thomas Behrmann, who in 1994 wrote about the development of pragmatic literacy in the Lombard city communes,[15] and by E. Mühle, who wrote in that same year about commerce and pragmatic literacy as evidenced by the birchbark documents of Novgorod.[16] Clearly the interest in town chanceries predates these first uses of 'pragmatic literacy' in any language by many decades; the questionnaire developed in Münster, however (which in turn was indebted to that of Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record*[17]) has been received among students of urban literacy generally from the 1990s onwards. A slightly different approach is implied by the use of 'people's literacy' in the title of A.A. Svanidze's article of 1997, dealing

[12] Cf. B. SCHLIEBEN-LANGE, "Reden und schreiben im romanischen Mittelalter: Einige pragmatische und soziolinguistische Überlegungen", *Lendemains* 4 (1979), pp. 56-62.

[13] "Der Münsterer Sonderforschungsbereich 231 'Träger, Felder, Formen pragmatischer Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter'", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 24 (1990), pp. 430-459 at p. 389.

[14] See, e.g. *Statutencodices des 13. Jahrhunderts als Zeugen pragmatischer Schriftlichkeit: Die Handschriften von Como, Lodi, Novara, Pavia und Voghera*, ed. H. KELLER and J.W. BUSCH (München, 1991: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 64) and *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter: Erscheinungsformen und Entwicklungsstufen (Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums 17.-19. Mai 1989)*, ed. H. KELLER (München, 1992: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 65).

[15] Th. BEHRMANN, "The development of pragmatic literacy in the Lombard city communes", in: *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West, 1200-1330*, ed. R. BRITNELL (Woodbridge, 1996), pp. 25-41.

[16] E. MÜHLE, "Commerce and pragmatic literacy: The evidence of birchbark documents (from the mid-eleventh to the first quarter of the thirteenth century) on the early urban development of Novgorod", in: *Medieval Russian Culture*, 2, ed. M.S. FLIER and D. ROWLAND (Berkeley, Calif., and Los Angeles, Calif., 1994: *California Slavic Studies* 19), pp. 75-92.

[17] See *supra*, note 1.

with Russian towns from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries.[18] Here, the stress is on the town schools and their impact on (lay) urban society.

German has the possibility to form single words denoting the development of literacy and orality, a possibility not available in English. In 1980, Michael Giesecke wrote of the vernacular and the " 'development of literacy' [*Verschriftlichung*] of life" in late medieval Germany.[19] *Verschriftlichung* became generally accepted in the late 1980s and 1990s, and its process character was strengthened by the use of *Verschriftlichungsprozeß* ('the process of the development of literacy'). These terms were used from the start by the Münster historians dealing with aspects of (mainly Italian) urban literacy. Thus, Thomas Behrmann wrote in 1991 about the charters and statutes of the urban communes in Italy, suggesting that the development of literacy was a learning process.[20] *Verschriftlichung* was translated into Dutch as *verschriftelijking*; it was used in an urban context in 2004 by Jeroen Benders in his study of the development of literacy in the government of Deventer until the end of the fifteenth century.[21]

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[18]   A.A. SVANIDZE, "People's literacy, education and schools in Russian towns, 13th-17th centuries", in: *Studien zur Geschichte des Ostseeraums*, 2: *Die Städte des Ostseeraumes als Vermittler von Kultur 1240-1700*, ed. J.-K. HÜTHE and T. RIIS (Odense, 1997: *Odense University Studies in History and Social Sciences* 2002: *Byhistoriske Skrifter* 9), pp. 14-20.

[19]   M. GIESECKE, " 'Volkssprache' und 'Verschriftlichung des Lebens' im Spätmittelalter: Am Beispiel der Genese der gedruckten Fachprosa in Deutschland", in: *Literatur in der Gesellschaft des Spätmittelalters*, ed. H.U. GUMBRECHT (Heidelberg, 1980), pp. 39-70.

[20]   Th. BEHRMANN, "Verschriftlichung als Lernprozeß: Urkunden und Statuten in den lombardischen Stadtkommunen", *Historisches Jahrbuch* 111 (1991), pp. 385-402. Cf. also H. KELLER, "Über den Zusammenhang von Verschriftlichung, kognitiver Orientierung und Individualisierung: Zum Verhalten italienischer Stadtbürger im Duecento", in: *Pragmatische Dimensionen mittelalterlicher Schriftkultur: Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums 16.-19. Mai 1999*, ed. C. MEIER et al. (München, 2002: *Münstersche Mittelalterschriften* 79)., pp. 1-22; ID., "Die Veränderung gesellschaftlichen Handelns und die Verschriftlichung der Administration in den italienischen Stadtkommunen", in: *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter: Erscheinungsformen und Entwick-lungsstufen (Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums 17.-19. Mai 1989)*, ed. H. KELLER et al. (München, 1992: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 65), pp. 21-36; G. DILCHER, "Oralität, Verschriftlichung und Wandlungen der Normstruktur in den Stadtrechten des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts", in: *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*, pp. 9-19; A. MIHM, "Vom Dingprotokoll zum Zwölftafelgesetz: Verschriftlichungsstufen städtischer Rechtstradition", in: *Schriftlichkeit und Lebenspraxis im Mittelalter: Erfassen, Bewahren, Verändern*, ed. H. KELLER, C. MEIER and T. SCHARFF (München, 1999: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 76), pp. 43-67. Hagen Keller used *Verschriftlichungsprozeß* as early as 1988 ("Oberitalienische Statuten als Zeugen und als Quellen für den Verschriftlichungsprozeß im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert", *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 22 (1988), pp. 286-314).

[21]   J.F. BENDERS, *Bestuursstructuur en schriftcultuur: Een analyse van de bestuurlijke*

'Orality' is quite often used in opposition to 'literacy'. 'Oral' has for a long time been in common use to denote spoken as opposed to written modes of communication. The use of the term 'orality', however, seems relatively recent. It seems to appear in medieval studies as late as 1986, when Evelyn Birge Vitz uses it in a study of the Old French octosyllabic couplet.[22] She explicitly refers to Walter J. Ong's synthesis of 1982, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.[23] Medievalists, apart from literary historians who used it in a restricted sense,[24] have tended to avoid the use of 'orality' for about a decade; since 1990 the term has gradually become accepted.[25] In general, though, the use of 'orality' remains restricted to certain forms of oral communication. *Oralität*, the German equivalent of 'orality', was used in 1992 in a study of urban literacy by G. Dilcher in opposition to *Verschriftlichung*. It would take some time before the problem of the relationship between speech and writing could develop from an 'either / or'-question into a 'more / less'-question.

verschriftelijking in Deventer tot het einde van de 15de eeuw (Hilversum, 2004).

