

## REVIEWS

HLAVAČKOVÁ, Miriam (ed.). *OD SYMBOLU K SLOVU. PODOBY STREDOVEKEJ KOMUNIKÁCIE. (FROM SYMBOL TO WORD. FORMS OF MEDIEVAL COMMUNICATION.)*. Bratislava : Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, VEDA, publisher of the SAS, 2016, 456 pages. ISBN 978-80-224-1537-8.

The world of symbols, images, rituals and words as specific resources for communication reaches back to the oldest periods of human existence. A long road leads from the ancient forms of spreading of information to those of today. It also leads to understanding of such a conceptually and temporally distant problem as the passing on and reception of information in medieval society. Precisely the themes that join the effort to grasp various aspects of oral, non-verbal or written communication in the Middle Ages became the central feature of the monograph with the title *Od symbolu k slovu. Podoby stredovekej komunikácie (From symbol to word. Forms of medieval communication.)* reviewed here. The central theme became the connective tissue of the monograph, but the differentiated approaches of the authors of this collective work are also emphasized by its division into five thematic circles. The first two are directed towards the diplomatic messages or exchanges of information between different social groups, the third deal with their interaction on the symbolic level and the last traces the evidence value of the communication symbols in narrative sources, medieval wall paintings, seals and documents.

Miroslav Lysý presents the first contribution to the history of medieval diplomacy. The author is concerned with the Early Middle Ages, but his interest is directed especially to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and the written sources from the Great Moravian period. Emphasis is placed on the questions connected with the methods of sending messages, directly by the monarch or by social elites organized in an assembly, the connection between sending of gifts and the possible subordination of the Prince of Great Moravia to the Eastern Frankish monarch and the possible existence of messages for these purposes also in the Slavonic environment. In his conclusions, the author emphasizes that in spite of the absence of a single mechanism for the sending and receiving of messages, there was a shift in the diplomatic practice of the Slavonic environment of Great Moravian diplomacy. However, the contributions of Tomáš Homoľa and Eva Frimmová bring testimony about the advances in diplomatic communication captured in detail by the sources. Both authors rely on detailed reports about the flourishing diplomatic practices of the courts of important royal dynasties. The contributions connect with each other in time, but the two authors emphasize different aspects of diplomatic negotiations. Tomáš Homoľa has studied their course and wider context in the reign of Matthias Corvinus. On the basis of accounts in chronicles, he devotes attention to the accompanying rituals, symbolic communication and background of the diplomatic moves of political actors. Eva Frimmová has directed her attention to the diplomatic activities of the Jagiello dynasty and especially the Habsburgs at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the political context. In the context of talks about dynastic unions she points to the active role of Papal diplomacy, the financial background of diplomatic successes or the military conflicts stirred up by the Emperor with the aim of strengthening the power political plans of the Habsburgs in Central Europe.

Daniela Dvořáková's account of the communication between the court of Queen Barbara of Cilly and King Sigismund from the Luxembourg dynasty opens a second theme in the monograph directed towards verbal and written communication. The author presents the composition of the queen's court in the form of graphs, on the basis of which she points to a gradual change in its

composition. Her conclusions cast doubt on the possible existence of a centre competing with the court of the King of Hungary, in spite of the exceptional position of Queen Barbara in the power structure of the Kingdom of Hungary. Different forms of medieval communication, directed towards the Catholics in Husite Bohemia and kinship relations in aristocratic families are covered in the contributions of Jan Hrdina and Monika Tihányiová. The first uncovers the problems of the lower Catholic clergy in the period 1420–1467 using official and private letters and documents. The second is mainly a sounding into the family and marital relationships of selected members of the aristocracy. Miriam Hlavačková turns her attention to the medical profession in the Middle Ages. Against the background of a broadly outlined problem, including a general description of medieval medicine, the methods of treatment and the ideas of the period about the causes of illness, the author presents recommended, sometimes rather curious forms of communication between doctor and patient. However, apart from dealing with the problem considered here, they testify to the distance of the medieval thought system from ours. Peter Labanc has undertaken a statistical analysis of the legal actions at the trustworthy place of Spišská Kapitula from 1260 to 1387. He notes a growth in the frequency of legal acts in some periods of the existence of the trustworthy place, the position of the official asking for testimony, the number of witnesses of the legal act and their time. The author concludes that written testimony had growing importance in the legal system, there was a tendency towards institutional securing of the state power and there are possibilities for further research. However, these statements apply to all the contributions to this thematic field.

