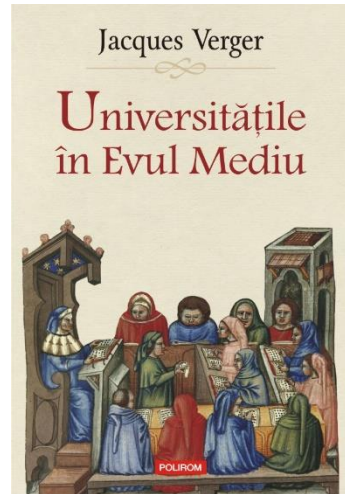


A French Professor Emeritus on Tertiary Education in Medieval Times

Ana-Magdalena Petraru

Jacques Verger, *Universitățile din Evul Mediu/ Les universités au Moyen Âge (Universities in the Middle Ages)*, translated by Simona Ilieș, Polirom Publishing House, 2019, 256 pages



As the two prefacers to the Romanian edition argue, the Middle Ages are renowned for setting up higher education as an establishment called university compared to the Academy of the Antiquity. The university resembles a corporation and the author focuses on the feature in its mission to train professors and students so as to serve various public institutions. Excellency is its aim and it comes along with the legitimacy of intellectual work. Meant to introduce us to a work initially published in the 70s when the sub-field was untackled by French historiography, which then became popular, hence the four later editions, the Romanian translation was carried out as part of a research project, *The Rise of an Intellectual Elite in Central Europe: Making Professors at the University of Vienna, 1389-1450* between UBB and The Romanian Academy in Cluj¹.

In the introduction to his work, Jacques Verger points out that his approach goes for universities as cultural cradles of civilisation in which a chapter of the general history of philosophy, law or sciences

¹ Monica Brînzei and Alexander Baumgartner, "Prefață la ediția în limba română" (Preface to the Romanian Edition). In Jacques Verger, *Universitățile din Evul Mediu (Universities in the Middle Ages)*, translated by Simona Ilieș, Polirom Publishing House, 2019, pp. 6-8.

was written; among other means of accounting for the topic, he mentions the study of universities as institutions and human groups against a given historical background (bringing into play distinctions made by colleagues such as Gordon Leff who stresses the university's 'ideological role' of producing ideas vs. its 'professional' one of educating people). The French historian's emphasis lies on an attempt to a sociology of medieval culture in its scholarly dimension that a university provides, acknowledging the limitations of his endeavour (the exclusion of other types of education, i.e. secondary and religious, monastical, on the one hand and the passage from the Middle Ages to Renaissance, along with the humanism that penetrated universities in the late XVth and early XVIth cent., on the other hand)².

Divided into two parts, the book deals with the rise and success of universities between the 12th and 13th centuries (part one) and the end of the Middle Ages, 14th-15th centuries inquiring on the fall as decline or transformation (part two). This point counterpoint structure based on the rise and fall of the university as institution is studied in six chapters, three for each part. Structured in four subchapters, chapter one analyses Western schools at the beginning of the 12th century, the Renaissance of the 12th century, the first universities and last but not least, the "spontaneous" vs. the "created" universities. The author's purpose is not to clarify the distinction between pontifical, and imperial universities or both that seemed obsolete at the time, but to go to the root of the phenomenon by showcasing it and offering Paris and Bologna as role models.³ Liberal arts were the basis of education as distinguished by Antiquity figures (i.e., both the *trivium* – grammar, dialectic and rhetoric and the *quadrivium* – arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy) and theology was above all, crowning them.⁴ As Translation Studies scholar, of particular interest to us is the section devoted to translators and translations in the 12th century when Latin and Greek literature was received in this manner. On the topic, Verger underlines that "the geography of translation centers (...) does not coincide at all with that of schools. These centers were mainly in contact with countries for which the Greek legacy remained alive: the

² Jacques Verger, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-12.

³ Jacques Verger, *op. cit.*, p. 17, *passim*.

⁴ *Idem*, p. 20.

Byzantine Empire and especially the Muslim world in which Greek texts had not only been known and translated, but also enriched with often original commentaries.”⁵ Despite the criticism brought to their endeavor or what the field understands through *traduttore, traditore*, later on replaced by *traduttore, truditore*, the translator is seen as traitor in the era because of the literalism of the translated texts and the lack of elegance and style which made them difficult to read. Mostly indirect translations from Greek (through Syriac and Arabic languages), they are acknowledged by the author as more exact than initially considered.⁶

Interesting to note is the division made by the historian between ‘spontaneous’ universities which came into being via the development of preexistent schools (e.g., not only Paris and Bologna that used secession to fight back local authorities, but also Oxford) and those that resulted from migration from other centers (more of a relocation than the sense we give to the important phenomenon nowadays, of transplanted population from developing countries or less so to developed states of Europe and elsewhere) such as Cambridge, Angers and Orléans; in the ones ‘created’ by the Pope or emperor, mediocrity ruled until the 14th or the 15th century (Toulouse, Naples).