[22] E.B. VITZ, "Rethinking Old French literature: The orality of the octosyllabic couplet", *Romanic Review* 77 (1986), pp. 307-321.

[23] W. ONG, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982); 2nd edn., reset but otherwise unaltered, with slightly different pagination (London, 2002); VITZ, "Rethinking Old French literature", p. 300.

[24] E.B. VITZ, "Orality, literacy and the early Tristan material: Béroul, Thomas, and Marie de France", *Romanic Review* 78 (1987), pp. 298-310; D.H. GREEN, "Orality and reading: The state of research in medieval studies", *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 267-280; ID., "Individual and society: The evidence of writing and orality in late medieval Germany", in: *Homo Sapiens, Homo Humanus II: Letteratura, arte e scienza nella seconda metà del Quattrocento: Atti del XXIX Convegno internazionale del Centro di studi umanistici Montepulciano–Palazzo Tarugi–1987: Individuo e società nei secoli XV e XVI: Atti del XXX Convegno internazionale del Centro di studi umanistici Montepulciano–Palazzo Tarugi–1988*, ed. G. TARUGI (Firenze, 1990), pp. 291-301; R. BEATON, "Orality and the reception of late Byzantine vernacular literature", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 14 (1990), pp. 174-184. GREEN, "Orality and reading", e.g. focuses on the implications of orality for the history of reading (preparing ID., *Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature 800-1300* (Cambridge, 1994)).

[25] See, e.g. C.J. MEWS, "Orality, literacy, and authority in the twelfth-century schools", *Exemplaria* 2 (1990), pp. 475-500.; D.L. VANDERBILT, *Orality, Textuality and the Anglo-Saxon Historical Imagination: An Original Study* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1990); L.J. MILLER, "The transition from orality to literacy in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms", *Dissertation Abstracts International–A: The Humanities and Social Sciences* 53,2 (1992), p. 483A; A.V. MURRAY, "Voices of Flanders: orality and constructed orality in the chronicle of Galbert of Bruges", *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 48 (1994), pp. 103-119; J. STEVENSON, "Literacy and orality in early medieval Ireland", in: *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration: Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. D. EDEL (Blackrock, 1995), pp. 11-22; and M. INNES, "Memory, orality and literacy in an early medieval society", *Past and Present: A Journal of Historical Studies* 158 (1998), pp. 3-36.

Since the 1990s, the opposition between 'literacy' and 'orality' gave way to an approach in which the use of writing is studied as one form of communication among the many forms (non-verbal, oral or written) that may be available in a society.[26]

Research Questions

Developments in the study of medieval literacy generally have made researchers aware that a long series of questions new and old needs to be addressed. First, the 'key-concept' of the medieval town itself needs to be revisited. How should scholars dealing with literacy define a town? A settlement can be usefully termed to be more or less 'urban' if it fulfils more or fewer functions. A town may or may not have functions in the exercise of power, in jurisdiction and in the organisation of religious life (e.g. in the Church's administration). A town may or may not have functions in the organisation of the local, regional or supra-regional economy (it may know trade or industry, and it may provide financial services). But one may wonder whether all towns have a role as cultural centres. Do they, e.g. because of the existence of non-rural forms of life, of physical and mental mobility, influence the development of educational institutions such as schools and universities? Indeed, which 'urban' functions presuppose literate skills for at least some town dwellers?

Next, there are questions about the chronological and geographical limits of the phenomenon of urban literacy. Did the towns and their specific forms of literacy decide the rise of literacy taking place everywhere in *Latinitas* in the so-called 'long' thirteenth century?[27] Was urban literacy equally important in all parts of Europe? Or were there local specificities in the development of literacy?

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[26] I refrain from giving a full bibliography of studies on urban literacy that reflect this development. M. MOSTERT, "A bibliography of works on medieval communication", in: *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Turnhout, 2011: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 1), 2 (in preparation) lists more than 5000 titles, among them many relative to urban literacy. An extract will be published as M. MOSTERT, "A short list of works on medieval urban communication", in: *New Approaches to Medieval Urban Literacy*.

[27] M. MOSTERT, "Communication, literacy and the development of early medieval society", in: *Communicare e significare nell' alto Medioevo*, 2 vols. (Spoleto, 2005: *Settimane di Studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo* 52), p. 50.

And what about the documents we associate with urban literacy? Should we, in examining the presence of written records in towns, allow for different registers of literacy? Should we not, in other words, consider the 'horizons of texts'[28] and the literacy skills of their producers and users? Considering the variety among town dwellers (clerics next to lay people, professionals of the written word next to occasional users of writing, and all these next to illiterates), one may assume that literacy skills differed from one social group to another. Did attitudes towards the written word result from an experience of the urban educational system? Who, in fact, learned to read (and write) in medieval towns? And how? And did it make a difference to acquire literacy in Latin or in a vernacular?[29]

On which levels (and in which registers) did different groups of people have access to writing? An answer to this question may be helpful when we analyse the various types of written records present in towns. A distinction can be made here. The *need* and the *usefulness* of written texts may not have been the same for communities and for individuals. Those 'institutional' written records which were indispensable to knowing the rules for the running of whole communities (collections of written law, charters of liberties, different kinds of municipal registers etc.) ought to be distinguished from other, more 'personal' documents. One can think here of the practical use of writing by individuals for their own professional and religious purposes (bookkeeping, testaments, correspondence etc.).[30] Besides written records belonging to the domain of 'pragmatic literacy', other kinds of texts were also produced in towns. Was there any connection between practical literacy, literary (and historical) creativity and book production?

Who participated in the production of written records? Here, we think first of the urban chanceries and their personnel, or of notaries. But in how far did these professionals monopolise pragmatic literacy in towns? And are the chanceries' supplementary functions (e.g. as 'literary centres') not exaggerated by

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[28] This term was introduced by L.B. MORTENSEN, "The Nordic archbischoprics as literary centres around 1200", in: *Achbishop Absalon of Lund and his World*, ed. K. FRIIS-JENSEN and I. SKOVGAARD-PETERSEN (Roskilde, 2000), p. 143.

[29] Cf. A. ADAMSKA and M. MOSTERT, "O sposobach uprawiania dyplomatyki miejskiej: Przykład holenderski", in: *Miasto, ludzie, instytucje, znaki*, ed. Z. PIECH (kraków, 2008), pp. 477-486.

