

Studying Medieval Urban Literacy: A Provisional State of Affairs¹

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Introduction

Interest in the uses of writing in medieval urban settlements is not new at all. Research carried out from the 1980s onwards has led to the virtually unquestioned opinion that, in the Middle Ages, in towns one seems to have had more chance of being confronted with writing than elsewhere. Moreover, there are reasons to assume that it was there, in the cities and in the in larger and smaller towns, that the ‘modern’ literate mentality was born.²

¹ This text is based on M. MOSTERT and A. ADAMSKA, “Introduction”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns: Medieval Urban Literacy I* (Turnhout, 2014: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 27), pp. 1-10; ID., “Introduction”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns: Medieval Urban Literacy II* (Turnhout, 2014: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 28), pp. 1-16; and ID., “Whither the study of medieval urban literacy?”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 427-431. Together with *New Approaches to Medieval Urban Literacy*, ed. G. DECLERCQ *et al.* (Brussels, 2013: *Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten: Contactforum*), *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns* and *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns* form the main results of the research project ‘Medieval Urban Literacy’, sponsored by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO; Dossiernummer 236-50-002) and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB).

² Different from other social scientists, historians usually try to keep their distance from the fuzzy term ‘mentality’. They avoid exclusive definitions, and prefer to enumerate the factors contributing to the development of ‘literate mentalities’. Among the most important factors are the realisation that it is a ‘natural’ thing to preserve human actions in writing, and that written records can be used to reconstruct the past. Writing is ‘trusted’ as an instrument for fixing, defining events. Another, quantitative, factor is progress in alphabetisation: the spread of the elementary skills of reading and writing among ever more social groups. The development of

Publications on medieval urban literacy, however, continue to restrict themselves in great part to the realm of diplomatic and institutional history. They consider the different types of written records produced in towns, paying much attention to the history of the institutions producing, using, and keeping them. All the same, in the last decades research has visibly expanded thanks to the intensive study of such phenomena as the use of public space in towns, secular and religious ceremonies, and the forms of expressing the town's identity (or urban *memoria*). It remains true, nevertheless, that certain urban milieus participating in written culture continue to catch the scholars' attention more than others. The field is gradually increasing, however, and it no longer embraces only the professionals of the written word employed by municipal institutions, but also 'occasional' and 'accidental' creators and users of records.³

The long-term study of the urban communes of northern Italy undertaken by scholars from Münster has suggested a direct link between the reception of the written word in daily life and the emergence of literate mentalities. From the twelfth century onwards, these communes seem oriented towards the production and use of written texts ("*Schriftorientierung*"); they seem to have possessed a collective will to develop literacy ("*der kollektive Wille zu Schriftlichkeit*"). They also preserved written records. This readiness to engage in written culture can be considered as an important sign of changes in thinking and in the perception of the world. It shows an increasing growth of the use of the reasoning faculties ("*Rationalisierungsprozeß*").⁴ When, in 2007, a research project on 'Medieval Urban Literacy' was started, these observations formed an important stimulus for a renewed discussion of the nature of the phenomenon. From the very beginning it was clear that this discussion should

literate mentalities can be measured by the growth (or decline) in the prestige of those individuals who can read and write. On the subject of 'literate mentality', see M.T. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 2012), pp. 187-335; 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), pp. 13-47, at p. 37.

³ Understanding the development of the research questionnaire is facilitated by M. MOSTERT, *A Bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication* (Turnhout, 2012: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 2), chapters 12 ("The use of writing by different social groups", pp. 347-383, and in particular pp. 364-372 on town dwellers), 13 ("Uses of writing in government, management and trade", pp. 385-414, and 4 ("Ritual", pp. 149-180).

⁴ 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 (Munich, 1995: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 68), p. 1-16.

be conducted from a comparative perspective, and take in as many examples as possible. Our aim was to abandon the limited and intellectually feeble comparisons which take into account only the most urbanised parts of late medieval Europe.⁵ Instead, it seemed fruitful to include also the ‘peripheries’ of medieval *Latinitas*, considering areas with their own dynamics of development of urban culture, such as the Iberian Peninsula, or indeed regions like Scandinavia or East Central Europe, which have been described as true peripheries.⁶

Our choice influenced also the chronological boundaries of the investigation. Focussing on some of the fully developed ‘models’ of the medieval town,⁷ those of the communes of northern Italy and those of the towns of Europe north of the Alps which were organised according to so-called ‘German law’, we concentrated on the period between the late twelfth and the middle of the sixteenth century. For considerable parts of *Latinitas*, the terminus *ante quem* of the ‘medieval’ period had to be put in the more recent ‘early modern’ period, because local chronologies did not observe the traditional boundaries between the Middle Ages and Early Modern times. This is also reflected in the distribution of sources. As far as the history of literate behaviour in general is con-

⁵ As examples of a comparative approach, see: *Memoria, Communitas, Civitas – Mémoire et conscience urbaines en Occident à la fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. H. BRAND *et al.* (Sigmaringen, 2003); *Villes de Flandre et d’Italie (XIII-XVI siècle): Les enseignements d’une comparaison*, ed. E. CROUZET-PAVAN and É. LECUPPRE-DESJARDIN (Turnhout, 2008: *Studies in European Urban History* 12).

⁶ Some authors use the concept of ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ in a different way. Within the urban microcosm they treat municipal chanceries as ‘centres’ of written culture (also in a spatial sense), while individual households had a ‘peripheral position’. See A. LITSCHER, “Writing and social evidence ‘before the archives’: Revealing and concealing the written in late medieval Lüneburg”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 185-208, and, to some extent, H. OBERMAIR, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of Bolzano, South Tyrol”, *ibid.*, pp. 49-68.

⁷ Historians of social communication follow the discussions about the nature of medieval towns by specialists in the domain of urban history. What seems to be most relevant here is the question to which extent settlements fulfilled certain functions which are usually perceived as ‘urban’. A town may or may not have functions in the exercise of power, in jurisdiction and in the organisation of religious life (i.e. in the organisation of the Church). A town may or may not have functions in the organisation of the local, regional or supra-regional economy. And one may wonder whether all towns had a role as cultural centres. From the abundant literature on this essential problem of urban history, see: *Was machte im Mittelalter zur Stadt? Selbstverständnis, Außensicht und Erscheinungsbilder mittelalterlicher Städte*, ed. K-U. JÄSCHKE and Ch. SCHRENK (Heilbronn, 2007: *Quellen und Forschungen zur geschichte der Stadt Heilbronn* 18).

cerned, traditional periodisations of western history are to be reconsidered seriously.⁸

Pragmatic Urban Literacy

Let us begin with a consideration of the production, uses, and preservation of records for the purposes of the municipal administration. These activities belong squarely to the registers of pragmatic (or practical) literacy,⁹ but because they were exercised mainly by municipal institutions (or at least under their authority), they can also be called ‘institutional literacy’ or ‘civic literacy’. The definition proposed by Sarah Rees Jones, that ‘civic literacy’ was “the capacity of urban governments to generate both records and archives as part of their process of self-government”, seems to touch the core of the problem.¹⁰ The systematic growth of this capacity was in great part determined by the law. The ‘legal setting’ of an urban community, whether it was a *locatio*-charter in the area of ‘German’ law, a Castilian *fuero* or a collection of local customary law put into writing,¹¹ resulted in the growing production of records which were either *necessary* or *useful* for the municipal administration. But the

⁸ More on this problem in A. ADAMSKA, “Orality and literacy in medieval East Central Europe: Final prolegomena”, in: *Oral Art Forms and their Passage into Writing*, ed. E. MUNDAL and J. WELLENDORF (Copenhagen, 2008), pp. 69-83, at pp. 71ff., and K. SZENDE, “Towns and the written word in medieval Hungary”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 123-148, esp. pp. 126-127. See also A. WALSHAM and J. CRICK, “Introduction: Script, print and history”, in: *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700*, ed. J. CRICK and A. WALSHAM (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 1-25. About the *terminus a quo* in the history of European urbanisation, see: *Die Frühgeschichte der europäischen Stadt im 11. Jahrhundert*, ed. J. JARNUT and P. JOHANEK (Cologne, 1998).

