

The History Guide

Lectures on Ancient and Medieval European History

Lecture 26

The 12th Century Renaissance

Our own generation enjoys the legacy bequeathed to it by that which preceded it. We frequently know more, not because we have moved ahead by our own natural ability, but because we are supported by the mental strength of others, and possess riches that we have inherited from our forefathers. Bernard of Clairvaux used to compare us to puny dwarfs perched on the shoulders of giants. He pointed out that we see more and farther than our predecessors, not because we have keener vision or greater height, but because we are lifted up and borne aloft on their gigantic stature.

---John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, 1159-60

By the end of the 11th century, western Europe had made some remarkable advances in a number of areas. By today's standards these advances would appear small if not even insignificant. Nonetheless, advances were made in social organization, technology, intellectual pursuit and education. This overall improvement continued throughout the 12th century at an accelerated rate. The people who inhabited western Europe showed tremendous energy and persistence in all of their activities whether religious, political, economic or cultural. They had a willingness to experiment with new types of organization and in general, were receptive to new ideas. They produced great leaders who gave form to their aspirations. These leaders were supported by public opinion which for the most part was much more homogenous than it is today.

Great Churchmen such as [St. Bernard of Clairvaux](#) (1090-1152) were almost entirely dependent upon public opinion. A man such as Bernard could dominate Europe because people believed the ideals he expressed. Great kings like Henry II of England (1133-1189) drew their strength from a general public's desire for law and order. [PETER ABELARD](#) (1079-1143) was a great teacher because he had an eager audience -- he could hardly live without the students who came from all over Europe to attend his classes at Paris. Without a doubt, the 12th century in western Europe can be characterized as a flowering of civilization, indeed, a renaissance.



It is clear that all European social life during the Middle Ages was based upon several dominant ideals. These ideals were inspired by the Christian faith as interpreted by the Church. Not everyone lived up to these ideals, but everyone was affected by them. Ordinary men and women might sin but they were more than careful to do penance before the situation got out of hand. It can be said with certainty that the Church ordered everything -- sight and sound, time and space, fell under the control and word of the Church. In her wonderful book, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978), the historian Barbara Tuchman wrote that:

Christianity was the matrix of medieval life: even cooking instructions called for boiling an egg "during the length of time wherein you say a Miserere." It governed birth, marriage, and death, sex, and eating, made the rules for law and medicine, gave philosophy and scholarship their subject matter. Membership in the Church was not a matter of choice; it was compulsory and without alternative, which gave it a hold not easy to dislodge. (p. 32)

With Tuchman's quote in mind, the dominant force in this climate of opinion was clearly the Christian Church. But, the religion of the 12th century was undergoing a gradual transformation. Whereas in an earlier time, man was becoming more Christian, in the 12th century, there were efforts underway to make Christianity more human. That is, more oriented toward man. During the historical Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries, this sentiment would be expressed by the word humanism.

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12th century Europe embraced a relatively new optimistic faith. There were many people who could neither accept nor believe that the majority of mankind would be damned forever. At the same time as this concern for what was human in Christianity occurred, there was also a strong desire for a more personal and intense religious experience, something we will witness again during the Protestant Reformation. The Christian Matrix, the monopoly of Christian knowledge by popes, clerics and monks and the intense personal devotion of the common person ought to reveal to us that the medieval world was nothing less than an Age of Faith.

The second important group of ideals concerned the medieval concept of justice. This concept of justice came as much from Christian virtue and divine law as it did from the real world of 12th century politics. Justice, both secular and divine, became the key to good government, peace and security. Because of this, the 12th century made great efforts to improve their judicial systems. The study of Roman law was revived and a summary of the laws of the Church was given by the Benedictine monk Gratian (f.12th century) in his collection of canon laws known as the *Decretium Gratiani* (c.1140). Early medieval courts found themselves in hopeless situations when faced with contradictory statements by opposing parties. The courts usually took refuge in the judgment of God alone. By the 12th century, there was expressed a general dissatisfaction with law and the courts. Jurists experimented with proofs and demonstrations, the use of witnesses increased as did the utilization of juries. Even stronger than these more technical improvements was a change in the spirit of the people. There was a growing desire to obtain legal solutions to controversies instead of fighting them out. In the end, the courts were forced to make themselves more efficient. And as the courts tried more cases per term (instead of two or three year), they gained valuable experience which aided in the development of

law and the concept of justice in general.