[30] It has been noticed that it is almost impossible to distinguish between 'public' and 'private' urban literacy. See BEHRMANN, "Einleitung", p. 2.

today's historians?[31] Was there a connection between the legally-oriented urban chancery and notaries and the other, more or less occasional pen-pushers (the "*Halbgelehrten*",[32] the "*proletaires d'une sous-culture écrite*"[33]) who were also active in the towns?

The use of the written word was an important (if not dominant) mode of communication in towns, and a crucial factor deciding the model of 'urban' culture.[34] Is this sufficient, however, to conclude the existence of a specifically urban literate mentality? Did urban life provide easier access to the written word than other social environments? Did the town mean a higher level of alphabetisation? Also among women? Did it bring bout changes in the forms of piety or in the perception of, e.g. time and space?

All these questions – and many more – need to be addressed to understand the phenomenon of medieval urban literacy. One might be singled out for further discussion here. To understand what is 'urban' about urban literacy, it might be helpful to study 'peasant literacy' or 'countryside literacy': to go outside the town walls, so to speak, the better to understand what went on inside them.

Peasant Literacy?[35]

The idea of a radical opposition between the 'literate' town and the completely 'illiterate', countryside has for a long time dominated historians' minds. The view that in the Middle Ages and in Early Modern Times "two cultures developed side by side: an urban culture that was essentially literate, and a

[31] Cf. the opinion of Prevenier that "urban chanceries are actually the invention of historians" (PREVENIER, "La production et conservation des actes urbaines", p. 563).

[32] U. MEIER, "*Ad incrementum rectae gubernationis*: Zur Rolle der Kanzler und Stadtschreiber in der politischen Kultur von Augsburg und Florenz in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit", in: *Gelehrte im Reich: Zur Social- und Wirkungsgeschichte akademischer Eliten des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. R.Ch. SCHWINGES (Berlin, 1996), pp. 481 ff.

[33] P. CHAUNU, *Le temps des réformes: Histoire religieuse et système de civilisation: La crise de la Chrétienté: L'Éclatement (1250-1550)* (Paris, 1975), p. 20.

[34] See, a.o., H. SAMSONOWICZ, "Die Hanse als Wirtschafts- und Kulturgemeinschaft", in: *Die Rolle der Stadtgemeinden und bürgerlichen Genossenschaften im Hanseraum in der Entwicklung und Vermittlung des gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Gedankengutes im Spätmittelalter*, ed. J. TANDECKI (Toruń, 2000), pp. 25-32.

[35] The following has been taken from A.B. ADAMSKA and M. MOSTERT, "The literacies of medieval town dwellers and peasants: A preliminary investigation", in a *Festschrift* for H. Samsonowicz, to be published in October 2010.

rural culture, essentially illiterate",[36] was reinforced by the scholars' conviction about the homogenous, static and conservative character of the peasantry.[37] Only in the last decades, thanks to a considerable input from historical anthropology and cultural history, historians have started to see peasant communities as complex structures, with their own internal dynamics.[38] Moreover, it becomes ever more clear that, when talking about (late) medieval peasants, one talks about several rather different groups in the rural population. Their differences depended on the economic features of a region and on the legal status of the settlements they happened to lived in, on their material status, on the distance from the nearest city and that from the parish church, etc. The physical and mental distance between 'the town', especially if it was a small one, and 'the countryside' might be shorter than one use to think.[39]

[36] C.M. CIPOLLA, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 54.

[37] The definition of the medieval 'peasant' is fraught with difficulty, as in many cases where one might want to distinguish between different groups in the countryside the sources do not allow clear distinctions. For this preliminary investigation it seems sufficient to state that we are interested in those who are the actual *laboratores* of the theory of the Three Orders, those who provided the others with food through their own toil, rather than their (usually equally country-dwelling) lords and masters, be they secular or ecclesiastic. Clearly, this definition leaves much to be desired, as among the *laboratores* there existed many economic, social, juridical and, indeed, geographical nuances.

[38] From the long bibliography it will be enough to remind the reader of only a few titles: E. LE ROY LADURIE, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975); C. GINZBURG, *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del'500* (Torino, 1976); D. BALESTRACCI, *The Renaissance in the Fields: Family Memoirs of a Fifteenth-Century Tuscan Peasant*, ed. And trans. P. SQUATRITI and B. MEREDITH (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1999); C. WICKHAM, "Gossip and resistance among the medieval peasantry, *Past and Present* 160 (1998), pp. 3-24.

[39] Important are many studies of H. Samsonowicz and his pupils concerning the dynamics of social and cultural exchange between small towns and the countryside in late medieval Poland. See H. SAMSONOWICZ, "Środowiska społeczne piszące w Polsce u schyłku średniowiecza", in: *Pogranicza i konteksty literatury polskiego średniowiecza*, ed. T. MICHAŁOWSKA (Wrocław, Warszawa and Kraków, 1989), pp. 97-108; ID., "Średniowieczne księgi sądowe małych miast w Polsce", in: *Homines et societas: Studia historyczne ofiarowane Antoniemu Gąsiorowskiemu w sześćdziesiątą piątą rocznicę urodzin* (Poznań, 1997), pp. 447-484; ID., "Pismo, obraz, głos: Formy przekazu informacji w świecie Hanzy", in: *E scientia et amicitia: Studia poświęcone profesorowi Edwardowi Potkowskiemu w sześćdziesięciopięciolecie urodzin i czterdziestolecie pracy naukowej* (Warszawa and Pułtusk, 1999), pp. 167-172; ID., "Die Hanse als Wirtschafts- und Kulturgemeinschaft"; ID., Z badań nad kancelarią małych miast w Polsce XV wieku", *Miscellanea Historico-Archivistica* 1 (1985), pp. 243-259; ID., "Horyzonty przestrzenne małego miasta w środkowej Europie późnego średniowiecza: Próba modelu", *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych* 50 (1989), pp. 31-44; ID., "Elita władzy w małych miastach Polski w późnym średniowieczu", in: *Genealogia - kręgi zawodowe i grupy interesu w Polsce średniowiecznej na tle porównawczym*, ed. J. WRONISZEWSKI (Toruń, 1989), pp.* ; A.

