

A Brief History of Medieval Education

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Monks Learning Geometry.
(An illustration from the beginning
of a medieval copy of *Euclid's Elements*.
British Library, MS Burney 275, f. 293r.)

This essay presents a concise history of medieval education. While it focuses somewhat parochially on Christian Europe, I believe its interest transcends the peoples involved. History is like a laboratory in which we can study the human person as a social animal. Often, the people and events of the past can give us insight into the tendencies of humans and our societies in general. In this overview, I shall refrain from any such speculation, but I hope to provide some material for reflection.

The late Roman Empire laid the foundations for medieval education. Roman education was done in Latin and focused upon the liberal arts, so named because they constituted the proper education for a free man. The liberal arts consisted of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. The trivium included grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The quadrivium

included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Having developed in the Roman Empire, the western Catholic Church also taught in Latin and came to use the same liberal arts texts as their pagan contemporaries.

After the reign of Julian the Apostate (AD 361–363)—and more so after the Western Empire fell in AD 476—the primary job of education came to rest on the Church, which was the largest organization remaining in Western Europe and the one best equipped to educate. Thus, from the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Church—using the subject matter and language of the Roman Empire—was the primary administrator of education, and it continued in that position throughout the period.¹

In the early Middle Ages (ca. 500–1000), Western education had two main centers of learning: the cathedral school and the monastic school. Both were scattered through the remains of the Western Roman Empire (primarily Western Europe), and both were aimed at training students to be useful members of the Church through education in Latin based upon the liberal arts.

Each monastic school (especially after the ninth century) generally consisted of two separate sections—an inner school and an outer school. The outer school was, when possible, open to the general public, so that all who wanted to learn (the boys, at least²) could do so. More often, in the early centuries of the Middle Ages, the outer monastic schools taught primarily those who were to occupy low positions in the Church. The inner school was only for those who were going to be scholarly monks or occupy other necessarily learned ecclesiastic positions.

Cathedral schools, like the outer monastic schools, were open to the public at little or no cost when the Church had the resources; but at times, they

could educate only those aspiring to be choir boys, priests, or other ecclesiastical officers. Cathedral schools were generally analogous in quality to outer monastic schools, though some exceptional cathedral schools were of much higher quality. When kings needed educated courtiers, they typically had to choose from the students of the monastic and cathedral schools.

The program of education in both monasteries and cathedrals was much the same. The young boys began at age seven by memorizing the Latin Psalter. Actual understanding of Latin came next.

The fragmentation of post-empire Europe led to the development of the Romance languages from Latin. Thus, by the eighth century, Latin was still the language of reading and writing; but it was a different language from what anyone spoke with their mothers. Consequently, many priests and monks never did, in fact, learn the *meaning* of the Latin psalms they memorized.

Students first learned to write on wax tablets, a custom inherited from Roman education. Then students generally began, through dictation, to copy their master's textbook with a pen, ink, and parchment, a material far more durable than paper. Parchment was made from the scraped, stretched, and dried skin of sheep. Following the Saracen occupation of Egypt (AD 642), parchment was scarce for much of the Middle Ages,³ but monks were able to produce modest amounts locally. The monks of Ireland, in particular, copied many great works of Roman antiquity that would have been lost if not for the Irish sheep.

The standard educational texts remained much the same throughout the Middle Ages, especially before the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century (not to be confused with the later and more famous Renaissance that spread across Europe in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries). The works of Martianus Capella (fl. ca. 375–425), Boethius (ca. 470/5–524), and Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636), among others, provided more or less concise summaries of the liberal arts.

Grammar, which meant mastery of the Latin language, was seen as the most important of the liberal arts, because it was necessary for the study of the other subjects.⁴ From the times of such Church fathers as Tertullian and Augustine on down through the centuries, the liberal arts were seen as essential for understanding the Bible.⁵ The Bible was, of course, read in a Latin translation now known as the Vulgate. Standard reference works for general knowledge included Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (in 20 books)⁶ and the 37-book *Natural History* preserved from the Roman author Pliny (AD 23–79).⁷

As students advanced through their course of study, they would memorize the aforementioned compendia, which were treated as unquestionable authorities on matters such as science and math. The master (teacher), then, was also an unquestionable authority, since he did not question the truth received from the books. In the early centuries (ca. 500–800)—which a publisher recently told me I am not allowed to call “the Dark Ages”—this deference to authority was actually quite logical. In most cases, the teachers had nothing close to the depth of knowledge the authors of the texts had possessed. They were right to assume their authorities knew better. If one wanted to move beyond the liberal arts in the early Middle Ages, one could usually choose from the Christian Scriptures and the Church Fathers.

