

Class handout: Universities in Medieval Europe

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1 Origins

Many of the ancient universities in Europe trace their histories back to very fanciful origins (e.g., Oxford, which claims to have been founded by Alfred the Great!) but in actual fact the universities, in the modern sense of the word, first developed around 1200. The first two universities in Europe were those of Paris and Bologna. The University of Paris developed out of the cloister and cathedral schools in Paris, especially that associated with the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The University of Bologna grew out of the Bologna Law School, established in the early 11th century.

A brief comment on the word *universitas*. The word originally just meant a plurality or collection of people. Rashdall says:

At the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries, we find the word applied to corporations either of masters or of students; but it long continues to be applied to other corporations as well, particular to the then newly formed guilds and to the municipalities of towns; while as applied to scholastic guilds it is first used interchangeably with such words as ‘community’ or ‘college’. In the earliest period it was never used absolutely. The phrase is always ‘University of Scholars’, ‘University of Masters and Scholars’, ‘University of Study’, or the like. [4, vol. 1, p. 5]

So, at the start, *universitas* meant the students and masters, not the administrative unit. The term used for the abstract scholastic unit was *studium*, or *studium generale* (a *studium* that accepted people from all over).

2 Paris model vs. Bologna model

The birth of the universities brought with it certain problems:

- It created an influx of foreigners (students and teachers) into cities where they were not citizens.
- The prestige of a university degree required a uniform set of standards.
- The intellectual atmosphere became difficult for the church to control.

Paris and Bologna responded to these problems in different ways. Their two methods became known as the “Paris model” and the “Bologna model” of organization, and successive universities followed one of these two models.

In the **Bologna model** there was no centralized administrative structure. Non-Bolognese students grouped together to form *universitates* or ‘nations’:

- *universitas legistarum citramontanorum*
- *universitas legistarum ultramontanorum*
- *universitas artistarum et medicorum*

- *collegium doctorum*

Each nation elected its own rector, who was usually a student.

In contrast, the **Paris model** was based in the administrative structure, not the structure of its student. There was a single *universitas* formed into various faculties:

- *Facultas Artium*
- *Facultas Iurisprudentiae*
- *Facultas Medicinae*
- *Facultas Theologiae*

Each faculty had their own administration (including a *decanus*, dean, and a *quaestor*, financial officer), who were elected by the masters in the faculty. There was a university wide *concilium generale* which elected a rector, who was usually a professor. The *conclium generale* was dominated by the Arts Masters. There were also colleges, offering accommodation for poor students (and sometimes professors).

3 Textbooks and courses of study

Undergraduate study was divided into the *trivium*, or *artes sermocinales*, and the *quadrivium*, or *artes reales / artes physicae*. The *trivium* consisted of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic/logic, and the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The curriculum for the *trivium* and *quadrivium* was extremely stable and static across time and geography. Standard textbooks for the *trivium* included:

- Grammar
 - Aelius Donatus, *Ars minor*, *Ars maior*.
 - Priscianus, *Institutiones grammaticae*.
- Logic / Dialectic.
 - *Logica vetus et nova* (Boëthius’s translations of Aristotle, plus Porphyry’s *Isagoge*.)
 - Petrus Hispanus, *Summulae logicales* (13th C).
 - William of Ockham, *Summa logicae* (14th C).
- Rhetoric.
 - Cicero.
 - Quintilianus, *Institutio oratoria*.

4 Course of study and degrees

(The material in this section applies to the **Paris model** universities, specifically Paris and Oxford).

There is a slogan, *Nullus sit scholaris Parisius qui certum magistrum non habet*—“No one may be a scholar in Paris who does not have a specific master”. Students were organized into a *schola* or *familia scholarum*, a group of students headed by a *magister*, who provided both academic and social guidance to the student until he obtained his baccalaureate, from the Arts Faculty. In Oxford, the baccalaureates were conferred by the Chancellor, as opposed to in Paris where the Chancellor played no role.

Once a student had his baccalaureate, he would spend two to three years as a teaching assistant to a *magister* in one of the four faculties. After this, a private “defense” was held, after which the student would become “licentiate”. In order to become a *magister* himself, he would have to pass a public exam, the *inceptio*, along with a public disputation.

The path of theology was a bit different: after becoming a bachelor in arts, a student could then spend one year lecturing on the Bible and another lecturing on Peter the Lombard’s *Commentary on the Sentences*, after which time he would become a bachelor in theology, and could continue his studies (for a total of 7 years) to become a doctor in theology.

I’ll give an example of the academic career of a student in early 14th-century Oxford: Richard Kilvington. (The dates are to some extent approximate and reconstructed.)

- 1317: matriculated as a student (age 14 or 15)
- 1321: Bachelor of Arts
- 1326: Master of Arts
- 1333: lectured on the Sentences
- 1334: lectured on the Bible
- by 1335: Bachelor of Theology
- 1337: Doctor of Theology

5 Founding of other universities

- Oxford (1212)
- Salamanca (1218)
- Montpellier (1220)
- Naples (1224)
- Cambridge (1225)
- Toulouse (1229), Orléans (c. 1235), Papal Rome (c. 1245), Piacenza (1248), Angers (c. 1250), Sevilla (1254), Valladolid (c. 1290), Lisbon (c. 1290), Lerida (c. 1300), Avignon (1303), City of Rome (1303), Perugia (1308), Treviso (1318), Cahors (1332), Grenoble (1339), Pisa (1343), Prague (1348), Florence (1349), Perpignan (1350), Huesca (1354), Arezzo (1355), Siena (1357), Pavia (1361), Cracow (1364), Orange (1365), Vienna (1365), Pécs (1367), Lucca (1369), Erfurt (1379), Heidelberg (1385), Cologne (1388), Ferrara (1391), Buda (1395).
- 1400: 30. 1500: 60. 1600: 110. 1700: 150.

References

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- [3] Lyte, Henry C.M. 1886. *A history of the University of Oxford from the earliest times to the year 1530* (London: MacMillan & Co.).
- [4] Rashdall, Hastings, *The universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*; a new edition in three volumes ed. by F.M. Powicke and A.B. Emden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936–).