The main argument supporting the opinion that the peasantry of late medieval Europe remained outside the realm of the written word came from the investigation of practical literacy skills, i.e. the skills of reading and writing. The very low numbers of people in the countryside who could write (if only in the sense of being able to put their own signature) was juxtaposed to the much higher percentage of persons in towns who could wield a pen.[40] The line of argumentation was extremely simple: the incapability to write excluded people from participation in written culture. Such a strong conclusion is possible only when one uses a very narrow, restricted idea of literacy. This is no longer satisfactory in the light of the development of research carried out in the last twenty years.[41] Today, when analysing the skills of reading and writing, one allows for several possible levels of literacy (e.g. distinguishing between the 'illiterate', 'semi-illiterate', 'semi-literate', and 'literate', even if these distinctions were not absolute). In the Middle Ages, as today, it was possible to be (fully) literate in some fields of culture and to be merely semi-literate in others.[42] Moreover, the inability to read and write did not exclude one from the *passive* participation in written culture. One could, for instance, hear a written text being read aloud, or one could 'delegate' the labour of writing.[43]

BARTOSZEWICZ, *Czas w malych miastach. Studium z dziejów kultury umysłowej późnośredniowiecznej Polski* (Warszawa and Pułtusk, 2003); EAD., "Miasto czy wieś? Małe miasta polskie w późnym średniowieczu", *Przegląd Historyczny* 99 (2008), pp. 121-136.

[40] The percentage of peasants able to write their name in sixteenth-century Poland (*c.* 2%, compared to 70% of the (male group of) richest merchants, and 40% of small merchants in towns) seems not to differ very much from many other parts of Europe (for a comparative analysis, see a.o.: I.G. TÓTH, *Literacy and Written Culture in Early Modern Central Europe* (Budapest, 1996), pp. 19 ff.).

[41] In Polish scholarship, H. Samsonowicz was one of the first historians rejecting the sharp dichotomy between medieval *litterati* and *illitterati*: "Between a winner of a literary price and an illiterate there exist a gamut of intermediary cases of people using writing on different levels (...). Maybe the most important criterium of division is to distinguish between those who use writing because of their duties, and these who in writing express their thoughts and feelings" (SAMSONOWICZ, "Środowiska społeczne", pp. 97-98; translation Anna Adamska).

[42] See: M. MOSTERT, "Forgery and Trust", in: *Strategies of Writing: Studies on Text and Trust in the Middle Ages*, ed. P. SCHULTE *et al.* (Turnhout, 2008: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 13), pp. 40-41.

[43] For the state of scholarly discussion on ways of accessing writing by semi-illiterates, see: A. ADAMSKA, "The study of medieval literacy", pp. 23 ff.; EAD., "'*Audire, intelligere, memorie commendare*': Attitudes of the rulers of medieval Central Europe towards written texts", in: *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Text, Relations and Their Implications*, ed. S. RANKOVIĆ *et al.* (Turnhout, 2010: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 20), pp. 333-352.

The Chronology and Geography of Rural Literacy

Before we discuss some examples of the participation of rural communities in written culture, thereby suggesting differences and similarities between town and countryside, a remark should be made about the chronological and geographical framework of the phenomenon. Recent studies let us assume that, in some ways, this participation starts in the thirteenth century,[44] when we can also see an escalating growth of literacy generally. Northern Italy,[45] Southern France, England and the Low Countries will remain in the vanguard of the process until the turn of the fifteenth century, when some forms of peasant contact with the written word can be noticed in the German lands, and then in the peripheries of medieval *Latinitas*, in Scandinavia and East Central Europe.

In today's research there is a tendency to move the traditional chronological boundaries of investigation. Medievalists often use evidence from the sixteenth, and even from the seventeenth century, especially when investigating the peripheries of medieval Europe. This is inspired by the growing conviction that, as far as the intensive development of literacy is concerned, we are dealing with a single process. This started in the so-called "long thirteenth century", and was to end only with the *Ancien Régime*.[46] In surprisingly many respects the 'literate behaviour' of people in the Early Modern Period remained 'medieval', even if they were convinced themselves of having made enormous progress.

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[44] We are leaving aside the broadly discussed case of the use of the written word by the rural communities on the domains of the monastery of St. Gallen, in Carolingian Rhaetia and Alemania. According to some scholars, this largest extant collection of private charters in early medieval Europe reflects the complex way of making legal transactions between the monastery and local community. Cf. a.o.: R. MCKITTERICK, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 78 ff; K. HEIDECKER, "Urkunden schreiben im alemannischen Umwelt des Klosters St. Gallen", in: *Die Privaturkunden der Karolingerzeit*, ed. P. ERHART *et al.* (Zürich, 2009), pp. 183-192.

[45] One should keep in mind essential distinction between Italy (with her uninterrupted continuity in the use of the written word) and Europe north of the Alps. Cf. a.o. A. PETRUCCI and C. ROMEO, *"Scriptores in urbibus": Alfabetismo e cultura scritta nell'Italia altomedievale* (Bologna, 1992).

[46] About the importance of the so-called 'long thirteenth century' in the development of literacy, cf.: M. MOSTERT, "Communication, literacy and the development of early medieval society", *passim*. On the necessity of shifting chronological boundaries when studying some aspects of medieval literacy, cf. a.o. K. SZENDE, "Urban literacy in the Carpathian basin: Questions, results, perspectives", in: *New Approaches to Medieval Urban Literacy*, and M. JUCKER, "Urban literacy and urban secrecy? Some new approaches to an old problem", *ibid.*

Institutional and Private Uses of Writing

It would be wrong to think that the inability to read and write among the members of the rural communities in medieval Europe kept them in a state of 'primary oral culture'. They did not lack an understanding what writing is and how it works. A first contact with the written word had come through Christianity, a religion of the Book, through the participation in the liturgy, through visual contact with Christian symbols and inscriptions. However, in pastoral care writing played only a secondary role.[47] For the perception of the importance of written modes of communication, the diffusion of pragmatic literacy proved far more important, vehiculated as this usually was by the State. Pragmatic literacy inspired gradual, but very important changes in traditional legal and economic practices.

A spectacular example of this process is the history of medieval England, probably the first developed bureaucratic monarchy in pre-modern Europe. The highly centralised government was the main producer of written records, not only on the central level of the royal chancery but also on a local level. One could maintain that the administrative literacy of the State reached the English countryside through the local bailiffs, who, from 1285 onwards, had to supply royal tax collectors with the names of the peasants in every village and hamlet in the kingdom, written in a roll.[48] The example of the State was followed by ecclesiastic and secular land owners. They used written records for the purpose of the administration of their estates. Some ideas about the speed of this process can be taken from the events during the so-called Peasants' Revolt of the early 1380s. The anger of the peasants turned against the enormous masses of written records of feudal duties, lordly court books, land surveys, tax lists etc., preserved in the archives of local landlords.[49]

We see the same sequence of events, i.e. the growing use of writing for administrative purposes by the State and by land owners, followed by the spontaneous or premeditated destruction of written records, in several parts of late

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[47]   There is no room here to discuss the literacy skills of the parochial clergy, nor the role of oral communication in the transmission of religious messages. Cf. a.o.: *Heresy and Literacy*, ed. P. BILLER and A. HUDSON (Cambridge, 1994), *passim*; S. BYLINA, "La catéchèse du peuple en Europe du Centre-Est aux XIVe et XVe siècles, [in:] *Christianity in East Central Europe: Late Middle Ages*, ed. P. KRAS and W. POLAK (Lublin, 1999), pp. 40-53.