Between the founding of post-Roman monastic and cathedral schools and the arrival of universities beginning in the twelfth century, Europe saw increases in the availability and content of education. Political instability limited the ability of the Church to provide education until Charlemagne (“Charles the Great”; ca. 747–814) united most of Western Europe in the Frankish Empire. The Pope crowned Charles as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in AD 800, and thus began the Carolingian Age (the reign of Charlemagne and his near descendants).

In the decades leading up to his coronation, Charlemagne had begun what is now called the

Carolingian Renaissance. As mentioned above, many priests only *recited* Latin in the eighth century; they did not *understand* it. Consequently, verbal errors in the administration of the sacraments became common, and Charlemagne was concerned that such sacraments would not be valid. Although scarcely literate (or genuinely illiterate), he threw his considerable political power behind education to address this crisis. Many bishops appointed by Charlemagne enforced the mandate that a basic education be available to all who wished to learn, a feat which was then possible because the unity of the Empire had made sufficient funds available to the Church. More schools were built, and more knowledge was disseminated.

Charlemagne appointed Alcuin of York (ca. 732–804) as his minister of education. This was

significant because Alcuin, a highly educated monk, had inherited the learning preserved in the monasteries of Ireland that had subsequently spread to England and beyond in the seventh and eighth centuries. This learning included but was not limited to works of the Roman poets. Under Alcuin, the forgotten information was spread to schools in the rest of Europe. The Carolingian court also developed a new, clearer script for copying these books, which was known as Carolingian minuscule.

The centuries following the Carolingian reforms saw much political strife as the Holy Roman Empire fragmented. The Church, however, managed to maintain within its monasteries the knowledge that had spread from Ireland, even if the availability of education waned.

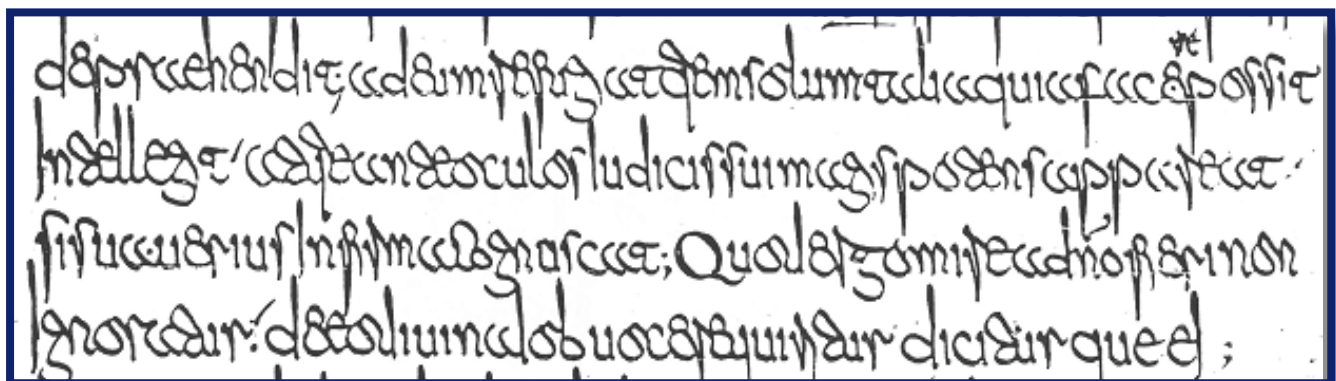


Image 1: *Luxeuil Lectionary*. This script, named “Luxeuil” after the monastery, is an example of a Merovingian book script of the seventh or eighth century.⁸