⁹ On the concept of ‘pragmatic literacy’ (and *pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*), see most recently MOSTERT, *A Bibliography*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ S. REES JONES, “Civic literacy in later medieval England”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 219-230, at p. 220. The process of the growing use of writing for administrative purposes is called by some authors the ‘documentalisation’ of urban self-government (see J. BENDERS, “Urban administrative literacy in the northeastern Low Countries: A comparison of Groningen, Kampen, Deventer, and Zutphen, twelfth-fifteenth centuries”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 97-122, at p. 99). Until now this has been the main concern of scholars. See, e.g., J. RAUSCHERT, *Herrschaft und Schrift: Strategien der Inszenierung und Funktionalisierung von Texten in Luzern und Bern am Ende des Mittelalters* (Berlin and New York, 2006); A. BARTOSZEWICZ, *Piśmienność mieszczańska w późnośredniowiecznej Polsce* (Warszawa, 2012); P. CHASTAING, *La ville, le gouvernement et l’écrit à Montpellier (XII^e-XIV^e siècle): Essai d’histoire sociale* (Paris, 2013).

awareness that some records are necessary and others useful in a community's life could not develop without a basic familiarity with the written word. Here and there, for instance in Sweden, institutional urban literacy connected with 'older' literate behaviour, in the Swedish case based on epigraphic runacy.¹²

When reflecting on the rich varieties of literacy one encounters in medieval towns, it is remarkable that everywhere in the vast area under consideration, from Castile to Poland and beyond, its centres were the municipal chanceries. This leads to the conclusion that the chanceries' activities should be investigated from a perspective going beyond the traditional approach of diplomatics. Combining administrative, bureaucratic and political functions, in close connection with the urban elites,¹³ producing and preserving written records, the chanceries were indeed the brains of the urban communities, or, as the French scholar Claude Gauvard put it, they were at once "*place de pouvoir*" and "*place de mémoire*".¹⁴ However, all case studies uncover the same methodological doubt: when can we speak of the institutionalisation of an urban chancery? From the moment the records started to be produced systematically? When the title of the official town notary appeared? Or should we rather take as the *terminus a quo* of its existence the moment when a town got the right to use its communal seal¹⁵ or that of issuing its own charters on voluntary jurisdiction?

¹¹ See I. LARSSON, "Producing, using, and keeping records in medieval Swedish towns", in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 13-30; J.M. LÓPEZ VILLALBA, "Urban chanceries in the Kingdom of Castile in the Late Middle Ages", *ibid.*, pp. 69-69; BENDERS, "Urban administrative literacy in the northeastern Low Countries"; SZENDE, "Towns and the written word in medieval Hungary"; A. BARTOSZEWICZ, "Urban literacy in small Polish towns and the process of 'modernisation' of society in the later Middle Ages", in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 149-182; and A. FLÓRA, "'Laborem circumspecti domini notarii': Town notaries in early modern Transylvania", *ibid.*, pp. 313-335.

¹² LARSSON, "Producing, using, and keeping records", pp. 17-20. More on this subject in M. SCHULTE, "Pragmatic runic literacy in Scandinavia c. 800-1300: With a particular focus on the Bryggen Material", in: *Epigraphic Literacy and Christian Identity: Modes of Written Discourse in the Newly Christian European North*, ed. K. ZILMER and J. JESCH (Turnhout, 2012: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 4), pp. 155-182.

¹³ Reflecting on the close relationship between the municipal chancery and urban government, one should not forget the chancery's role in the creation of an urban *memoria* which by its very nature possessed a strong sacral dimension. See *infra*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Cl. GAUWARD, "Conclusion", in: *Écrit et pouvoir dans les chancelleries médiévales: Espace français, espace anglais*, ed. K. FIANU and D.J. GUTH (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1997), pp. 333-342, at p. 335.

¹⁵ On the functions of municipal seals, see a.o. B.M. BEDOS-REZAK, "Du modèle à l'image: Les signes de l'identité urbaine au Moyen Âge", in: *Le verbe, l'image et les représentations de la société urbaine au Moyen Âge*, ed. M. BOONE *et al.* (Antwerpen and Apeldoorn, 2002), pp.

The answers given by the authors differ one from another;¹⁶ nevertheless it is clear that, from the beginning of the fourteenth century onwards, the great take-off of institutional urban literacy was already in motion in most areas of *Latinitas*.

As an obvious sign of this development we can consider the growth in numbers and the progressive diversification of records produced to make known the rules for the running of whole communities (charters of liberties, collections of written law, different kind of municipal registers), and for memorising the actions of their members. Within a few decades, the focus of civic literacy, the ‘town book’ (*liber municipalis*, *stadens bok* etc.), successively diversified into a web of registers, even in very small towns.¹⁷ The growing care for municipal financial records, for instance in the towns of the northern Netherlands,¹⁸ confirms opinions about the importance of making calculations and numeracy in the mental formation of town dwellers.¹⁹ This leads to another important question: how are we to deal with this multiplicity of urban administrative records? Is it sufficient to investigate only samples of documentation that we consider typical and draw far-reaching conclusions? Geertui van Synghel proved that the classical, palaeographical method of identifying individual hands of scribes can be useful in the study of considerable pre-bureaucratic amounts of records. The result of long years of dedicated research has been the reconstruction of the whole landscape of literacy in the late medieval city of ’s-Hertogenbosch in Brabant. This encourages further methodological reflection.

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¹⁶ Cf. G. VAN SYNGHEL, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of ’s-Hertogenbosch (Brabant)”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 31-48; BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”; and FLÓRA, ““*Laborem circumspecti domini notarii*””.

¹⁷ See the examples discussed by LÓPEZ VILLALBA, “Urban chanceries in the Kingdom of Castile in the Late Middle Ages”, and BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”, respectively.

¹⁸ See BENDERS “Urban administrative literacy in the northeastern Low Countries”.

¹⁹ See P. PORTET, “Les techniques du calcul élémentaire dans l’Occident médiéval: Un choix de lectures”, in: *Écrire, compter, mesurer: Vers une histoire des rationalités pratiques*, ed. N. COQUERY *et al.* (Paris, 2006), pp. 51-66. More about this *infra*, p. 12.

Administrative Urban Documentation

Many case studies deal with the management of administrative urban documentation. This term covers several activities: the (sometimes advanced and complex) procedures of the documents' transmission and publication, but also the development of methods for keeping records and of instruments facilitating their retrieval. The investigation of late medieval systems of making indices and cross-references to other records,²⁰ and of making decisions about which records were to be preserved, is part of the 'new' history of medieval archives. This renewed discipline also shows an ever growing interest for the materiality of civic institutions: for the buildings that housed the urban chancery, for technical solutions invented for the preservation of records, and so on.²¹ A comparative approach reveals fascinating similarities (and a few peculiarities) as far as these problems are concerned. The situation in early sixteenth-century Lüneburg, where the town council decided that the municipal chancery was too large, and too well-equipped for the needs of the community,²² seems quite exceptional. Everywhere in Europe, scribal offices took up ever more room in increasingly ostentatious municipal buildings, while the growing care for the safety of the official documentation resulted in putting urban records in places that were perceived as secure. Information about the keeping of documents in wooden chests with three keys begins to sound almost commonplace.²³

²⁰ The practice of building a 'frame' of references for every single document, discussed by Ch. WEBER, "Trust, secrecy, and control in the medieval Italian communes", in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 243-265, using the example of the extended notarial system of late medieval Florence, was widespread also at very low levels of participation in literacy, e.g. by semi-literate peasants. See D. BALESTRACCI, *La zappa e la retorica: Memorie familiari di un contadino toscano del Quattrocento* (Florence, 1984), translated as *The Renaissance in the Fields: Family Memoirs of a Fifteenth-Century Tuscan Peasant*, trans. P. SQUATRITI and B. MERIDETH, with an introduction by E. MUIR (University Park, PA, 1999).

²¹ See SZENDE, "Towns and the written word in medieval Hungary", and REES JONES, "Civic literacy in later medieval England".

²² See LITSCHER, "Writing and social evidence 'before the archives'".