[48]   CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 45 ff.

[49]   M. Rampton, "The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the written word", *Comitatus* 24 (1993), pp. 45-60.

medieval Europe, e.g. in Denmark.[50] Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that such episodes should not be judged simply as acts of the blind anger of illiterates, physically destroying the 'source' of their oppression, but rather as a proof of their understanding of the 'power' of pieces of parchment to change reality.[51]

From a long-term perspective, being 'exposed' to pragmatic literacy stimulated peasants to adapt to it in some ways, first of all through the production of administrative records by the rural communities themselves. The legal system stimulated this process. In Southern France, the spread of Roman law and increasing self-government of rural communities resulted in the growth of institutional literacy, and in the development of 'village chanceries' already in the thirteenth century.[52] By-laws of village communities, the recording of transactions of land in special record books, official correspondence of villages with central and local courts (and among the villages themselves) were the bulk of peasant institutional pragmatic literacy. This kind of pragmatic literacy grew visibly in the fifteenth century, particularly in the German lands and in Scandinavia. The adaptation of so-called German law stimulated the same process also in East Central Europe.[53] Purely practical circumstances could play quite

[50]   B. POULSEN, "Using the written word in a late medieval rural society: The case of Denmark, in: *Along the Oral-Written Continuum*, pp. 415-433. See also: K.-J. LORENZEN-SCHMIDT, "Early literacy in rural communication in the late Middle ages and early modern period – The example of Schleswig-Holstein", in: *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. P. HERMANN (Aarhus, 2005), pp. 305-322; M. MOSTERT, "Veelkleurige religie en zakelijk schriftgebruik", in: *Geschiedenis van Holland*, ed. T. DE NIJS and E. BEUKERS, 4 vols. (Hilversum, 2002), 1, p. 183.

[51]   RAMPTON, "The Peasants' Revolt", pp. 50 ff. By the way, during the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the actors tried not only to destroy 'bad' charters, but they tried to provide new ones, containing more favourable legal solutions (*ibid.*). see also A. ADAMSKA and M. MOSTERT, "The 'violent death' of medieval charters: Some observations on the symbolic uses of documents", in: *Ecclesia, cultura, potestas*, ed. P. KRAS *et al.* (Kraków, 2006), pp. 699-710.

[52]   Cf. J. DRENDEL, "Localism and literacy: Village chanceries in fourteenth-century Provence, in: *Écrit et pouvoir dans les chancelleries médiévales: Espace français, espace anglais*, ed. K. FIANU and D.J. GUTH (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1997), pp. 255-268. But, for instance in Hungary, the law did not demand any use of written word from the peasants; oral testimony was sufficient until the end of the eighteenth century, and passive participation in literacy was its consequence. I.G. TÓTH, "Une société aux lisières de l'alphabet: La paysannerie hongroise aux XVIIᵉ et XVIIIᵉ siècles, *Annales ESC* 56 (2001), pp.863-880.

[53]   Cf. a.o. POULSEN, "Using the written word in a late medieval rural society", pp. 423 ff.; LORENZEN-SCHMIDT, Early literacy in rural communication", pp. 310 ff.; A. NEDKVITNE, *The Social Consequences of Literacy in Medieval Scandinavia* (Turnhout, 2004: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 11), pp. 182-183; S. KURAŚ, *Przywileje prawa niemieckiego miast i wsi małopolskich XIV-XV wieku* (Wrocław, Warszawa and Kraków, 1971), pp. 78 ff; J. SŁOWIŃSKI,

an important role. In late medieval Poland, the highest standard of work by 'village chanceries' could be found in villages situated near the larger towns or belonging to urban parishes.[54] This highlights the relationship between 'urban' and 'rural' literacy.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, writing started to dominate legal procedure at the local level. This took the form of records locally known as court rolls, *Weistümer*, or village court accounts.[55] Registering the settlement of disputes, the execution of the law, public negotiations between landlords and peasants, and the reaching of consensus, these court accounts provide us with sources for the study of the internal dynamic of local communities. To historians dealing with literacy, this kind of record offers excellent materials to investigate the relationship between oral and written legal practices. The growing practice of copying court accounts and of relying on them (because in the later Middle Ages they came to be considered as texts possessing public trust), testifies that written words became an important tool to govern rural communities.[56] Moreover, English, Danish and German courts registers reveal the growing web of interrelated written documents (deeds of land transfer, charters, tenants' lists, wills, documentation of rights on field and forest). And they were produced for and used by individuals.

The adoption of literate modes of behaviour by individual peasants seems to have remained passive for a long time. Nevertheless, being 'exposed' to literacy coming from outside had to result in a growing understanding of the importance of written records as a guarantee of the durability of legal actions. From the end of the thirteenth century, written documents accompanied tenancy agreements even concerning small pieces of land, in England and in the

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"Kancelarie wsi małopolskich od końca XIV do schyłku XVIII wieku", *Studia Źródłoznawcze* 31 (1990), pp. 25-36.

[54] A. BARTOSZEWICZ, "Piśmienność mieszczańska w poźnośredniowiecznej Polsce", in: Festschrift H. Samsonowicz (in print). We are grateful to the Author for the possibility to consult the article before publication.

[55] From the abundant bibliography on this kind of records, see a.o. S. OLSON, *A Mute Gospel: The People and Culture of the Medieval English Common Fields* (Toronto, 2009), pp. 124 ff.; G. ALGAZI, "Lords ask, peasants answer: Making traditions in late medieval village assemblies", in: *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silences and Commemorations*, ed. G. SIDER and G. SMITH (Toronto, 1997), pp. 199-229; S. TEUSCHER, "Textualising peasant enquiries: German *Weistümer* between orality and literacy", in: *Charters and the Use of the Written Word in Medieval Society*, ed. K. HEIDECKER (Turnhout, 2000: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 5), pp. 239-253; *Katalog małopolskich ksiąg sądowych wiejskich*, ed. T. WIŚLICZ (Warszawa, 2007).

[56] Cf. TEUSCHER, "Textualising peasant enquiries", *passim*.

Low Countries, and peasants took these documents home with them.[57] The same phenomenon can be noticed two centuries later in Denmark. There, the growth of the peasants' familiarity with the written word was stimulated by their involvement in the local structures of the royal administration and their daily contact with the bureaucracy of the State. It facilitated the understanding that it is wise and useful to have written proof of rights of possession.

