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Great Minds of the Medieval World

Course Guidebook

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Other Great Courses taught by Professor Armstrong include *Turning Points in Medieval History*, *The Medieval World*, and *Analysis and Critique: How to Engage and Write about Anything*. ■

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography	i
Course Scope	1

LECTURE GUIDES

LECTURE 1

Augustine of Hippo	3
--------------------------	---

LECTURE 2

Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great	10
----------------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 3

Boethius and the <i>Consolation of Philosophy</i>	17
---------------------------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 4

Isidore of Seville and the <i>Etymologies</i>	24
-----------------------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 5

The Venerable Bede	31
--------------------------	----

LECTURE 6

Alcuin, Charlemagne, and Alfred the Great	38
-------------------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 7

Avicenna and the Golden Age of Islam	45
--------------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 8

Alhacen and the Scientific Method	52
-----------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 9

Averroes and Aristotelian Philosophy	58
--------------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 10

Maimonides and Jewish Law	65
---------------------------------	----

Table of Contents

LECTURE 11	
Rashi and Biblical Interpretation.....	72
LECTURE 12	
Saladin and the Defeat of the Crusaders	78
LECTURE 13	
Hildegard of Bingen	85
LECTURE 14	
Bernard of Clairvaux.....	92
LECTURE 15	
Abelard and Héloïse	99
LECTURE 16	
Peter Lombard and the <i>Sentences</i>	106
LECTURE 17	
Thomas Aquinas.....	113
LECTURE 18	
William of Ockham and John Duns Scotus	120
LECTURE 19	
Geoffrey Chaucer and Dante Alighieri	127
LECTURE 20	
Francesco Petrarch	134
LECTURE 21	
Lorenzo de' Medici	141
LECTURE 22	
Christine de Pisan	148
LECTURE 23	
Sir Thomas Malory and <i>Le Morte Darthur</i>	155

Table of Contents

LECTURE 24

William Caxton and the Birth of Printing	162
------------------------------------------------	-----

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Bibliography	169
--------------------	-----

Great Minds of the Medieval World

Scope:

The European Middle Ages have been characterized by some as a time that is primarily marked by broad, impersonal forces—religious uniformity, rigidly hierarchical social structures, and slow technological or scientific progress. However, through close examination of the period, this lecture series reveals that, in fact, the opposite is true: The Middle Ages was a remarkable time of human innovation, social experimentation, and religious change. That this is the case becomes blindingly evident when we engage the period through the lens of some of its most brilliant thinkers: the “great minds” of the Middle Ages. These individuals both responded to and influenced the world around them, in many cases altering social structures, educational practices, and religious dogma and making significant contributions to fields as diverse as art, literature, medicine, science, and banking.

In this course, we’ll meet some of the greatest minds of the Middle Ages, beginning with Saint Augustine, the North African Christian bishop whose life story and philosophical writings arguably laid the foundation and limned the outlines of most of the major developments in philosophical and religious thinking for centuries to come. We’ll meet Augustine’s “heirs”—such writers as Boethius, Isidore of Seville, and Pope Gregory the Great. We will learn how the military minds of such figures as Charlemagne and Alfred the Great were influenced by the religious sphere and vice versa. The great cross-fertilization of medieval thinking will get considerable attention as we examine the careers and thinking of Islamic scholars, including Avicenna, Averroes, and Alhacen, whose work and innovations in the fields of medicine and science would profoundly affect the shape of the medieval world. Great Jewish scholars, such as Rashi and Maimonides, are engaged against the backdrop of a growing university system; in the 12th century, universities in Paris, Bologna, Oxford, and elsewhere were reengaging with works from classical antiquity and seeking answers to old questions in new places.

Along the way, we will also meet a few remarkable women, including Hildegard of Bingen, Héloïse, and Christine de Pisan. The career of Hildegard was shaped by a love of God and intense visions that gave her the courage and authority to speak out on religious matters. The career of Héloïse was forged by the unique combination of intellectual brilliance, a first-rate education, and a tragic love story. In the last case, unexpected widowhood and the need to support her family led Christine de Pisan to pick up her pen as Europe's first professional female writer.

In the last section of the course, we'll examine how the medieval world was transitioning into the early modern one. Such figures as Petrarch, Dante, Chaucer, Lorenzo de' Medici, Sir Thomas Malory, and William Caxton helped usher in a new age by means of literary, economic, and technological innovations. The course as a whole offers a rich tapestry woven by shining strands of thought from different time periods, geographic regions, social strata, religious spheres, and gender roles. ■

Augustine of Hippo

Lecture 1

Many “great minds” are known to us as the result of a watershed moment that propelled them out of oblivion and onto the stage of history. We’ll begin our course with a figure whose entire life might be called such a watershed moment: Saint Augustine of Hippo. He was born in North Africa in the 4th century to a middle-class family; nothing about his background would suggest that he was destined to become one of the most important figures in the Catholic Church. Augustine’s was a great mind that helped shape the political, religious, intellectual, and social landscape of the Middle Ages, and even centuries after his death, thinkers would return to his writings for guidance.

Augustine’s Early Questioning

- The journey of Augustine (354–430) from North Africa to Italy in 383 seems to have been one of the key moments in the development of this great thinker’s personality. Indeed, there is something dramatic about this event because he had to deceive his mother about his intentions and sneak away before dawn to board the ship.
- Augustine’s father, Patrick, seems to have been relatively indifferent to religion, but his mother, Monica, was a devout Christian and apparently prodded her son to accept the teachings of Christianity and, eventually, to accept baptism and full membership into the church.
 - It’s important to remember that the Christian Church in the 4th century was still in its infancy. Such doctrines as confession, penance, priestly celibacy, and excommunication weren’t yet clearly established.
 - In fact, many of these sacraments and theological positions would be developed much later, using the writings of Augustine.

- How did Augustine reach the point at which his ideas would prove so crucial to Christian doctrine? He started by trying to explain many of the issues that people have struggled with since the beginning of time: Why are we here? How is the world ordered? Why does evil exist?
- Augustine's first approach to these questions was made by engaging with the philosophies of classical authors, such as Plato; indeed, even after he became a Christian, Augustine would continue to argue that the works of pre-Christian writers had value for a Christian population.
- The attempt to understand the relationship of good and evil in the world led Augustine to the philosophy of the Manichaeans, a religious sect generally classified as heretical Christians. They believed that Jesus was divine, but they also believed that their originator, Mani, was part of the supreme deity and that all human beings carried what we might call "God particles" within them.
 - What attracted Augustine to Manichaeism was that it offered a seemingly rational explanation for the relationship between good and evil. The basic theory was that there were two equal and opposing forces in the universe—good and evil; these two forces constantly strove against each other, but in the end, they would tend to settle in balanced opposition.
 - Spirit was the good force, and matter, or flesh, was the evil one; thus, Manichaeism could explain why someone like Augustine might simultaneously long to live a life of celibacy while succumbing for more than a decade to the temptations of the flesh.
 - But Augustine's mind was still troubled by flaws in the logic of Manichaeism even while he was a member of that sect. Ultimately, he returned to his beloved classical scholars, and using the techniques of classical rhetoric, essentially argued himself out of a belief in Manichaeism.

- Augustine was still struggling with his questions when he left Carthage, where he had been teaching, and traveled to Italy in 383. In 385, Monica traveled to Italy to join her son, and she continued to try to persuade Augustine to accept Christianity.

Conversion to Christianity

- Augustine had originally gone to Rome to become a teacher of rhetoric, and his skill as a speaker had brought him to the attention of high-ranking officials there, who offered him the position of orator of the imperial court. Rome at this time was a hotbed of recalcitrant pagans, heretical Christians, and hypocritical mainstream Christians who sought after and used their high religious offices for personal and political gain.
- Disillusioned with Rome, Augustine began to go to Milan to hear the bishop there, a man named Ambrose, preach on the Bible. Augustine often sought Ambrose out to discuss his questions about faith, the universe, and God.
 - Eventually, these discussions led Augustine to an important conclusion about biblical exegesis: The Bible could be used as a tool to instruct on a variety of levels, from the simplest and most literal to the most complex and symbolic.
 - This insight was crucial because up until this time, Augustine had considered the Bible to be, in many sections, an unsophisticated text that was not well written, whereas now, he came to recognize and appreciate its complexities.
- After years of wrestling with questions of good, evil, the nature of God, and the nature of man, Augustine was primed for the moment of conversion to Christianity. According to the *Confessions*, this moment occurred when he, in great inner turmoil, was sitting in a garden and heard the voice of a child chanting, “*tolle, lege; tolle, lege,*” “take up, and read.”
 - Augustine picked up the book of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans that he had to hand, and his eyes fell on this passage: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness,

not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.”

- As Augustine relates in his *Confessions*, he had often asked that God take away his lustful desires, stating in one of his most famous quotes: “God, grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.”
- The time had finally come, and after this impetus, Augustine unleashed the greatness of his mind on the world.

“On the Master”

- One of the most interesting texts Augustine wrote after his baptism and return to Africa, where he became bishop of Hippo, was a dialogue called “On the Master,” concerning the nature of truth.
- In this early work, Augustine developed two major points that would inform all his later thinking and writing. The first was the idea that words are only signs that point to the reality of what they attempt to name or represent.
 - This idea would be worked out more fully in the 20th-century theories of such thinkers as Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstructionism. Derrida and other deconstructionists argued that language embodies what they called



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The amazing body of Augustine’s work—letters, treatises, dialogues, and more—reveals that his thinking constantly evolved over the course of his life and career.

signifiers, signifieds, and referents. The signifier is the word, such as *book*; the thing signified is the idea of the word *book*—what that term represents to the speaker; and the referent is the actual physical object.

- The point here is that language can work only if those communicating have some agreement about what signifiers are supposed to mean. Deconstructionists would say that language and human communication are inherently complicated; meaning is endlessly delayed and deferred; and the only way that two speakers can ensure they understand each other is to be inside each other's minds.
- This thinking can be traced back to Augustine, who was especially concerned with the question of how one can know or understand the divine and share that knowledge with others.
- The second idea that Augustine developed in “On the Master” was that the ability to determine and test truth had to be an innate sense. He did not mean that the determination of what is “true” was subjective and unique to each individual but, rather, that all individuals had the capacity to recognize truth, and this capacity had to be divinely given.

Later Writing

- During his time as bishop of Hippo, Augustine worked through many of his ideas from the pulpit. By all accounts, he was an engaging, entertaining preacher, who filled his sermons with wordplay, puns, and vivid images.
- One of the most important Christian practices that was being worked out in these early days of the church was the use of exegesis—interpretation of the Bible to understand what it meant on multiple levels. As Augustine's thinking about the Bible developed, he came to believe that a set of keys could be used to “unlock” the meaning of scripture.

- Much of Augustine's textual production was a reaction to what was happening in the world around him. He was particularly affected by the fall of the Roman Empire.
 - In a sort of reverse migration, many Roman citizens fled from Europe to Africa after the Visigoths took control of most of the empire. Many of those citizens who were still pagan asked Augustine: If this religion of Christ is so great, how could your God allow a Christian empire to be overrun?
 - In part, this question led Augustine to write his monumental *City of God*, in which he argued that such events as the fall of the Roman Empire were mere episodes in a much longer story and that humans cannot know all of God's providential plan. This led to still thornier problems, but far from shying away from them, Augustine confronted them.
 - For example, if God had made everything and God is only good, then where does evil come from? Augustine's explanation—one that would be taken up by later thinkers and mystics—is that evil is not itself a thing or a substance; rather, it is an absence, a lack of goodness.
- This discussion of God's providential plan also raised another thorny issue, the question of free will: If God knows everything that has been, is, and will be, and God knows what you are going to do before you do it, then how is it possible for you to make choices, to act in good or bad ways of your own volition? Doesn't that mean that everything is foreordained?
 - Augustine's solution is that it only seems as if there is no free will. There is free will for human beings because human beings live inside time—humans on earth have a past, present, and future.
 - In contrast, God exists outside of time. Indeed, God created time; thus, even though God knows what you will do, you still have the free will to act.

- Augustine's output in terms of writing was staggering: close to 100 books and treatises, plus letters to important church figures and sermons. These writings were the single most influential body of work for all the great medieval minds who followed. We will return to Augustine throughout the course and see how his thought was appropriated, adapted, and interpreted in significant ways.

Suggested Reading

Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*.

Chadwick, *Augustine*.

Questions to Consider

1. What moments in Augustine's early life seem to have most strongly affected the development of his later philosophy and worldview?
2. In what ways do you think Augustine's different roles as father, son, scholar, and Christian combined to produce his character?

Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great

Lecture 2

As noted in the last lecture, Saint Augustine is considered one of the four fathers of Christianity, the others being Saint Ambrose of Milan, Saint Jerome, and Pope Gregory the Great. Ambrose and Augustine agreed on the importance of trying to align the ideals of the classical world with those of Christianity. Like Augustine, Ambrose also sought to promote Christianity by dynamic preaching. In this respect, he was different from Jerome, who seems to have been cold and aloof. Jerome's great contribution, of course, was the translation of the Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate. For his part, Gregory the Great helped to secure the philosophical and theological positions of these three as foundational to the church's identity.

Saint Ambrose of Milan

- Ambrose (339–397) came from a well-to-do Roman family and rose to a position of some power in early Christian society within the empire. He was born in the city of Trier in Gaul, which had a large Christian community at the time.
- In young adulthood, Ambrose entered the legal profession and, from there, became governor of the Roman province of Liguria. He was in Milan in 374 when the bishopric became vacant and, according to his biographer, Paulinus, was coerced into taking the position by leaders of the Milanese community.
- Once he was in the bishop's seat, Ambrose prayed, fasted, preached, studied, and made himself available to those who sought him out on spiritual matters. Augustine himself noted that Ambrose had so many visitors that it was often impossible to meet with him.
- Ambrose was the first important symbolic reader of scripture. He read scriptures on multiple levels and argued that one set of meanings—the literal—could be used to teach basic lessons to

newcomers to the Christian faith, while symbolic interpretations could provide more complex lessons to those who were more advanced students of religion.

- Ambrose was also one of the first to try to reconcile the various versions of the gospels with one another. In addition, he was interested in miracles and saintly intervention, taking pains to publicize miraculous events and to promote the veneration of newly confirmed saints in order to persuade those who were not firmly committed to investigate Christianity.
- Ambrose and Augustine agreed on the importance of trying to align the ideals of the classical world with those of Christianity. Ambrose used classical ideals to formulate a theory of virtue that was pragmatic and could be of use to humans in their daily lives on earth. This rather no-nonsense approach was the result, no doubt, of his deep engagement with his parishioners. He was an involved, active bishop who tended to the needs of his flock tirelessly and sought to promote Christianity by dynamic, accessible preaching.

