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978-0-521-43978-7 - A Concise History of the University of Cambridge

Elisabeth Leedham-Green

Excerpt

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## I

FROM THE BEGINNINGS TO THE  
LATE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The University of Cambridge was not founded by Athenian philosophers in the train of Cantaber, the princely Spanish son-in-law of Gurguntius Brabtruc, king of Britain, in the year 4321 after the creation of the world (in 4004 BC), nor yet by Sigebert, king of the Angles (aided and abetted by St Felix) in the seventh century AD. Greek philosophers escaping with Brutus from fallen Troy did not establish a university at Cricklade (= Greekland) in Wiltshire, presumably in the twelfth century BC, and subsequently transfer to Oxford. It is, at best, very doubtful that King Alfred founded or re-founded an academy at Oxford; and if he did, there was no continuity between that school and the later university there. These agreeable fables first appear in written records in the fourteenth century, when rivalry between the universities was already sufficient to give rise to that most venerable of contests the university lying match, and they were further elaborated by zealous antiquaries of the sixteenth century: Prince Cantaber features, along with some very favourable charters attributed to King Arthur, to Cadwallader and to Edward the Elder, in the very scholarly (and still useful) *Privileges of the University of Cambridge* presented to the university by Robert Hare in 1590, while King Sigebert held his ground, albeit somewhat precariously, in Cambridge's annual Commemoration of Benefactors until 1914. The Cambridge University Archives can show papal bulls over the names of the seventh-century popes Honorius I and Sergius I: elegant but unconvincing, they bear witness to the university's struggles for exemption from ecclesiastical authority in the early fifteenth century.

The schools of Oxford increased in stature and in numbers as a result of the migrations from Paris in 1167 and from Northampton in about 1192, but the university did not owe its origins to either of these events,

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although it was in the 1190s that it emerged as the premier *studium* in the country. Whether, in the earliest years of any given *studium* in medieval Europe the teaching masters were as concerned about their precise status as modern scholars have been on their account is doubtful. A master would lecture where pupils, and perhaps patrons, might be found and it was only where a group of such masters attracted an audience sufficient to give some promise of continuity that they set about establishing a guild and, as such, claiming protection and privileges as occasion demanded from pope or monarch, bishop, prince or municipality, each in turn anxious to enhance their sphere of interest.

A *studium* was simply a school with formal facilities for advanced study. It was Italian jurists of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who gave legal force to the distinction between a *studium particulare* which attracted students only from its immediate vicinity and a *studium generale* which attracted an international clientele and as such could appeal for recognition from emperor or pope rather than from monarch or bishop. In practice the distinction, which was sometimes applied retrospectively, could be hard to justify. Relatively few European students came to study in Oxford in the twelfth century, yet by 1209 Oxford was one of only eight European schools generally regarded as *studia generalia*. The others – not all of them destined to survive as such – were Bologna, Paris, Montpellier, Palencia, Reggio Emilia, Vicenza and, less certainly, Salerno, where advanced studies were exclusively medical. It soon came to be expected that a *studium generale* would offer facilities for study in at least two of the senior faculties of theology, law and medicine.

If Oxford was the only British school recognised as a *studium generale* at the beginning of the thirteenth century, it should not be supposed that other advanced schools had not also been flourishing in Britain in the twelfth century. Schools thrived in the cathedral cities of Lincoln and York, and also in London; both law and theology schools were to be found in Exeter in about 1200, and in Hereford in the 1190s it was claimed that all seven of the liberal arts (the *trivium* and *quadrivium*) were taught.<sup>1</sup> Northampton, in the late twelfth century, certainly rivalled Oxford in size and in national esteem, even after the migrations away

<sup>1</sup> For the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* see below, pp. 17–18.

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from Northampton in 1192 and 1238. In 1261 Henry III formally approved the settlement of a university there, but when those scholars who had not removed to Oxford in the previous year ill-advisedly took the wrong side during Henry's siege of the town in 1264 the royal licence was very naturally revoked.