An important mark of this process is the growing use of seals. Seals are considered by scholars today as an important tool both in visual and in written communication, even if the suggestion that "the possessor of a seal was *necessarily* [my italics] a person familiar with documents and entitled to participate in their use", seems to go a bit too far.[58] The chronology of the spread of seals among village communities and individual peasants, even the smallest of them, north of the Alps was parallelled by the increasing use of the written word. This use of seals started in the late thirteenth century in England and developed in the fifteenth century in the German lands and Scandinavia. It remains to be studied in which respects peasant seals were imitations of the seals of landlords and town-dwellers.[59]

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, at the turn of Early Modern Times, peasants were not only passive participants in written culture. They did not merely receive charters, but they had become able to use writing in the management of their own affairs. Recent research has underlined the importance for this development of two areas, Northern Italy and the northern parts of the German lands. A spectacular example of writing in daily life is the personal account book of a peasant family from the Siena region, composed between 1405-1502 in form of two little booklets.[60] They contains receipts for their purchases of cattle, for loans, for the sale of firewood, wine and lime, and for the purchase of wheat. The *materia scribendi* of these personal accounts is strictly business and has nothing to do with the early modern peasant diaries

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[57] CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 50 ff.; J. BURGERS and M. MOSTERT, "Oorkondenvervalsing in Holland? De rehabilitatie van het 12de- en 13de-eeuwse Hollandse oorkondenwezen", *Holland* 35 (2003), p. 149.

[58] CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, p. 51.

[59] Cf. a.o. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 308 ff.; POULSEN, "Using the written word", p. 433; W. SCHÖNTAG, "Siegelrecht, Siegelbild, und Herrschaftanspruch: Die Siegel der Städte und Dörfer im Deutschen Südwesten", in: *Das Siegel: Gebrauch und Bedeutung*, ed. G. SIGNORI (Darmstadt, 2007), pp. 127-138; K. FOLLPRECHT, "Pieczęcie mieszczan krakowskich", in: *Pieczęcie w dawnej Rzeczpospolitej: Stan i perspektywy badań*, ed. J. PAKULSKI and J. WRONISZEWSKI (Warszawa, 2006), pp. 339-354.

[60] BALESTRACCI, *The Renaissance in the Fields*, p. 6.

known from Germany.[61] We may assume that this account book had as its model the merchants' accounts, popular among all social strata in Tuscan towns in the fifteenth century. Confirmation of this can be found in the source itself. Benedetto del Massarizia registered in his account book the exact date of a transaction, the names of the persons involved, and a cross-reference to where exactly written information about the same transaction could be found (in a notary's book, e.g., with the exact indication of the page). In this way his administration gives information about the personal bookkeeping of *c.* thirty people from the region of Siena, including small merchants and town dwellers.[62]

Accounts of the same kind have survived from the frontier area between Germany and Denmark, especially Schleswig-Holstein and Jylland, from the first half of the sixteenth century. Peasants from this prosperous area were not brought under strict 'feudal' dominion and participated in trade and the credit economy. Some of them left account books, such as that of Anders Ogel, who left an account his trade in Hamburg (*c.* 1545). He was not the only one.[63] Such examples suggest that contact with urban culture and participation in the market economy, also on the local level, was an important stimulus for the development of private pragmatic literacy among peasants. Peasants' account books follow the well-developed models of merchants' records. One can see the importance of numeracy skills, understood not only as the mechanistic ability of counting, but also as a basic understanding of the money economy, and showing an ability of make plans and calculations.[64] From this perspective, the gradual restriction of the peasants' personal mobility and of their participation in the market economy, as happened to the peasants in East Central Europe in the sixteenth century, was to have consequences for the development of pragmatic literacy in rural milieux.

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[61] Cf. *Writing Peasants: Studies on Peasant Literacy in Early Modern Northern Europe*, ed. K.-J. LORENZEN-SCHMIDT and B. POULSEN (Odense, 2002), *passim*.

[62] BALESTRACCI, *The Renaissance in the Fields*, p. XIX. Balestracci edited the notebooks, although the Italian original is to be preferred, as the English translation does without many of the references and identifications of scribes which are given in the original. See also D. BALESTRACCI, *Cilastro che sapeva leggere: Alfabetizzazione e istruzione nelle campagne toscane alla fine del Medioevo (XIV-XVI secolo)* (Ospedaletto (Pisa), 2004).

[63] POULSEN, "Using the written word", p. 431.

[64] LORENZEN-SCHMIDT, "Early literacy in rural communication", p. 307; compare with SAMSONOWICZ, "Średniowieczne księgi sądowe", p. 483.

Using and Keeping Written Records

For scholars dealing with medieval literacy, not only the production but also the use and preservation of written records is an important sign of understanding the importance of the written word. Obviously, one keeps things rather than throwing them away when one is convinced that these things are important either for understanding the past or for future use, when they can be used to give testimony about the past.

Many accounts of local tribunals show that peasants understood this function of documents. They were able to 'come and show' charters proving rights of tenancy or possession.[65] Nevertheless, we get an ambiguous picture of the practices of record keeping in the rural communities of medieval Europe. On the one hand, scholars assume that some kinds of charters (for instance those confirming tenancy rights) in later medieval England were produced in the hundreds of thousands (*sic!*). However, as they only possessed temporary value, they were not kept.[66] Similarly unclear is the preservation of the so-called *locatio*-charters of the villages founded according to 'German' law in Central Europe before these charters were subject to large-scale destruction in the sixteenth century.[67] On the other hand, there are traces of the careful keeping of records by village communities and by individual peasants for centuries, sometimes lasting until quite recent times. There is relatively rich evidence of communal and personal archives from Scandinavia. A spectacular example is the history of a charter of 1292, containing the delimitation of two farms in the diocese of Stavanger. The charter was kept by one of the parties and was used, through being read aloud, in 1627, during another dispute about the same boundary line. Only in 1847 the heirs of the keepers donated the charter, which had remained in their hands for 555 years, to the Norwegian National Archives.[68]

Other arguments to support the thesis that the role and function of written records were generally understood in late medieval rural society come from unexpected sources, such as literary texts. The ballads of Robin Hood, the most famous medieval outlaw (and not only in England), reflect the existence of a "document driven culture", using writing for the purposes of communication.

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[65] The usual expression in the English local court rolls (cf. OLSON, *A Mute Gospel*, p. 135).

[66] CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record*, p. 50.

[67] KURAŚ, *Przywileje prawa niemieckiego miast*, pp. 78 ff.