Saint Jerome

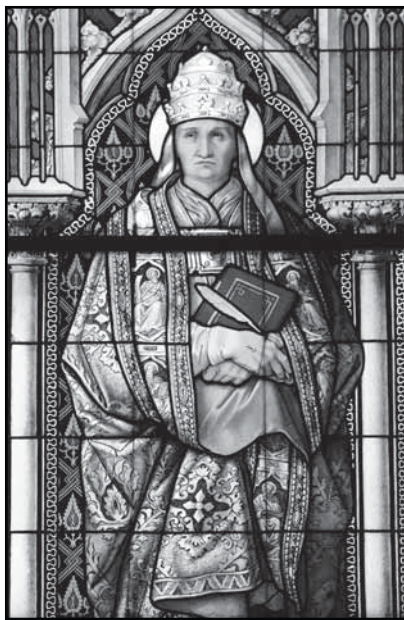
- Like Ambrose, Jerome (c. 347–419/420) came from a relatively well-to-do family who had high ambitions for their son. He also studied such classical writers as Virgil and Cicero, and he seemed destined for a life as a scholar and teacher. What was different about Jerome was his desire for self-denial, asceticism, and the eremitical life.
- Where Augustine had enjoyed the carnal pleasures of a mistress for more than a decade, Jerome found himself tortured by desires for non-Christian books and sought to protect himself from these desires by ridding his home of classical texts. Indeed, it is the love of non-Christian books that seems to have troubled Jerome most. One of his most compelling pieces of writing was in response to the charge that he was “a Ciceronian, not a Christian,” which came to him while he was experiencing some sort of vision or dream.

- Jerome was one of the earliest and most prominent practitioners of monasticism and one of the most notable failures at it. His first monastic community simply broke up, probably in part because of Jerome's generally unpleasant attitude and constant abrasive criticism.
 - Jerome then decamped to the Middle East, where he formed another monastic community in Antioch. That, too, broke up, and Jerome then seems to have joined a community of desert hermits, living among them for most of the decade of the 370s.
 - In 379, he returned to civilization, spending time in Antioch and then back in Rome itself.
- Jerome attended the General Council at Constantinople in 381, one of the last cooperative meetings between the leaders of the Latin-speaking church in the West and the Greek-speaking church in the East. He then returned to the Middle East, this time establishing a monastic community near Bethlehem. From this community, he engaged in a lively and sometimes caustic correspondence with Augustine.
- Like Ambrose, Jerome spent a great deal of time in an effort to reconcile the gospels and to reconcile basic church teachings. In attempting to explain how the writings of Saints Peter and Paul could seem so at odds, Jerome said that Peter and Paul had only pretended to disagree with each other, the better to draw in intellectuals who would be intrigued by trying to solve this theological conundrum.
- Part of the difficulty that Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose faced in their theological arguments stemmed from the flawed translations of scripture that were available at the time. It was in response to this issue that Jerome made perhaps his greatest contribution to the intellectual and theological life of the medieval world.
 - During his time in the Holy Land, Jerome realized that producing a reliable version of the Bible required going back to the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, rather than relying on the Greek of the Septuagint.

- Jerome was asked by the pope to produce a cleaner, more reliable version of scripture than any of those circulating in the medieval world. During the years that he was back in Rome (382–385), Jerome produced a new Latin version of the gospels. Upon his return to Jerusalem, he undertook his version of the Old Testament, working on that project from 391 to 406.
- The Latin version of the Bible produced by Jerome became known as the Vulgate. Its importance cannot be overstated throughout the Middle Ages, a time when scripture was foundational to every aspect of life—religious, political, scientific, and societal.

Gregory the Great

- Gregory (c. 540–604) was born into the senatorial class of Rome and was expected to rise to a position of some power. He did this in part by engaging in a rather surprising act of generosity: After being named prefect of Rome in 573, he gave a large portion of his wealth to a charitable cause, founding several monasteries.
- Gregory wasn't so much a great thinker as he was a great implementer. In other words, he was smart enough to see the potential in the ideas of others and put those ideas into practice.



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Pope Gregory the Great was not an original thinker, nor did he possess a staggering intellect; his contribution lies in his implementation of the key ideas of others.

- For example, in the 6th century, monasticism was still in its childhood, and there were many different sets of rules for how to live in a religious community. Gregory supported and affirmed the Rule that had been devised by Saint Benedict of Nursia, an almost unbelievably thorough guide to monastic living.
- As a complement to Benedict's Rule for brothers in monastic life, Gregory penned the *Regula Pastoralis*, or *Guide to Pastoral Care*. This manual was directed to those in church office and provided guidance to those who were responsible for attending to the religious health of a large community.
- Gregory also worked to promote the image of Rome as a holy center, and some of his actions on behalf of Rome presaged events that would take place almost half a millennium later, in the buildup to the Schism of 1054.
 - In that later event, the pope of Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople, in a struggle over which of their respective offices was the higher ranking and more authoritative, excommunicated each other, precipitating a breach between Western Catholic Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity that persists to this day.
 - But it was Gregory, in the 6th century, who fired one of the earliest salvos in this conflict when he explicitly refused to agree that he and the patriarch should be considered co-ecumenical; instead, Gregory argued that whoever held the seat of the pope in Rome should be regarded as the supreme leader of Christianity.
- By far, Gregory's greatest contribution to the medieval world came in his development of what is now known as the four-fold exegetical model of reading scripture.
 - In this approach, the first level of reading is literal; believers read the Old Testament to understand historical facts and learn about events that actually happened.

- The second level of interpretation is allegorical, in which the events of the Old Testament are understood to symbolize important events surrounding the life of Christ. For example, the Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale is an allegory about Christ. Jonah actually spent three days in the belly of the whale, but that event happened because it prefigured the three days Jesus would spend in his tomb before he was resurrected.
- The next level of scriptural interpretation is the tropological, or moral. Here, the idea was that all passages of the Bible, apart from their Christological significance and historical accuracy, had a lesson to impart. The story of the long-suffering Job, for example, could be said to have the tropological message that even in the midst of great trials, God is still present and that recognition of God's power will yield rewards in the end.
- The fourth level of the four-fold exegesis was anagogical, that is, having a spiritual meaning. For example, a straightforward anagogical interpretation would say that Job's sufferings signify what life is like for all of us on earth, and the rewards he enjoys in the end signify the heavenly rewards that will be granted to those who are saved.
- Gregory is rightly called "the Great" because his actions and writings had a tremendous influence throughout the medieval world and for centuries to come.
 - His *Pastoral Care* was the first book translated into Old English in Alfred the Great's education program. Several centuries later, Bernard of Clairvaux would turn to Gregory for guidance as he formulated his own theological positions on a number of issues.
 - Augustine continued to be the single most important figure in medieval religion and philosophy, in no small part because Gregory had made his writings easier for laypeople to understand.

- And the four-fold exegetical model would become so standard in later medieval approaches to scripture that it didn't occur to many thinkers and writers that there was ever a time when scripture wasn't read in this way.

Suggested Reading

Evans, *Fifty Key Medieval Thinkers*.

Rebenich, *Jerome*.

Questions to Consider

1. Of the three church fathers discussed in this lecture, which seems to have had the greatest immediate impact on the world around him? Which one has had the greatest impact on traditions and practices still in place today?
2. Which biographical detail do you find most surprising when it comes to each of these men?

Boethius and the *Consolation of Philosophy*

Lecture 3

The subject of this lecture, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, was born around the year 480 into a life of some privilege. As an adult, he rose high in the court of the Roman emperor Theodoric, eventually becoming a consul and, at the height of his career, occupying a position akin to prime minister. In addition to serving in the highest ranks of politics, Boethius also turned his attention to study and writing, particularly in the areas of education and philosophy. He became famous throughout the medieval world because of a remarkable text he wrote after he was accused of treason and sat in prison awaiting execution: the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Boethius as Scholar and Writer

- Like Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory, Boethius (c. 480–524) was born into a life of privilege and was expected to do something significant. After the deaths of his parents when he was young, he was adopted by a prominent family. As an adult, he eventually held the highest office in the land below that of the emperor Theodoric.
- Boethius devoted his attention to study and writing. Unlike other thinkers of his day, he knew Greek and could engage such classical writers as Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus in their original language. In fact, Boethius had as one of his goals to produce good Latin translations of the great Greek thinkers to make their work widely available. And it is thanks to Boethius that we now have copies of some texts that have been lost in the original.
- In addition, Boethius exerted a significant influence on medieval education. Indeed, he effectively defined the parameters that governed the way that all medieval students and scholars would think about categories of knowledge.

- Drawing from his classical training, Boethius identified four important areas of study—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—in which a well-educated person should be proficient. He also coined the term *quadrivium* (“four roads” or “four-way path”) to refer to these subjects.
- By giving these four areas of study a collective name, Boethius had a profound influence on how educational programs developed in the medieval world. It was generally expected that the *quadrivium* would be studied after a student had mastered the fields of rhetoric, grammar, and logic (the *trivium*, or “three-way path”). In combination, the *trivium* and *quadrivium* made up the seven liberal arts.
- These were considered “liberal” in that they were based primarily on thinking rather than practice, as opposed to, say, medicine or architecture. With the rise of the university system in the 11th and 12th centuries, mastery of the liberal arts was required before a student could be admitted to more advanced fields of study, such as theology or philosophy.
- After completing study of the liberal arts, the student who wished to become a *magister*, “master,” could continue for several more years of study. His masters would then subject him to several rounds of oral examination in his chosen subject. The truly dedicated scholar would then earn the title of doctor, meaning that he had reached the highest academic rank possible.
- In addition to his translations and commentaries on Greek texts, Boethius penned several original tracts, many dealing with matters of religious faith. He wrote treatises that sought to define the nature of Christ and was involved in several debates about theological points of contention.

Conflict between East and West

- Boethius seems to have been one of the first people in the medieval world to recognize the growing rift between the Greek Orthodox and Latin Catholic churches. His perception was such that he anticipated the Schism of 1054 more than 500 years before it happened. From about 520 to 523, he worked actively to heal the breach between the two branches of Christianity.
- Boethius's involvement took place immediately after an event known as the Acacian Schism, which was a break between the Eastern and Western churches that erupted because of ideological differences.
 - In short, the patriarch of Constantinople, Acacius, held one view about the dual nature of Christ, while the pope in Rome, Felix, held another.
 - Boethius was present at the debates surrounding this matter, which was eventually resolved under the influence of the newly enthroned eastern emperor, Justin, in the year 519. But the reunification didn't hold, and Boethius became even more deeply involved.
- Adding to the conflict between the pope and the patriarch, each of whom thought his office was supreme, was the fact that the emperor Theodoric in the west and the emperor Justin in the east were in a similar struggle to assert their supremacy.
 - This issue goes back to the crisis of the 3rd century when, in an attempt to better manage its vast empire, Rome had divided itself in half, setting up two emperors. Diocletian, who had put this plan in motion, had given himself a seat in the wealthier, more stable east.
 - Thus, when the western half of the empire was overrun by the Goths, the attitude in the east was that the empire still existed; the western portion was in temporary disarray, but that would be resolved soon. And, of course, it was the eastern emperor who was supreme. Later, the western emperors disagreed.

- In 523, Boethius was accused of colluding with those who were supposedly plotting with the eastern emperor, Justin, to overthrow the western emperor, Theodoric. Boethius was exiled to Pavia, where he was imprisoned for about a year before being executed. It was during his imprisonment that he wrote the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a seminal work for any number of later writers and thinkers.

Boethius and Lady Philosophy

- Let's consider five compelling points that made the *Consolation of Philosophy* such a central text: (1) Boethius's views of the relationship of Christianity to pre-Christian philosophy, (2) his use of allegory, (3) the image of the Wheel of Fortune, (4) his definition of God's goodness, and (5) his discussion of free will. In his text, Boethius describes how a personified Lady Philosophy appeared to him to help him reason out how he had arrived in prison.
- Why didn't Boethius write about an imagined or divinely inspired conversation with Christ instead of using a female allegory? Boethius might answer that philosophy and religion are not incompatible, and in fact, pre-Christian philosophical strategies could be used to confirm the rightness of Christian doctrine.

Boethius sought the reasons for his imprisonment not through simple faith but through logic, reason, and the rhetorical strategies of classical authors.

- As he set out to understand the relationship of Christianity to pre-Christian knowledge, Boethius invoked the second major element of his text: allegory. His use of allegory here—his technique of personifying an abstraction—set an important literary precedent. Allegory would become a strategic tool used by numerous medieval authors, including Chaucer, Dante, and Petrarch.
- One of the first things Lady Philosophy tells Boethius is that he has no right to mourn his sudden change in status. To explain this, she invokes the image of the Wheel of Fortune.
 - All men sit on Fortune’s Wheel, which is always turning. If you are at the top, in a position of power and status, you can be sure that the wheel will soon turn and leave you figuratively hanging upside down. You can also be certain that the wheel will eventually turn again, and you’ll be back on top.
 - In an age when so much of the population encountered unexpected disasters, the idea of the Wheel of Fortune was quite comforting. It could give hope to those who were suffering and check the arrogance of those in power.
 - In Boethius’s text, Philosophy tells him he has no right to be upset—after all, he knows about Fortune, and it is Fortune’s nature to be fickle.
- Philosophy further tells Boethius that he is suffering from an illness, and she has arrived to cure him. His illness is an incorrect belief in what leads to happiness. Most people think that money or high social status will make them happy, but they are wrong. The only way to true happiness is to be virtuous enough to attain unity with God, who is goodness itself.
 - Philosophy argues that goodness is not a quality that God has, but it is inseparable from his being. Goodness and God are one and the same. Therefore, joining with God is attaining goodness, which is the ultimate reward.

- But Boethius argues, if goodness is the ultimate reward, why are evil men sometimes found in positions of power or wealth, while so many virtuous men end up poor and powerless? Philosophy's answer here is truly stunning: The good, she says, are always in the best positions, and the wicked never are. Obviously, Boethius's experience would seem to belie this claim, as he points out, but Philosophy attempts to shift his perspective on the world.
- Virtue, she says, is something that is always secure in the person who has it; that person always has goodness and, thus, unity with the creator. In fact, when the wicked are caught and punished for their misdeeds, the punishment is actually a reward because it corrects the wicked behavior and moves the evildoer closer to being virtuous.
- Similarly, a wicked person who goes through life with all the status and luxuries he could desire is, in fact, being punished because he is not being moved toward being virtuous and, therefore, cannot attain goodness, or union with God.
- Finally, Boethius addresses the matter of free will alongside the issue of divine foreknowledge, a question that Augustine had wrestled with. Boethius builds on Augustine's argument that just because God knows what you're going to do doesn't mean that you are unable to choose to do good or to do bad. Boethius formulates one of the most influential theories about God and predestination by arguing that God exists, in effect, outside of time.
 - Human beings live in a temporally ordered universe; they can look back to the past and ahead to the future while they exist in the present.
 - In contrast, God is in an eternal present; all of what has been, what will be, and what is are known to him at once.
- In the end, Boethius was executed. But so compelling is the theory of consolation that he worked out while imprisoned that we might

guess he went to his death feeling secure in the knowledge that his virtue was intact, and the reward—union with a divine creator who was goodness itself—was waiting for him on the other side of his mortal life.

