“I should not begin with the word obviously...,” is the first sentence of David Luscombe’s masterly introduction to “Medieval thought,” first published in 1997. He was addressing the problem that his subject, medieval thought, does not, strictly speaking, exist—but that nevertheless, he was going to write a book on it. To be more precise: medieval thought does not simply exist, in a material way, but it can be described and explained from contemporary sources. That is what David Luscombe did, and what we can learn from his books.

I would like to tackle my subject in a similar way. Obviously, knowledge did and does not exist in a material way. But it can be described as an individual as well as collective capacity and strategy, which helps or even enables people to sustain their life and change their world. Furthermore, knowledge may be explained as part of medieval society, that is of concepts of order, of religious ideals, and of learned traditions or innovations with varying degrees of instrumental value. Knowledge has obviously always been part of the self-consciousness of humankind and of their ideas about the world and their imaginations of reality. Imagination is a highly important concept in this context, since it connects to the specific, contemporary expressions of meanings and interpretations.

The Cologne manuscript chosen as the title page of our conference programme points out such an imagination, the one of the “house of knowledge” (mansio or domus in the words of medieval Latin sources). Konrad von Megenberg (1309–1374) invented the best known image of this topic. In his Yconomica, published in about 1350, he found a definition of a school, based on the Aristotelian distinction between person, house and community as communicacio personarum in domo /
communicatio personarum docentis hominis et illorum qui ab eo discunt in mansorio sollicitudinis litterarum (community of persons in the house / community of people, that is of the one teaching others and those who are learning from him in a house of scientific studies).  

Centuries later, when universities were coming into existence all over Europe, scholars wrote: “Science has built itself a house.” Instead of “science” some of them preferred to say “wisdom”, in tradition of the ancient symbolic figuration of Sophia or sapientia. Science and wisdom, of course, were not the same then, as will be seen later, just as they are not the same today. However, more important is the fact that there has to be a specific location for them, a “house of knowledge.”

Just the same topic is pointed out here, in the so-called “Friedrich-Lektionar” from around 1130 (see Fig. 1), but we do not see a material building or institutional order. The meaning is more complex: Archbishop Frederick (Friedrich von Schwarzenburg, 1100–1131) had himself depicted in an iconographic style we usually associate with Saint Jerome (347/48–419/20), the translator of the Bible into Latin, sitting at his desk in the middle of a small room. Artists mostly entitled this type of image as “Saint Jerome in his studio.” He is writing, and while doing so, a large number of books seem to surround him. Very often a veritable lion, lying at his feet, appears as an attribute. The depicted room is not yet a room for studying, nor a reading room or a library. It simply represents the earliest idea and perhaps most impressive imagination of a very special location: “the wise man’s house”.

The manuscript of the “Friedrich-Lektionar,” which this illustration belongs to, contains part of the letter-collection of Saint Jerome. It seems to be clear why the archbishop, having ordered the copy of this letter-collection, decided to have himself represented in a position similar to the one of Saint Jerome. Sitting on a decorated throne-like

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4 Plotzek, “Friedrich-Lektionar” (see above, n. 3).