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Introduction

The Life and Works of John Duns the Scot

We know very little with certainty about the details of Scotus’s life and the chronology of his writings, and the evidence and arguments used to establish what we do know are sometimes forbiddingly complex. I make no attempt here to lay out all the speculations or even to adjudicate all the controversies. What follows is therefore a partial and inevitably controversial account of Scotus’s life and works. It would, I believe, command wide acceptance among students of Scotus; I indicate some points of dispute in the text and offer extensive references for those who want to explore these matters in more detail.¹

I. SCOTUS’S LIFE

As a guide through the complexities of the narrative that follows, I first offer a chronology in tabular form. AY stands for academic year, a period extending from early October to late June.

23 December 1265–	John Duns born in Duns, Scotland, a few
17 March 1266	miles from the English border
17 March 1291	Ordained to the priesthood at Saint
	Andrew’s Priory, Northampton, England
AY 1300–01	Took part in a disputation under Philip of
	Bridlington
26 July 1300	Was one of twenty-two candidates
	presented to the Bishop of Lincoln for
	faculties to hear confessions in the
	Franciscan church at Oxford

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AY 1302–03	Lectured at Paris on the <i>Sentences</i> of Peter Lombard
June 1303	Expelled from France, along with eighty other friars, for taking the pope's side in a dispute with the French king; most likely returned to Oxford
April 1304	Allowed to return to France; resumed lectures on the <i>Sentences</i>
18 November 1304	Appointed regent master of theology for the Franciscans at Paris by Gonsalvus of Spain
early 1305	Incepted as master
Advent 1306 or Lent 1307	Disputed the <i>Quodlibetal Questions</i>
October 1307	Took up duties as <i>lector</i> at the Franciscan <i>studium</i> at Cologne
8 November 1308	Died at Cologne

The first definite date we have for Scotus's life is that of his ordination to the priesthood in the Order of Friars Minor – the Franciscans – at Saint Andrew's Priory in Northampton, England, on 17 March 1291. The minimum age for ordination was twenty-five, so we can conclude that Scotus was born before 17 March 1266. But how much before? The conjecture, plausible but by no means certain, is that Scotus would have been ordained as early as canonically permitted. Since the Bishop of Lincoln (the diocese that included Oxford, where Scotus was studying, as well as St. Andrew's Priory) had ordained priests in Wycombe on 23 December 1290, we can place Scotus's birth between 23 December 1265 and 17 March 1266.

It seems likely that Scotus began his studies with the Franciscans at Oxford at a very young age. The history written by John Mair (or John Major) in 1521 says that "When [Scotus] was no more than a boy, but had been already grounded in grammar, he was taken by two Scottish Minorite [i.e., Franciscan] friars to Oxford, for at that time there existed no university in Scotland. By the favour of those friars he lived in the convent of the Minorites at Oxford."² A. G. Little³ reports that it was typical for boys to begin their studies at Oxford when they were as young as ten or twelve years old. And Scotus himself, in a remark that many have quite naturally taken as a reflection on his own early training, notes that "these days boys

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are taught and trained forthwith in matters pertaining to the clergy or the divine office, so nowadays a boy of thirteen years is more adequately instructed in such matters than a twenty-five-year-old peasant might have been in the primitive church."⁴

Direct evidence about Scotus's theological education at Oxford is hard to come by. One commonly accepted chronology assumes that he followed the typical course of training for university students.⁵ That course would require that after completing his preliminary studies in the faculty of arts Scotus would spend six academic years studying theology. In his seventh and eighth years he would have learned to serve as opponent, and in his ninth year as respondent, in disputations. In his tenth year he would have prepared his lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, to be delivered in the following year. In his twelfth year he would have been required to lecture on the Bible, and in his final year to dispute under various masters. Now we know that Scotus participated in a disputation under Philip Bridlington during Bridlington's year of regency, which was the academic year 1300–01.⁶ This fact would suggest that Scotus's final year of training at Oxford was 1300–01. If so, we could conclude that Scotus began his theological study in 1288, served as opponent in 1294–96 and as respondent in 1296–97, prepared his lectures on the *Sentences* in 1297–98, delivered them in 1298–99, and lectured on the Bible in 1299–1300. After his studies were completed in 1301, a further year would be required before Scotus was qualified to read the *Sentences* at Paris; Brampton therefore concludes that "He must have taught in an unknown convent in England as a lector."⁷

Unfortunately, the assumption on which this chronology rests – that Scotus would have followed the typical university course leading to the mastership in theology – is very likely false. The university regulations establishing that course applied to secular masters, not to members of the mendicant orders, who were granted a number of dispensations from the sequence prescribed for secular degree candidates.⁸ Indeed, the Franciscan educational system allowed enough flexibility at various levels of study that it is impossible to reconstruct a year-by-year chronology of Scotus's studies, or even to determine exactly when they began.