Suggested Reading

Marenbon, *Boethius*.

———, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think Boethius turned more toward logic than faith while he was in prison?
2. What parts of Boethius's conversation with Lady Philosophy seem to be most overtly an attempt to reconcile faith and logic? Which aspects of the argument do you find most persuasive?

Isidore of Seville and the *Etymologies*

Lecture 4

In many ways, the subject of this lecture, Isidore of Seville, has much in common with Boethius in the early days of his career. As you'll remember, Boethius sought to make all the important works of Greek rhetoric and philosophy available to the medieval world through Latin translations and commentaries. Isidore had a similar idea, but his ambitions were much greater: He didn't want to make a specific group of texts available to the world; he wanted to make knowledge itself more accessible. Isidore was the medieval world's first encyclopedist, and his project would have a profound influence on how medieval scholars would approach particular subjects and how subjects of study themselves would be defined.

“The Last Scholar of the Ancient World”

- Isidore (c. 560–636) was born in what was then Visigothic Spain. He came from a high-ranking family; his father apparently still had some status in what was left of the Roman world, and his mother seems to have been a Visigoth and politically well connected.
 - At the time of Isidore's birth, the Visigothic rulers of Spain were Christians, but they were Arian Christians. Arianism, put simply, was the belief that although Jesus had been divine and was the son of God, he could not be as divine as God for the simple reason that he had been incarnate for a time.
 - This belief had been pronounced heretical at the Council of Nicaea in 325, but Arianism was a persistent heresy that took a long time to be fully rooted out. Later in his life, Isidore would be a key player in the conversion of the Visigoths in Spain from Arianism to mainstream Catholicism.
- Isidore was educated in the first cathedral school on the Iberian Peninsula. His brother Leander was head of the school, and the course of study was based on the seven liberal arts, that is, the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. When Isidore emerged from the

cathedral school at Seville, he had mastered these subjects and attained some proficiency in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. For this reason, the 19th-century scholar Charles de Montalembert called him “*le dernier savant du monde ancien*,” “the last scholar of the ancient world.”

- The most obvious meaning of this description is that Isidore was one of the last of a line of scholars who had studied or engaged with the classical Greek and Roman worlds. This would be true for some centuries because knowledge of the classics would fade until key texts were rediscovered in the early modern period.
- But this description of Isidore is also accurate in another sense. For the sake of convenience, scholars usually define the Middle Ages as lasting from about 500 to 1500, and Isidore would, thus, technically belong to the medieval world. But in terms of temperament and his approach to knowledge and faith, he seems much more to belong to the world of Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome—those men from an earlier age whose work shaped the Middle Ages.
- For example, Isidore was responsible for the circulation and promotion of Aristotle and his works in Iberia in the early 7th century. Most of the rest of the medieval world and its scholars would have to wait for hundreds of years to encounter Aristotle, when he was reintroduced to Europe via contact with the Islamic world.

Unification of Spain

- Isidore also played a prominent role in converting the Arian Christians to orthodox Latin Christianity, an endeavor first undertaken by Leander when he was bishop of Seville. After Leander’s death, Isidore not only finished what his brother had started, but he exceeded Leander’s project by seeking to reconcile the disparate cultures of Rome, the Visigoths, and the native Iberian citizens.

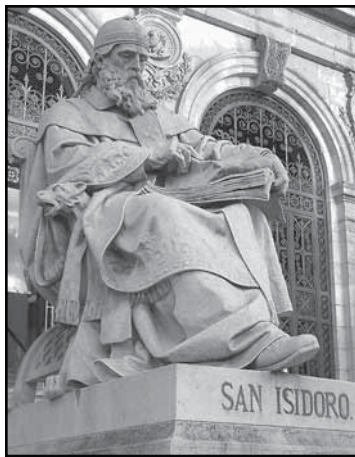
- The way in which Isidore approached this reconciliation had some remarkably democratic features, especially considering the ecclesiastical, political, and hierarchical conventions that were in place in 7th-century Iberia.
- At the second Synod of Seville (618/619), Isidore acted as overseer, and the procedures he set in place there show some of the earliest traces of what we might think of as representative government. He tried to give all parties involved at the synod a chance to speak, and he succeeded in leading them to a kind of consensus. Key to that consensus was the use of religion as an umbrella under which all the peoples in Iberia could be considered united.
- Even more important was the fourth Council of Toledo (633), where Isidore astutely reinforced the unity he had created earlier among the disparate factions in Iberia. The council affirmed the supremacy of the Visigothic kings and declared that ultimate loyalty belonged to them.
 - Interestingly, the acts of the council make no mention of the pope in Rome. Thus, Isidore had united his people through the Christian faith as dictated by the see of Saint Peter, but he had maintained and affirmed this unity by emphasizing loyalty to the temporal, secular rulers in Visigothic Spain.
 - This is a key point: Power was held by the secular ruler, but that power was over a people who were definitively Christian. The implication was that decrees of the pope would be enacted only with the approval of the secular ruler.
- At the same time that Isidore seems to have neatly addressed problems of supporting the faith and supporting the kingdom, he sought to shore up this unity by enacting legislation to have Jewish children removed from their families and educated as Christians (canon 60 of the council). In canon 65, the council also decreed that public office could not be held by Jews or Jewish converts to

Christianity. Isidore obviously felt that in a unified polity, some differences could not be allowed to continue.

- By all accounts, Isidore was revered and recognized for his learning, his innovation, and his desire for unity of church and country. His fellow religious leader Braulio of Zaragoza praised him as having held back the incursions of the barbarians that had threatened to overwhelm Iberia. And several years after his death, at the eighth Council of Toledo (653), Isidore was described as “the extraordinary doctor, the latest ornament of the Catholic Church, the most learned man of the latter ages, always to be named with reverence.”

The *Etymologies*

- On the basis of his accomplishments in converting the Arians and unifying Spain, we might assume that Isidore would have gained admittance to the ranks of those exalted and honored in the church. But it is his massive encyclopedia, the *Etymologies*, that sets Isidore apart from all other scholars and thinkers of his time and place. His goal was to make all the knowledge of his time accessible, to assemble in one text everything that was most important for men to know.
- It’s important to note that there were some existing texts resembling what we think of as an encyclopedia, and Isidore probably drew from these as he composed the *Etymologies*. But none of these source texts had the breadth, depth, and scope of Isidore’s work.



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The creation of the *Etymologies* was accomplished not so much because Isidore was an original thinker, but because he was the first person to act on the idea of compiling an encyclopedia.

- After Isidore had assembled the content of the *Etymologies*, he sent it to Braulio, who divided the work into 20 sections. To modern eyes and ears, the organization of the *Etymologies* seems somewhat random, but it makes sense if considered mostly in terms of general subject matter.
 - The first three books are concerned with the liberal arts; the fourth, with the field of medicine and the institution of the library. Book VII is concerned with God and the hierarchy in heaven and on earth; book VIII discusses the institution of the church and its various sects.
 - Book IX discusses languages and kingdoms. Book XI deals with humankind, and book XII, animals and birds. Book XVII focuses on agriculture; book XIX, on ships, houses, and clothing; and book XX concludes with domestic concerns.
 - The range of topics covered in these categories was truly astounding. Isidore's main method of working was to quote from earlier authorities.
- Those who dive into the *Etymologies* will learn a plethora of interesting facts. It's also noteworthy that Isidore seems to have accepted a geocentric theory of the universe—with the earth at the center of everything. In addition, he preserved the idea of the four humours from the ancient Greek medical tradition.
- To get at this information, Isidore culled from such works as Martial's *Epigrams*, the writings of Tertullian, and Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. In addition to Boethius, Isidore quotes from Saint Jerome, Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Virgil, Cicero, and Ovid. Gregory the Great was apparently a good friend of Isidore's brother Leander, and Isidore leans heavily on texts produced by Gregory or commissioned and promoted during his papacy.
- What seems to have been most important to Isidore is that priests and bishops be educated properly—that they know how to care for their flocks and recognize the importance of education generally.

This would seem to be one of the motivating factors behind the production of the text itself. And in a shrewd move, Isidore dedicated the work to the Visigothic Iberian king Sisebut, a move that seems to reinforce Isidore's desire to affirm the unity of his country by linking secular leaders and the church.

- Throughout the *Etymologies*, we see a concern with language—the idea that words can convey truths if we understand their origins. For example, he explains that the Latin word for *wine*, *vinum*, is derived from *vena* (“veins”) because wine assists with blood flow. Although the ultimate meanings and sources of words seem important to him, Isidore never moves into the realm of allegory or symbolism described and explored by Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Boethius. Isidore keeps his study focused on the observable.
- The *Etymologies* was probably not in finished form at the time of Isidore's death, but it was an achievement that would have a profound impact on the medieval world. Some scholars have gone so far as to claim that it was the most authoritative and influential text for all of the Middle Ages, with the sole exception of the Bible. Well into the Renaissance or early modern period, Isidore's *Etymologies* would be the standard reference work for everyone who wished to be an educated member of society.
- In Isidore's case, originality of thought was not the force that drove a shift in the understanding of knowledge and education. Isidore looked emphatically to the past, to models of learning and collecting information that had existed long before he came onto the scene. But in attempting to develop such ideas to their most complete expression, he made a contribution to the medieval world that was far greater than the sum of its parts.

Suggested Reading

Barney, Beach, and Berghof, eds., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*.

Henderson, *The Medieval World of Isidore of Seville*.

Questions to Consider

1. What immediate impact might Isidore's encyclopedia have had on the world around him?
2. How does the desire to profess faith and acquire knowledge seem to join together in unique fashion in the person of Isidore?

The Venerable Bede

Lecture 5

To think of the Middle Ages as being characterized by any sort of sameness or intrinsically “medieval” quality that existed throughout the 1,000-year span from 500 to 1500 is a fraught endeavor. Fifth-century Italy was vastly different from 12th-century England, which was vastly different from 15th-century France, and so on. This is why we need to take care to place each of our great minds in his or her place. For the Venerable Bede, that time and place was the late 7th and early 8th centuries in the north of England, a time of relative peace and prosperity, when a young Christian boy could receive an education in preparation for a life in the church.

Early Years at Wearmouth

- Bede (672/673–735) was probably born somewhere in the region of Wearmouth in Northumbria, at a time when a devout family could secure stability and grace for a young boy by offering him to the local monastery. Such a “donation” was a common practice in the 7th century, and boys who were given in this way to the church were known as oblates. Bede became an oblate at the age of 7, when he was accepted into the monastery of Wearmouth.
- Bede lived at the monastery in a dormitory with other boys. His daily routine consisted of lessons, prayers, and manual labor, all in preparation for a future lived entirely within the church. With this sort of background, a boy might hope to advance to the position of priest, abbot, or even bishop.
- When Bede was 12 years old, a wave of plague swept through the countryside. We have an account of this event in the *Life of Ceolfrith*, written by the abbot of Wearmouth and the nearby house of Jarrow. The sole survivors of the disease at the monastery were Ceolfrith and one small boy. Given the timing of this account, there is no doubt that the boy was Bede.

- We can only imagine what effect the devastation of the plague would have had on the pious mind of the young Bede. Why had he alone of all his cohort been spared? In 7th-century England, the only answer to that question was that God must have spared him for some great purpose. This might have seemed a terrifying challenge to Bede, but he more than rose to it.
- By the age of 19, Bede had been consecrated a deacon; by age 30, he had become a priest. This accelerated move through the ranks seems to suggest an innate brilliance and intellectual curiosity in the young man. Although he cannot compare with Augustine for sheer amount of written output, Bede also produced an astonishing body of work, dealing with such diverse matters as theology, music, natural science, grammar, and more.



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Bede plumbed the depths of the library of Wearmouth, using the sources he found there to write some 40 original texts.

Bede's Sources

- Much of his writing grew out of Bede's appointment as master of education at the monastery when he was still quite young. He mined the library of Wearmouth, and we know much of what this library contained because in the introductions to his works, Bede takes great pains to cite the sources he used, including Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Gregory, Isidore, and others.

- Keep in mind that all books at this time were painstakingly made by hand. An animal had to be slaughtered and skinned, its hide stretched and scraped, smoothed with a pumice stone, and cut into sheets. The copying of manuscripts was considered a kind of prayer, and the illustrations—illuminations—elevated particular texts from a prayer to a glorious hymn.
 - Bede’s monastery had many simple manuscripts—unadorned words scratched onto animal hide—but it also had some of the most beautiful of the pre-8th-century world.
 - For example, the Codex Amiatinus is an illuminated Bible that was commissioned by Abbot Ceolfrith sometime around 692. It was probably produced in Bede’s home monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow.
- One of the texts that deeply influenced Bede was Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, and inspired by this, he set out to compose what is arguably the most important historical text concerning medieval Britain. This is the work that we today call the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. This massive text—divided into five books—tells the history of Britain up to Bede’s day, and as the title suggests, it is a history that is refracted through the prism of faith.

The *Ecclesiastical History*

- Modern scholars are almost uniformly admiring of and grateful to Bede because, as one of them has said, were it not for the *Ecclesiastical History*, there are any number of battles, kings, conferences, and other people and events of which we would know nothing. Many of Bede’s sources are now lost, and his text remains the sole witness to key historical moments that give us a much richer picture of the early medieval period in Britain.
- As far as historians and literary scholars are concerned, the early medieval period is full of gaps; Bede fills in many of those gaps, and it is because of this, perhaps, that many scholars forgive or try to explain away the many accounts of miraculous happenings that Bede includes in his text.