Christian faith and ideal of justice affected all people in western Europe. Less widespread but still of supreme importance in our story, was the growing desire for knowledge. This desire influenced thousands of men and women of all social classes. Some of this knowledge was in theology and still more in jurisprudence. But the desire for knowledge had roots of its own, that is the love of study for its own sake, independent of the Church or courts of law. Some Church Fathers opposed this secular tendency but in the end, the love of learning overcame opposition.

Students in the 12th century were eager for knowledge and sought it out with enthusiasm. They read the Latin classics, analyzed the texts of Roman law, they read and commented on the works of the Church Fathers. The most advanced scholars knew that the Muslims of Islamic civilization had great storehouses of knowledge so they traveled to Spain to tap these new sources of information. Others went to Constantinople to obtain translations of Greek manuscripts. In the end, these scholars renewed western knowledge of Greek science and philosophy and to this added the treasures of Arabic mathematics and medicine. This renewed energy started men thinking about basic scientific problems and translations of the 12th century began, I think, a line of investigation which lead, in the end, to [Copernicus](#) and [Galileo](#) in the early 17th century.

We do not know precisely how many students attended the lectures of Europe's greatest scholars. However, it is obvious that the old monastic and cathedral schools could not absorb the increasing number of students. So, students began to congregate in cities where a likely master could be found. From this development came the great universities of the late 12th century -- Oxford, Paris and Bologna.

Many men in the 12th century were ambitious and certainly wanted to better themselves. This was usually accomplished by creating fortunes. In other words, there were some men who were interested in profits alone. However, this profit motive, if we can call it such, was clearly not as strong as it would become in the 16th century and after. The largest group of ambitious men were the peasants. The peasants did not really want greater wealth since they were more interested in improving their status. As a dominant ideal, status was more important than wealth. This is obviously the case in a society where one's position was governed by a carefully graded hierarchy, a matrix (those who work, those who fight, those who pray -- see [Lecture 23](#)). The peasant who went to the German frontier to clear land or to France to work as a member of a textile guild did not necessarily do so in order to increase his wealth. What he did gain was more freedom for himself and greater opportunities for his children.

The new students who attended European universities also gained more in status than they did in wealth. Some entered the clergy but these positions were declining in number. Sons of the nobility entered monasteries for the status it brought to them and their families. Joining a monastery also had the psychological and social effect of bringing the family closer to God. The study of law was prestigious in itself and students sought profit and power through its study. But even in jurisprudence there were those men who studied law for its own sake, in other words, for knowledge alone. The landholding class were sure to make as much money as they could by renting their land as well as by opportune marriages with other wealthy families. But they tended to spend their money as fast as they could make it. In general, the class of landlords and landowners were not good businessmen by any modern standard. Their ideal was free and easy spending and not thrift. They wanted to live nobly, that is, they wanted to live without working. They were, as an order, more apt to run into debt and make some shrewd investments that increase their income and

profits.

We would expect to see the town dweller or bourgeoisie to be the one order most fully imbued and dominated by the profit motive. Status meant less to them than did money. They prized money so much because they were more skilled in using it to increase their wealth. They knew how to split the risks of a long voyage by selling shares in a ship. They also knew about loans and interest. But even in the 12th century towns, the profit motive was not entirely dominant. There were few external restraints: guilds had not yet developed their detailed regulations. The restraints this order faced were inherent in the nature of early medieval business practice. Merchants and artisans were a small minority living in a society which did not really trust them. These merchants and artisans had to give each other mutual support in order to preserve their rights and property. While they shared common dangers they also shared their business opportunities. Without this cooperation and mutual support, the economic life of the town and country would have been weakened. As a result, great concentrations of wealth among this order of people were rare.

While ambition and desire for worldly success were pretty much common in the 12th century, they were not always associated with a desire to make money. Improvement in one's status was the most common ambition. Wealth was less important than such things that is personal freedom, titles, high office or the reputation one earned as a scholar.