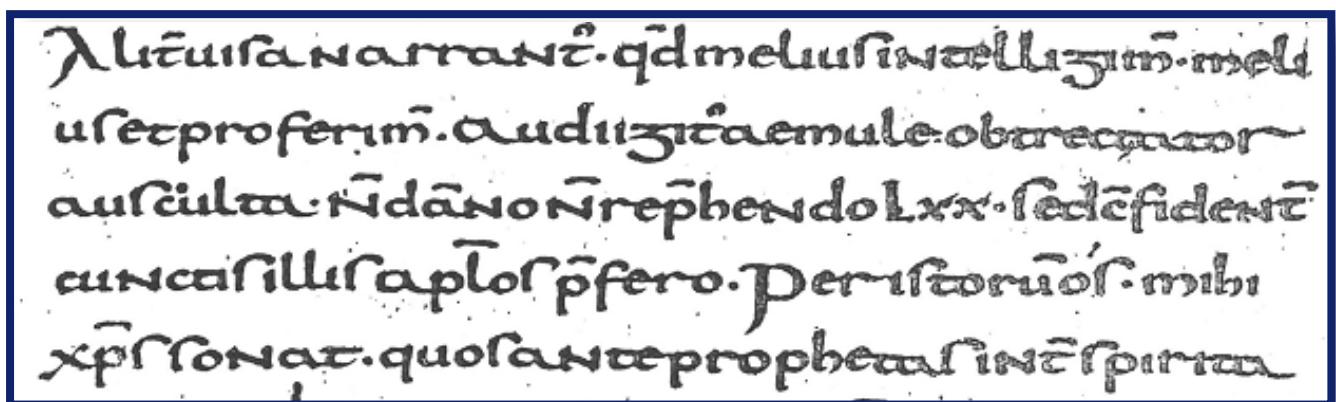


Image 2: *Zurich Bible* copied at Tours under the direction of Alcuin of York in the later eighth century or beginning of the ninth. This is an example of Carolingian minuscule.⁹

In the twelfth century, much knowledge found its way to Europe (and *back to* Europe) through translation into Latin. Arab Spain was the main source of these texts. The Crusades, indirectly, also brought many writings to Europe from the East, though most of them did not arrive until a little later.

Perhaps the most significant new arrivals were works of Arabic geometry and the lost works of Aristotle, complete with commentary. The vast spread of this and other knowledge to and within Europe in the twelfth century is often referred to as the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century and sometimes as the Medieval Renaissance (when viewed as spanning more time than just the twelfth century). Leading up to this renaissance, great teachers, such as Peter Abelard, began to gain recognition. Abelard was a pioneer of what came to be called scholasticism, a philosophical method of argumentation heavily reliant on Aristotle's deductive logic.¹⁰ Scholastics used logic to reconcile and systematize the sometimes diffuse knowledge they had inherited from antiquity. This was a new attitude toward authority. Authoritative texts were still respected and assumed to be correct, but now Europeans were in a place to build upon what they had received.

The unity and universality of the Church and of Latin in the West, combined with increased knowledge and famous teachers, led many scholars to look abroad to supplement the limited education available in their home cities or countries. These traveling scholars began to gather around famous teachers, some in cathedral or abbey schools (as occurred at Paris) and some not.

Over time, a custom developed by which masters lived on the money paid to them by students who attended their lectures. The students from other countries, often poor, were not well-liked in certain cities, such as Bologna. Thus, they formed student guilds called *universitates* to protect themselves from exploitation. Some of these "universities" were so powerful that the masters formed similar guilds to protect themselves from exploitation by the students. In this manner one

of the first universities was founded in Bologna. Around the same time (the twelfth century), the cathedral school of Notre-Dame in Paris became popular enough to organize a university. These first universities set the pattern for many that followed in the centuries to come.

The first medieval universities were called *studia generalia* (singular, *studium generale*) until the fifteenth century. These schools were universally recognized in the certificates they conferred by authority of the Pope, who chartered the universities.¹¹ The first degrees were *licentia docendi*, licenses given in the Church, conferring the authority to teach. Thus, the theoretical goal of a university education was to become qualified to teach in one's field, even if one had no intention of teaching as a profession.

Students as young as 14 or 15 years old arrived at the university. All students had to study the liberal arts first for about five to eight years, during the course of which they would become bachelors and then masters of the arts, if they endured and met the requirements. Most students departed after a year or two with no degree, but the mere fact of having attended was still noteworthy.¹²

During the thirteenth century, the old liberal arts texts were largely replaced by the works of Aristotle. After becoming a master of arts, one could move on to law, medicine, or theology to earn the terminal designation of master (*magister*) or doctor and the right to teach anywhere in Europe.¹³ The process of becoming a master or doctor would take another several years. The masters teaching in the universities would lecture, primarily. As the etymology suggests, such teaching usually involved reading and commenting upon an authoritative text.

In addition to the ancient texts of Aristotle in the arts and the Bible in theology, some more recent (twelfth-century) compilations at the time also became authoritative textbooks in the universities. This development was natural because the new textbooks consisted largely of quotations or summaries from earlier authoritative works.

For the study of canon law (i.e., Church law), a monk named Gratian compiled the *Decretum*, a collection of authoritative quotations and decrees arranged topically with an introduction and some explanation. For the study of the Bible's sacred history, Peter Comestor (literally, "Peter the Eater") compiled the *Historia Scholastica*, a continuous history from creation to the ascension of Christ that clarified the chronological sequence of events in the Bible and filled in the gaps with help from both the Church fathers and pagan historians.¹⁴

Peter Lombard compiled *The Sentences* for the advanced study of theology.¹⁵ Arranged topically in four books, *The Sentences* consists of quotations from the Church fathers on all topics of theology, interspersed with some explanation. Selections from Augustine of Hippo (354–430) dominate the collection. From the middle of the thirteenth century to the end of the Middle Ages (and beyond in some places), every theologian was required to teach and comment on *The Sentences* in order to receive his terminal degree. Thus, in theology, a commentary on *The Sentences* was the medieval analogue to the modern doctoral dissertation.