- It is clear that Bede hoped his work would be copied, circulated, and read aloud. His inclusion of miraculous, dramatic, entertaining, and to our modern eyes, seemingly impossible events was obviously meant to both entertain and inspire a greater faith.
- In some sense, Bede was trying to finish melding together a Germanic social sensibility with a Christian worldview, something that had been in process for centuries. Britain, as part of the former Roman Empire, had become Christian when the emperor Constantine did and had mostly stayed Christian even as Rome fell. The withdrawal of the Roman legions opened Britain up to invasion from a new group of peoples, the Anglo-Saxons, a loosely related group of Germanic tribes who began a full-scale invasion of Britain in the middle of the 5th century.
- Bede laments that even when peace was made, the native Britons don't seem to have attempted to preach to or convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons. In the early pages of his *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede relates how this began to change. The story he tells is surely apocryphal but so compelling that it has been repeated down through history.
- In Bede's story, Pope Gregory the Great encounters some beautiful blond slave boys who had been captured in Britain and brought to Rome for sale. Gregory relates the boys' answers to his questions about their background to a series of Latin words associated with Christianity. He then decides to send a mission to the English to convert the pagans.
- From this point, Bede fills his text with dozens of conversion narratives, many of which show a fascinating blend of the Anglo-Saxon with the Christian.
 - One of the most famous passages concerns an episode in which the loyal retainers of King Edwin of Northumbria are trying to determine whether they want to follow this new faith—

Christianity—or stay with the gods they have worshipped for so long.

- One of Edwin’s counselors uses a beautiful metaphor of a sparrow flying through the mead hall to suggest the fleeting nature of life on earth.
- Bede’s *History* is full of such engaging, arresting moments. When we think of history, we one often thinks of texts that are dry, but Bede gives us the fullest picture possible of events under discussion.
 - When he relates the story of the conversion of the kingdom of Northumbria under King Edwin, he includes details about the influence of Edwin’s wife, Æthelburga, who as a Frankish princess came to her bridal bed already a Christian.
 - Whenever possible, he uses direct speech, and nowhere is that more compelling than in the moment when Edwin’s chief pagan priest, Coifi, casts his lot with the new religion of Christianity.
 - We also learn of the cowherd Cædmon, who is given the gift of divine poetry when an angel visits him in a dream; we hear how Saint Oswald achieved his exalted position and the details of his martyrdom. These are just a few of the myriad stories that Bede tells, and the glimpses they afford us of life in early Britain are by turns endearing, astonishing, confusing, and rich in detail.

Bede’s Legacy

- Although the *Ecclesiastical History* was Bede’s greatest literary legacy, he shaped education and philosophy in the decades and even centuries that followed his death primarily through his personal interactions. He not only passed on to his students all the knowledge he had so eagerly gathered, but he also inspired in them a pure love of learning.
- Bede was beloved and revered in no small measure because of the example of devoted service to God that he performed throughout his

life. This is captured by a letter written by one of Bede's students that detailed the end of his life. Cuthbert, the writer of the letter, would go on to become the abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow.

- In this missive, Cuthbert paints an astonishing picture of Bede on his deathbed, continuing to teach, to work on a translation of the Gospel of John into English, and to edit Isidore of Seville's book *On the Wonders of Nature*.
- As he drew near to the hour of his death, Bede continued dictating to his scribe, made gifts of his few possessions to specific brothers in the monastery, and said to those gathered around his bedside: "My soul longs to see Christ my King in all His beauty."
- Within a generation of Bede's death, his writings were in demand by those who lived in other centers of learning, both in Britain and on the continent. The demand for copies of his writings and other texts in the library at Wearmouth-Jarrow became so great that the scribes there had to invent a less aesthetically pleasing "hand" that allowed them to copy manuscripts more quickly.
- It is because of Bede's influence that England came to be considered one of the great centers of learning of the early medieval world. Inspired by Bede, a former student of his named Egbert, archbishop of York, turned York into a hub of learning that would produce the renowned scholar Alcuin, who brought Bede's works to the court of Charlemagne. And it was Charlemagne who founded one of the greatest educational institutions in the medieval world, the palace school at Aachen.
- About a century after Charlemagne, Alfred the Great of England would lament the fact that once Britain had been full of renowned scholars—such as Bede and Alcuin—but in his day, study and learning had moved across the channel to the continent. The legacy of Bede would inspire Alfred to try to reclaim the top spot in the hierarchy of philosophy, pedagogy, and learning by launching his own ambitious educational program.

Suggested Reading

Blair, *The World of Bede*.

Brown, *Bede the Venerable*.

Questions to Consider

1. As thorough, comprehensive, and engaging as it is, what might we lack or miss in a text as spiritually oriented as the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*?
2. Do you think the impressive careers of Bede's students have more to do with him individually or more to do with the historical situation that made possible the Northumbrian Renaissance of the 7th and 8th centuries in the first place?

Alcuin, Charlemagne, and Alfred the Great

Lecture 6

In our last lecture, we discussed the Venerable Bede, the premier man of letters in 8th-century England. As we saw, Bede was important not only for his original writings and the way in which he gathered and made knowledge accessible but also for the way in which he promoted and supported an educational program in Northumbria. One of the products of this activity was the great British scholar Alcuin of York, who lived in the second half of the 8th century. Sometime around 781, Alcuin met the man whom history has come to call Charlemagne, and this meeting of two great minds would dramatically affect knowledge and learning throughout the medieval world for some time to come.

Charlemagne and Alcuin

- Charlemagne (747?–814) came to the throne of the people known as the Franks in the year 768. His was a great mind the likes of which the world has seen perhaps only a few times in recorded history.
 - Most importantly for a king in the brutal world of the 8th century, Charlemagne was a great warrior and brilliant military strategist. He pushed his enemies south and east and followed behind them, claiming their forfeited lands for himself and establishing the Carolingian Empire, whose borders encompassed most of modern France and Germany and pushed into Spain and Italy.
 - Self-consciously modeling himself after the Roman emperors of old, Charlemagne put in place a bureaucratic system of administrative governance that allowed some degree of local autonomy while uniting disparate groups of people under his rule.
 - He enforced this unity by acting as a reformer of the church; he standardized church services, made sure parishes had clean

copies of important scriptural texts, and promoted the use of music—songs chanted by monks—to attract people into regular attendance at services.

- These activities alone might secure Charlemagne the title of “great mind,” but it was his meeting with Alcuin (c. 732–804) and the way in which the two of them worked together to establish the palace school at Aachen that is, perhaps, the emperor’s crowning achievement.
- After meeting for the first time, Charlemagne and Alcuin of York began a correspondence; the ruler wanted answers to some of the more pressing—and practical—questions of the day, including how a king should rule and where the line (if any) should be drawn between the secular and religious duties of a monarch. Soon, Alcuin was serving as Charlemagne’s co-architect of a full-scale cultural revolution, and central to this was the founding of the palace school at Aachen.
 - Aachen had been, in former days, a Roman military base, but when Charlemagne took it over, he transformed it into a glorious center of operations.
 - One part community center, one part religious institution, one part library, and one part royal palace, Aachen’s buildings were specifically constructed to recall the glories of the Roman past, with Charlemagne going so far as to loot Roman ruins and bring artifacts to his center of operations to give it as authentic an air as possible.
- An intelligence as keen as Charlemagne’s also recognized one of the most pressing needs of the early medieval world: to preserve knowledge, particularly knowledge from the classical world. He sent scouts throughout the known world to procure editions of as many important texts as possible, had clean copies made, and had foreign texts translated into Latin, the language of all educated people and of the church.

- Growing up in Northumbria, Bede spoke a northern dialect of early English, as did Alcuin; Charlemagne probably spoke a Germanic Frankish dialect, as well as an early form of what would eventually become French. But all three of these men could communicate to speakers of other languages through Latin.
- Charlemagne’s biographer, Einhard, notes that Charlemagne was quite proficient in Latin as both a reader and a speaker and that he was also interested in “barbarian languages”—those tongues spoken by peoples far to the east and south. Whenever possible, the emperor sought to have examples of those languages recorded.
- But it was his translation program that was, in many ways, his greatest gift to humanity. By preserving so many texts in Latin, Charlemagne made sure that those works can still be “unlocked” and made accessible to people today.
- To further this preservation and education program, Charlemagne also ordered the creation of a new style of handwriting—easier for scribes to write and for others to read. This form is called Carolingian miniscule. Interestingly, Charlemagne himself could not write. According to Einhard, the emperor kept a wax tablet and stylus near his throne, and when he had a spare moment, he would practice forming letters; however, learning to write seems to be almost the only challenge that Charlemagne could not overcome, and he finally gave up the attempt.
- In addition to Alcuin, Charlemagne set out to bring to Aachen the greatest living minds of the late 8th and early 9th centuries. From Italy, he brought the medieval scholars Peter of Pisa and Paulinus of Aquileia; from Spain, Theodulf of Orleans; and from Britain, not just Alcuin but such famed thinkers as Clemens Scottus, Cathwulf, Beornred, Dungal, and Dicuil.

- The center of learning in the early medieval world had been Britain, but Charlemagne's actions began a shift away from the island and toward the continent. And what Charlemagne started, the Vikings finished. In 793, the Viking age began with the sack of Britain's Lindisfarne Abbey, launching almost a century of nonstop raiding.

Alfred the Great

- Alfred was the youngest son of the West Saxon royal house, and he came to the throne only after his father and brothers had all died, most of them meeting their ends while fighting the Vikings. Through a combination of force of will, ingenuity, intelligence, and sheer luck, he managed to turn the tide and establish a more-or-less peaceful relationship with the Viking raiders.



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- When Alfred was born in 848, England was divided into four small, relatively autonomous Anglo-Saxon kingdoms; when he died in 899, it was basically divided into two parts: the Danelaw to the north and the unified kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons in the south. This would serve as the foundation for what we think of as England today.

In King Alfred's view, it was the decay of learning in England that had caused the Viking attacks, not that the attacks had affected learning.

- In many ways, Alfred's life has a fair amount in common with Charlemagne's, and the two men are often compared to each other, not least because Alfred seems to have deliberately modeled himself after Charlemagne in many respects. It is their commonalities in terms of military prowess, wise rule, intelligence, and visionary thinking that links them together in our study of great minds.
- Like Charlemagne, Alfred wanted to preserve knowledge, but his situation was a little more desperate. As he notes, the monasteries and libraries of his time were all "ravaged and burnt."
 - Thus, Alfred had to restore knowledge before he could embark on an educational program. This task was a problem because learning had decayed to the point that there were few clerks who knew enough Latin to even perform a basic mass!
 - Alfred's solution was both inspired by Charlemagne's example and innovative: He proposed to translate important works into English, an idea that most scholars in the rest of the medieval world would have thought ridiculous.
- Alfred was the kind of man to lead by example. He was not a king to send others into battle while he remained behind to command from afar; instead, he rode into battle himself at the head of the line. He was a man who could engage in royal diplomacy with the Viking leaders at court and fight them hand to hand on the decks of their ships. Educated to read and write both English and Latin, Alfred also took the lead when it came to his educational program.
 - Alfred tells us in a preface that he himself translated Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care* from Latin into Old English. He then ordered that copies should be made of this text so that one would be available in every bishopric in the kingdom.
 - The *Pastoral Care* is divided into four parts: (1) a description of how to select fit men for service in the church, (2) an explanation of how a pastor should conduct himself in daily life, (3) practical advice on dealing with difficult parishioners,

and (4) a warning that a man in a position of authority in the church must guard against personal ambition.

- This selection of a particular text to translate underscores the inextricable nature of religious and secular authority in the medieval world. Alfred, like Charlemagne, sought to reform and unify his nation in part by reforming and shoring up support for the church.
- Indeed, Alfred went a little farther than Charlemagne in that, according to his preface, he did not see the decay of learning in England as a result of the Viking attacks; on the contrary, he seems to say that the Viking attacks were, in some way, a just punishment for the fact that the English had allowed the state of learning to decline at the end of the 8th century. What better way to begin to fix this problem than to make available Gregory the Great's guide for pastoral life?

Impact of Alfred and Charlemagne

- Alfred, like Charlemagne a century or so before him, had a mind that was truly “great”; indeed, he is the only English monarch to be given the title “the Great,” and a quick consideration of his accomplishments establishes why this is so.
- Just as Charlemagne's palace school at Aachen was a brilliant idea that helped preserve important knowledge by translating it into Latin, so the Alfredian Renaissance made knowledge more accessible to a population for whom Latin was declining as medium for exchange of ideas.
- Although Alfred and Charlemagne were arguably not themselves great philosophers, they were certainly great minds: They built on the foundations of medieval and classical scholarship that had come before them, and they created a springboard from which later generations of scholars would be able to launch themselves to greater heights of philosophy and education.

Suggested Reading

Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship, and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*.

Browne, *Alcuin of York*.

Pollard, *Alfred the Great: The Man Who Made England*.

Wilson, *Charlemagne*.

Questions to Consider

1. How interconnected and interdependent are the lives and careers of Charlemagne, Alcuin, and Alfred the Great when it comes to determining their accomplishments?
2. How important were Alfred's and Charlemagne's careers as warriors to their undertakings as scholars and vice versa?

Avicenna and the Golden Age of Islam

Lecture 7

We generally think that the term *medieval* refers to Western Europe from about 500 to 1500—a predominantly Christian world. As a generalization, this is not too far off the mark, but when we probe deeper, we find that the picture is not nearly as simplistic; indeed, many of the great leaps forward of medieval European society were precipitated by contacts with peoples and ideas that were outside what we think of as the mainstream of that society. In our next several lectures, we'll look at some of the great thinkers of the Islamic and Jewish worlds who had a significant impact on the Middle Ages, beginning with the Persian scholar known as Avicenna.

Avicenna's Influence on Medicine

- The influence of Avicenna (980–1037) on the world around him was profound, but his name is not generally well known today. Those who recognize the name usually associate him with two important works, the *Book of Healing* and *The Canon of Medicine*, which served as the foundational texts of the medical schools of the medieval world. In fact, we could argue that the study of medicine as a discrete subject only became truly possible once Avicenna's works traveled from the Middle East to Italy in the 12th century.
- The first true medical schools of the Middle Ages were founded in Salerno, Italy; there, starting in the 9th century, ancient traditions of Greek and Latin healing were taught according to a well-organized curriculum, and medical treatises from the North African and Muslim worlds were incorporated from an early date.
 - The position of the Italian peninsula relative to Africa and the Middle East and its vigorous trading activities meant that there had long been contact among these cultures. But it was when Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* arrived in the 12th century that medicine as a subject began to be codified and standardized throughout the medieval world.

- Eventually, medical schools opened in Bologna, Padua, Paris, Oxford, and other European cities. And in all of them, Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine* was the basis of education. This would remain a fact of medical study in some areas even into the 17th century.
- Essentially, what Avicenna did in the *Canon* was to compile and arrange the medical writings of the Greek physicians Galen and Hippocrates and to offer his own commentary on these early medical theories. He also provided a list of how to prepare, dispense, and properly use more than 800 medical compounds to treat various ailments.
- Avicenna offered advice on how to treat cancer and how to use anesthetic when performing surgery. His text also helped to solidify the ancient and medieval medical theory of the four humours—blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Avicenna refined this idea, combining it with his own thinking about the theory of the “four temperaments.” These ideas about the basic nature of human bodies would remain dominant throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.