²³ The practice of using religious institutions for the safekeeping of urban records is part of the larger problem of the Church's participation in 'urban' literate behaviour. See BENDERS, "Urban administrative literacy in the northeastern Low Countries"; VAN SYNGHEL, "The use of records in medieval towns: The case of 's-Hertogenbosch"; SZENDE, "Towns and the written word in medieval Hungary"; WEBER, "Trust, secrecy, and control in the medieval Italian communes"; and M. DE SMET, "Heavenly quiet and the din of war: Use and abuse of religious buildings for purposes of safety, defence and strategy", in: *The Use and Abuse of Sacred Places in Late Medieval Towns*, ed. P. TRIO and M. DE SMET (Louvain, 2006: *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia: Studia* 38), pp. 1-36, at pp. 5-8; J. RÖHRKASTEN, "Secular uses of the mendicant priories of medieval

The growing care for the safety of institutional urban records was caused not only by fears of their dispersion or destruction by natural disasters, but in great part also by the need of discretion and the wish to keep important matters secret. Restricting access to the records, and ways of dealing with documents meant to be ‘secret’, have been studied by Michael Jucker, Bastian Walter and Christoph Weber. They confirm earlier scholarly observations about the direct engagement of urban archives in current politics. Their analysis of these phenomena agreed with the results of recent studies showing that the management of urban records (seen as an element in political decision-making) usually involved minute numbers of people only, all of them belonging to the power and money elites of the urban communities.²⁴ The paradox of the ‘social history of secrecy’ is that, despite its nature, secrecy left quite a few traces in the written sources, and scholars have become aware of the serious methodological challenges this poses. We should welcome a temperate remark of Christoph Weber that “what we can apprehend from written sources ... concerned the ordering of the surroundings in which confidentiality existed and secrecy was kept”.²⁵ This kind of study may provide a valuable contribution to a “new cultural history of politics”.²⁶

It is even more fascinating to see, at the same time, the reverse of the ‘public / secret’ coin, that is the fact that some official urban records had a clearly ostentatious character. Manuscripts, often richly decorated, in which privileges and laws binding a community were copied, as e.g. the Red Privilege Book of ’s-Hertogenbosch, the *Stadtbuch* of Bolzano, the *Golden Boeck* of Kampen and, to some extent, the Diary of Ghent, can be treated as testimony of well-developed communal identities as well as of institutional literate mentalities.

It seems justified to take a closer look at those who were directly involved in this kind of literate behaviour, that is the professionals of the written word who were active in urban environments. There is no surprise that attention

London”, in: *The Use and Abuse of Sacred Places*, pp. 135-151, at pp. 142-146 (with very interesting remarks on the use of the Dominican and Carmelite priories in London as places of residence of the English royal chancery).

²⁴ See, e.g., the recent study of the role of the urban proto-bureaucracy in international politics in the late fifteenth century by B. WALTER, *Informationen, Wissen und Macht: Akteure und Techniken städtischen Außenpolitik: Bern, Straßburg und Basel im Kontext der Burgundischen Kriege* (Stuttgart, 2012: *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Beihefte* 218).

²⁵ WEBER, “Trust, secrecy, and control in the medieval Italian communes”, p. 248.

²⁶ M. JUCKER, “Urban literacy and urban secrecy? Some new approaches to an old problem”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 231-242, at p. 231.

goes, in the first place, to the employees of the municipal chanceries, often called *notarius civitatis* or *Stadtschreiber*. A series of case studies shows clearly that they gradually became members of the municipal government, urban diplomats and messengers, rather than remaining mere managers of pragmatic literacy. Their engagement in those municipal affairs demanding practical literacy skills and some legal expertise was the same in large towns, involved into regional and even international politics, and in very small settlements in the periphery.²⁷ This involvement of the official experts of institutional literacy created room for those who did the actual scribal work, that is public notaries and ‘occasional’ clerks; the first of them came from ecclesiastical institutions.

In the communes of Northern Italy and in the Iberian towns, the notarial system was the backbone of the whole social infrastructure, while the examples of 's-Hertogenbosch and Bolzano show without any doubt that also after the institutionalisation of urban chanceries the skills of casual employees were used quite often.²⁸ The collective picture of the public notaries in Dalmatia, sketched by Branka Grbavac, confirms opinions about the peripatetic nature of late medieval urban professionals of the written word. Notaries born and educated in northern Italy looked for jobs not only in regions relatively close by, as Dalmatia, but they could be found everywhere north of the Alps. This is especially true of the period before the increase in the number of foundations of transalpine universities in the second half of the fourteenth century.²⁹ The practice of multitasking, of combining the occupation of municipal notary (or of public notary) with that of the head of the town school may be considered another characteristic of the profession.³⁰

²⁷ See LÓPEZ VILLALBA, “Urban chanceries in the Kingdom of Castile in the late Middle Ages”; BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”; FLÓRA, “‘*Laborem circumspiciti domini notarii*’”, and, as a further example from the rich literature on this subject, WALTER, *Informationen, Wissen und Macht*, pp. 151-184 (with bibliographical references).

²⁸ VAN SYNGHEL, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of 's-Hertogenbosch”; OBERMAIR, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of Bolzano”; and WEBER, “Trust, secrecy, and control in the medieval Italian communes”. Cf. the remarks by J. ANTONI IGLESIAS on the importance of notarial registers as a source for the everyday urban life (“Books and booksellers in the cities of the Crown of Aragon: The example of Barcelona”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 179-193, at p. 180).

²⁹ See B. GRBAVAC, “The professional formation of public notaries in Dalmatia from the second half of the twelfth century to the end of the fourteenth century”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 285-312, and, for a comparative perspective, *Notariado público y documento privado de los orígenes al siglo XIV: Actas del VII Congreso Internacional de Diplomática*, 2 vols. (Valencia, 1989: *Papers i Documents* 7).

³⁰ See, e.g. BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”, pp. 175-178; GRBAVAC,

The Success of Institutional Urban Literacy

Scholarship likes to see the development of institutional urban literacy as a success story, treating the appearance of proto-bureaucratic structures and the growing amounts of records produced as signs of progress of the reasoning faculties, as a “*Rationalisierungsprozeß*”. One should remember, however, that the everyday practice of urban administrative literacy also had dark sides: irretrievability of the records, their incompleteness, illegibility, fraud and falsification – all sorts of misuse of the written word were painfully part of reality as well.³¹ Should we treat these phenomena as signs of the underdevelopment of literate mentalities or as marks of a shift from blind, almost religious trust in the written word towards an awareness of the limits of trust in writing? We ought not to forget that the growth of institutional literacy by no means meant the abandoning of oral communication, nor the abandoning of the legal status of forms of orality. We should take these things into account when we judge the growth of urban literacy and its historical consequences.

In further research a crucial question ought to be whether, and to what extent, the use of the written word for administrative purposes stimulated the development of personal, private uses of writing by individuals. Some case studies are already suggesting a positive answer to this question. Their authors are pointing out that literacy developed thanks to written procedures, established step by step by urban governments, and that literate mentalities could develop by providing town dwellers with the means of distinguishing valid from invalid documents through the municipal government’s monopoly of the production and validation of certain types of records.³² However, private legal literacy was only one of many forms of using the written word in towns.

“The professional formation of public notaries in Dalmatia”, p. 297.

³¹ See LITSCHER, “Writing and social evidence ‘before the archives’”, and, on the same problem in a rural environment, A. ADAMSKA, “Waging war and making peace with written documents: The Kingdom of Poland against the Teutonic Knights (1411-1422)” 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. 263-275, at p. 273.

³² A good example of this phenomenon is the development of documentary practice in late medieval Regensburg. As time passed, the testaments of town dwellers were considered valid only when they were written down by sworn municipal clerks (Th. PARINGER and O. RICHARD, “Die Testamente der Reichsstadt Regensburg aus Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit: Entstehung – Überlieferung – Quellenwert”, *Archivalische Zeitschrift* 87 (2005), pp. 197-234, at pp. 220 ff.). See also BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”, and LITSCHER, “Writing and social evidence ‘before the archives’”.

'Personal' Uses of Writing in Medieval Towns

The pragmatic, 'civic' uses of writing we have concentrated on so far were meant to meet the needs of municipal governments. In large part this type of literacy was developed by professionals of the written word working in the institutional framework of the town chancery. There was also a wider spectrum of the uses of script in the urban environment, even if we will not completely lose sight of municipal clerks or public notaries there either. The better to judge the functions of these professionals in the community, it is necessary to map all areas of written culture in town, and to determine writing's place within the 'urban' system of communication.

To this end, two questions suggest themselves. Who was able to participate in literacy through the skills of reading or writing? And how could one acquire basic and advanced literacy skills? Considering the variety in literacy among town dwellers (clerics³³ next to literate lay people, professionals of the written word³⁴ next to occasional users of writing, and all of these next to illiterates), one may assume that literacy skills differed from one social group to another. Research conducted over the last decades suggests that the urban environment created much more educational opportunities than non-urban environments, thanks to better access to schools, and also to the teaching that was done in the home.³⁵

³³ On 'urban clergy', see *infra*, pp. 12-13.