From what has been said it ought to be clear that the 12th century was both original and energetic. In this way, it was perhaps a worthy rival to the Golden Age of Greece and Rome. Today, we are still influenced by the 12th century: in art, literature, educational systems and social relationships. As I have already mentioned, the 12th century witnessed a growing desire for knowledge. The thousands of students who roamed Europe at the end of the century were interested in every scrap of knowledge they could find. They studied all available texts in western Europe and made long journeys to Spain or to Constantinople to secure Greek and Arabic material which interested them. Their first task was to be able to use language as a precise instrument of learning and that language was Latin. So, the 12th century saw a revival of the classics in order to increase one's vocabulary and improve style. More attention was also given to the study of logic. Logic developed clear thinking and accurate reasoning: logic also drove scholars to the east in order to read Greek translations of [Aristotle](#) who was, after all, the greatest master of logic. And in seeking translations of Aristotle's logic, the scholars also found Arabic science and the great commentaries of Muslim scholars. The knowledge of Latin and logic thus helped the general revival of law and theology. In addition to Aristotle, came the mathematics of Euclid, the astronomy of [Ptolemy](#) and the medicine of Galen and Hippocrates.

Legal studies were centered in Italy where Roman law was never forgotten. Irnerius of Bologna was perhaps the first great teacher of law. He taught the careful reading of texts and this had the result of producing man with real knowledge of the law. The study of Roman law was also soon supplemented by the study of canon law, the law of the Church. Here it Bologna was also Gratian whom we've already mentioned. Gratian's great contribution was to codify canon law in 1141 by making it more systematic and logical. Students flocked to the university at Bologna to study the great bodies of law under great teachers.

If Italy was the center of jurisprudence, then France was certainly the home of theology. And it was Peter Abelard who was the most famous of the 12th century French theologians. Abelard gave up his rights to his father's fief so that he could study at Paris. His first interest was logic but he soon turned to theology. He was an intelligent but cranky man and disliked by his fellow

teachers for his very outspoken criticism of their work. His *SIC ET NON* (or *Yes and No*) accumulated the opinions of church fathers on both sides of shocking questions. He seduced Heloise, the niece of the prominent Parisian clergyman, Bishop Fulbert. This act barred him from promotion in the Church. Other theologians borrowed from Abelard's style but were far less inflammatory. They tried to build a logical structure into Christian theology, a structure, I suppose, which would meet the needs of the Christian matrix.

The great increase in the number of students and in the attitudes of a man like Abelard and others, worried the Church, the teachers, and the students themselves. The Church worried about the content and implications of the new learning. There was, after all, much in Aristotle and Muslim scholars which seemed to contradict Christian dogma. The church perhaps feared the excessive rationalism of scholars who thought they could find a logical explanation for everything. The teachers at the medieval schools faced the problem of collecting fees from poor scholars and of meeting competition from the many unqualified teachers who populated the growing towns. Finally, the students were always strangers in the towns where they congregated. These students were regularly over charged for their fees and poorly treated by the townspeople. The older or cathedral and monastic schools could not cope with these problems. A new institution was needed and that institution was the university or *universitas*, an expression which referred not to a place but to a group of people.

The first university was conceived at Bologna in Italy. The law students at Bologna were mature adult males. They resented the high fees they were charged, they feared the wrath of the townspeople, and they believed that their professors were not giving them their money's worth. The students organized to protect themselves and stipulated regulations which limited the cost of their rooms and board. They also specified the minimum content of their courses. In turn, professors formed their own corporations in which their most important concern was the standardization of admission to the profession.

At Paris, professors formed their own corporate body. Students would not be admitted to higher learning until they had passed the arts course and no one could teach until they had graduated from the appropriate faculty. In the 12th century there were only four higher faculties: Theology, Medicine, Law, and Philosophy.

Regardless of which medieval university we choose to investigate, students began their career in the faculty of arts. There they studied grammar, rhetoric and logic (the *trivium*) and arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music (the *quadrivium*). These are the seven liberal arts which had been specified by Alcuin as part of the Carolingian Renaissance in the 8th and 9th centuries (see [Lecture 20](#)). A master would lecture on various subjects but the bulk of one's education came from what was called the [DISPUTATION](#). The student would be asked a multitude of questions and was forced to defend his position with impeccable logical argument.