[68] Quoted after NEDKVITNE, *The Social Consequences of Literacy*, p. 97. See also POULSEN, "Using the written word", p. 431.

The heroes of the Robin Hood stories use letters, writs, petitions, and seals as a matter of course.[69] At the same time, at the other end of medieval Europe, Slovak outlaws operating in the Polish-Hungarian borderlands could send written threats to small towns. The so-called 'Letter of Bardiów' from 1493, quite often discussed in Polish scholarly literature,[70] gives exceptional evidence about semi-literates imagining a charter. The cumulation of visual elements in the lower half of the document (drawings) and an object (a small broom) tied to the place where the seal of the issuer would usually be affixed, confirms the general opinion of the primary perception of the document by seeing and touching.

But to be honest, even if we conclude that in the late Middle Ages and in the Early Modern Period peasants could understand how writing works, and that they kept records which were important for them for one reason or another, this does not mean that they fully participated in written culture. There is evidence suggesting that their respect for the written word remained, to a great extent, that of semi-illiterate people. Peasants could recognise and understand the sense of the image and words engraved on a seal.[71] They understood the power of the written word to change reality, but they used this power mainly in magical practices.[72] They understood the need for keeping documents, but

[69]   W.M. Ormrod, "Robin Hood and public record: The authority of rriting in the medieval outlaw tradition", in: *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. R. Evans *et al.* (Cardiff, 2006), pp. 59 ff.

[70]   S.A. Sroka and M. Biesaga, "List zbójników z 1493 roku i jego język", *Studia Źródłoznawcze* 45 (2008), pp. 49-57; S.A. Sroka, "Villains, merchants and the written word: A document of highland outlaws from the Polish-Hungarian border area from 1493", in: *Medieval Legal Process: Physical, Spoken and Written Performance in the Middle Ages*, ed. M. Mostert and P.S. Barnwell (Turnhout, 2010: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 19) (in print). A. Bartoszewicz, "Piśmienność mieszczańska", p. 19.

[71]   This ability should be studied in the context of the high sensitivity to visual signs and symbols of medieval society, not without reason called an 'emblematic society' (M. Pastoureau, *Une histoire symbolique du Moyen Âge occidental* (Paris, 2004), p. 222).

[72]   The use of writing for magical purposes is a standard argument to prove the illiteracy of people engaging in it. However, recent studies pointed out that this kind of practice remained the domain of literates and (especially) semi-literates, such as the rural clergy (cf. S. Bylina, "Kultura ludowa a pismo w Polsce średniowiecznej", in: *Kultura piśmienna średniowiecza i czasów nowożytnych: Problemy i konteksty badawcze*, ed. P. Dymmel and B. Trelińska (Lublin, 1998), p. 31 ff., and K. Bracha, "Pismo, słowa i symbole: Między średniowieczną pobożnością a magia", in: *Inskrypcje toruńskie*, ed. I. Sawicka (Toruń, 1999, p. 16). On this subject see also: M. Mostert, "La magie de l'écrit dans le haut Moyen Age: Quelques réflexions générales", in: *Haut Moyen-Age: Culture, éducation, société: Études offertes à Pierre Riché*, ed. M. Sot (Paris, 1990), pp. 272-281; G. Klaniczay and I. Kristóf, "Écritures saintes et pactes

many scholars suspect that often they could not read them, because sometimes they kept the 'wrong', irrelevant records.[73] If so, how was the production of records in 'village chanceries' possible? Who wrote down the many registrations of transactions? Who wrote down the peasants' personal accounts?

Overcoming Technical Illiteracy

The possible ways by which peasants might try to overcome their technical illiteracy should be analysed on several levels. Where institutions of self-government of village communities developed, and with them some forms of institutional literacy, one may assume the presence of scribes 'officially' appointed in the service of the village communities (e.g. the *clericus totae communitatis* in England[74]). In Southern France, these scribes were well-trained notaries.[75] On the other hand, it is quite plausible that most scribes producing written records in the rural milieu were connected with external institutions, i.e. with the administrative apparatus of the State or of land owners. Others were professionals of the written word, working in towns. Not only the personnel of urban chanceries or notaries should be taken into consideration, but a "small army of jobbing clerks" who had had a glimpse of a university education. These people were surprisingly mobile, real proletarians of the written word.[76]

The provisional conclusion that 'countryside' literacy was supported first of all by 'occasional' scribes, is confirmed by the analysis of the problem of the private uses of the written word by individual peasants. Those who understood how useful it might be to do just as merchants did, writing down information about their own purchases and sales, could overcome their own techni-

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diaboliques: Les usages religieux de l'écrit (Moyen Âge et temps modernes)", *Annales HSS* 56 (2001), pp. 947-980; K. BRACHA, "Folklore der Schrift: Einige Zeugnisse des Spätmittelalters Mittelosteuropas", in: *The Development of Literate Mentalities*, pp. 497-518.

[73] For an example, see TÓTH, "Une société", p. 873; see also POULSEN, "Using the written word", p. 429.

[74] OLSON, *A Mute Gospel*, p. 139.

[75] DRENDEL, "Localism and literacy", p. 265.

[76] See a.o. OLSON, *A Mute Gospel*, p. 133; BARTOSZEWICZ, "Piśmienność mieszczańska", p. 15. Compare to: P. CHAUNU, *Le temps des réformes: Histoire religieuse et système de civilisation: La crise de la Chrétienté: l'Éclatement (1250-1550)* (Paris, 1975), p. 20. The participation of the local clergy in the making records is rather unclear. In theory, parish priests belonged to the world of *litterati*, but the making of charters and judicial records belonged to a different register of literacy.

cal illiteracy by delegating the labour of writing. As we have seen, enlightening direct evidence of this practice can be found in Northern Italy, in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.[77] Here the practice of keeping personal accounts in writing developed not only among the urban elites of the larger cities, but also among small merchants, poor servants and peasants. Because they did not know how to write, they "had it written by a third party".[78] A Tuscan peasant, Benedetto del Massarizia, whom we have already mentioned, let his personal account book be written by at least thirty different hands. Most of them could be identified, and this is why we know that this peasant asked favours from people of very different social status, starting with professional notaries from Siena and ending with friars and craftsmen.[79] This example shows quite clearly that a lack of basic literacy skills does not necessarily exclude one from participation in written culture. It also shows an important mechanism of the application of writing as a technology. A fifteenth-century Tuscan peasant asking literates to write things down for him makes decisions not dissimilar from the decisions made by a person in our own day, who, unfamiliar with computers, has heard that it is useful to have an electronic bank account. At least at the beginning, such a person will most likely ask somebody else (probably a person who is both 'computer-literate' and trusted!) to set up such an account.