It is not possible to assign an exact date to the emergence at Oxford of an organised body of doctors and masters. One Theobald of Etampes taught there as early, perhaps, as 1094; Robert Pullen, who had studied in Paris, taught theology there in the 1130s. The religious houses certainly accommodated scholars, but there is no hard evidence for organised and continuous schools before the late 1180s and no single recorded event marks the beginning of a university at Oxford.

The University of Cambridge, by contrast, is alleged by Roger of Wendover,<sup>2</sup> an unreliable but in this instance plausible contemporary source, to trace its origins to a crime, and a bloody one. In 1209, it appears, two Oxford scholars were convicted of the murder or manslaughter of a woman and were hanged by the town authorities, apparently with the assent of King John. In normal times the ecclesiastical authorities would have exerted themselves, no doubt successfully, to claim immunity for these clerks – for the vast majority of university scholars were at least in minor orders – but the times were not normal: king and pope were in conflict, and the powers of the church were accordingly much diminished. In protest at the hanging the University of Oxford went into voluntary suspension and the great majority of scholars migrated to Paris, to Reading and to Cambridge. Migrations from one medieval university to another, both by individuals and by groups of scholars, were commonplace enough, and the Oxford scholars proceeding to Paris were but reversing the Paris migration to Oxford of 1167. Those going to Reading and to Cambridge, however, must have regarded their secession as merely temporary. The choice of Reading is comprehensible enough on geographical grounds and the sojourn of the Oxford scholars there was indeed temporary. The choice of Cambridge calls for an explanation and only hypothetical ones can be supplied.

In respect to communications Cambridge was well situated, at least in the summer when the winter floods had subsided, and had been settled

<sup>2</sup> Died 1236.

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in turn by Romans, Saxons and Danes; it certainly had grammar schools in the twelfth century and about it lay the considerable religious establishments of Ely Cathedral, Crowland Abbey and, on its doorstep, Barnwell Priory. As much might be said for a number of other places. It is, indeed, possible that the great polymath Robert Grosseteste, later bishop of Lincoln, had lectured in Cambridge in the 1190s, but there is no evidence for continuous or organised teaching in the superior faculties of theology, law and medicine in Cambridge in the twelfth century. The band of scholars trudging into Cambridge included among their number, quite possibly as their leader, one John Grim, who had held the office of Master of the Schools (the forerunner of the chancellorship) in 1201. He was quite simply coming back to his family home, as were several others.

Five years later King John was reconciled with Pope Innocent III, whereupon the papal legate not only ruled that the Oxford townsmen must make retribution for the hanging but also tried to establish terms, favourable to the clerks, on which the town and university of Oxford could co-exist peacefully. The Reading colony returned to take its part in the newly self-confident university, and so did some of those who had migrated to Cambridge. Others, however, remained, encouraged perhaps by the graduates in the entourage of Eustace, bishop of Ely. By 1225 at the latest they had achieved sufficient status as a corporation to have a chancellor with powers delegated by the bishop of Ely. It was in about 1225, moreover, that the potential body of students was swollen by the establishment of a house of Franciscans in Cambridge, to be joined by the Dominicans by 1238.

As early as 1233 the existence of a *studium* at Cambridge had received papal recognition in an indult, or decree, of Gregory IX of 14 June awarding to the chancellor and *universitas* of scholars the *ius non trahi extra*, that is, the right not to be sued in courts outside the diocese of Ely so long as they were prepared to submit to the jurisdiction either of the chancellor or of the bishop. In 1290 a letter from Pope Nicholas IV addressed to the canons of the Order of Sempringham, some of whom were studying in Cambridge, described the school as a *studium generale* and this standing was confirmed, rather than first established, by a papal bull of 9 June 1318 granted in response to a petition from Edward II. As so often Cambridge had started after Oxford and finished first: Oxford

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1. Detail from charter of Edward I, 1291/2, confirming the privileges of the university. The illuminated initial shows the king presenting the charter to two Doctors of Divinity, kneeling, a Doctor of Canon Law, standing on the left, and, beside him, a Doctor of Civil Law.

was granted the *ius non trahi extra* only in 1254 and, in spite of repeated attempts, never received papal recognition as a *studium generale*.