We do, however, have some good evidence relating to the final stages of his academic career at Oxford. We know, for example, that Scotus was in Oxford in July 1300, when the English provincial,

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Hugh of Hertipole, asked Bishop Dalderby to license one “Johannes Douns,” along with 21 others, to hear confessions at the Franciscan church at Oxford.⁹ As Wolter notes,¹⁰ it seems highly improbable that Hugh would have presented Scotus for faculties to hear confessions in the Oxford church if he had assigned Scotus to go to Paris for the fall term, which would have started only about ten weeks later. So it is reasonable to conclude that Scotus remained in Oxford through 1300–01.

Further evidence is found in a statement Scotus makes in the prologue to his *Ordinatio*. Having argued that the long endurance of the Church testifies to its divine authority, he considers the objection that Islam has also endured for many centuries:

If an objection is raised concerning the permanence of the sect of Mohammed, I reply: that sect began more than six hundred years after the law of Christ, and, God willing, it will shortly be brought to an end, since it has been greatly weakened in the year of Christ 1300, and many of its believers are dead and still more have fled, and a prophecy current among them states that their sect is to be brought to an end.¹¹

What Scotus has in mind here is the defeat of the Sultan of Egypt by Turks allied with the Christians of Armenia and Georgia on 23 December 1299. News of that defeat probably reached Oxford in June of 1300, but the excitement it generated proved to be short lived. Now this passage occurs in the second part of the Prologue to the *Ordinatio*, the revised version of his Oxford lectures, but it has no predecessor in the *Lectura*, which gives the actual text of the lectures he had delivered some time earlier. The obvious conclusion to draw is that Scotus was just beginning to revise his Oxford lectures in the summer or early fall of 1300 and that the lectures themselves had been given some time earlier.¹²

Scotus began lecturing on the *Sentences* at the University of Paris in October 1302. In the spring of 1303 he probably participated in the disputation between the Franciscan Regent Master, Gonsalvus of Spain, and the Dominican Meister Eckhart. Around that time the campaign of King Philip IV (“the Fair”) of France to call a general council to depose Pope Boniface VIII moved into high gear. Beginning in March Philip secured the support, first of the French nobility, then of nearly all the higher clergy, and finally of the University of Paris and the chapter of Notre Dame. As Little continues the

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story, "On 24 June a great anti-papal demonstration was organized in the gardens of the Louvre; the mendicant friars attended in procession, and the meeting was addressed by Bertold of St. Denys, bishop of Orleans and ex-chancellor of the university, and by two Friars Preachers and two Friars Minor."¹³ The next day royal commissioners visited the Franciscan convent and asked each friar individually whether he consented to the king's proposals. Eighty-four Franciscans, nearly all French, were listed as agreeing to the king's appeal; eighty-seven, mostly foreigners, dissented. Among the dissenters were Scotus and Gonsalvus. The king ordered the dissident friars to leave France within three days.

We are not absolutely certain where Scotus went during his exile from France. Some have suggested Cambridge, since it appears that Scotus lectured at Cambridge at some point.¹⁴ But most scholars find it more probable to suppose that he returned to Oxford, and the Vatican editors believe that the so-called *Lectura completa*, a set of lectures given at Oxford on Book 3 of the *Sentences*, dates from Scotus's exile.¹⁵ In any event, the exile was not long. Boniface VIII died on October 11, and the new pope, Benedict XI, made peace with Philip. In April 1304 Philip permitted Scotus and the rest of the friars to return to Paris. Scotus probably resumed his lectures with Book 4 of the *Sentences*.

Some time early in the academic year 1304–05 Scotus acted as respondent in the formal disputation that was part of the inception of Gilles de Ligny. (*Inception* is the name for the academic exercises by which a bachelor theologian received the doctorate and was promoted to master.) Shortly thereafter, on 18 November, the Franciscan Minister-General, Gonsalvus of Spain, sent a letter to the Minister-Provincial of France asking that Scotus be put next in line for such promotion: "I assign to you John the Scot, of whose praiseworthy life, outstanding knowledge, and most subtle intelligence I have been made fully aware, partly through long experience and partly through his reputation, which has spread everywhere."¹⁶ Scotus incepted as master early in 1305. It was around this time that Scotus disputed with the Dominican William Peter Godinus on the principle of individuation.¹⁷ In either Advent 1306 or Lent 1307 he conducted a quodlibetal disputation.

