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***Illitteratissimae litterae?* Analysing ‘literary’ reception of letters in Late Antique Gaul**

This paper questions the common modern distinction between literary and non-literary texts in Graeco-Roman culture. With special focus on the private and official letters of aristocrats in Late Antique Gaul it will be shown that, neither from the point of view of the writer, nor from that of the contemporary reader, did a given letter *not* have a ‘literary’ quality per se. Obvious differences in language and style are not necessarily an indication of an intended ‘literary’ or ‘non-literary’ reception, they merely reflect different communicative situations and rhetorical codes. The form of transmission or medial representation may serve as false friends: Cassiodor’s official letters, for example, were legal texts in the first place, but became ‘literature’ by being copied into a manuscript collection. This ‘redeployment’ truly changed the nature and semantic of the original text by changing its mediality, signalling to or preparing the reader for a specific literary reception. Thus the private letter exchanges of Avitus of Vienne, Ennodius or Ruricius of Limoges – indeed highly elaborate social performances – were only collected and published after their authors had died. However these letters certainly had a ‘literary’ reception during contemporary circulation within the peer-groups of their authors. Instead of projecting modern ideas of ‘the literary’ onto Late Antiquity, one would therefore do well to look at the actual reading conventions and habits within the elite micro-communities in which these letters were exchanged. Fictional texts aside, only the reconstruction of the essential ‘contracts’ between texts and readers makes for historical reliability and offers insight into the forms and manners of literary reception within relatively closed interpretative communities.