³⁴ The professional formation of municipal clerks and notaries forms a problem in itself. Often, scholars attribute to them high level of education (see, e.g. GRBAVAC, "The professional formation of public notaries in Dalmatia", following the usual argumentation found also in, e.g. U.M. ZAHND, "Studium und Kanzlei: Der Bildungsweg von Stadt- und Ratsschreiber in eidgenössischen Städten des ausgehenden Mittelalters", in: *Gelehrte im Reich: Zur Sozial- und Wirkungsgeschichte akademischer Eliten des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. R.Ch. SCHWINGES (Berlin, 1996: *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung: Beihefte* 18), pp. 453-476). However, we should also take into consideration apprenticeship as an equivalent way of acquisition of professional skills (see, e.g. M. MOSTERT, "Some thoughts on urban schools, urban literacy, and the development of western civilisation", in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 337-348, at p. 346).

³⁵ See MOSTERT, "Some thoughts", pp. 341-345. Teaching at home, at a first glance less visible on the map of the urban educational system, was still important both in the centres as in the peripheries of medieval *Latinitas*. See, e.g. R. WITT, "What did Giovannino read and write? Literacy in early Renaissance Florence", in: *Essays in the Renaissance*, ed. W. KAISER (Florence, 1995: *I Tatti Studies* 6), pp. 83-114, and BARTOSZEWICZ, "Urban literacy in small Polish towns", p. 165.

The importance of schools for the urban communities could be reflected in drawn-out conflicts between the ecclesiastical and municipal authorities about their control, teaching programme, and financial status. Such conflicts occurred all over Europe, from England to Poland. The main result of these confrontations was the emergence of a school system geared towards practical needs. This is most clearly visible in the towns of northern Italy and in the Hanseatic towns, but the model was adopted also in the peripheries of Europe. This is significant for our subject because it outlines the ‘horizon of needs’ of the urban populations, and especially that of the merchants.³⁶ The abilities of reading and writing were combined with numeracy skills such as making calculations, with accountancy, with knowledge of the writing of business letters, with knowledge of the regional *lingua franca* of commercial contacts, with an orientation in law and monetary systems – and, next to all this, with a certain amount of religious formation.³⁷ Several types of written records produced by lay town dwellers reflect this type of formation.³⁸

For the balanced judgement of the literacy skills possessed by the members of urban communities, however, other ways of participating in written culture should be considered as well. It is becoming ever more clear that a lack of the technical abilities of reading and writing did not exclude individuals from contact with the written word – even if its active use could considerably change the town dwellers’ attitudes to writing. As important as active and personal participation in written culture through different forms of reading and writing, is ‘passive’ and ‘indirect’ literate behaviour. Examples of this are the delegation of tasks requiring literacy skills to professionals, semi-professionals and ‘occasional’ scribes. They were much easier to find in the urban environment

³⁶ See MOSTERT, “Some thoughts”, pp. 345-347.

³⁷ From the abundant scholarly literature on the subject, we mention P. PORTET, “Les techniques du calcul élémentaire dans l’Occident médiéval: Un choix de lectures”, in: *Écrire, compter, mesurer: Vers une histoire des rationalités pratiques*, ed. N. COQUERY *et al.* (Paris, 2006), pp. 51-66; I. CECCHERINI, “Le scritte dei notai e dei mercanti a Firenze tra Duecento e Trecento: Unità, varietà, stile”, *Medioevo e Rinascimento* 24 (2010), pp. 29-68; M. KINTZINGER, “Schule und Bildung”, in: *Die Hanse: Lebenswirklichkeit und Mythos*, ed. J. BRACKER *et al.* (Lübeck, 1999), pp. 590-596; H. SAMSONOWICZ, “Kultura miejska”, in: H. SAMSONOWICZ and M. BOGUCKA, *Dzieje miast i mieszczaństwa w Polsce przedrozbiorowej* (Wrocław, Warsaw, and Cracow, 1986), pp. 213-283, at p. 268.

³⁸ See also J. DOTSON, “Fourteenth century merchant manuals and merchant culture”, in: *Kaufmannsbücher und Handelspraktiken vom Spätmittelalter bis zum beginnenden 20. Jahrhundert – Merchant’s Books and Mercantile Practice from the Late Middle Ages till the Twentieth Century*, ed. M.A. DENZEL *et al.* (Wiesbaden, 2002), p. 75-88.

than elsewhere.³⁹ Familiarity with script, understanding how writing ‘works’, and an awareness of its graphical forms (even if one was technically unable to read the written message) influenced the average level of literacy in towns as strongly as alphabetisation as it is traditionally understood.⁴⁰ This simple observation is put to the test, however, when we take into account the complex ethnic and religious structures of medieval and early modern towns.

Written and Spoken Languages

Several case studies present the complicated interconnections between the languages of oral and written communication on the one hand, and religious and ethnical identity on the other, especially in the cities in the eastern periphery of late medieval *Latinitas*. They provide an excellent illustration of phenomena discussed by experts of the social history of language,⁴¹ for instance the existence of several linguistic communities, which could be open or closed, whose frontiers intersected, and which could be in a state of contact or conflict. An individual could be a member of several linguistic and textual communities

³⁹ On the phenomenon of passive participation in literacy on different steps of the social ladder, see: A. ADAMSKA, “‘*Audire, intelligere, memorie commendare*’: Attitudes of the rulers of medieval Central Europe towards written texts”, in: *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. S. RANKOVIĆ *et al.* (Turnhout, 2010: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 20), pp. 337-357; A. ADAMSKA and M. MOSTERT, “The literacies of medieval town dwellers and peasants: A preliminary investigation”, in: *Świat Średniowiecza: Studia ofiarowane profesorowi Henrykowi Samsonowiczowi*, ed. A. BARTOSZEWICZ *et al.* (Warsaw, 2010), pp. 317-330. The easy access to services offered by ‘occasional’ professionals of pragmatic literacy persists. Armando Petrucci recalls that in the 1950s, at the entrance of the register of births, marriages and deaths in Rome he often saw a crowding group of scribes (“*intermediari grafici*”), ready to produce any kind of document on the spot for anybody who would need it (A. PETRUCCI, *Prima Lezione di Paleografia* (Rome and Bari, 2002), pp. 25-26).

⁴⁰ See M. MOSTERT, “Forgery and trust”, in: *Strategies of Writing*, pp. 37-59; I. LARSSON, “Producing, using, and keeping records”, pp. 28-29. It is worth adding that the cumulation of relatively high alphabetisation and familiarity with the written word was not limited to urban settlements within medieval *Latinitas*. See: J. SCHAEKEN, “The birchbark documents in time and space – Revisited”, in: *Epigraphic Literacy and Christian Identity*, pp. 201-224; D. BUBALO, *Pragmatic Literacy in Medieval Serbia* (Turnhout, 2014: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 29).

⁴¹ The questionnaire of the discipline has been presented several times by Peter Burke. See P. BURKE, “The social history of language”, in: *The Social History of Language*, ed. P. BURKE and R. PORTER (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 1-34; ID., *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 15 ff.

at the same time, because he or she had to operate within different languages at home, when going to church, to the market, or when appearing before the judge. The practice of oral and written communication in cities such as Lviv or Vilnius⁴² confirms the opinion that language was a factor working ‘across’ and not only ‘within’ ethnic and social strata.

At a one and the same moment, several languages could possess the status of languages of prestige, depending on the cultural setting in which they were used. In East Central Europe and in Scandinavia the usual dichotomy between Latin and the vernacular(s) clearly shifted in the direction of a complex relationship between Latin, German⁴³ and indigenous vernaculars. As Anti Selart’s analysis of the term *Undeutsch* shows, the prestige of a language could be strongly reinforced by social distinction, often stigmatising those who were unable to use it.⁴⁴ More often, however, prestige was based on the fact that a language was a transmitter of religion or of a legal system, or because it played the role of a *lingua franca* (*Umgangssprache*). The uses of German, which could play almost all of these roles in different parts of north eastern periphery of medieval Europe, prove to be a fascinating theme.⁴⁵

From the point of view of the historian of literacy, however, even more important is the conclusion that in practice the barriers posed by the multiplicity of spoken languages were much easier to overcome than those of ‘alien’ writing systems.⁴⁶ We observe the existence not only of linguistic and textual

⁴² See A. JANECEK, “Urban communes, ethnic communities, and language use in late medieval Red Ruthenian towns”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 19-35, and J. NIEDZWIEDZ, “Cyrillic and Latin script in late medieval Vilnius”, *ibid.*, pp. 99-116.

⁴³ Properly speaking, it was a matter of different variants of the Middle Low German and Middle High German.

⁴⁴ See A. SELART, “Non-German literacy in medieval Livonia”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 37-63.