According to tradition, Scotus's time in Paris came to a sudden and unexpected end when the Minister-General transferred him to

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the Franciscan *studium* at Cologne. Whether this story of a hasty removal is true or not, it is certainly the case that Scotus's successor at Paris is known to have been master at least as early as 25 October 1307, and Scotus is listed as "lector of Cologne" in a document dated 20 February 1308,¹⁸ so it is likely that Scotus began teaching in Cologne in October 1307 and continued through the rest of the academic year. In default of hard evidence, various speculations, ranging from the fantastic to the mundane, have been proposed to explain why Scotus was transferred out of the far more prestigious University of Paris at the height of his career. One of the more ingenious explanations was that of Callebaut,¹⁹ who argued that Scotus was in danger because of his opposition to the French king's vigorous measures to suppress the Knights Templar, measures enthusiastically supported by John of Pouilly, who had accused Scotus of heresy for his defense of the Immaculate Conception and expressed the desire to attack Scotus "not by arguments but in some other way" (*non argumentis sed aliter*). So, according to Callebaut, Gonsalvus sent Scotus to Cologne to be out of the way of danger. A more matter-of-fact explanation was suggested by Longpré, who noted that it was common for the Franciscans to send their star theologians from one house to another.²⁰ But whatever his reason for being in Cologne, he was not to be there long. He died at Cologne in 1308; the date is traditionally given as November 8. He was buried in the Franciscan church in Cologne, where today his remains rest in an ornate sarcophagus bearing the Latin epitaph that has been associated with his burial place for centuries:

*Scotia me genuit,
Anglia me suscepit,
Gallia me docuit,
Colonia me tenet.*

Scotland bore me,
England received me,
France taught me,
Cologne holds me.

II. SCOTUS'S WORKS

What follows is a discussion of Scotus's works in a rough chronological order (since no precise order can be given). For each work I indicate the best available edition, if any. (Note that the Wadding edition of 1639 is not a critical edition and must therefore be used with care; the Bonaventure and Vatican editions are critical editions.)

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More detailed discussions of the nature, authenticity, authority, and chronology of Scotus's works can be found in the critical prefaces to Volumes 1 and 3 of the Bonaventure edition and Volumes 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 17, and 19 of the Vatican edition.

<i>Quaestiones super Porphyrii Isagogem</i>	edition: Bonaventure 1
<i>Quaestiones in librum Praedicamentorum</i>	edition: Bonaventure 1
<i>Quaestiones in I et II librum Perihermeneias</i>	edition: Wadding 1 (Bonaventure, in progress)
<i>Octo quaestiones in duos libros Perihermeneias</i>	edition: Wadding 1 (Bonaventure, in progress)
<i>Quaestiones in libros Elenchorum</i>	edition: Wadding 1 (Bonaventure, in progress)

These works are collectively known as the *parva logicalia*, or "little logical works." They have traditionally been dated to early in Scotus's career, possibly as early as 1295, although the evidence currently available does not permit any definitive dating. There is substantial evidence that these are genuine works of Scotus.²¹ The manuscript tradition for each of these works contains ascriptions to Scotus. Antonius Andreas, an early and generally faithful follower of Scotus, includes summaries of Scotus's questions on the *Isagoge* and *Praedicamenta* in his own works. And Adam Wodeham, who is noted for his accurate citations of Scotus, twice cites the questions on the *Perihermenias* in his *Lectura secunda*.

<i>Lectura</i>	edition (Books 1 and 2): Vatican 16–19 edition (Book 3): not yet edited
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The *Lectura* contains Scotus's notes for the lectures he gave on Books 1 and 2 of the *Sentences* as a bachelor theologian at Oxford. It is therefore his earliest theological work, and since the later revision of these lectures, the *Ordinatio*, was never completed, it is the only Oxford commentary we have on certain parts of the *Sentences*. For example, Scotus never dictated a revised version of Book 2, dd. 15–25, and the Vatican edition of the *Ordinatio* does not contain questions on those distinctions.

We also have a set of lecture notes on Book 3, the *Lectura completa*, which exists in only three manuscripts and has not yet been

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edited. These lectures were also given at Oxford, but later, possibly during Scotus's exile from Paris in 1303–04. We have no *Lectura* at all on Book 4. Some have argued that Scotus never lectured on Book 4 at Oxford, but Wolter suggests that “the total absence of any Oxford lectures on Bks. III and IV before Scotus went to Paris may be a consequence of the destructive raids on the university libraries of England in 1535 and 1550.”²²

*Quaestiones super
libros De anima*

edition: Bonaventure (in progress)

Although some scholars deny the authenticity of the question-commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, the attributions to Scotus in the manuscript tradition and its explicit citation by Adam Wodeham provide strong evidence in favor of its authenticity. Further discussion of the authenticity and dating of the work should be sought in the forthcoming critical edition.