Masters also were expected to hold formal disputations in the scholastic method. The *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274) is an artificial example of what a scholastic disputation was like.¹⁶ Educated as a Dominican friar in the thirteenth century, Aquinas developed the disputation into a philosophical and pedagogical method and, thus, arguably brought scholasticism to its height.

A disputation involved interlocutors defending opposite sides of a question, based upon revered authorities, which the master would then answer. The master's solution ideally would both answer the question and explain how all the authorities were actually in harmony. Similarly, Aquinas' method involved (1) stating a question; (2) giving (typically) wrong responses, called "objections," with support of authorities such as Scripture or a noted theologian; (3) citing an authority opposed to the wrong responses; (4) formulating an answer

to the question; and (5) finally, resolving each objection individually, applying Aristotelian logic every step of the way.¹⁷

Aquinas applied this method to most major questions in theology. The grand, though incomplete, work that resulted has usually been called the *Summa Theologica*. Now known as the *Summa Theologiae*, it is the most famous of the scholastic *summae*, or summaries, of the state of human knowledge on a given topic. For Aquinas, the method of his *Summa* was a teaching method; but precisely as such, it came to shape philosophical discourse.

Dominican friars, and many others, use the *Summa* for theological and philosophical formation still in the present day. In this method, we see the meeting of dependence on authority with rigorous logic, the pinnacle of scholastic thought. We also see a clear example of how medieval education, itself shaped by authority—always of the Church and eventually of Aristotle too—played a large role in shaping medieval philosophy. After all, the philosophers of the Middle Ages all (or nearly all) went to school *somewhere*.

Eventually, the universities broke loose from the authority of the Church and her traditions, but not during the Middle Ages. The factors that would morph universities into their modern form included the rise of nationalism, Renaissance humanism, myriad social consequences of the Black Death of the fourteenth century, and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. To tell that story would take us beyond the limit set for this essay, which is the end of the Middle Ages, traditionally marked by the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

To illustrate the enduring significance of scholastic education in the medieval university system right up to the end of the period and beyond, however, I will end with a simple observation: Even Martin Luther, who started the Protestant Reformation in 1517, commenced his theological career by writing a commentary on *The Sentences* of Peter Lombard.

NOTES.....

1. Simon Somerville Laurie, *The Rise and Early Constitution of Medieval Universities* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), 28, https://archive.org/details/riseearlyconstit0000laur_n9h3/page/n9/mode/2up.
2. Educational opportunities for women did exist in medieval Europe as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, primarily in convents. In the right convent, a nun could lead a scholarly life similar to that of a monk. The writings of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) exemplify this phenomenon in the High Middle Ages.
3. Laurie, *The Rise and Early Constitution*, 37.
4. Ibid., 57.
5. J. Adamson, “Education in the Middle Ages” in *Education and Western Civilization* (Arlington, VA: College Readings, Inc., 1972), 125.
6. Stephen Barney et al., trans., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006), https://books.google.com/s?id=3ep502syZv8C&printsec=frontcover&source=gs_bse_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
7. “Books by Pliny the Elder,” *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/author/50041>.
8. “Luxeuil Lectionary,” MS Latin 9427, fol. 176v., National Library of France, Manuscripts Department, *Portail Biblissima*, <https://portail.biblissima.fr/ark:/43093/ta4c4604e51cb620a9c67e646ea44a231e2e6141ed>.
9. Zurich Bible, MS C.I., Library of the University of Zurich, *Zentralbibliothek Zürich*, <https://www.zb.uzh.ch/en>.
10. William Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002), 160–161, <https://archive.org/details/voyageofdiscover0000lawh>.
11. Helen Wieruszowski, *The Medieval University* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1966), 15, <https://archive.org/details/medievaluniversi0000wier/page/12/mode/2up>.
12. Edward Grant, *Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30–40.
13. At first, “doctor” was an alternate title for “master.” For example, in order to teach law in an early university, one became a doctor and not a master. The theologian, on the other hand, was called a “master of the sacred page” (referring to the Bible).
14. J. P. Migne, *Corpus Corporum*, University of Zurich, <https://mlat.uzh.ch/browser/11575>.
15. Pierre Lombard, *Sententiae*, Jacques Chirac Media Library, https://portail.mediatheque.grand-troyes.fr/iguana/www.main.cls?surl=search&p=*&recordId=2.915.
16. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>.
17. Lawhead, *The Voyage*, 170. 