For practical purposes, however, it was not to the church but to the crown that the university most often looked for protection and for privileges. The crown, in turn, was increasingly in need of able administrators and of diplomats who would be internationally respected. It was in the king's interest, therefore, to foster the universities, so long at least as they proved conformable. In 1231 Henry III issued three writs, designed to promote the security and the privileges of scholars *vis-à-vis* the town. At least one of these writs clearly regarded the chancellor and masters of Cambridge as having the power to act as a legal corporation. It was on their recognition as such that the status of Oxford and Cambridge uniquely rested, and from the time of Henry III each successive king or

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queen was on accession routinely solicited for a charter confirming all rights granted in earlier reigns.

The speed with which the *studium* at Cambridge achieved maturity as an institution is dramatically illustrated by a compilation, dated on secure palaeographical grounds to about 1250, to be found in MS 401 (folios 54r–55v) in the Angelica Library in Rome and published by Father M. B. Hackett in 1970. The exact status of this compilation is open to question. If, as Father Hackett maintained, it represents an official code of statutes, then it is the earliest such code of any university in Europe. Other scholars have maintained that the manuscript represents rather a privately commissioned compilation comprising a mixture of formal statutes and of less official ‘ordinances’. The thirteen chapters deal with such matters as university officers – the chancellor; rectors/proctors; and bedells;<sup>3</sup> regent masters and their assemblies;<sup>4</sup> judicial procedures; academic dress and discipline; hostels and rents; funerals and the commemoration of benefactors. They demonstrate conclusively that within forty years of its establishment the scholars of Cambridge had developed some institutions, notably the court of the masters, which owed nothing to Oxford origins.

So far as the ecclesiastical authorities were concerned it was the delegating of the bishop of Ely’s powers to a chancellor that marked the first step in the attempts of the masters to attain autonomous status. From early in the thirteenth century chancellors were in fact chosen by the masters, but their election had to be confirmed by the bishop, who also exacted an oath of obedience. In 1374 John of Dunwich, elected chancellor for the second time, endeavoured, unsuccessfully in the end, to refuse the oath. Hitherto relations between the university and the bishop had been relatively smooth: an amicable settlement had been reached in 1264 as to the settlement of appeals from the jurisdiction of the chancellor’s court, which were to be heard by the assemblies of the university before being called into the bishop’s court, and there seems to have been little episcopal interference in academic affairs. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, however, matters began to come to a head. After John of Dunwich’s attempted defiance the bishop, in 1392, tried to call into

<sup>3</sup> For the functions of these officers see pp. 11–15 below.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 15.