⁴⁵ See A. ADAMSKA, “Latin and three vernaculars in East Central Europe from the point of view of the history of social communication”, in: *Spoken and Written Language: Relations between Latin and the Vernacular Languages in the Earlier Middle Ages*, ed. M. GARRISON *et al.* (Turnhout, 2013: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 24), pp. 325-364. A good example of an extreme valorisation of language are the attitudes towards the so-called ‘heretical’ texts, discussed in P. KRAS, “*Libri suspecti, libri prohibiti*: Wycliffite and Hussite writings in fifteenth-century Polish towns”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 195-226. All texts with religious content written in the vernacular were treated as suspicious by the ecclesiastical authorities, while Latin ensured, at least at first sight, the orthodoxy of a text’s contents.

⁴⁶ JANECEK, “Urban communes, ethnic communities, and language use”, p. 28; NIEDZWIEDZ, “Cyrillic and Latin script in late medieval Vilnius”, pp. 101-102. Cf. A. ADAMSKA, “Latin and vernacular – Reading and meditation: Two Polish queens and their books”, in: *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages: Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit*,

communities, but also of ‘alphabetical’ communities, which most probably were more closed than the linguistic ones. The idea of alphabetical communities challenges the earlier concept of familiarity with script, as this familiarity seems to have been unbalanced. One may assume that, for instance in the reality of the towns of Red Ruthenia, Lithuania or Livonia, familiarity with the dominant Latin alphabet was more widespread among the minorities than familiarity with these minorities’ alphabets among the majority – let alone familiarity with the alphabets of ‘outsiders’. Crossing the borders of one’s mother tongue and of one’s ‘own’ alphabet was probably stimulated in the first place by the demands of the urban proto-bureaucracy, based as it was on a legal system of written texts in one particular language and using a particular alphabet.⁴⁷

Personal Uses of Writing and Institutional Literacy

An awareness of the multiplicity of languages and alphabets in the urban environment is important when confronting the problem of the personal literate behaviour of individual town dwellers. Case studies deal with only a few fragments from the wide spectrum of written records produced and kept by individuals. There is no doubt that the institutional, administrative literacy of the municipalities forced the use of certain written records by individuals. As time passed, certificates of legitimate birth and testaments were required if one was to be allowed to function within a community. The ability to show written confirmations of business transactions and of the ownership of goods, and receipts for the payment of debts, was proving ever more useful and profitable.⁴⁸

It is fascinating to see how homogeneous were the forms of some of the records belonging to the sphere of this personalised administrative literacy. Testaments, for instance in late medieval Poland and Transylvania,⁴⁹ were no

and Awakening the Passion, ed. S. CORBELLINI (Turnhout, 2013: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 25), pp. 219-246, at p. 238.

⁴⁷ The importance of the language of law has been emphasised recently, e.g. in *Rechts- und Sprachtransfer in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, ed. E. EICHLER and H. LÜCK (Berlin, 2008).

⁴⁸ See BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”, pp. 162-164, and LITSCHER, “Writing and social evidence ‘before the archives’”, p. 194.

⁴⁹ J. WYSMULEK, “Urban testaments in Poland: Research present and future”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 299-312; M. LUPESCU MAKÓ, “Spoken and written

different from the testaments known from other parts of Europe. Everywhere, from the thirteenth century onwards, the development of testamentary practices took place in a situation of tension which is typical for pre-modern literacy: tension between spoken and written law, between Latin and vernacular languages, and finally between a formulaic text and the individuality of its author. Last wills and testaments also illustrate an important mark of literate behaviour already mentioned here: the delegation of the technical task of making records to the professionals of the written word, or to accidental scribes.

This kind of literate behaviour, which was active but nevertheless indirect, aided as it was by intermediaries, acquired a direct character when town dwellers started producing written records in their own hand: to put in writing their accounts, to correspond by letter, or to create written testimony of the history of their own families. These testimonies could be in the modest form of memoranda notices in the margins of their prayer books.⁵⁰ They could also develop into official accounts of the history of a family, so-called *Familienbücher*, *libri di famiglia*, or *ricordanze*. Such books from Nuremberg, studied by Karin Czaja,⁵¹ are an attractive example of the efforts spent on the organising and ordering of the collective *memoria*^{52?} of small (family) communities within the large urban community. Their development testifies to the “naturalisation of writing in burgherly households” in late medieval times.⁵³ Equally relevant is the fact that they were kept up to date by several generations. This allows an analysis of changes in their internal organisation, for instance the development

words in testaments: Orality and literacy in last wills of medieval Transylvanian burghers”, *ibid.*, pp. 271-297.

⁵⁰ Cf. VAN SYNGHEL, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of ’s-Hertogenbosch”, p. 46. The practice of making personal notes (e.g. about the birth of one’s children) on the margins or empty pages of Books of Hours or other prayer books which were often passed from one generation to the next, is well known from studies of the literate behaviour of the social elites (see, e.g., A. ADAMSKA, “The Jagiellonians and the written word: Some preliminary remarks about royal literacy in the later Middle Ages”, in: *Hofkultur der Jagiellonendynastie und verwandter Fürstenhäuser – The Culture of the Jagiellonian and Related Courts*, ed. U. BORKOWSKA and M. HÖRSCH (Ostfildern, 2010: *Studia Jagiellonica Lipsiensia* 6), pp. 153-169, at p. 160).

⁵¹ K. CZAJA, “The Nuremberg *Familienbücher*: Archives of family identity”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 325-338.

⁵² We use this term in the sense given to it by German scholars from the 1980s onwards. For a bibliographical overview, see M. BORGOLTE, “*Memoria*: Bilan intermédiaire d’un projet de recherche sur le Moyen Âge”, in: *Les tendances actuelles de l’histoire du Moyen Âge en France et en Allemagne*, ed. J.-Cl. SCHMITT and O.G. OEXLE (Paris, 2003), pp. 53-69.

⁵³ So LITSCHER, “Writing and social evidence ‘before the archives’”, p. 204.

of strategies of including documents or cross-references to records remaining in the archives.

Scholars are right to emphasise the many similarities between *Familienbücher* and cartularies, but even more interesting is their resemblance to the town books.⁵⁴ It is visible that their authors learned to manage written records through experience of the domain of pragmatic literacy. From it they took certain habits of organising the written word (for instance the layout of the page, the way of making cross-references, the use of wax tablets and marginal notes) and transferred them to the other texts they created, such as family histories or texts with religious content.⁵⁵

At the same time, questions need to be asked when discussing the problem of the role of towns as centres of the production of manuscript and early printed books. Using statistics and arguments of quantitative codicology, the careful analysis of this role by Eltjo Buringh provides earlier scholarly opinions, which until now were based on case studies and estimations only,⁵⁶ with verifiable evidence that towns were indeed centres of book production on a proto-industrial scale.⁵⁷ The case study of Antoni Iglesias in its turn cleverly shows the complex network of the lay professionals and semi-professionals involved in book production and trade, taking as an example late medieval Barcelona.⁵⁸ Doubts remain, however, whether the production of books in town was an intellectual activity, or whether it was a craft like any other. This question is even more interesting when one considers the large participation of ‘occasional’ scribes for whom the copying of books was a job on the side, next to their main occupation as merchant or craftsman.⁵⁹ Hearing about a textile merchant from Barcelona who earned additional money as a scribe,⁶⁰ one won

⁵⁴ See CZAJA, “The Nuremberg *Familienbücher*”, pp. 327-328.

⁵⁵ See the examples discussed by S. CORBELLINI, “Beyond orthodoxy and heterodoxy: A new approach to late medieval religious reading”, in: *Cultures Of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages*, pp. 33-53.

⁵⁶ On the methodology of this kind of research, see: E. ORNATO, “La codicologie quantitative, outil privilégié de l’histoire du livre médiéval”, *Historia – Instituciones – Documentos* 18 (1991), p. 375-402.

⁵⁷ E. BURINGH, “The role of cities in medieval book production: Quantitative analyses”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 119-177.

⁵⁸ IGLESIAS-FONSECA, “Books and booksellers in the cities of the Crown of Aragon”.

⁵⁹ This practice is known also from other regions. See, e.g., E. POTKOWSKI, “‘*Cathedrales Poloniae*’: Copistes professionnels en Pologne à la fin du Moyen Âge”, in: *Le statut du scribe au Moyen Âge: Actes du XI^e colloque scientifique du Comité International de Paléographie Latine*, ed. M.-C. HUBERT *et al.* (Paris, 2000), pp. 333-343, at p. 334.