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As significant as Avicenna's medical writings were, they are not even a fraction of the intellectual endeavors that make him one of the truly great minds of the Middle Ages.

Childhood and Youth

- Avicenna was born into a high-ranking Persian family in the year 980. While still a child, he was sent to apprentice with a grocer, where he encountered Indian mathematics and the concept of zero, as well as a basic form of dactylonomy, or “finger counting.” By age 10, he had memorized all of the Qur’an. At 13, he started to study medicine in earnest, and after that, he studied law. At age 16, he embarked on the study of philosophy.
- It is no surprise that Avicenna quickly achieved a measure of fame, and his services were sought after by a number of important political leaders of the day. Even as a young man, he was regularly consulted by high-ranking authorities on matters of medicine, religion, and philosophy. For example, Nuh ibn Mansur, a leader of the Samanid people in Bukhara, asked for Avicenna’s help with a medical matter. The youth promptly cured the emir, who then, in gratitude, offered Avicenna the use of his vast library.
- It is one of the tragedies of history that Nuh ibn Mansur and Avicenna lived through a period that was politically unstable and during which numerous Islamic factions warred with one another for control.
 - By birth, Avicenna was a Persian, and his native tongue was a language in the Indo-European family. Arabic, the language in which he wrote most of his important works, came to be the dominant language of Islam; it belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family and is related to Hebrew, Aramaic, and Phoenician.
 - The linguistic factor is just one indicator of the religious and political issues that would combine to oust Nuh ibn Mansur and many other leaders from their positions of power. Frequently, Avicenna would find himself attached to the court of a high-ranking official as an advisor, only to have to flee the realm when revolution came.

- For much of his life, Avicenna traveled throughout the Middle East as an itinerant scholar, moving from what is today Uzbekistan to Persia to locales near the Aral and Caspian seas and stopping at many points in between.

Philosophical Thought and Writings

- During his youth, Avicenna became obsessed with Aristotle's theory of metaphysics and found that unlike everything else, a full grasp of Aristotelian theory eluded him for some time. Ultimately, he came across a book by a writer known as al-Farabi that offered him a roadmap toward reconciling Aristotelian and Platonic thought with some of the philosophical positions of Islamic scholars.
 - In particular, Avicenna was wrestling with the idea of how to explain God, creation, being, and the relationship of those things to one another.
 - Three of the key ideas he developed were: (1) the distinction between essence and existence, (2) an approach to the problem of evil, and (3) the concept of the "floating man."
- One of the most important things Avicenna did in his philosophical writings is to make a much clearer distinction than Aristotle did between what he called "existence" and "essence." To do this, he worked out a scheme of being that relied on concepts of necessity and contingency.
 - All things that exist have an essence, but their essence is not an explanation or a cause for their existence. In other words, essence is the idea of the thing, and existence is the thing itself.
 - Building on Aristotle, Avicenna considered that there are three possible modes of existence: An essence can exist in a physical form; it can exist in the mind; or it can exist in itself, without any relation to something we can see physically or comprehend mentally.

- Things come into being because of some agent or being that causes their essence to come into being. But even though things exist, it is not necessary that they exist; we can observe that things enter into existence and pass out of existence, and because things are not eternal, they must not be necessary. They are, then, contingent; that is, the coming into existence of a thing is dependent on some other factor, not the thing itself.
- The essence of a thing does not create or determine its existence. Contingent existence only becomes necessary when something causes that necessity. All of existence stands in a chain of relationships—of one thing that causes another. If we keep following that chain back, we eventually arrive at the final cause, which is always God. God is the only existent thing that is also necessary.
- God is also simple and unified. As the only necessary existent, God cannot be broken down into ontological qualities.
- But if God is necessary and the origin of all things, how do we explain evil? In a Boethian approach, we might argue that things we think are evil are really good; we just can't recognize that fact. Avicenna argues that even evil things are "accidental" consequences of what are ultimately good things.
- What does God, the indivisibly good first cause, know about the end results in a long chain of causation? For Avicenna, the answer is that God knows nothing about human history. God understands the world of which he is the first cause, but he does not (nor should he) know about individuals or particulars. This position caused consternation for later Muslim scholars, who saw it as a heretical denial of God's intervention in and knowledge of the world he had created.

- Given Avicenna’s mastery of so many scholarly fields, it should not be surprising that he tackled the question: How do we know that we know? What is the knowing self?
 - In answer, Avicenna anticipates Descartes’s famous *cogito ergo sum*—“I think, therefore I am”—by formulating what came to be called the “floating man” theory. He worked through this theory in a text known as the *Treatise on the Soul*.
 - In this work, Avicenna offers the reader the hypothetical situation of a man who has no senses and is suspended in midair. Can a man in such a state even know that he is a man, that he has a body, that he exists?
 - In order for the floating man to doubt his own existence, there must first be an intellect—a consciousness—that questions what and who and where he is, even if that consciousness can find no objective answers. And because there is a consciousness that wonders, we must conclude that there is a consciousness—a soul—that is independent of the body.
 - In this respect, Avicenna is arguing for a kind of dualism—where body and soul are independent entities—or, to put it another way, the soul is the essence, which always is in existence, and the body makes that existence manifest.
- We see this body/mind dualism play out in the cruelest fashion near the end of Avicenna’s life. Stricken with what his biographer described as “a colic,” Avicenna attempted to cure himself by self-administering a series of enemas. Despite—or perhaps because of—this treatment, he developed seizures and an ulcer, and in the treatment of those, he overdosed on opium. He recovered for a time but soon relapsed and passed away. He was buried in Hamadan, in present-day Iran, where visitors still visit his grave.

- Avicenna is considered by many to be the greatest thinker and polymath of the Islamic golden age, and his writings were deeply influential on the great intellects of the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish traditions. Arguably, his greatest achievement was to fuse Islamic theology with Aristotelian metaphysical thought, although in the West, it was his encyclopedic medical texts that had the most profound and visible impact on medieval society.

Suggested Reading

Goodman, *Avicenna*.

Hasse, *Avicenna's De Anima in the Latin West*.

Siraisi, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think Avicenna's philosophies would have been fundamentally different had he been raised in a Christian rather than an Islamic society, or does it seem that his thoughts on contingency, necessity, existence, and essence would be arrived at eventually by another thinker with a similar intellect and background in studying the texts of the ancient world?
2. Which of Avicenna's theories seems the most innovative, original, or striking?

Alhacen and the Scientific Method

Lecture 8

In the last lecture, we discussed the Persian scholar Avicenna, who was one of the brightest intellectual lights of the late 10th and early 11th centuries. In this lecture, we'll talk about the one man who could rival Avicenna as the greatest polymath of the High Middle Ages. This is Avicenna's direct contemporary, a man known to us today as Alhazen or Alhacen. Like Avicenna, Alhacen was a product of the Islamic golden age, a time when society in and around the Middle East regularly produced scholars of the highest order.

Alhacen and Optics

- Alhacen was born in Basra, in present-day Iraq, in the year 965 and probably spoke, read, and wrote Arabic from his earliest days. He received, by all accounts, the best education that the Islamic world had to offer, studying in both Basra and Baghdad, which was arguably the greatest city in the world at the time. He seems to have excelled in math and science and continued his studies in these fields even when he was working in a civil service position in Iran as a young adult.
- Although he was famed during his lifetime for accomplishments and learning in a variety of subjects, what he is most known for today—and the area in which he had the greatest influence on the medieval world—was his theory of optics. He wrote a seven-volume treatise on the subject, the *Kitab al-manazir*, which was translated into Latin at the end of the 12th century and, thus, passed into the scholarly world of medieval Europe.
- One of the key points of Alhacen's theory of optics had to do with ideas about vision.
 - According to the classical scholars Alhacen had studied, such as Euclid and Ptolemy, vision was made possible by the emission theory, which held that the eye emitted light; when

the light from the eyes landed on an object, it became visible to the viewer.

- Aristotle, in contrast, held to the intromission theory. This theory held that objects or people emitted their images into the eyes of the viewer.
- Alhacen worked out a complex theory that managed to combine both theories. His work laid the foundation for such later scholars as Johannes Kepler and Roger Bacon.
- Both of these scholars—and many others—were intrigued by Alhacen’s experiments with mirrors. Through his intense study of reflection and refraction, Alhacen was able to prove that light travels in straight lines, an incredibly important idea for those who would come after him.
- In addition to his experiments with mirrors, Alhacen also spent considerable time experimenting with pinhole projection to try to understand how the eye processes information. His experiments would lead later scholars to a better understanding of image inversion in the eye. Although Alhacen erroneously believed that the lens was the most important transmitter of images to the optic nerve, his writings and experimentation on this subject would eventually help scholars to identify and recognize the role that the retina, rods, and cones played in conveying visual information to the brain.

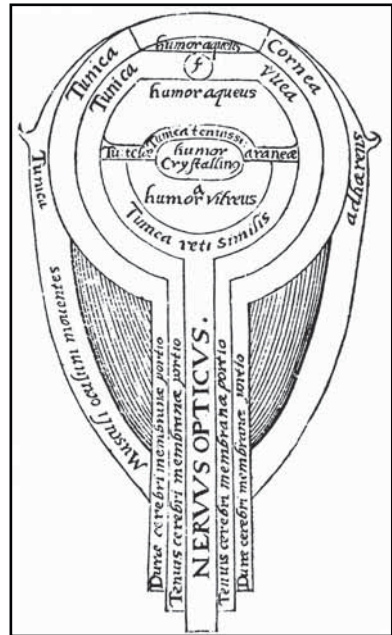
Alhacen’s Problem

- His inquiry into optics led Alhacen to another conundrum, one that had first been discussed by Ptolemy several centuries before. The problem, which has come to be called Alhacen’s problem, is this: Imagine you have a perfectly round pool table, and you want to hit a ball so that it bounces off the edge in such a way that it will then hit a second ball at a particular point. How do you know exactly how to aim the first ball to make sure it hits the second?

- Alhacen considered this problem from the perspective of optics, casting the problem in terms of a spherical mirror and a light source. If there is an observer, and you want to aim the light at the mirror and is reflected directly into the eyes of the observer, how do you calculate the position, distance, and angle of the light source, the mirror, and the observer relative to one another?
- Alhacen eventually found his way to an answer, but most medieval mathematicians had difficulty following his argument. It wasn't until Descartes, centuries later, that the Western world finally got a handle on Alhacen's problem, and it continues to intrigue modern mathematicians.

Scientific Methodology

- Alhacen's discoveries were certainly important to the medieval world, but by far, his greatest achievement lies not in what he discovered but in how he set about discovering it. He has been called, of course, the father of modern optics, as well as the second Ptolemy, but perhaps his most impressive title is the father of scientific methodology.
- Alhacen was the first to test his theories by means of rigorously controlled physical experiments. In explaining his procedure, Alhacen made the following statement: "The duty of the man who investigates the



Although he wasn't quite right about how the eye works, Alhacen's theories laid the foundation for later scholars in optics.

writings of scientists ... is to make himself an enemy of all that he reads and, applying his mind to the core and margins of its content, attack it from every side. He should also suspect himself as he performs his critical examination of it, so that he may avoid falling into either prejudice or leniency.”

- Whenever Alhacen wanted to test a particular theory, he ran experiments multiple times, each time varying the conditions and keeping careful notes of the results. His mind was capable of astounding leaps of insight and original thinking even as it took delight in the rigor of methodical testing.
- In addition to Alhacen’s problem, he took on a puzzle known as the moon illusion. The basic question, one that confounded the greatest minds of the medieval period and beyond, is this: Why does the moon look so big when it is on the horizon, close to the earth, but when it is high up in the sky, it appears much smaller?
 - Alhacen’s answer to this question was, essentially, that the difference in size was an optical illusion. It’s important to note that at the time, the idea that the moon illusion was the result of individual perception was a fairly unusual proposition.
 - Alhacen claimed that when the moon was low on the horizon, the eye could pick out several objects between the viewer’s perspective and the position of the moon, and this made the moon appear larger. As the moon rose in the sky, however, those objects that had been present in the field of vision of the viewer were no longer in view, and it was the absence of intervening objects that made the moon appear smaller.
- What we see with Alhacen is a kind of organic interweaving of his various interests; optics is the ground zero from which he begins his analyses, and it is optics that led him to geometry and mathematics, then to psychology and perception. He was the first scholar to find a way to link algebra and geometry, in the process creating the subfield of analytical geometry and paving the way for non-Euclidean geometry.

- With all his interest in science and math, it may be surprising to learn that Alhacen was devoutly religious and even wrote a treatise on Islamic theology. Although there are many today who regard these two spheres as diametrically opposed to each other, in the Middle Ages, this was hardly the case, and in many instances, the great thinkers believed that they could use their scientific knowledge to prove the existence of God.

The House of Wisdom

- According to some versions of his biography, Alhacen was summoned by the caliph of the Fatimids to Egypt, where he was given the task of building a series of dams and waterworks to help regulate the Nile and its flooding. He apparently accepted the challenge and began trying to construct a dam at Aswan, where a modern dam sits today.
- He anticipated what modern engineers would need to do by hundreds of years. But in the year 1011, engineering was not yet at a point that could make Alhacen's dream a reality, and he soon realized that building the dam was simply not possible. Fearing for his life in the face of the wrath of the caliph, Alhacen is said to have feigned insanity to escape punishment. He saved his life but spent the next 10 years under house arrest.
- With the death of the caliph in 1021, Alhacen was freed from house arrest. He then traveled to Islamic Spain, or Al-Andalus, a unique society that was a fusion of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic culture and an oasis of tolerance, education, and civilization. There, he continued to teach and write, but near the end of his life, he made his way back to Egypt and spent a great deal of time in Cairo in the *dar al-hikmah*, or "house of wisdom."
 - The house of wisdom was essentially a forerunner to the modern university—part library, part translation center, part school. The *dar al-hikmah* in Cairo was just one of a few houses of wisdom that had been established throughout the Muslim world, the most famous of which was founded in Baghdad in the 9th century.

- Much as Charlemagne in the West had sought to gather together scholars and texts with the foundation of his palace school at Aachen, the caliphs of Baghdad sought to acquire great works and make them available in Arabic translation. Such men as Alhacen came to the house of wisdom not only to study but also to make contributions to the store of knowledge available to the world.
- When Alhacen died in the year 1040, he left a significant and lasting legacy for the medieval world—not just for the Islamic East but also for the Christian West because his theories would be translated into Latin and become influential in Western science. His influence is still felt today and possibly will be in the future. Of the 200 or so texts he composed, only 55 have survived, and some of these have not yet been translated from the Arabic in which he composed them. We may still discover new ideas in his writings once full translations are made.

