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Comparing the Comparisons: The Many Literacies of East Central Europe

Challenges which we face when investigating history of literacy and social communication can provide valuable material for reflection on the future of the study of the medieval East Central Europe within the 'global' Middle Ages. The question "what can we learn about nowadays situation in Medieval Studies from studying uses of writing in East Central Europe" can be asked, especially after almost 20 years of work carried out and organized from Utrecht. The area of research that we have in mind, seriously contributes to the change of paradigm of cultural history, to the growing understanding of coexistence between instruments of written, oral non verbal (e.g. visual) communication. It seems that medievalists have abandoned the comfort zone of certitudes based on either/or distinction between either orality or literacy, between either being literate or illiterate, between either possessing or not possessing basic literacy skills, between either knowing or not knowing Latin etc.

An important mark of the subsequent research projects on the subject, having been launched in Utrecht from 1996 onwards, is the comparative approach. This approach is necessary to answer essential questions concerning the dynamics of development of medieval system of communication, and also the existence of specifically 'Latin' model of literacy.

Therefore from the very beginning we considered to include into our research the peripheries of medieval *Latinitas*, as Scandinavia and yes, East Central Europe, understood as medieval Kingdoms of Bohemia, Poland and Hungary in their historical boundaries. These peripheries were not situated on clearly- defined cultural frontier; rather they formed areas of passage between several models of written culture. Their study in the comparative perspective possesses, however, practical dimension, and scholars are confronted with many obstacles as far as its chronological and geographical setting is concerned.