⁶⁰ See IGLESIAS-FONSECA, “Books and booksellers in the cities of the Crown of Aragon”,

ders whether this small job influenced his personal literate behaviour. Was such a part-time scribe also a reader? Did he also copy some texts for his own use? Presumably he was he able to read, although there may also have been scribes with a hand good enough to reproduce a text without fully understanding its content.⁶¹

This matter is more difficult to reflect upon than the advanced literate behaviour of the fourteenth-century merchants of northern Italy, expressed in their reading, copying, and writing commentaries on pious literature for the sake of their own spiritual development. This was mirrored on a smaller scale elsewhere,⁶² but for most areas of medieval *Latinitas* personal participation in written culture is indicated first of all by the possession of books.⁶³ Considering this topic, one has to remember that in the multilingual and multi-alphabetical settings of late medieval towns the circulation of books should be investigated separately for every textual and alphabetical community. The parallel histories of Cyrillic and Latin books in Vilnius at the turn of early modern times, sketched by Jakub Niedźwiedź,⁶⁴ clearly show the need of simultaneous analysis. It seems as if in all these communities, however separated they were from one another, the late medieval period knew secular readers of religious literature who owned at least a personal prayer book, and who were not afraid to compete with their parish priest in knowledge of the Bible.⁶⁵ This suggests that the development of literacy may have influenced an ‘urban’ model of lay piety, although it would probably go too far to assume the emergence of two separate urban models of religious behaviour, one for literates and another for illiterates.⁶⁶

p. 187.

⁶¹ On this topic, C. JACOBSEN, “A modern scribe views scribes of the past”, in: *Scraped, Strokes, and Bound: Materially Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. J. WILCOX (Turnhout, 2013: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 23), pp. 75-92, is well worth reading.

⁶² Sabrina Corbellini calls this kind of literate behaviour “active readership” (CORBELLINI, “Beyond orthodoxy”, p. 36). On the same literate behaviour of town dwellers in Poland, see the conclusion of BARTOSZEWICZ, “Urban literacy in small Polish towns”, p. 181.

⁶³ Of course, one is aware that ‘possession’ was not a decisive factor for judging the reading skills and literate behaviour of the owner. See, e.g., Paweł KRAS’ opinion about the possession of manuscripts of heretical texts, in his “*Libri suspecti, libri prohibiti*”, p. 197.

⁶⁴ NIEDZWIEDZ, “Cyrillic and Latin script in late medieval Vilnius”, esp. pp. 103-104.

⁶⁵ Tracing the reception of heretical texts says much about the circulation of manuscripts, even in small urban communities in the eastern periphery of the *Latinitas* (see KRAS, “*Libri suspecti, libri prohibiti*”, p. 222). The topic of the ‘democratisation’ of access to religious literature has an abundant bibliography. See most recently *Cultures of Religious Reading*.

⁶⁶ On the concept of ‘civic piety’, see A. VAUCHEZ, “Introduction”, in: *La religion civique*

Again the Urban Professionals of the Written Word

In the landscape of the uses of the written word in medieval towns, of often strongly ‘personalised’ pragmatic, sacral, and memorial literacy, once again we see the professionals of the written word who were employed by the municipality at work in the most unexpected places. They were real intermediaries of pragmatic literacy between their main place of work and the members of the community at large. Not only did they participate in urban book production, but in some places they exercised control over the circulation of books as well.⁶⁷ Recent case studies confirm the opinion⁶⁸ that they were also creators and managers of a collective communal identity, expressed through the official accounts of the history of their community of which they were the authors. Such chronicles were meant to provide answers to two crucial questions. Where do we come from as a community? And what in our past has made us so special? As one might expect, an important part of the *materia scribendi* about the communal past was an urban myth of origins which might derive from ancient or Christian history. This myth could also draw on the strong self-consciousness of a community (as in twelfth-century Genua), and, as time passed, adopt the ‘modern’, humanist rules of historical narrative.⁶⁹

à l'époque médiévale et moderne (Chrétienté et Islam): Actes du colloque organisé par le centre de recherches "Histoire sociale et culturelle de l'Occident, XI^e-XVIII^e siècle" de l'Université de Paris X-Nanterre et l'Institut universitaire de France (Nanterre, 21-23 juin 1993), ed. A. VAUCHEZ (Rome, 1995: *Collection de l'École Française de Rome* 213), pp. 1-5, and H. MANIKOWSKA, “Wstęp: Religijność miejska”, in: *Ecclesia et civitas: Kościół i życie religijne w mieście średniowiecznym*, ed. H. MANIKOWSKA and H. ZAREMSKA (Warsaw, 2002: *Colloquia Mediaevalia Varsoviensia* 3), pp. 11-34. It is regrettable that this in-depth analysis did not make an impact on international scholarship; it was of course published in a lesser-known language.

⁶⁷ See IGLESIAS-FONSECA, “Books and booksellers in the cities of the Crown of Aragon”, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁸ See H. LOWAGIE, “The political implications of urban archival documents in the late medieval Flemish cities: The example of the Diary of Ghent”, in: *Writing and the Administration of Medieval Towns*, pp. 209-218; P. JOHANEK, “Hofhistoriograph und Stadchronist”, in: *Autorentypen*, ed. W. HAUG and B. WACHINGER (Tübingen, 1991), pp. 50-68; *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. and Berlin, 2004).

⁶⁹ See M. CAMPOPIANO, “The problem of origins in early communal historiography: Pisa, Genoa, and Milan compared”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 227-250, and I. KURELAC, “Writing about the past of a country from the communal viewpoint: Features, models, and examples in Croatian humanist historiography”, *ibid.*, pp. 251-268. Comparative materials from Northern Europe are provided in the publications cited in the previous note. See also J. RAUSCHERT, “Trust and visualisation: Illustrated chronicles in the late Middle Ages: The

In the creation of ‘civic’ history, clergy participated as actively as the lay professionals of the written word in the service of the municipal governments. Written practices of *memoria* of individual religious communities, as for instance that of the collegial chapter of St. Donatian in Brugge,⁷⁰ were somehow part of the memorial practices of the whole urban community. Other forms of ‘fusion’ of municipal and ecclesiastical elements can be added to the list of phenomena of urban literacy, such as mendicant houses functioning as municipal archives and *loca credibilia*, together with cathedral and collegial chapters, and the support of the municipal administration by clergy in the early stages of the urban community’s development. Together this suggests a high level of participation by the clergy in the development of urban literacy. This suggestion inspires reflection on the nature of the ‘urban’ Church.⁷¹

The relationship between Church and town shows two-way traffic. The evidence of town clerks working for ecclesiastical institutions⁷² lets one see urban literacy as a net of complex interconnections between ecclesiastical and secular structures. In practice there was a permanent exchange of skills and services rather than the existence of two separate bureaucratic systems working in parallel.

The Framework of ‘Urban’ Communication

To evaluate properly all dimensions of urban literacy one needs to establish its place within the framework of ‘urban’ communication generally.⁷³ So-called ‘urban rituals’ were marked by a high density of interconnections between orality, sonority and all kinds of visual messages in a relatively limited

Swiss illustrated chronicle by Diebold Schilling from Luzern, 1513”, in: *Strategies of Writing*, pp. 165-182.

⁷⁰ See H. CALLEWIER, “Remembrance and literacy: Memorial practices of the secular clergy in fifteenth-century Bruges”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 313-223.

⁷¹ A medieval town was without doubt a special kind of sacral community, in which sacral and secular structures met. From the legal point of view these structures may have been separate, but at the same time they used and authorised each other (see MANIKOWSKA, “Wstęp”, pp. 11-12).

⁷² VAN SYNGHEL, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of ’s-Hertogenbosch”, pp. 43-44.

