Fund for Scientific Research – Flanders

International Conference

Understanding Monastic Practices of Oral Communication (Western Europe, Eleventh-Thirteenth Centuries)

Ghent University (Belgium) - 23-24 May 2008

Abstracts
### Session 1: Examining the politics of non-written communication

**Gerd Althoff (Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität Münster):** "Oral and non-verbal communication (by signs and gestures) in monasteries focussing on St. Gall and the work of Ekkehard IV"

Abstract forthcoming.

**Wojtek Jezierski (Stockholms Universitet):** "Verba volant, scripta manent? The Limits of Speech, the Politics of Silence and the Practical Logic of the Institution in some Monastic Conflicts of the High Middle Ages"

Abstract forthcoming.

**Steven Vanderputten (Ghent University):** "Non-written modes of negotiation with the lower aristocracy in early-twelfth-century Flanders (preliminary title)"

Abstract forthcoming.
Session 2: Traces of orality in liturgy, customs and material culture

Susan Boynton (Columbia University): "The oral transmission of monastic customs and liturgical practice in the eleventh century"

Much of our information about the liturgy at Cluny in the eleventh century comes from three sets of prescriptions: the Liber tramitis (compiled for the abbey of Farfa in the first half of the century), the customary of Ulrich of Zell (compiled for William of Hirsau in the third quarter of the eleventh century) and the customary of Bernard (compiled for use at Cluny, around the same time as Ulrich's customary). Many passages in these texts, as well as the circumstances of their compilation, indicate the central role of orality in the transmission of monastic customs. In this paper I will focus particularly on the oral learning of liturgical practices.

Diane J. Reilly (Indiana University), "The Educative Function of Oral Lections and their Images in Cistercian Monasteries"

As is the case with most monastic communities, the intellectual culture of the Cistercian order is known almost entirely through its literary records. Cîteaux and its daughter houses produced many well-known theologians, and the "textual communities" in which they worked have long been the subject of scholarly study. Art historians, by contrast, have focused their attention on the artistic remains of the order, particularly the luxuriously illustrated manuscripts of early Cîteaux and Clairvaux, the architecture of the later-twelfth-century Cistercian monasteries, and the artistic legislation that outlawed the former and inspired the latter. Less studied has been the intersection between the surviving manuscripts and the liturgy of the Cistercian order. In fact, the illuminated manuscripts of Cîteaux, when examined with their function in mind, reveal that the Cistercians may have, from the founding of the order, prioritized communal liturgy and understood its potential to cultivate shared spiritual experiences as well as a common understanding of the Bible and theology. The method used for this mode of communication was primarily oral, rather than written.

While the many surviving spiritual and theological writings of famous Cistercians have provided the basis for our understanding of Cistercian life from the third decade of the twelfth century onwards, evidence for the intentions of Cîteaux's founders is harder to identify. The earliest Cistercians invested heavily in artistic projects, such as providing a full complement of illustrated Bible manuscripts and commentaries for use in the Night Office. Cîteaux's earliest customary reveals the importance of the Office to the first Cistercians, for its instructions for each step are minutely detailed. The goals of this practice are less well understood. Rather than assuming that the monastic Office was a repetitive, hide-bound institution perpetuated primarily for the sake of tradition, and because it was mandated in the Benedictine Rule, it might be more useful to reexamine the function of the Office and its implements. A careful reading of later Cistercian literature reveals that writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux were profoundly influenced by their experience of the Night Office, and translated the lessons learned there into their own work.
Bernard of Clairvaux and other Cistercian writers not only praised the utility of the Night Office in nurturing the spiritual development of their flocks, but also emphasized the importance of aural experience of texts for a complete assimilation of their contents and meaning. Furthermore, the manuscripts that provided these texts for the first novices of Cîteaux, which included Bernard, appear to have influenced these novices' understanding of the Bible even decades later. Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons and commentaries incorporate interpretations of Biblical events that he must have learned from the images that accompanied the Night Office lections, as they are preserved in the early Cîteaux manuscripts. Thus while scholars have assumed that the "textual community" that Bernard inspired was centered around private reading of scripture and commentary, it may instead have been founded on oral practice, paired with visual stimuli. This finding has implications for our understanding of both the purpose of illuminated manuscripts, and the intentions of the Night Office.

