

## Preface

Medieval and early modern sources deal regularly with the problem of ‘poverty’. Such ‘poverty’ at times referred to the members of widely different groups in society: ‘Poor beggars,’ ‘poor priests and monks,’ ‘poor students’ and ‘poor virgins’ appeared as well as ‘poor queens and kings,’ ‘poor knights,’ ‘poor merchants,’ ‘poor officials,’ and so on. In such contexts, the sign languages applied to mediate these diverse ‘poverties’ played an important role in their textual and visual representations. Various material objects and groups of things, gestures, behaviour, and other aspects of culture were drawn on to communicate and characterise the ‘poverties’ addressed. In doing so, those characteristics could, on the one hand, be identical to each other or based on similar patterns of argumentation, independent of the status of the persons or groups of people being described; on the other hand, they could also be very different.

At the *Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, such research problems led to the idea of organising an international workshop of specialists from various fields of Medieval Studies. In autumn, 2005, scholars from nine different countries met to discuss the importance, patterns, and differences in the ‘sign languages of poverty,’ to investigate them comparatively, and to analyse them critically. Interdisciplinary communication from a transdisciplinary vantage point was intended to offer new results with regard to these relevant questions about medieval material life and its representation.

This publication offers the results of that workshop. The contributions of it deal with how members of medieval society communicated to make ‘poverties’ and paupers recognisable and understandable, with the languages and dialects used to mediate the appropriate messages, and the symbols that were applied. Moreover, the essays are also intended to serve as an impetus for further study into the general relevance, re-occurring networks, and patterns of material culture in the past.

We would like to express our thanks to all the participants in the round table discussion for their important contributions to the meeting and the proceedings. We are also particularly grateful to the Austrian Academy of Sciences for the possibility of publishing this volume in one of their series and

for their continuous support of the research and activities of the *Institut für Realienkunde*.

Krems, March 2007

Gerhard Jaritz