⁷³ The character of the town as a special *Kommunikationsraum* has often been emphasised in the scholarly literature. See, e.g. *Kommunikation in mittelalterlichen Städten*, ed. J. OBERSTE (Regensburg, 2007: *Forum Mittelalter – Studien 3*); *Die Stadt als Kommunikationsraum*, ed. I.Ch. BECKER (Ostfildern, 2011: *Stadt in der Geschichte 37*).

physical space. The term ‘urban ritual’ usually refers to recurrent collective activities in which sacral and secular, ‘civic’ elements were closely associated with each other.⁷⁴ The celebration of religious feasts, for instance of the ‘typically’ urban feast of Corpus Christi, the commemoration of the saints who were the patrons of the community, and the processions of fraternities, were multimedial performances, just as royal entries, installations of new mayors, or the public punishment of criminals. Careful studies by Dusan Zupka and Katell Lavéant show how ‘dramatic’ urban culture could be.⁷⁵

In Hungarian, French, Italian, or Flemish towns, the written word formed only part of the urban rituals, and not necessarily the most important one, if one considers the cumulation of visual and sonic messages. This conclusion inspires questions about the efficacy of the different forms of communication in town. Within the phonic area marked by church bells, music, and the sounds of drums and door knockers, the human voice, especially that of the official town crier, probably was among the most efficacious instruments of communication.⁷⁶ It was accessible to everybody who was able to understand the language in which such a messenger was making his proclamations in the name of the municipality. As far as the multiple instruments of visual communication are concerned, the problem is more complex. It would be too optimistic to assume that everybody in the crowd assisting at a royal entry, for instance in the Hungarian capital of Buda,⁷⁷ was able to ‘read’ and properly understand the message enclosed in the colours, gestures, movements, and objects possessing symbolic value that were on display. Some spectators could recognise the members of the cortège by their clothes, coats of arms and attributes; some others would be able to identify the king; but many people would only know that something important was happening, because there were richly clad lords on horses, music, and bells tolling ... To designate the levels of participation in visual communication, the concept of ‘visual literacy’ is helpful, that is the

⁷⁴ The state of research is presented, with bibliographical references, in D. ZUPKA, “Communication in a town: Urban rituals and literacy in the medieval Kingdom of Hungary”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 341-373. See also MOSTERT, *A Bibliography*, pp. 149-180 (chapter 4, “Ritual”).

⁷⁵ See K. LAVÉANT, “Drama and urban literacy: Recording and documenting the performance in the southern Low Countries (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries)”, in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 375-387, at p. 383.

⁷⁶ On the status of the town crier and the uses of public space in the late medieval town, see the example discussed in N. OFFENSTADT, *En place publique: Jean de Gascogne, crieur au XV^e siècle* (Paris, 2013).

⁷⁷ See ZUPKA, “Communication in a town: Urban rituals and literacy”, pp. 367-368.

competence in decoding and understanding visual messages. As in the case of 'textual' literacy it can be shown to possess different registers and levels.⁷⁸

What strikes us about urban visual literacy is that its level could be increased through the use of additional spoken or written information. Spectators at a royal entry could enlarge their understanding of the event when someone explained to them the meaning of the things they saw.⁷⁹ The efficacy of visual communication, which was very much embedded in the framework of a concrete time and place, depended to some extent on the support of the forms of orality and literacy.

Express attention has been devoted to this problem because it seems that the mechanisms of visual communication also applied to the main form in which the written word was present in the urban space, that is to inscriptions.⁸⁰ In the towns of northern Italy they appear to have been one of the most common instruments used by the municipal governments to mark a public space, and to create collective identity through providing information about the communal past. In other parts of Europe, the place of the inscriptions rather signified control by the town's lord. Everywhere, however, the inscriptions' accessi-

⁷⁸ See W.J. DIEBOLD, "Verbal, visual and cultural literacy in medieval art: Word and Image in the Psalter of Charles the Bald", *Word and Image* 8 (1992), pp. 89-99. This is mirrored by German ideas of *Schriftlichkeit* and *Bildlichkeit* (M. CURSCHMANN, "Pictura laicorum litteratura? Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Bild und volkssprachlicher Schriftlichkeit im Hoch- und Spätmittelalter bis zum Codex Manesse (Abb. 2-11)", in: *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Mittelalter*, ed. H. KELLER et al. (Munich, 1992: *Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften* 65), pp. 211-230. These concepts settle an old discussion on the accessibility of pictorial images (see, e.g. L.G. DUGGAN, "Reflections on 'Was art really the 'Book of the illiterate?'"", in: *Reading Images and Texts: Medieval Images and Texts as Forms of Communication*, ed. M. HAGEMAN and M. MOSTERT (Turnhout, 2005: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 8), pp. 109-119).

⁷⁹ This kind of relationship between visual and oral communication is discussed ever more often in the scholarly literature. See, e.g. the concept of *visibile parlare* used by P. BOUCHERON, *Conjurer la peur: Sienne, 1338: Essai sur la force politique des images* (Paris, 2013), pp. 103-116, and the analysis of the meanings of urban processions by E. MUIR, "The eye of the procession", in: *Ceremonial Culture in Pre-Modern Europe*, ed. N. HOWE (Notre Dame, IND, 2007), pp. 129-153.

⁸⁰ The definition of 'inscription' used by A. ZAJIC, "Texts on public display: Strategies of visualising epigraphic writing in late medieval Austrian towns", in: *Uses of the Written Word in Medieval Towns*, pp. 389-426, is broader than that dominating the older scholarly literature. Apart from texts carved in hard materials, it embraces also the quite popular form of displaying texts on wooden tablets. See also A. NEDKVITNE, *The Social Consequences of Literacy in Medieval Scandinavia* (Turnhout, 2004: *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 11), p. 41; R. MARKS, "Picturing word and text in the late medieval parish church", in: *Image, Text and Church, 1380-1600: Essays for Margeret Aston*, ed. L. CLARK et al. (Toronto, 2009), pp. 162-188.

bility, visibility, and legibility formed the main issue.⁸¹ It is too easily assumed that the very presence of inscriptions on the facade of a church or a town hall, inside these buildings, or in the graveyard, stimulated ‘familiarity’ with the written word. Systematic research is needed to understand how their messages were transmitted in practice to those who themselves were unable to read epigraphic script.

Reflection on the strategies of placing inscriptions in urban space contributes to the broader study of the topography of literacy in towns. One can easily imagine that the institutional uses of writing occurred in the town’s heart, in the town hall or castle which, together with a market place, spatially defined the town’s communal identity. The market place saw ceremonies of the making and reading aloud documents – and spectacular acts of their destruction.⁸² A considerable amount of the daily practice of municipal literacy was also carried out by parish churches and religious houses, and their implantation in large part determined a town’s topography of literacy. Their own infrastructure (for instance the churches’ own book collections and collections of documents, their schools, and their space for the placement of inscriptions and epitaphs) were part of the cultural equipment of the whole urban community, and their vicinity could attract booksellers and the production of books.⁸³ In some of the larger urban centres of late medieval times the map of literacy had an extra dimension thanks to the formation of clearly visible university districts, which were much easier to spot than the private places of contact with the written word in the houses of town dwellers.

The topography of urban literacy can be regarded also in another way. Case studies prove that the active literate behaviour of town dwellers in the domain of pragmatic literacy was very often limited to the most wealthy inhabitants of a town. In Bolzano, for instance, more or less three quarters of the

⁸¹ See CAMPOPIANO, “The problem of origins in early communal historiography”; ZAJIC, “Texts on public display”; and M. VON DER HÖH, *Erinnerungskultur und frühe Kommune: Formen und Funktionen des Umgangs mit der Vergangenheit im hochmittelalterlichen Pisa (1050-1150)* (Berlin, 2006).

⁸² See ZUPKA, “Communication in a town: Urban rituals and literacy”, p. 354; J. VAN LEEUWEN, “Rebels, texts and triumph: The use of written documents during the revolt of 1477 in Bruges”, in: *Strategies of Writing*, p. 301-322, at pp. 308 and 312 ff. On the role of urban space as an instrument of creating collective identity, see: *Shaping Urban Identity in Late Medieval Europe – L’apparition d’une identité urbaine dans l’Europe du bas Moyen Âge*, ed. M. BOONE and P. STABEL (Leuven and Apeldoorn, 2000).

⁸³ See CALLEWIER, “Remembrance and literacy”, and IGLESIAS-FONSECA, “Books and booksellers in the cities of the Crown of Aragon”.

population did not have the chance to be documented in the municipal records.⁸⁴ Such data should never be forgotten when we admire the multifaceted urban uses of writing.

Whither the Study of Urban Literacy?

Having studied instances of both ‘civic’ and ‘personal’ urban literacy, can we draw some provisional conclusions? In a general sense the forms of literate behaviour found in medieval towns were doubtless conditioned by the ‘urban’ way of life, by its complexity of social organisation, and in particular by the nature of ‘urban’ occupations. That the prevalence of trade and craftsmanship gradually detached the life of communities of town dwellers and individuals from the rhythms of nature, that town life changed attitudes towards time and space, and that it stimulated the development of rational, abstract thinking, is a venerable idea which seems to be confirmed by ongoing research.⁸⁵ It is clear that the development of uses of writing in town did not depend much on the settlements’ size: very small urban settlements showed the same behaviour, usually also in the same registers of literacy, as the large ones. The towns’ often multi-ethnic and multilingual character, together with their relatively high frequency of social contacts, predestined them as places of cultural exchange.⁸⁶ Although it is still far too early for a proper synthesis, the broad, comparative perspective adopted in our project allows us nevertheless to indicate some general characteristics of urban literacy. They will doubtless be adjusted by further research; we thought it might be worthwhile even so to provide an outline of what we have observed so far.