Tjamke Snijders (Ghent University): "Discursive and formal transformations of hagiographical tradition in the matins liturgy of some high medieval Benedictine houses"

This paper deals with the discursive and formal transformations of the hagiographical readings that were performed in the midnight office of matins. As three to eight of those readings were performed daily, matins was potentially an opportunity of communicating specific information about a number of saints to the monks. However, the precise form and content of these readings have not yet been extensively studied. This paper intends to focus on the role and transformations of these hagiographic readings in Benedictine houses by addressing questions of length, the selection of suitable readings from a saint’s life, and the contents of the readings that were selected. I will do this by analysing a collection of tenth to twelfth century hagiographical manuscripts from several Benedictine houses.
Keynote lecture 1

Elisabeth Van Houts (Cambridge University): "Private conversations amongst monks and nuns (1000-1200)"

This contribution explores historiographical and hagiographical narratives for traces of private conversations between the inmates of monastic houses. The concept of private is a contentious one especially in a monastic context. Provisionally I would argue that the 'private' was any exchange of words not immediately necessary for the conduct of the monk's or nun's life as described formally in the monastic rule. I will consider aspects of friendship, strife and (emotional) care. I will also consider the many hidden layers of oral communication as revealed by language (Latin and vernacular), which ultimately was written down and forms our prime evidential base.

Session 3: Traces of orality in the transmission of memory

Marie-Anne Polo de Beaulieu (CRNS): "Traces d'oralité dans les recueils d'exempla cisterciens XIIe-XIIIe siècles"

Abstract forthcoming.

Geoffrey Koziol (University of California, Berkeley): "What Charles the Simple told the canons of Compiègne: oral and written transmissions of memory in the Genealogia Dictata a Karolo Rege"

We are used to thinking that monasteries were the principal guardians of memory and knowledge of the past for members of the lay aristocracy (see Geary, Schmid/Wollasch, Oexle, Hlawitschka). We therefore tend to think that monasteries were the principal vehicle by which the lay aristocracy (including kings) learned about their families' past, and were the primary shapers of the aristocracy's sense of its past. The diplomas of Charles the Simple show that this is not true. In fact, Charles himself knew a great deal about his past - which he learned from his mother, I think - and it was this past that he drew on to determine which diplomas he was going to issue, for which monasteries. However, for the purposes of this conference, the most directly relevant evidence is information embedded in Witger's genealogy produced in the mid 10th century for Arnulf of Flanders. Here we find a genealogy of Charles the Simple's immediate ancestry that was communicated directly by Charles himself to the canons of Saint-Corneille. Not only does the genealogy itself explicitly state that its information came directly from Charles, orally (dictata); the information the genealogy provides supports this claim, for the people...
it includes and omits, honors and dishonors, were very specifically tailored to Charles' own past, and his own policies as revealed in his diplomas. We do not give the lay aristocracy enough credit for knowing its past. We do not give knowledge of its past (i.e., received memory) enough credit for actively shaping the policies of lay leaders. Also, the genealogy, coupled with information from Charles' diplomas, confirms the importance of women - mothers in particular - in communicating this knowledge to sons. But here we see that Charles' mother actively shaped her son's understanding of the past in order to forge in him certain values, which, in fact, he himself exhibited throughout his reign and actively sought to promote.

Prof. dr. Edina Bozoky (Université de Poitiers): "Oralité et fabrication de légendes hagiographiques"

Abstract forthcoming.

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Friday 23 May 2008: 17.15 - 18.00

**Keynote lecture 2**

**Peter Dinzelbacher (Universität Wien): "Orality in visionary literature"**

Abstract forthcoming.
Session 4: Talking shop 1 - educating the monastic mind

Mirko Breitenstein (Technische Universität Dresden): "Real or fictitious dialogues between a master and a pupil in a medieval monastery"

First of all, the presentation will focus on general questions about the relation between reality and fiction in dialogues between master and pupil in a medieval monastery. In this, the focal points will be the location and time of the conversations, the relation between the interlocutors as well as the question of the author as a possible participant in the dialogue. Scriptures for the practical and spiritual instruction as well as example collections, especially the Dialogus miraculorum of Caesarius von Heisterbach, will serve as subjects of the analysis. In addition to these primarily content-related aspects, the second stage of the presentation will explore the issue of the benefit of suggesting oral speech in dialogues that have been put into writing. At the same time, it is to be analysed, which forms of dialogic communication – the Socratic or the magisterial dialogue – are preferred in which context.