The student studied in the Arts Faculty for three years and if he had done well received the Bachelor of Arts degree (B.A.). He then went on to study for another year or two whereupon he was eligible to receive the Masters of Arts degree (M.A.). After a few more years he could enter the higher faculty and receive the Doctor of Philosophy degree (Ph.D.). The J.D. degree (Doctor of Jurisprudence), M.D. degree (Doctor of Medicine) and the D.D. degree (Doctor of Divinity) were all derived from this scheme.

The Doctor of Philosophy degree was granted after original work was completed. The student would complete a work of original

scholarship (the dissertation or thesis) and would have to defend that work in front of a large audience. This audience would include his Masters as well as anyone else who cared to attend. This is similar to today's Ph.D. defense: examinations are open to the public although the rigorous nature of the 12th century disputation has perhaps been lost in modern times.

The university was no playground for the wealthy. True, it offered an outlet for social mobility. Fees were paid according to one's status and it was entirely possible that these fees could be waived. Some students were housed together according to their academic interest and a Master was assigned to each house. These houses were eventually referred to as colleges. For instance, when I was an undergraduate student at Boston University, I was enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts. Some of my friends were in the College of Public Communication and others in the College of Business Administration. Together, these individual colleges constitute the university. To take another example, at Harvard each dormitory or house, as they are properly called, contains a tutor or master.

The medieval university also employed what were referred to as stationers. These individuals would produce readable copies of important texts. Students would borrow eight pages at a time, take them back to their house and copy them. These pages would be returned the next day in the student would borrow another eight pages.

At Paris, Vienna and Oxford there is a great deal of evidence which points to student rowdyism: gambling, drinking, whoring and street fighting. The evidence also points to a rather clear demarcation between "town" and "gown." Even worse, and capable of even more violence, were the passions aroused between students of different nationalities. A contemporary account of medieval students at Paris by [Jacques de Vitry](#) is quite revealing.

They affirmed that the English were drunkards and had tails; the sons of France proud, effeminate and carefully adorned like women. They said that the Germans were furious and obscene at their feasts; the Normans, vain and boastful; the Potevins, traitors and always adventurers. The Burgundians they considered vulgar and stupid. The Bretons were reputed to be fickle and changeable, and were often reproached for the death of Arthur. The Lombards were called avaricious, vicious and cowardly; the Romans, seditious, turbulent and slanderous; the Sicilians, tyrannical and cruel, the inhabitants of Brabant, men of blood, incendiaries, brigands and ravishers; the Flemish, fickle, prodigal, gluttonous, yielding as butter, and slothful. After such insults from words they often came to blows.

These were schools run by Masters and much of this "fun" was as much the result of the student's dissatisfaction with their professors as it was the open hostility of the townspeople. The situation was quite different at Bologna as this was a "student's university." At Bologna students determined what would be taught as well as the frequency of class meetings. The arts faculty was not as prominent an element as it was at Paris or Oxford.

Again, it is not known precisely how many students attended the 12th century universities at Paris, Oxford or Bologna. But there were other scholars in 12th century or who were not associated with university. These were the "Wandering Scholars," the 12th century equivalent, I suppose, of the counter-revolutionaries of the 1960s. These "scholars" had no fixed place in medieval society and they were pretty much uncertain about their life in general. They tried to attach themselves to a patron and were critical of just about everything, especially the Church. The majority of the scholars were anonymous but they left their mark on the western

intellectual tradition by composing poetry. They introduced rhythm and rhyme into medieval poetry and wrote both in Latin and in the vernacular. These wandering scholars attached themselves to a man by the name of Goliath, and formed what was called "Order of Vagrants." Their style of verse, as well as their lifestyles became known as Goliardic and collectively they are called the Goliards (see [Lecture 24](#)). In general their poetry sang the glories of "wine, women and song." They usually gathered in taverns and got drunk in order to forget their miseries. They felt uncertain of their fate, life was nothing more than a "wheel of fortune."

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