One could argue that one of the main features of medieval urban literate behaviour was the coexistence of different forms and registers of literacy. Only a part of the making, using, keeping, and control of written records was institutionalised by the proto-bureaucratic structures of the urban chancery. A person

⁸⁴ OBERMAIR, “The use of records in medieval towns: The case of Bolzano”, p. 56. The same conclusion is reached in respect of testamentary practices in Cracow by WYSMULEK, “Urban testaments in Poland: Research present and future”, pp. 310-312.

⁸⁵ J. LE GOFF, “Au Moyen Âge: Temps de l’Église et temps du marchand”, *Annales ESC* 15 (1960), pp. 417-433, remains an inspiration after more than half a century.

⁸⁶ This role of late medieval and early modern urban settlements was recently emphasised in a model publication: *Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe, 2, Cities and Cultural Exchange in Europe 1400-1700*, ed. D. CALABI and S. TURK CHRISTENSEN (Cambridge, 2006).

might participate (actively or passively) in the ‘civic’ administrative literacy controlled by the municipal government as a member of urban community. That same person could enter the domain of sacral literacy, taking part in collective devotional practices framed by the structures of parish and confraternity. He or she created an area of personalised active literacy when putting into writing accounts and records of the familial past to be remembered, corresponding by letters and by ruminating prayers from one’s own prayer book. And all this might involve switching between two or more languages and alphabets.

It is evident that only a small percentage of urban dwellers showed all these forms of literate behaviour. Establishing the limits of access to the individual forms and registers of urban literacy is one of the main tasks for further research. Nevertheless, already at the present stage of research we may assume that in the urban communities participation of lay people in literacy was higher than in non-urban environments, among men as among women.⁸⁷ This results from the character of the urban professions (involving women to a relatively high extent) and also from the accessibility of different forms of schooling.

A fascinating mark of urban literacy is the predominance of practical uses of writing. Ways of managing knowledge and of organising the written word that are typical of pragmatic literacy left a distinctive mark on the attitudes of town dwellers towards other kinds of written texts.⁸⁸ Probably the same practical orientation caused a preference for literate behaviour using the vernacular languages, which in its turn reinforced the emergence of educational opportunities in the vernacular. From this resulted the growth of active literate behaviour – even if it was not always direct, but far more often delegated – which found an expression in the large-scale production, use and preservation of written records. It also had a calculable dimension: the production of parchment and

⁸⁷ A serious problem emerges when one tries to give estimates of urban alphabetisation. Scholars offer highly optimistic numbers for literate town dwellers, usually based on nothing more than educated guesswork; these numbers are often taken to be precise statements of fact without criticism (see, e.g. LARSSON, “Producing, using, and keeping records”, pp. 28-29, and S. THRUPP, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London (1300-1500)*, 2nd edn. (Ann Arbor, 1962), p. 158).

⁸⁸ Further reflection on this mark of urban literacy should include the opinion of an eminent expert on the subject of medieval literacy, Michael Clanchy, who argued that “The growth of literacy for practical purposes ... was not necessarily an inevitable process. ... The contemporary assumption that literacy is primarily utilitarian in purpose and character is a product of recent history and not an invariable norm” (M.T. CLANCHY, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1308*, 3rd edn. (Oxford and Malden, MA, 2013), pp. 333-334).

paper, the production of books and the book trade, could form a not negligible part of the urban economy.

Yet another feature of urban literacy is the availability of professionals and semi-professionals of the written word. The town clerks only met part of the urban needs for writing – even if it was an important part of these needs. These needs could also be met in part by members of the urban clergy, advanced pupils of the local schools or, in towns that hosted an university, by students – or simply by the better educated town dwellers. The availability of these *intermediari grafici*, to use the expression of Armando Petrucci,⁸⁹ made the presence of the written word common, and accessible to almost everyone. At the same time, the development of a corporative identity of the urban professionals of writing can be detected. This identity was certainly modelled on the guild system, but it went much further than the self-esteem of craftsmen: public notaries together with *notarii civitatis*, *Stadtschreiber*, common clerks, or scribes, often had intellectual ambitions. More importantly, in their communities they were persons of public trust, and they were aware of this position.

'Urban' and 'Countryside' Literacy

The need for further study of all these characteristics of medieval urban literacy, necessarily from a comparative perspective, is obvious. To find out what was 'urban' about 'urban literacy', one also needs to compare medieval literate behaviour in towns with that in the non-urban areas of medieval Europe.

There is evidence about the uses of writing in the countryside. At first sight this evidence may seem accidental only, as it comes from widely distant times and places, but it is interesting nevertheless. It suggests that in many different parts of *Latinitas* the vicinity of even the smallest of towns and market places induced the use of the written word by communities of peasants. The professionals and semi-professionals of writing to whom we have paid so much attention as representatives of urban literacy, were the real ambassadors of pragmatic literacy in the European countryside.⁹⁰ The observations on literate prac

⁸⁹ PETRUCCI, *Prima Lezione di Paleografia*, pp. 25-26.

⁹⁰ A. BARTOSZEWICZ, "Urban literacy in small Polish towns", pp. 175-178; WEBER, "Trust, secrecy, and control in the medieval Italian communes", p. 252; VAN SYNGHEL, "The use of records in medieval towns: The case of 's-Hertogenbosch", p. 37. See also A. NEDKVITNE, *The Social Consequences of Literacy in Medieval Scandinavia*, p. 198; F.K. WRAY, "Women,

tices in the countryside which can be found in the scholarly literature about many regions (and which, alas, have been published in many, sometimes lesser-known languages), merit systematic research.

There is also another reason to enlarge the study of urban literacy by the study of literate behaviour and attitudes to the written word in the countryside. The traditional view that in pre-modern times “two cultures developed side by side: an urban culture that was essentially literate, and rural culture essentially illiterate”,⁹¹ can no longer be supported. Since Carlo Cipolla voiced this opinion in 1969, the criteria for judging ‘literacy’ and ‘illiteracy’ have been refined by decades of research on literacy and communication, and also by abandoning the old convictions about the homogeneous, static, and conservative character of the peasantry. Considerable input from historical anthropology and cultural history has begun to reveal a new image of peasant communities as complex structures with their own internal dynamics.⁹² This means that the development of new research questionnaires to interrogate the well-known sources is required. One should also take into account that the subject to be investigated can no longer be restricted to the ‘literacy’ of peasants in the narrow sense of the word. If it is true that ‘urban’ uses of the written word were determined mainly by the nature of the urban settlements, then the same might be assumed for the uses of writing by social groups living in the countryside. It would be justified to take into consideration the literate behaviour of all these groups, and not just that of the peasants. Members of the small nobility and rural priests may show a similar ‘rural’ attitude towards the written word, resulting from a way of life that cut across social boundaries.⁹³ This modernised research on ‘countryside

testaments, and notarial culture in Bologna’s *contado* (1348)”, in: *Across the Religious Divide: Women, Property, and Law in the Wider Mediterranean (ca. 1300-1800)*, ed. J.G. SPERLING and F.K. WRAY (New York and London, 2010), p. 82; J. CHIFFOLEAU, *La comptabilité de l’au-delà: Les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d’Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age (vers 1320-vers 1480)* (Rome, 1980), pp. 81-82; O. REDON, “Le notaire au village: Enquête en pays siennois dans la deuxième moitié du XIII^e siècle et au début du XIV^e siècle”, in: *Campagnes médiévales: L’homme et son espace: Études offertes à Robert Fossier*, ed. E. MORNET (Paris, 1995), pp. 667-680.

⁹¹ C.M. CIPOLLA, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 55.

⁹² There is a rich bibliography. See, e.g. 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, *La zappa e la retorica*; Ch. WICKHAM, “Gossip and resistance among the medieval peasantry”, *Past and Present* 160 (1998), pp. 3-24.

⁹³ We took this approach to the problem when preparing a preliminary survey of the features of rural literacy in the pre-modern West: ADAMSKA and MOSTERT, “The literacies of medieval town dwellers and peasants”. See also: *Clergy, Noblemen, and Peasants: Oral and Literate Com-*

literacy' will also throw new light onto 'urban' uses of the written word. For now, however, this new subject of research is as yet only a glimpse in the eye of the historian of social communication.

munication in the Medieval Countryside, ed. M. MOSTERT and A. ADAMSKA, in preparation for *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy*.