Albrecht Classen (University of Arizona): "Performance, Orality, and Communication in Medieval Women Convents in Light of the Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and the Tristan Tapestry of the Wienhausen Convent"

Although the plays by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim have survived only in written form, both her comments in the prologue and the actual plays indicate how much the poet intended them for public-monastic performance. Moreover, these plays were written in order to reconfirm the monastic community in its religious, moral, and ethical steadfastness and offered a wide range of opportunities to discuss the basic values presented to the audience. Hrotsvit was not such a narrow-minded author to limit her plays to a strictly religious theme; instead she incorporated numerous other elements to enliven the plays, particularly since she wanted to compete with Terence and pull her fellow-sisters away from those secular plays. In other words, Hrotsvit’s plays served the purpose to engage the entire community in a discourse about basic monastic and religious values. By the same token, the late-medieval Cistercian women’s convent of Wienhausen produced the famous Tristan tapestry in which the nuns wove the entire Tristan narrative. Again, we are faced with a “textual” product (text = textile) that contains, only thinly hidden, a larger act of performance and oral communication, but for us frozen in time. Each convent was predicated on the ideal of community, and each community is predicated on communication, hence these textual/textile products serve as ideal repository of both aspects, communication and community, hence deeply reflect the world of oral performance.
**Session 5: Talking shop 2 - voicing the monastic mind**

**Mette Bruun (University of Copenhagen): "Grunts, murmur and frowning: Bernard of Clairvaux on the communicative function of gestures, sounds and facial expressions"**

Cistercian monasticism is equally bent on silence and cenobiticism. The monks are bound to each other’s company but with little room for conversation, and the non-verbal communication between them is highly charged. Always a keen observer, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) highlights what may be considered syntactical aspects of the wordless but facetted and tense sound- and body language of the monastic community. From the wandering eyes and cocked ears of the monk who is smitten by curiosity to the grunting, distended nostrils and frowning of the monk who expresses his resent towards a fellow brother; and with the murmur echoing the complaints of the Israelites against Moses (Exodus 16.2-3) as a latent threat to unity and obedience.

This paper focuses partly on central Bernardine passages on gestures, sounds and facial expressions, partly on his exposition of their soteriological implications.

**Julie Barrau (Cambridge University): “Can we tell how good monks were at speaking Latin?”**

Anselm of Canterbury wrote to his nephew: “You should always, unless compelled by necessity to do otherwise, speak Latin.” This rule of thumb was supposed to apply in most of the communities – at least the male ones - that our conference is concerned with, so it might seem unnecessary to look at the monks’ actual command of Latin; they were, after all, by definition the Latin speaking body of medieval societies, and there are abundant testimonies of an improving teaching of Latin literature and grammar in monasteries over our period.

However, stories about abbots who were illiterate, about others who chose to teach their brethren in the vernacular, and about the increasing abandonment of oblation in order to favour the entry of young adults, make a closer study tempting. Of course, reliable evidence about actual oral practice in Latin is difficult to gather as it is always reshaped and mediated through writing. We shall therefore also consider the general question of whether monastic spoken Latin is accessible to historians, and any conclusions we draw will be necessarily tentative.

**Wim Verbaal (Ghent University): “Oleum de saxo durissimo: Bernard of Clairvaux and his poetics of silence”**

Modern scholars have often remained perplexed in front of Bernard of Clairvaux’s artistic verbosity, which they deemed in opposition to the nudity and silence of cistercian context. It was sometimes suggested that, to a certain degree, Bernard’s ornate language substituted the Romanesque imagery, so harshly condemned in his
Apology. This contribution will try to approach Bernard’s language from an opposite view, not considering the florid language of his writings as if decorating the bare walls of cistercian architecture or filling up the absence of sounds, but rather as the mere expression of cistercian silence. Bernard’s poetics is a poetics of silence.

**Saturday 24 May 2008: 14.00 - 14.45**

**Keynote lecture 3**

Marco Mostert (Utrecht University): “Orality, non-written communication and the future of monastic studies”

Abstract forthcoming.