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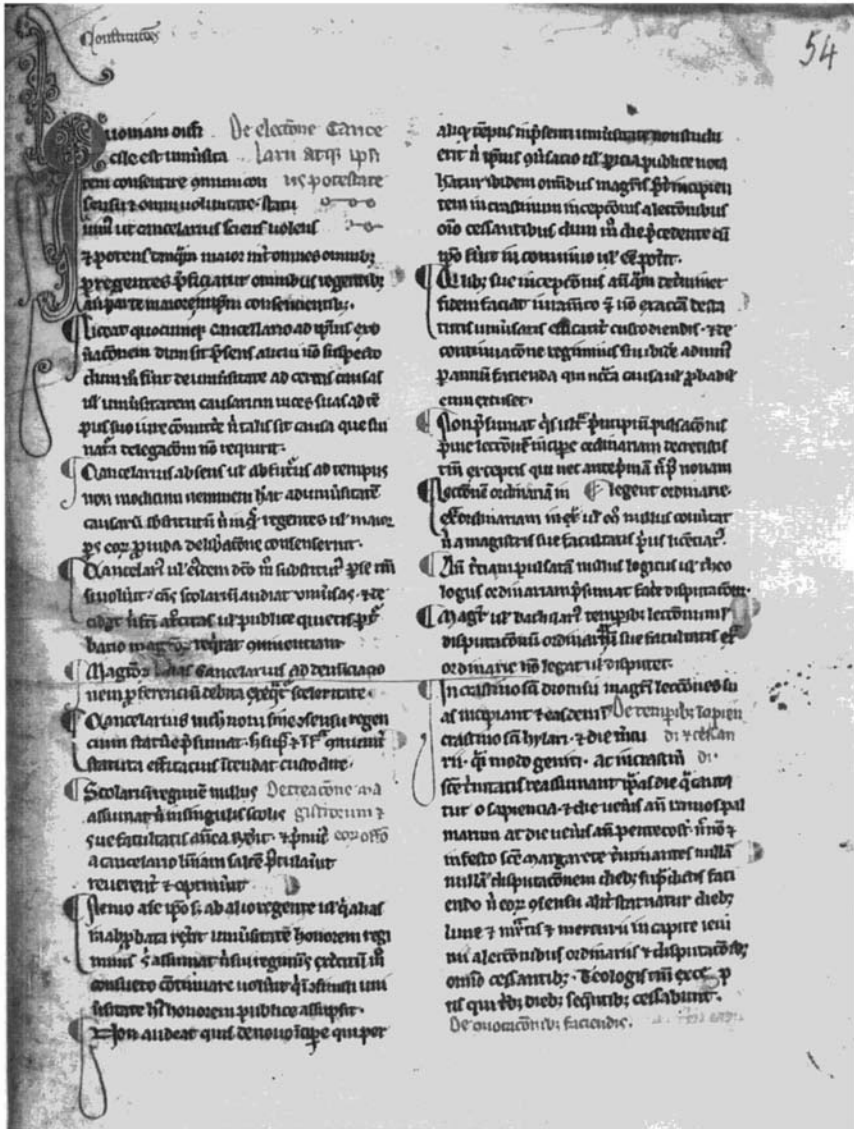
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2. The earliest recorded statutes of the university, preserved in a manuscript in the Angelica Library in Rome, dating from *circa* 1250.

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his court cases which the chancellor regarded as properly his. In 1401 the university was subjected to a visitation by Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, which, indeed, passed off peaceably enough – ironically in the light of the fact that in this same year the university secured a bull from Boniface IX whereby the chancellor was no longer liable to episcopal confirmation.

The papacy, at least, seems to have held Cambridge in higher esteem than Oxford, in part, perhaps, because the smaller university was free from the taint of Wyclifism. When the Council of Constance ended the Great Schism, and the inconveniences of having two popes, in addition to an antipope, by establishing a new pope in 1417, a letter announcing the election was sent to Cambridge, but not to Oxford. Finally, in July 1430 Pope Martin V commissioned the prior of Barnwell and John Depyng, a canon of Lincoln, to investigate the claim of the Cambridge masters to be free of all ecclesiastical jurisdiction; the prior, acting alone, found in favour of the university, and his decision was ratified by a bull of Eugenius IV in September 1433. Oxford, again, had to wait, this time until 1479. These manifestations of papal favour were theoretically important in the academic arena of western Christendom: the status of *studium generale* implicitly, and soon explicitly, brought with it the *ius ubique docendi* – the right of its masters and doctors to teach in other such schools. In fact, however, it appears that at some universities at least the resident masters were capable of effectively maintaining a ‘closed shop’, while, conversely, more European scholars frequented the schools of Oxford, which held the title only by tradition, than those of Cambridge, which held it by papal fiat.

At a more mundane level the problems which most pressed on the university were those arising from their relations with the townsmen among whom they lived. In the first instance they required rooms and houses in which to live and to lecture, and they wished to have them at a reasonable, if not a preferential, rate. They needed also their victuals – food, drink and candles – and they wanted value for money. They wanted their streets free from ordure, and from prostitutes, and they needed the co-operation of the civic authorities in the provision of custody for those committed to prison in the chancellor’s court. Their securing of these aims was proceeding satisfactorily enough, if in a piecemeal fashion, when the violent if brief eruption of the Peasants’ Revolt in