The corporate dimension of universities detailed in chapter two is also worth bringing into play because it has endured to this day with its unity as main feature owing to Pope’s actions, the collaboration between them as institutions that created diversity (and separated them from other urban corporations) due to the random mobility of professors compared to a ‘Brownian motion’⁷ and of students (between two and five thousand in big centers from all social classes, students that went to several universities at once). Ambiguities were also a drawback, Verger quoting Le Goff’s opinion on the universities’ “internal contradictions”⁸ in the attempt to escape the constraints of urban population while remaining a Church’s institution.

⁵ *Idem*, pp. 24-25.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ M. Bloch, *apud* Verger, *idem*, p. 81.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 87.

Chapter three focuses on the problems and conflicts of the 13th century which chiefly rise from the papacy's involvement in higher education and the idea that universities were supposed to be ecclesiastical institutions as one of the key functions of the Church; it includes a case study on Scholasticism and its tremendous importance that made the conflict between the mendicant monks and secular clergy at the middle of the 13th century insignificant.

Chapter four continues to expand on the relation between Church and universities insisting on the fact that the 14th and the 15th centuries need further research. Concentrating on the 'bankruptcy' of university theology which occurred in the period mentioned above, reasons given range from the small number of trainers that came from mendicant orders, the competition of law as field of study, the universities' social recruitment and a more general orientation of the secular clergy.⁹ It is also argued that the Church at the end of the 15th century was rather populated by jurists, graduates of Law, than theologians leaving the matter of redemption to legal terms, along with its administration, material and political interests.¹⁰

In chapter five, the rapport between universities and states is discussed, the latter being threatened by the former, a dangerous agent which could stir socially and religiously the masses, despite the acknowledgement of their prestigious and prosperous role to the cities that hosted them.¹¹ Founded by monarchs and princes to be confirmed by the Pope, universities reached Scandinavia in the 15th century (Uppsala and Copenhagen) while England's kings only drew attention through their inactivity which the French scholar blames on the Hundred Years' War and the War of the Roses, inviting us to reflect on other likely motives, as well. Regarding the universities' relation with the state, it is stressed that legal studies facilitated the recruitment of civil servants; moreover, in spite of the general lack of involvement of the institution in politics (the university of Prague had both an intellectual and religious role in the 14th century and is associated to the nationalist Czech movement of the time), university professors sometimes sought to gain political power and exert it. With the Middle

⁹ *Idem*, pp. 127-128.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 140.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 155.

Ages ends the autonomy of the university, a collateral victim of a politics that aimed at a global reduction of privileges, in general and of the Church, in particular to be integrated to the kingdom's "common law" as defined and applied by legal jurisdictions.¹²

Chapter six, on the university and society, investigates the social processes within universities, thus continuing the study of their social role in the previous chapters to account for a sociology of intellectual activity at the end of the Middle Ages. By contrasting the rich and the poor (a heterogeneity preserved from the 13th to the 15th cent.), the author elaborately prepares the reader for the closure for the latter and the dominion of the former (noblemen's empowerment of science and exclusion of those that could not afford going to university); the university professors' aim to live a nobleman's life as a step towards nobility that should become an heir's privilege to be passed on is explained through the elections of the 14th century, the venality of offices in the 15th century at macrolevel plus marriage arrangements and land acquisition at microlevel¹³. Of seminal importance is an increasing awareness of intellectual work, the notion of philosopher acquiring as much prominence as that of knight, priest or monk, 'the job' implying disinterested research and study in a framework of professional ethic.¹⁴ The conclusion reached herein which we treasure, is that a teacher or a professor's job with its technical demands did not enrich the one who embraced it, yet it gave him or her independence due to the professional solidarity, the desire for constant social and intellectual innovation; this comes despite the author's claim that the aforementioned aspects were of no interest to the holders of humanist culture and the teacher or professor would be replaced by an academic figure in his/her office, and the physician by a court person¹⁵.

Jacques Verger's book is a must read during these pandemic times in which classic education and blended learning are taken to a new level, from face to face to hybrid and online teaching. A glance at

¹² *Idem*, p. 187.

¹³ *Idem*, p. 204, *passim*.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 214-215.

¹⁵ ¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 222.

universities in the Middle Ages allows specialists and amateurs altogether, trainers and trainees, to reflect on the intricacies of various transition periods in distant times from various perspectives and avoid making the mistakes of the past. As a result, choosing from the best strategies and techniques of medieval masters to refine one's teaching method and intellectual profile becomes mandatory in achieving professional to lay communication.