Suggested Reading

Smith, *Alhacen's Theory of Visual Perception*.

Steffens, *Ibn Al-Haytham*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which of Alhacen's theories do you find most intriguing or interesting?
2. How successful do you think Alhacen was in reconciling faith to science and philosophy?

Averroes and Aristotelian Philosophy

Lecture 9

The Muslim conquest of Spain in the 8th century was astonishingly swift, and Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula would endure for hundreds of years, from about 711 until about 1000. The medieval Muslim state in Spain is referred to as Al-Andalus, and it fairly quickly became the most sophisticated, intellectually advanced, and socially tolerant society in the medieval West. It was into this society, some 400 years after the Muslim conquest, that Abū al-Walīd Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd—Averroes—was born in 1126. As we'll see in this lecture, it was his specific cultural and geographic context that enabled Averroes to serve as the bridge between the worlds of ancient and medieval philosophy.

Centers of Islamic Scholarship

- The city of Baghdad was constructed in the middle of the 8th century at the command of the Abbasid caliph, whose faction had long been in conflict with a rival Islamic faction, the Umayyads. Baghdad would become a jewel in the crown of the Islamic world, with a fully functioning political bureaucracy and a house of wisdom, established in the year 830.
- Apart from Baghdad and Cairo, the other great center of Muslim scholarship was on the Iberian Peninsula in the city of Cordoba.
 - In the middle of the 8th century, the Abbasids decisively conquered the Umayyads and slaughtered all but one member of the Umayyad ruling family. The lone survivor made his way to Spain and established an Umayyad government.
 - Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula lasted from about 711 to 1000. This medieval Muslim state is referred to as Al-Andalus, and it became the most intellectually advanced and tolerant society in the medieval West.

- Despite the animosity between the Umayyads and the Abbasids, a good deal of contact and interchange took place between the two Islamic centers, and copies of many of the texts that were translated in the house of wisdom in Baghdad eventually made their way to Al-Andalus. It was into this society that Averroes (1126–1198) was born, some 400 years after the Muslim conquest of Spain.
 - As a Muslim in Al-Andalus, Averroes had contacts in multiple directions. To the east was Baghdad, a center of learning; to the south was the capital of Marrakesh in North Africa, where Averroes would find his most important patron; and to the north and west was the medieval European world, on which he would have a profound impact.
 - It was his position and his connections to so many disparate communities that would make Averroes the link between the worlds of ancient and medieval philosophy.

Meeting with the Caliph

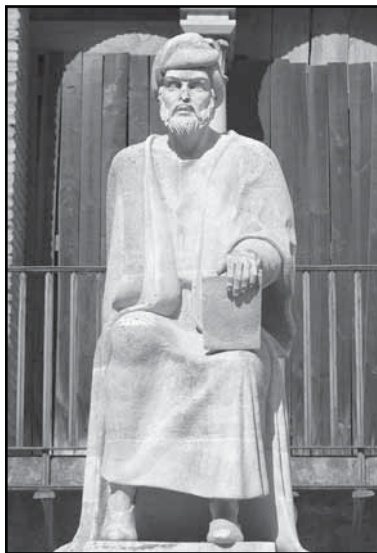
- As a young man, Averroes was summoned to the court of Abu Yaqub Yusuf in Marrakesh. Yusuf was deeply interested in matters of philosophy and metaphysics, and immediately upon meeting Averroes—who had been recommended by his teacher, Ibn Tufayl—Yusuf began to question the philosopher. The caliph asked how philosophers understood the nature of heaven and whether the world had always existed or had been created at a specific moment in time. The direction of the conversation made Averroes uncomfortable.
 - Many in the Islamic world believed that Aristotle’s view of an eternal world contradicted the Qur’an.
 - One of these was the Persian writer al-Ghazālī, who wrote a text called *Incoherence of the Philosophers*. In this work, he roundly condemned Aristotelian metaphysics and its attempts to understand the nature of reality as incompatible with true Islam.

- Averroes would have been familiar with the work of al-Ghazālī and may have worried that the caliph was trying to trap him into saying something potentially blasphemous. Recognizing what was happening, the caliph quickly explained that he himself had studied in Seville and had spent a considerable amount of time exploring Greek philosophy.
- According to his biography, Averroes professed astonishment at the scope and depth of Yusuf’s knowledge, and he understood some of the caliph’s frustration. He knew that Arabic translations of Greek philosophers were sometimes flawed and did not adequately represent the thoughts of the originals.
- What the caliph needed was someone who would write commentaries on the Greek philosophers to make their ideas easier to understand. Averroes agreed to take on the task and spent the next several years of his life working his way through Aristotle and writing commentaries that sought to clarify Aristotelian metaphysics.

Averroes’s Work on Aristotle

- Averroes did not just rewrite and correct problematic translations of earlier philosophers, but he added clarification and explanation whenever it seemed warranted. In doing so, he forged one of the strongest links in the long chain that joined the ancient world to the modern one; his commentaries on Aristotle would take center stage when 13th-century medieval scholars finally turned their attention to the Greek philosophers in a sustained and intellectually focused fashion.
- Sometime in 1168 or 1169, Averroes set to work, and his early results so pleased the caliph that he soon promoted Averroes to important civic offices. Yusuf first made Averroes a *qadi* (“judge”) in Seville, and later, he appointed him to the position of grand *qadi* of Cordoba. Although he had a busy life as a civil servant, Averroes also worked on his commentaries on Aristotle and other political, philosophical, and religious writings.

- Like Avicenna, Averroes felt that he had found a way to reconcile Aristotle and Islam. There were two key problems to address: First, there was Aristotle’s idea that God and the world were both eternal; God had not created the world at a specific historical moment. Second, Aristotle argued that God was not consciously involved with the specific events and circumstances of human history.
- Averroes composed short, medium, and long commentaries to explain Aristotelian theory. The short commentaries were summaries or paraphrases of the original texts; the medium commentaries included some explanation of some of the most complex ideas in Aristotelian thought; and the long commentaries were insightful, brilliant analyses that would provoke debates among the intellectual elites of Europe for centuries to come.
- Further, Averroes restored to the world a purer form of Aristotle than had been available for some time. He compared multiple translations of texts and often explained why he chose one version as more authoritative. He also weeded out portions of the texts that were not really Aristotle at all. And it was Averroes’s versions of Aristotle—with his commentaries attached—that would eventually be translated into Latin and work their way north into the European world.



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By discarding portions of earlier manuscripts that were not truly Aristotelian, Averroes arrived at the purest version of Aristotle in existence since the end of the ancient world.

Reconciliation of Aristotle and Islam

- To address Aristotle's claim that God and the world had always existed, Averroes asserted that the seeming incompatibility of this statement with the Qur'an was a misunderstanding. For Averroes, questions about the moment of creation were moot because God exists outside of time. There never was a time when God did not exist, and if God is omnipotent, then there was never a time when he couldn't have created the world. The Qur'an is not wrong, but humans are incapable of understanding creation except through the lens of time.
- Averroes takes a similar position on the question of God's knowledge. Al-Ghazālī had opposed Aristotle's suggestion that God occupies himself only with things that are divine and does not hear the prayers of common people. If that were true, al-Ghazālī contended, then it must mean that God's knowledge is limited, and that can't be true. Thus, Aristotelian thinking about God's knowledge is plainly heretical.
- Averroes again claims that it's not the answer that is wrong, but in our limited human understanding, we don't comprehend the question. Human knowledge cannot be the same as knowledge possessed by the divine. The two types of knowledge are ontologically and fundamentally different, to the point that we can't ever know what and how God knows; we can only know that God knows in a way that is different from how we know.
- Averroes argued that the Qur'an must be interpreted on more levels than the literal, pointing out that although the core verses are easily understood, the Qur'an itself calls attention to its own ambiguous nature in some instances.
 - One problematic area was the description of the afterlife. On one level, the Qur'an seems to suggest that the soul is reunited with the body in the afterlife; heaven is frequently described in terms of the sensual pleasures that the righteous will enjoy there. But how does the physical body reconstitute itself in the afterlife to join with the soul?

- On another level, one could argue that this description of the afterlife was figurative, meant to convey its joys in ways that most people could understand and relate to. Averroes didn't see any conflict here as long as one was reading the Qur'an on more than one level.
- In the end, Averroes argued, not only are philosophy and Aristotelianism not incompatible with Islam, but in fact, to truly understand the Qur'an, readers may need to use philosophical thinking.

Other Work by Averroes

- Even in what we might call his “day job” of *qadi*, Averroes was a prolific writer, composing a primer on Islamic law in 1168 that identified different schools of thought and offered guidance to those who were called upon to make new law in the process called *fiqh*. He particularly championed the use of analogy, and one of his biographers describes a situation in which he made a ruling by comparing a case of rumored homosexuality that came before him with a story in the Qur'an about a pure woman who was falsely accused of sexual impropriety.
- Averroes also served as the personal physician of the caliph Abu Yaqub Yusuf and wrote a medical text that was translated into Latin as the *Colliget*. In English, we know this work as the *Generalities in Medicine*, and along with Avicenna's work, it was a standard textbook in the earliest medical schools in the medieval West.
- Near the end of Averroes's life, his star dimmed. After his patron passed away, the caliph's son banished Averroes from the court in 1194 and ordered that all his books be burned. Averroes left Marrakesh and returned to the Iberian Peninsula, where he lived for some time under a sort of comfortable house arrest but with a reputation that was forever tarnished. After two years, the new caliph readmitted the philosopher into his good graces and lifted the bans he had placed on his writings. But Averroes wrote no more and passed away in 1198.

- Although his reputation in the Islamic world had been sullied and later leaders would condemn his work on Aristotle, the thinking of Averroes continued to spring up whenever a curious mind sought to understand the philosophers of ancient Greece. He is even found in Dante's *Inferno*, sharing the first circle of hell with such other "virtuous pagans" as Avicenna, Homer, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Suggested Reading

Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy*.

Sonneborn, *Averroes (Ibn Rushd)*.

Questions to Consider

1. How important, do you think, is the unique culture of Muslim Spain to the career of Averroes?
2. Both Averroes and Avicenna were deeply concerned with medical literature. What is fundamentally different about their approaches to the topic, and why or how does that matter?

Maimonides and Jewish Law

Lecture 10

From about the 8th through the 12th centuries, the Muslim-controlled Iberian Peninsula was a place of great learning, culture, and religious tolerance. It was this unique society that produced one of the greatest minds to emerge from a medieval Jewish community, Moshe ben Maimon, known today as Maimonides. Maimonides is notable for scores of accomplishments in both religion and philosophy, but in this lecture, we'll focus on just a few of his most significant contributions. These include his seminal work on Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, his thinking about the *via negativa*, or “negative theology,” and his attempt to reconcile religious law with philosophy in his text known as *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

Education and Early Work

- Maimonides (1135–1204) was born at a time considered by many scholars to be close to the apex of the Jewish golden age in Andalusian Spain. Soon after this time, the relatively tolerant Islam of the Umayyad and Almoravid caliphates in Cordoba would be replaced by the more austere and rigorously intolerant Almohad version of Islam. In response, the family of Maimonides left Cordoba and headed south.
- In the earliest days of his youth, Maimonides received a comprehensive and intensive education in the Mishnah, an important compilation of early oral teaching on Jewish law and custom.
- Even after leaving Cordoba, Maimonides continued to pursue a rigorous education; the family ultimately crossed the Mediterranean to North Africa and, for a time, lived in Fez, where Maimonides composed his first commentary on the Mishnah. This commentary was titled *Kitāb al-Sirāj*, meaning “*Book of Illumination*” or “*Book of the Lamp*.”

- In this text, Maimonides sought to defend a position that his father had taken while a community official in Al-Andalus. This was the idea that those who had been compelled to convert to Islam should be welcomed back into the Jewish community once they publicly renounced their “forced conversion.”
- This might not seem controversial today, but there was a sizeable faction in the Jewish community who felt that there was no room for such apostates. The fact that Maimonides’s father had spoken in favor of forgiveness and acceptance of these converts was a brave, principled, and in some quarters, unpopular stand. That Maimonides then wrote a text defending his father’s rabbinic ruling was no less significant.
- In the *Kitāb al-Sirāj*, Maimonides devised a list of 13 principles that he considered the fundamentals of Judaism. According to Maimonides, these were the principles from which any Jewish rabbi, jurist, or scholar must begin.
- After their time in Morocco, Maimonides’s family moved again—this time, to the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, where they found a less-than-warm welcome in lands that had recently become Crusader kingdoms. These were territories in the Middle East (the Levant) that had come under the rule of Western European Christians after the First Crusade. In the traditional homeland of Judaism, Jews from Spain now found themselves unwelcome and ill at ease; thus, Maimonides and his family headed south, to Egypt.

The *Mishneh Torah*

- Sometime around 1180, Maimonides completed his *Mishneh Torah*, an explication of the system of Jewish law. Generally considered his greatest contribution to religion and philosophy, the *Mishneh Torah* took a methodological approach to Jewish legal thought. Significantly, Maimonides chose to write this text in Hebrew rather than Arabic, the language in which he had done most of his earlier writing.

- In this great work, Maimonides gave a systematic accounting of all the laws of Judaism, explaining how and in what circumstances they should be applied and arguing for the logic and rationality of the laws. God had not given these laws simply because obedience is desired or required; all the laws served a much greater purpose, and together, they worked to establish a functioning, peaceful society. This result was achieved, Maimonides says, because all of Jewish law was created to improve both the body and the soul.



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Given that his father was a Jewish scholar of some renown, it's not surprising that Maimonides displayed a precocious intellectual curiosity and love of learning.

- The 14 books of the *Mishneh Torah* cover all aspects of Jewish life, both practical and esoteric. Among the topics addressed are prayers and blessings, proper observance of the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays, dietary restrictions, principles governing sexual behavior, family law, and legal ramifications of promises and oaths.
- The *Mishneh Torah* was a watershed moment in the history of Jewish jurisprudence, faith, and culture, but it also had a much wider influence, far beyond the specific community for which it was intended to be a guide.