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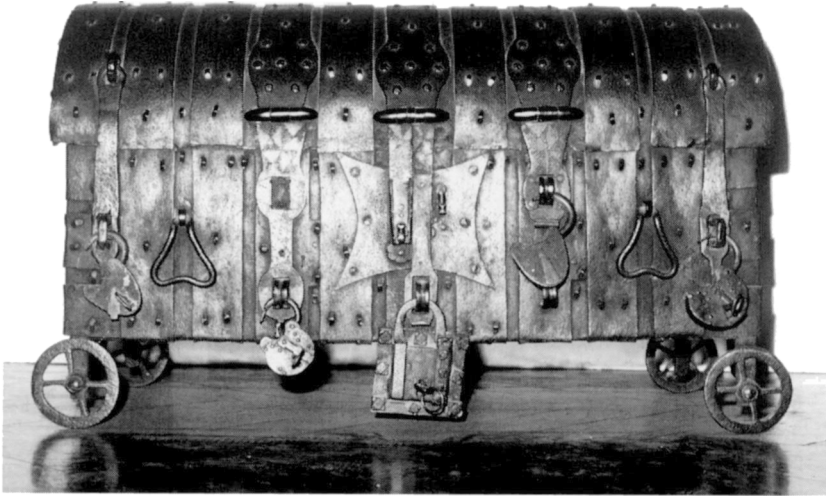
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1381 provided a magnificent opportunity to consolidate and increase their gains.

Brawls between scholars and townsmen were nothing new. A brawl between a northern and a southern student in 1261 had led to a general affray, joined by the townsmen, in which much damage was inflicted on persons, on property and on the records of the university. The year 1322 saw similar acts of vandalism, perhaps fomented by a clause in the university charter of 1317 which decreed that the mayor and bailiffs on taking office should swear before the chancellor to uphold the privileges of the university. This annual ceremony, known to the university as the *Magna Congregatio* and to the smarting townsmen as the 'Black Assembly', continued, predictably enough, to serve as a focus of hostility between town and gown until the last attempt to revive it in the nineteenth century.

The events of 1381, however, were of a violence hitherto unknown in Cambridge. The mayor and burgesses joined with rebels from the surrounding countryside in an assault on the property of the university, of Corpus Christi College (a substantial landowner in the town), of William Wigmore, a university bedell, as well as on the Carmelite house and on Barnwell Priory. There is a vivid account of one Margaret Sterre dancing around a bonfire of what were allegedly the muniments of the university, dragged out of the university church, crying, 'Away with the learning of the clerks, away with it!' It is, in fact, doubtful whether it was indeed muniments which burned so merrily. Some forty pre-1381 royal charters are listed in an inventory drawn up by William Rysley in 1420, of which over thirty survive to this day and not one of them is singed. It cannot be demonstrated that losses of earlier material are not due rather to the negligence of the clerks than to the fury of the town, although writs belonging to the university are also said to have been destroyed in a fracas some four years later. Some financial records may perhaps have been destroyed, but such documents were not to be regarded as worthy of systematic preservation for another hundred years or so. Some of 'the learning of the clerks', in the form of a number of books, may also have perished in the conflagration, but if so these were probably volumes whose owners, finding them at least temporarily inessential, had deposited them as security for loans from the university chests founded for that purpose.

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3. A university chest, dating from the fifteenth century, surviving in the Old Schools. Note the multiple locks necessitating the presence of several key-holders to open it.

Nevertheless, the remaining damage was real enough, and the threat to the university's security in the town certainly provoked royal alarm. The penalties for the town were bitter. For a year the hard-won rights of the burgesses to govern their own affairs – their liberties – were taken into royal hands, and when they were restored they were shorn of the control of the assizes of bread, wine and ale, whereby the prices of these essential commodities were periodically adjusted, and of the supervision of weights and measures in the town, which powers passed instead to the chancellor of the university.

This was only the most dramatic incident in a struggle for dominance between the university and town authorities, a struggle in which for centuries the university could call on the bigger battalions. By 1381 the university had already achieved, among other privileges, an agreement whereby representatives of the town and university together were to fix rents quinquennially, some control over the supply and price of essential foodstuffs and over the arrangements for keeping the streets clean. The