

Abstract

Radka Těšínská Lomičková: Cistercian and Benedictine Sign Language in the Middle Age

Sign language is an important communication phenomenon that has existed for a thousand years. In medieval monasteries signs were used to enable simple communication of messages when rules of silence forbade monks from speaking. This thesis concentrates on a study of sign language communication in Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries during the Middle Ages. In doing so it describes the history of sign language in Europe between the 10th and 15th centuries. Furthermore it shows that sign language was not only used in the center of the order but in the Czech Republic as well.

This thesis provides a detailed discussion of sign lexicons which are similar to a monolingual dictionary and are the basic and central source of information about each language. Lexicons contain words and short descriptions of how to make each hand sign. A careful analysis of one particular sign lexicon, called Siquis (which was used in Central Europe in the 15th century), reveals new information about daily life in medieval monasteries. The primary focus of the Siquis lexicon was liturgy, food and drink, utensils, persons, and activities. This thesis concentrates on both singular words and on the description of the signs in the lexicons. Moreover, it presents previously unknown or unused lexicons. It also compares the Siquis lexicon with other cistercian lexicons from Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and France.

Most of these lexicons were compiled and written in the 15th century. This thesis demonstrates that these lexicons were one of the elements of the reform in the Cistercian order that occurred in this century. The primary element of each reform was an emphasis on silence and keeping silence in a monastery. This made sign language, which facilitated the achievement of silence, a central and critical element of each reform. Therefore, this thesis addresses silence and its position in monasticism. Finally, to further understand medieval lexicons, they were compared with the sign language that is used today in Trappists monasteries.