The Guide for the Perplexed

- Maimonides also had a significant impact on philosophical thought—both within the Jewish community and beyond it. Perhaps the key work in this regard was his *Guide for the Perplexed*, which he completed around the year 1190. This work makes another attempt to reconcile Greek philosophy—particularly Aristotle—with Jewish theology.
- In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides takes up the challenge of reconciling faith with science and philosophy. As noted in the last lecture, Aristotle argued that the world had always existed, but the Torah clearly states that God created the world. We also noted another apparent conflict between theology and Greek philosophy: the matter of God’s presence and intervention in the daily events of the world.
- When Maimonides sought to explain these conundrums, he invoked two texts that were of prime importance in rabbinic scholarship: the creation account in Genesis and the account of Ezekiel and the chariot, which seems to indicate that in a moment of epiphany, God takes on human form. So potentially difficult and troubling were these passages that according to rabbinic law, public instruction on these topics was forbidden.
- Maimonides argued that when read correctly, these two texts actually demonstrate similarities between Greek philosophy and Judaism. The opening of Genesis, he argued, was a representation of cosmology and was the same thing that Greek scholars described as “physics,” and the story of Ezekiel was what Greek philosophers had considered “metaphysics.”
 - One of the charges that medieval Christians often leveled at the Jews is that they could not be saved because they read the Bible only literally. In addition to the historical truth of the Old Testament, Christians also believed that it held figurative meaning that foretold the coming of Christ.

- In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides argues aggressively for an interpretation of the Torah that is heavily reliant on figurative readings, a position that would create furor in Jewish scholastic circles of the day.
- Indeed, Maimonides pushed the link between Greek philosophy and Jewish belief to extreme limits, arguing that the patriarchs of Judaism had introduced much of the same material to their people in Israel that the Greek philosophers had taught their people in Greece. But after the Romans took control of the Jewish homeland, that knowledge was lost as the Jewish people scattered throughout the world.

Via Negativa

- One of the most important ideas that Maimonides explored in his *Guide for the Perplexed* was the *via negativa*, or “negative theology.” This is an attempt to define God not by what he is but by what he is not. For example, instead of suggesting “God is eternal,” negative theology asserts, “God has never not existed.”
- This negative theology can be usefully applied to the problem of evil. In an argument that would be echoed by many later theologians and mystics, Christian and otherwise, Maimonides explained that it is not the case that evil is a thing that exists or was created. Evil is simply the absence of good.
- On a related subject, Maimonides engaged the matter of the anthropomorphizing of God.
 - Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the foundational texts of the three major Abrahamic religions knows that God can seemingly feel sorrow, anger, or pity. In reading the Old Testament, someone without proper guidance might conclude that the Hebrew God is angry, jealous, and possessive—much like people but with limitless power.

- But Maimonides argues that God is not like people; people, for the most part, are not all that intelligent and are prone to superstition and bad behavior. Thus, it's important that most people think that God is like them but all-powerful; in other words, such a representation helps keep society in check.
- This, in turn, leads Maimonides back to one of his favorite subjects, the application of law. *The Guide for the Perplexed* returns to the discussion of the law from the *Mishneh Torah* and reiterates the philosophical reasons that the Ten Commandments should be obeyed.
 - Then, Maimonides moves to a more practical matter: How are flesh-and-blood people, with all their quirks and foibles, to be persuaded to follow the rules? In answer, he writes what has come to be known as the parable of the palace.
 - In this story, Maimonides describes a king who sits in his palace. In a series of six concentric rings that radiate from the palace, there are six groups of the king's subjects. The king here represents God, and the six kinds of subjects are those who are in different states relative to union with the divine. It should be the goal, Maimonides asserts, for all humans to attempt to come as close to the king as possible. For some, it will be a short walk; for others, a long and difficult journey.
 - Interestingly, the parable depicts a society in which everyone is connected; those in the outer rings are linked to the inner rings by proximity to the next ring in. Further, the barrier between groups is less a wall than it is a permeable membrane. The suggestion seems to be that it is possible for people on the periphery to move to the center by pursuing faith and receiving instruction.

- *The Guide for the Perplexed* is an erudite, complex, sophisticated work that provoked such intense reactions that it was actually banned by the leaders of some Jewish communities. But in Egypt, Maimonides maintained a position of power and influence. He was appointed *nagid* (“leader”) of the Egyptian Jewish community in 1171 and, later in his life, became a respected physician.
- To this day, Maimonides’s writings remain key components of Jewish law and culture and are a fundamental component of the foundation of thought and belief for most traditionally observant Jews. But in the immediate aftermath of his life and death, his writings quickly found their way into translations that would be matters of debate among those who were engaged in the study of Christian theology. In this respect, the medieval European world would be profoundly influenced by a man whose own faith community was kept strictly outside the boundaries of mainstream society.

Suggested Reading

Kramer, *Maimonides*.

Lerner, *Maimonides’ Empire of Light*.

Questions to Consider

1. Would the life and career of Maimonides have been possible if he had been born in another time and place?
2. How many “bridges” does Maimonides’s career create—between schools of thought, geographic locations, periods in history, and religious beliefs?

Rashi and Biblical Interpretation

Lecture 11

In our last lecture, we discussed the Jewish rabbi, physician, and philosopher Maimonides, who was a product of the unique culture of Andalusian Spain. As an Andalusian Jew, Maimonides had a life that was in many ways different from the experiences of Jews living elsewhere in Europe. The society of Al-Andalus was organized in terms of a particular set of Muslim beliefs; the rest of European society was structured in terms of Christian faith. This fact would have an important impact on the life of the subject of this lecture: Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, commonly known as Rashi, who spent most of his life in the French city of Troyes and never had the benefit of religious tolerance.

Experience in Christian Europe

- Rashi (1040–1105) was born in Troyes and educated from an early age. His first teacher was his father, a rabbi and respected leader of the Jewish community in Troyes. Then, at age 17, he went to the yeshiva of Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar in Worms, where he continued his education in the Torah and the Talmud with some of the greatest Jewish scholars of the day.
- Always eager to learn more, Rashi moved on to the Jewish community in Mainz, in the Alsace-Lorraine region, a long-disputed territory alternately claimed by France and Germany. When he was in his mid-20s, Rashi returned to Troyes, where he founded his own yeshiva around the year 1070. This yeshiva would persist until the middle of the 12th century and would play a crucial role in the promotion of medieval Jewish scholarship.
- Compared to Maimonides, who traveled from Spain to North Africa, the Holy Land, and Egypt, Rashi's travels and places of education were relatively limited and circumscribed. He moved only among communities in France and the Rhineland, and those communities themselves were limited in significant ways. In order to understand

this, we need to understand a little something about the relationship between Jews and Christians in 11th- and 12th-century Europe.

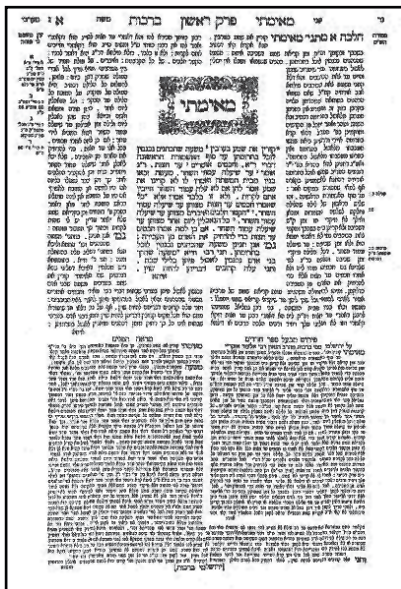
- In most places in Christian medieval Europe, Jewish communities were confined to specific quarters of towns. Many towns also had laws that forbade Jews from being out past a certain hour or from visiting certain parts of town. There were also rules concerning dress and restrictions on what kinds of work Jews could do.
- However, because usury was considered a sin worthy of excommunication by the medieval church, Jews were allowed to engage in moneylending. Although their own religion looked askance at loans, Jews had few options but to fill the urgent need for cash in a society that was shifting from rural and agricultural to urban and mercantile.
- The situation of being forced to live in ghettos, being stigmatized by their dress, and being limited to some of the most reviled jobs in society resulted in an increasingly negative view of Jews. Rumors spread that Jews had kidnapped and killed Christian children or that they were responsible for outbreaks of disease.
- It was this kind of fear and superstition that the Jews of Troyes, Mainz, Worms, and other European communities often faced. Even so, for most of Rashi's lifetime, Christian-Jewish interactions were tense but mostly civil. But then, in 1095, Pope Urban II called the First Crusade, urging Christian warriors to "reclaim" the Holy Land for Christendom. All those who participated would receive forgiveness of their sins.
 - For a variety of reasons, medieval society was ready to direct violence toward a distant, non-Christian foe. But several companies of Crusaders that set out for the Middle East decided to attack non-Christians along the way. The wave of violence that swept through the Rhineland from 1096 to 1098 was truly horrific. Entire communities of Jews were slaughtered by the marauding Crusaders.

- In some instances, Christian leaders attempted to protect the Jews, as was the case in Mainz, where the archbishop took a large group of Jews into his home for protection. But when the Crusaders broke in and the Jews realized that the bishop would be unable to protect them, they killed themselves and their children.
- In the anti-Semitic madness that swept the countryside during these years, many of Rashi's teachers and friends were killed.

Rashi's Commentaries

- Rashi's most important contributions—both to the Jewish community and the broader community of medieval Europe—were his commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud.
 - Most people are aware that the heart of the Hebrew scriptures is known as the Torah. The Torah is composed of five books, which are also included in the Christian Old Testament and are commonly called Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.
 - The Talmud is a long text that developed from an oral tradition over many centuries concerning the meaning of the Torah. By Rashi's day, it had become difficult to navigate.
- Rashi sought to explicate both the Torah and the Talmud so that they would be understandable even to children. His commentaries seem to come out of his long career as a teacher in the yeshiva he founded in Troyes, and in many ways, they are informed by the conversations and debates he had with his students.
- What is most striking about Rashi's attempt to write a comprehensive commentary on the Talmud is his approach of moving phrase by phrase and even word by word through the text, explicating everything in detail. His commentary on Leviticus 19:18 is an example.

- Rashi's commentaries were groundbreaking for a number of reasons, not least of which was his willingness to combine literal and figurative readings, often using parables and analogies to explain certain concepts and passages. He also frequently used French vernacular words to gloss difficult technical terms in Hebrew. Thus, not only are his commentaries fundamentally important for scholars of Judaism, but they also have an accidental benefit for scholars of Old French.



Rashi's commentaries on the Torah and the Talmud sought to understand and answer questions even before they were raised.

- So definitive, clear, and thorough are Rashi's commentaries that since his time, it has long been the position of most Jewish scholars that no other definitive work on the Talmud is needed. Instead, additional commentaries on Rashi's commentary are called for. Indeed, his work gave rise to a whole new class of scholar-writers, known as *tosafists*. They seek to better present and augment Rashi's commentary and enhance its impact on Jewish thought.
- In the decades immediately following Rashi's death and the establishment of the *tosafist* tradition, manuscripts of the Talmud were laid out in something like concentric circles or nesting squares, with the Talmudic text in the center, Rashi's commentary in the inner margin, and the *tosafist* commentary in the outer margin.

Sample Talmudic Passage

- Let's consider a passage from the section of the Talmud known as Mishnah *Megillah* 24a. It speaks of customs during religious services and reads: "The One who concludes with the reading from the Prophets He also passes before the ark, and he lifts his hands. And if he were a minor, then his father or his teacher passes in his stead. A minor may read from the Torah and recite the Aramaic translation. However he may not lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*, and he may not pass before the ark, and he may not lift his hands."
- Rashi then walks the reader through this passage, explaining every portion of the directive. First, he deals with who is allowed to do what, and says, "The sages have enacted that one who is accustomed to read the concluding reading from the Prophets should also lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*." He then deals with some questions: Why does the one who has done the reading read pass before the ark? "In order to fulfill the obligation on behalf of the congregation with regards to the sanctification of the prayer."
- Rashi's commentary on the circumstance of a minor who reads from the Prophets is a little difficult. He seems to say that a minor is not obliged to fulfill any sacred duty on behalf of the community, but the person who leads the responsive reading of the *Shema* is so obliged; thus, a minor cannot perform this function.
- Significantly, this commentary of Rashi was glossed by a *tosafist*. The commentator takes on the venerated rabbi's approach as a guide as he tries to understand this issue: "This is difficult: Why speak only of a minor? Even an adult cannot pass before the ark unless he has a full beard ... This difficulty may be resolved by saying that there they were dealing with a public fast-day [when] we should appoint only an elder who is familiar with the prayers, and one with much responsibility."

Reactions to Rashi's Commentaries

- Rashi's commentaries were specifically written as guides for his students and other members of the Jewish communities in Troyes and elsewhere throughout Europe—populations made up primarily of what are known as Ashkenazi Jews, or those who lived mainly in France, Germany, and Eastern Europe.
- In contrast, the Sephardic Jews were primarily from Spain, Portugal, and North Africa. Although it took some time, Rashi's commentaries eventually made their way to these communities, where they produced a variety of reactions, from excited acceptance to outright shunning.
- The one reaction they did not produce was indifference—in either Jewish or Christian communities. Christian scholars and holy men in later centuries turned to Rashi for guidance as they sought to understand the Old Testament and the religious traditions from which Christianity, Judaism, and Islam had all sprung. To this day, his writing and thinking are not just influential but fundamental to practicing Orthodox and many Conservative Jews, and his texts are also considered historically important in Reform Judaism.

Suggested Reading

Doron, *Rashi's Torah Commentary*.

Grossman, *Rashi*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why do you think Rashi's commentaries have been so influential and accepted for so many centuries, almost from the moment of their composition?
2. What effect do you think anti-Semitism had on Rashi's career and reception?

Saladin and the Defeat of the Crusaders

Lecture 12

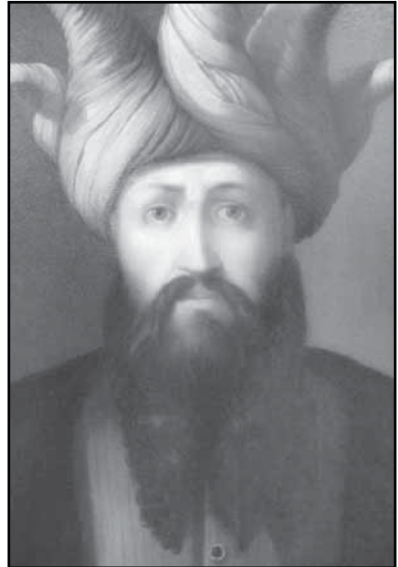
The Islamic leader Saladin encompassed a range of qualities and abilities that is rare in any one individual. He was a valiant fighter and brilliant military strategist who worked actively for peace and was as interested in studying and writing poetry as he was in probing the mysteries of faith and plumbing the depths of math and science. His was a great mind on the order of Charlemagne; indeed, in some ways, Saladin's greatness may have surpassed that of the Carolingian emperor. Saladin was a soldier who valued knowledge and wished to preserve it; a statesman who carved an empire out of a group of small, squabbling territories; and a devoutly religious and deeply curious human being.