General circumstances, then, decided literate behaviour. It was much easier to find an 'occasional' scribe near a town, even a small one, in those areas of late medieval Europe possessing a dense network of larger and smaller settlements. On the contrary, in such areas as medieval Norway, where travel to the next town or indeed to the parish church might take three days, one made an effort to find a scribe only on really special occasions.[80]

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[77] A similar case to that of Benedetto's booklets, this time from the area of Toulouse, has been noted by F. HAUTEFEUILLE, "Livre de compte ou livre de raison: Le registre d'une famille de paysans quercynois, les Guitad de Saint-Anthet", in: *Écrire, compter, mesurer: Vers une histoire des rationalités pratiques*, ed. N. COQUERY, F. MENANT and F. WEBER (Paris, 2006), pp. 231-247. It came to my notice too late to be worked into the present paper.

[78] BALESTRACCI, *The Renaissance in the Fields*, p. 2.

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 8. We have not discussed the topic of schooling in the countryside, as this would merit an article by itself. Most often the matter of formal education is studied by listing the schools existing at any given time in a region or environment. However, establishing the existence of schools in the countryside is not enough. It is important to realize that such schools in Hungary in early modern times, e.g., might be open only during Winter, when work on the land was at a standstill, thereby curtailing the teaching hours considerably. Cf.: TÓTH, *Literacy and Written Culture*, pp. 5 ff.

[80] Cf. NEDKVITNE, *Social Consequences of Literacy*, pp. 192 ff.

Peasant Literacy and Urban Literacy

At the present stage of research on literacy in the medieval 'countryside', one is dealing with a striking inconsistency. There is a painful scarcity of sources. In the past this has led to the view that the rural world of the later Middle Ages was a world without writing. More recently, this same lack of sources is glossed over with the dubious argument that the great 'literalisation' of late medieval society had to influence peasants in *some* way.[81] There is also an obvious tendency to reinterpret the accessible sources in a positive way, for instance concluding that, if some peasants' charters have been preserved, then there must have been many more of them.

One thing is clear, though. In late medieval and early modern Europe there were certain areas where peasants used the written word more than elsewhere. Preliminary comparative research suggests that these areas had some common characteristics: a developed market economy, intensive agriculture, personal freedom of the peasants – and proximity of urban settlements. All these factors enabled peasants' participation in the economic life of the area, and even their self-government.[82] This is reflected in the kinds of written records produced in the rural milieux, belonging as they do to the register of pragmatic literacy. An indispensable condition for the development of peasant literacy may have been, as elsewhere, trust in writing.[83] It seems that the growth of this kind of trust was determined in great part by the imitation of literate behaviour shown by other social agents of literacy, i.e. the local administration and urban milieus.

One could say that peasants' participation in literacy was mainly passive, considering that a great deal of scribal work was probably done by professionals of the written word coming from outside, and that there is much more evidence for their keeping of records than for their own production of records. And when they kept records, relatively much attention seems to have been paid to the *possession* of documents, treated as valuable objects, rather than to their contents. One should notice, however, that in some parts of Europe the literate behaviour of other social groups was actually much the same. Members of the small nobility in rural Hungary, who differed from peasants by their social self-consciousness if not by their way of life, could not read the letters patent preserved in their chests. They took it for granted that they had to be important

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[81] Cf. for instance NEDKVITNE, *Social Consequences of Literacy*, p. 195.
[82] See a.o. LORENZEN-SCHMIDT, "Early literacy in rural communication", p. 308.
[83] Cf. MOSTERT, "Forgery and Trust", p. 49.

because of their large golden letters and seals.[84] Maybe, then, there existed indeed a different 'countryside' attitude towards the written word, resulting from a shared way of life and crossing social boundaries. Maybe that, after all, we should consider the distinction between 'urban' and 'rural' attitudes towards writing as an important one?

A preliminary study of the literate behaviour in peasant communities lets us see some important similarities and differences between the literacy of the 'countryside' and that of the 'towns'. Looking into the mirror of the countryside gives us a sharper image of 'urban' literacy, allowing us to see its distinctive features more clearly. The literacy of the countryside appears receptive, limited, and rather passive, while that of the towns appears highly differentiated, personalised and active in the sense of the possession and use of practical skills. It might be true that in the countryside "reading and writing came to the local community through the parish priest, the local judge and the merchant in the nearest town".[85]

Considering the present state of research these conclusions are provisional at best. They might, however, be used as hypotheses for further enquiries into peasant literacy and urban literacy alike. For not all town-dwellers could aspire to all registers of literacy that have been shown to be present in urban societies, and some, if not most, may have been as technically illiterate as their peasant counterparts. And what of the many forms of literate behaviour that one observes in towns, as socially restricted as they may have been?

At the first round table devoted to 'medieval urban literacy' during the 2007 International Medieval Congress at Leeds a question was put. "What is 'urban' about 'urban literacy'?". The provisional answer was, that only the university and its forms of literate behaviour could not be found in the countryside.[86] Surely, one is bound to feel, this cannot be true. But even if it might turn out to be true, it is not a sufficient answer. Rather than looking for forms of literate behaviour which are either 'urban' or not, we have to be looking for forms which are more likely to be found in an urban context than elsewhere. This necessitates a reappraisal of what we think to know about 'urban literacy' – and, as its corollary, 'peasant literacy'.

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[84] See several examples of semi-literate behaviour of eighteenth-century Hungarian nobles in Tóth, *Literacy and Written Culture*, pp. 154 ff.

[85] Nedkvitne, *Social Consequences of Literacy*, p. 198.

[86] A thought-provoking suggestion voiced by Peter Johanek.

Another, even more fundamental, question was also discussed at the Leeds round table. "What was the role of towns in the development of European literacy as such?" Not even a provisional answer was given to this question. The assumption has always been – and still is – that urbanisation and the development of literacy went hand in hand. But we might wonder whether this was a uniquely 'western' development, or whether it is applicable in other societies as well. Just as the study of (medieval) urban literacy may be illuminated by the study of (medieval) peasant literacy, just so the study of the role of towns in development of literacy in the West may be illuminated by the study of other societies and civilisations. A comparative analysis of developing urban literacy in the ancient and medieval Middle East, ancient Greece and Rome, of China and the Indian subcontinent, and the larger centres in pre-Columbian Central America still is lacking. It is a topic that, suggested by the study of medieval urban literacy, ought to be taken up; it is not excluded that in this way the study of medieval literacy may help us understand the modern phenomenon of urbanisation on a global scale.

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