*Quaestiones super libros
Metaphysicorum Aristotelis*

edition: Bonaventure 3–4

The editors of the critical edition say that “this work of the Subtle Doctor has come down to us in a disorderly state,”²³ with questions ordered differently in different manuscripts, single manuscripts in multiple hands, questions transcribed more than once in a single manuscript, and the ordering of paragraphs within questions varying from one manuscript to another. Nevertheless, they say, “the meaning of the text which has come down to us is rarely compromised.”²⁴

The *Questions on the Metaphysics* have traditionally been dated early, a tradition that the Vatican editors follow,²⁵ but the editors of the critical edition argue that no single dating is possible for the entire work: “we suggest that these questions were composed and revised over an extended period of time and that certain questions stem from a period late in Scotus's career.”²⁶ Indeed, detailed textual analysis by Dumont, Noone, and the editors themselves strongly suggests that Books 7 through 9 date in their present form to late in Scotus's career; Wolter notes that Book 7 must date between Book 2 of the *Ordinatio* and Book 2 of the *Reportatio*.²⁷ On the other hand, Richard Cross argues that Book 5 of the *Questions on the Metaphysics* must predate the *Lectura*, and therefore that the first five books should all be dated to before 1300.²⁸

Scotus also wrote an *Expositio* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which is now lost. The *Expositio super libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis* printed as Scotus's in the Wadding edition is the work of Antonius Andreas.

Ordinatio edition (Books 1 and 2): Vatican 1–8
 edition (Books 3 and 4): Wadding 6–10

An *ordinatio* is a text that the instructor himself has set in order in preparation for publication (i.e., copying by the official university scribes and distribution to the booksellers). Scotus's *Ordinatio* is his revision of the lectures he gave as a bachelor at Oxford, based on the *Lectura*. We can clearly discern at least two layers of revision. The initial revision was begun in the summer of 1300 and left incomplete when Scotus departed for Paris in 1302; it probably did not get much past Book 2. Further revisions were made in Paris; we know that Scotus was still dictating questions for Book 4 as late as 1304, as well as updating the parts he had already revised while still at Oxford. These updates were usually in the form of marginal additions or interpolated texts that reflected what Scotus taught in Paris. Our picture of the nature and extent of the second layer of revisions is, however, still murky, in part because the Vatican edition of the *Ordinatio* is complete only through the end of Book 2, and no critical edition of the Paris *Reportatio* is available at all (see *Reportatio parisiensis*, below). Much further study is needed to understand just how much the *Ordinatio* represents the views Scotus held at Oxford and how much he revised it to reflect developments in his views while in Paris. At present, however, the most plausible view would seem to be that of Wolter, who wrote that it is a

serious and inexcusable mistake for scholars writing on Scotus today to regard his *Ordinatio* as a seamless garment rather than a work begun in Oxford and left unfinished when he left Paris for Cologne. It is particularly unwise to consider the basic text of the eleven volumes of the Vatican edition so far printed as necessarily representative of his final views simply because parts were updated with a view to what he taught later in Paris.²⁹

And Wolter argues persuasively that *Ordinatio* 1 "is simply a more mature expression of his early views, and needs to be supplemented by the later positions he held which can be found in the reports of his lectures at Cambridge and Paris."³⁰

Collationes oxonienses edition: Wadding 3; Harris 1927, 2:371–8;
et parisienses Balić 1929; three as yet unedited

The *Collationes* represent disputations in which Scotus participated at Oxford and Paris. Dumont notes that “The *Collationes* are perhaps the least studied of Scotus’s theological works, yet the fact that Scotus himself refers to them several times in the course of revising his *Ordinatio* indicates their importance.”³¹ He argues that the Oxford *Collationes* were disputed either during Scotus’s exile from Paris in 1303–04 or at some time between 1305 and his death in 1308.³² The Paris *Collationes* were presumably disputed at various times between 1302 and 1307.

Reportatio parisiensis edition: see below

A *reportatio* is a student report of a lecture. We have several *reportationes* of Scotus’s lectures at Paris, and the relationship among the various versions is unclear. There are also questions about the order in which he commented on the *Sentences*. One plausible view is that he commented sequentially on all four books in the academic year 1302–03, being interrupted near the end by his exile from Paris, and resuming with Book 4 upon his return in the spring of 1304. There are future-tense references in Book 4 to topics he will treat in Book 3, presumably in the academic year 1304–05, when he may have given another complete course of lectures on the *Sentences*. The one clear fact is that Scotus himself personally examined a *reportatio* of his lectures on Book 1, which is therefore known as the *Reportatio examinata*. Since this work represents Scotus’s most mature commentary on the matters treated in *Sentences* 1, it is of paramount importance in understanding his thought and its development. Unfortunately, it has not yet been edited. What the Wadding edition prints as *Reportatio* 1 is actually Book 1 of the *Additiones magnae*.

The Vatican editors³³ identify the following versions of the *Reportatio*:

On Book 1:	
<i>Reportatio</i> 1A (the <i>Reportatio examinata</i>)	edition: not yet edited
<i>Reportatio</i> 1B	edition: Paris 1517
<i>Reportatio</i> 1C (now identified as the <i>Reportatio cantabrigiensis</i>)	edition: not yet edited