The third and partially also the fourth and last part of the monograph turn to the symbolic aspects of medieval communication. Tomáš Borovský has significantly contributed to understanding the symbolism and functions of bells in the Middle Ages. The author does not direct his attention only to the position of bells in the liturgy, but also to the associated town celebrations. The contribution is interwoven with interesting examples from the Czech and Moravian environment, which point to the importance of the function of bells as a means of commemoration in the Middle Ages, specifically in relation to marking the anniversary of a death, or as an important part of town administration law, by summoning citizens to assemblies. Žofia Lysá informs us about the social stratification of urban society or about the financial investments of the propertied classes, for example, in Bratislava. The author considers the motives of the participants. In the framework of this problem, she also devotes attention to the growing number of donations to religious institutions, which very clearly have religious motives. Martin Nodl has concerned himself with the sources about the symbolic level of the activity of the Lithuanian Prince Žigmund Korybutovič in Husite Bohemia and the historical memory of his attempt to gain the Czech throne. The author has skilfully succeeded in depicting the contemporary response to the initial successes and eventual fall of the prince in the symbolic actions of actors as well as the later mediators of these events. The circle of themes in the chapter is closed by the contribution of Juraj Hric on the roots of Christianity and the cult of saints honoured in the towns of Pannonia. The author also devotes attention to the translation of their relics and transmission of their cult into the Early Middle Ages.

The contributions to the fourth part of the work are directed towards the literary language of the narrative sources. Peter Bystrický writes of the sagas and songs of Germanic origin, spread orally and written down only after centuries. The author does not draw information only from Germanic mythology, but also from history. His contribution includes poetry and prose works transmitted orally for generations. Early records of the Carpathians up to the 13th century are the subject of the contribution by Pavol Hudáček. The author considers mentions of forests, especially in chronicles, the symbolic meaning assigned to forests by medieval story tellers, and the existence of frontier forests, seen as a particular kind of barrier. Marek Oravec finds mentions of luxury objects on the pages of legends and chronicles. He traces their symbolic functions and perception in medieval society using examples from the oldest narrative sources.

The last chapter of the work is directed towards visual and musical communication. Dušan Buran presents especially Gothic monumental wall paintings as a means of visual communication. He points especially to the reasons for imitation of artistic depictions, emphasizing the function and aim of the imitation of luxury materials or popular motifs. Eva Veselovská has researched medieval notation or sources of musical culture from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in the territory of Slovakia. Notation systems developed in connection with ecclesiastical centres. Her contribution also includes a pictorial supplement. The collection of works by different authors ends with a contribution from Miroslav Glejtek, devoted to the symbolic, informative and communication value of the seal. The author also uses a rich pictorial supplement to present especially royal, municipal and ecclesiastical seals. He tries to identify the motives often leading to more complex images on seals. He concludes that their complex symbolism was not necessarily accessible only to the intellectual elites of society.

The monograph is the collective work of authors, who have succeeded in combining various aspects of medieval communication into a content rich, but surprisingly integrated publication, considering its rather broad central theme. Precisely the theme of exchange of information in the Middle Ages combines a relatively wide and heterogeneous field of research by the authors into a homogeneous looking book title. The specialized studies are not directed only to description of the functioning of the channels of communication in medieval society, but also to the symbols or the functions they fulfilled in individual fields of social interaction. Tracing of the same phenomena in different periods, as in the case of diplomacy in the Early and Late Middle Ages, or of heterogeneous social groups, as with correspondence between members of royal courts, aristocratic families and the lower clergy, enables authors to change their perspective or identify shifts in the development of the institutions by means of which information was spread. The publication also includes a pictorial supplement, which could be enriched with illustrations concerning the inspirational contributions on Germanic sagas or luxury objects in the possession of the Hungarian nobility. The division of the monograph into chapters offers a clear division of the work, but the assignment of some contributions to thematic circles although they are actually somewhere at their intersection, is not entirely unambiguous. However, the contributions form qualitatively balanced wholes, which supplement each other. The inter-disciplinary connections also reach beyond the traditional understanding of the problem, enriching it with new views. Therefore, the monograph *From symbol to word. Forms of medieval communication* is an important contribution not only to its actual theme, but also to knowledge of the social connections in medieval society. Thanks to its attractive content, the monograph is not only a work serving scientific aims, but also a book attractive to readers.

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