Saladin's Rise to Power

- Saladin (1137/38–1193) is one of those rare historical figures who was both adored by his supporters and admired by his enemies. Christian leaders who were forced by their superiors to break treaties with Saladin wrote letters of apology to him and were forgiven. Kings who came to fight him and were taken ill were provided the services of Saladin's personal physician. And after capturing the leaders of his enemies, he seated them on comfortable cushions and politely offered them water to slake their thirst.
- But Saladin was by no means weak, and he never asked his followers to do something he himself would not do. He personally beheaded Reynald of Châtillon, one of the leading figures of the Crusades, and never hesitated to stand at the front of a military charge. Nor did he lack for ambition; from his base in Egypt, he sought nothing less than to conquer all of the Middle East.
- The story of Saladin's origins makes the narrative of his rise to power and his later deeds all the more remarkable. He was born in the region of Tikrīt in modern Iraq. Although by faith he was a Muslim, by ethnicity, he was a Kurd.

- In our lecture on Avicenna, we touched briefly on what has come to be called the “Arabization” of Islam. As Islam grew and spread, it became increasingly necessary for its adherents to speak and write Arabic and to accept as leaders men of ethnic Arab descent. Given the fact that Saladin was a Kurd, it’s surprising that he rose to any kind of power in the Islamic world at all.

- Saladin distinguished himself through his military success, his loyalty to his leader, and the sharpness of his intellect. As a result, by the end of the 1160s, he had risen to the position of vizier of Egypt and, within a few years, was proclaimed sultan of Egypt and Syria.



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- Having consolidated his power, Saladin turned his attention to the Crusaders, who had arrived in the Holy Land in 1099 and conquered Jerusalem. They had then gone on

to establish four Crusader states in the Levant: the kingdom of Jerusalem, the county of Edessa, the county of Tripoli, and the principality of Antioch. From almost the second the European forces established themselves, however, they were under constant siege from the people they had displaced.

As a deeply religious Muslim, Saladin found the presence of Crusaders in the Holy Land an affront to his sensibilities.

- In 1144, a military leader named Zengi managed to retake the county of Edessa from the Crusaders. Thus, in 1145, the Second Crusade was called. As would be the case with almost every Crusade after the first, the second attempt was a failure, and Muslim power was only strengthened in the Levant. It was between the Second and Third Crusades that Saladin rose to his position as sultan. Indeed, the Third Crusade was called in response to Saladin's decisive defeat of the Crusader army at the Battle of Hattin in 1187.

The Battle of Hattin

- After he came to power, Saladin was interested in conquest but with as little loss of life as possible. To that end, he had made several treaties with Christian Crusader leaders and seemed to indicate a reluctant willingness to move toward some kind of accommodation. Thus, he was angry when a Christian leader broke yet another treaty in 1187. Saladin declared *jihad*, and what little Christian unity had remained in the Holy Land disintegrated.
- The Christian Raymond of Tripoli turned his back on the other Crusader states and made a separate treaty with Saladin. In accordance with the treaty, Raymond granted permission for a Muslim hunting party to enter his territory but then discovered that the "hunting party" numbered 7,000. Certain that Saladin was about to break their treaty, Raymond renounced his earlier agreement and rejoined the other leaders of the Christian Crusader states, meeting up with them in Acre.
- While Raymond was in Acre, Saladin's forces surrounded his home city of Tiberias and made prisoners of his wife, family, and subjects. And then Saladin waited. Most of the Crusaders contended that they needed to rescue the city immediately, but Raymond argued that Saladin's move was a trap designed to lure the Crusaders on a 40-mile march through the desert. The other Crusaders voted him down.

- The Crusader army moved from Acre to Sephoria in central Galilee. From there, on July 3, 1187, the Christian forces set out for Tiberias, bringing with them a relic of the True Cross. As long as the relic was with them, most were supremely confident of victory. The Christian troops also carried the Crusader standard, a source of inspiration that was visible to all.
- Although it had been chilly when the army set out in the morning, by midday, it was sweltering. Men and horses were thirsty, and scouts were sent out to check the known springs in the area. Saladin had anticipated this, and those springs that he had not already blocked up were swarming with Muslim warriors.
- As they drew closer to the Horns of Hattin, the Crusaders' thirst grew. But Saladin sent out parties of advance raiders, specifically instructed to ride within range, fire arrows into the advancing Christian forces, and then flee. The Christians would take losses and move further toward exhaustion as they attempted to pursue their attackers. By the evening, the Crusaders halted, looking out toward the Horns of Hattin and their enemy. In the space between them was a formation known as the Hill of the Multiplication of Pains.
- In the few remaining moments of daylight, the Crusaders made their charge. By the time it was fully dark, a third of the Christian army had been killed or had surrendered. On the morning of July 4, the fighting continued, but it did not last long. Exhausted, dying of thirst, and outnumbered, the Crusader armies were quickly routed.
- During the fighting, the Crusader standard was felled, and the relic of the Cross was wrenched from the hands of the bishop who had carried it. When the fighting was over, Saladin ordered that the leaders of the Christian army be brought to him in his tent, including the king of Jerusalem, Guy of Lusignan, and Reynald of Châtillon, who had provoked Saladin on numerous occasions. Saladin beheaded Reynald himself.

- After ceasing his siege of Tiberias—the trap he had laid to draw the Crusaders across the desert—Saladin sent Raymond of Tripoli’s wife on her way, with her passage paid and an escort to ensure her safe conduct.

Conquest of Jerusalem and Aftermath

- Given his earlier chivalrous behavior, it is perhaps no surprise that when he finally captured Jerusalem, Saladin acted in similar fashion. Once the resistance forces agreed to surrender, he allowed thousands of them to ransom themselves. He also permitted the Knights Hospitaller to pay the ransom of some of the poorer inhabitants of Jerusalem and allowed several thousand individuals to simply go free. The remaining inhabitants were taken as slaves.
- After the events of 1187, Jerusalem, the sacred city to the three major monotheistic faiths of the medieval world, became a symbol that was dramatically rewritten for both the Christian and Muslim faithful. For the former, Jerusalem was a symbol of loss, and for the latter, a new symbol of unity.
- Saladin recognized the tremendous power that Hattin and the capture of Jerusalem presented and pressed his advantage to make the most of this opportunity to unify many of the previously warring factions of the Muslim world. He deliberately timed his entry into the captured city to coincide with the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad’s legendary night journey to Jerusalem and commissioned sermons, poems, and chronicles to record the event.
- In response to Saladin’s victory, the Third Crusade was called, and King Richard I of England, also known as Richard the Lionheart, took up the cross. Richard’s first serious military endeavor in the Holy Land was the reconquest of Acre. Once this was accomplished, he executed every Muslim in the city, including women and children. Saladin responded by executing all the European prisoners he held. There could be no clearer indication that Richard should not mistake past acts of mercy for weakness.

- The two leaders found themselves in confrontation repeatedly, often in battles of wits rather than military might.
 - After Richard defeated Saladin's forces at the Battle of Arsūf in 1191, the English king decided to press his advantage and move quickly to the city of Ascalon. But when he got there, he found it deserted.
 - Angry and confused, Richard began to turn his forces toward Jaffa, when Saladin's forces—which had been hiding a few miles away—attacked.
 - It was when Richard's troops had been reduced to almost nothing and he himself was ill and horseless that Saladin made his famous chivalrous gestures, offering Richard the services of his private physician, as well as a new horse. So moved was Richard that at one point, he offered his sister to Saladin's brother as a wife, thinking that a marriage would resolve the conflict once and for all.
- In the end, the two great leaders signed the Treaty of Ramla (1192). In it, Richard agreed that Jerusalem would remain under Muslim control, and Saladin agreed that all Christians who wished to make religious pilgrimage to the city would be able to do so under his personal protection.
 - The geopolitical ramifications of this treaty were significant. Crusader territory was reduced to just a tiny strip of land, from Tyre to Jaffa, while the reach of the Islamic world was both expanded and unified in ways it had not been before.
 - After rising to power in Egypt, Saladin eventually controlled a vast swath of the Islamic world—from North Africa to Mesopotamia, Palestine, Egypt and beyond. And though Europeans clung to the hope of a restoration of Crusader power in the Levant, they were never able to recover from Saladin's victory.

Suggested Reading

Hindley, *Saladin: Hero of Islam*.

Lyons, *Saladin: The Politics of Holy War*.

Questions to Consider

1. How do you think Saladin's position as a cultural outsider in the Arab world may have influenced his rise to power?
2. What aspects of Saladin's character seem the most unusual for the time and place in which he lived?

Hildegard of Bingen

Lecture 13

Hildegard of Bingen is the first female great mind we will discuss in this course. This imbalance is simply due to the nature of society at the time. Women were not afforded the same opportunities as men and didn't have the occasion—or the ability in most cases—to make intellectual contributions that would be preserved. But more than 800 years after her lifetime, Hildegard finally achieved the status of a saint. She was also pronounced a Doctor of the Church, a title reserved for those saints who have made important contributions to theology and church doctrine. As we'll see in this lecture, despite the length of time it took, Hildegard was well deserving of this recognition.

Hildegard's Early Life

- Hildegard (1098–1179) was born to a relatively well-off German family, but from the moment of her birth, she was apparently a sickly child, perhaps suffering from epilepsy. When she was 8 years old, her parents brought her to the church at Disibodenberg as an offering, or oblate. Specifically, the plan was for Hildegard to become an anchoress. She was placed into the care of Jutta, the daughter of a noble family in the area, to be raised and instructed in Jutta's anchor-hold.
 - An anchoress was one who followed the vows of chastity, poverty, and stability of place to an even greater degree than nuns and was even more limited in her seclusion.
 - An anchor-hold was a small cell, usually attached to the side of a church. The cell often had two windows: one that provided a view into the church and one that provided access to the outside world, allowing food and other necessities to be passed inside.

- In many instances, anchorholds did not have doors. The anchoress was literally walled into her cell during a ceremony in which the last rites might be said for her. She would be, essentially, dead to the world.
- Her only activity and prime reason for existence was to engage in prayer, the better to save those who were forced to engage in worldly activities.
- Jutta's cell must have been more spacious and had more outside access than some, given that Jutta took on Hildegard and, over time, the daughters of other families. Eventually, Jutta and her charges relocated to more spacious quarters and started their own nunnery.
- Hildegard seems to have experienced what she interpreted as divine visions from about the age of 3. She did not at first understand that her experience was unique and only later learned that not everyone had the same experience. As she wrote: "When I was filled with this vision, I said many things which were strange to the hearers."



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As an anchoress, Hildegard would have been expected to pray to help cleanse the sins of those who provided her with worldly goods.

Hildegard as Abbess

- After her enclosure with Jutta, Hildegard seems to have spent her days in prayer and learning. From her later writings, we can see that she had a decent grasp of Latin, and she was well versed in the important theological texts of her age. She also seems to have studied music with Jutta, and many people today know her name because of her musical compositions.
- Although Hildegard learned to keep silent about her visions, it seems that at some point, she confided in Jutta. Jutta seems to have accepted that the visions were of divine origin, but she felt that modesty should prevent Hildegard from speaking about them beyond her immediate community.
- After Jutta died, the other nuns of the convent unanimously elected Hildegard to be their new leader. It seemed as if Hildegard would spend the rest of her days as abbess of a large and prosperous community of nuns.
- However, promptly upon her election, Hildegard announced that she wanted her community to move to Rupertsberg, near the town of Bingen, where the nuns could establish a new convent. Such a move would give Hildegard more independence because she would be mistress of her own abbey and not subject to the authority of the abbot at Disibodenberg.
 - Hildegard claimed that this move was divinely ordained, but church officials disagreed and denied her request.
 - In response, Hildegard was stricken with something resembling a coma; the abbot of her monastery came to her bedside to attempt to rouse her but found himself unable to do so. He relented, and miraculously, Hildegard was restored to good health and rose from her sickbed.
 - This was not the last time that Hildegard would be stricken by a mysterious illness that dissipated once church officials recognized the error of their ways.

- Interestingly, Hildegard herself did not always accede immediately to divine commands. Around the age of 42, she received another vision, in which she was ordered to make known her experiences to the world. She claims that at first she resisted, but she then became desperately ill; later, she would say that this was a punishment for not acquiescing to God's command. Once she accepted that she was to write down the sacred knowledge that she received in the form of visions, her illness abated somewhat.
- Hildegard seemed to combine a certain caution and respect for authority with a forceful and stubborn independence when she felt it was warranted.
 - For example, she wrote many letters during the early years of her adulthood to high-ranking ecclesiastical authorities, expressing concern about her visions and an anxious desire to know if they were, in fact, from God.
 - Once she received official sanction from such important figures as the archbishop of Mainz, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Pope Eugenius III, she lost no time in recording her visions and in writing letters to secular and church officials, admonishing them for certain actions she deemed unworthy of men of God.

Divine Visions and Descriptions

- Hildegard's visions can be truly fascinating. For example, in one she describes seeing a woman encircled by the branches of a tree and with feet of wood. In another, she describes a large circular object lit by a "globe of reddish fire."
 - Not only did Hildegard describe her visions in sometimes exhausting detail, but she also frequently drew them or had her nuns or one of her secretaries create an artistic representation, many of which have survived to this day. These images are truly astonishing, depicting details in vibrant colors.
 - Unfortunately, some of the original manuscripts containing Hildegard's drawings were destroyed during World War II, but in some cases, later copies survive. Hildegard's work

was important enough that not long after her death, various scriptoria put their monks and nuns to work making copies that were circulated throughout the medieval world.

- An early draft of Hildegard's first important visionary work, the *Scito vias Domini* ("know the ways of God"; referred to as the *Scivias*), made its way to Pope Eugenius III. He gave it his blessing and told Hildegard to continue her work, which she did.
 - Obviously, Hildegard's visions had an impact far beyond the particular community in which she lived and a powerful effect on religious and secular leaders throughout the medieval world. Religious pilgrims flocked to her abbey, and leaders sought her counsel on a variety of matters.
 - Even if people didn't necessarily fully understand the visions, it seems clear that everyone believed they truly came from God, and Hildegard was held in a great degree of reverence and awe.
- After describing or drawing her visions, Hildegard would then explicate them. In the *Scivias*, for example, she writes, "I saw a great mountain the color of iron, and enthroned on it One of such great glory that it blinded my sight. On each side of him there extended a soft shadow, like a wing of wondrous breadth and length." She then goes on to explain that the mountain is symbolic of God's kingdom; the wings represent the balance between justice and merciful protection; and so on.
- All of Hildegard's texts follow a similar model of describing and expounding on her visions, but each has a slightly different focus.
 - The *Scivias* focuses on the relationship between God and humanity, discussing the creation and the shape of the universe. It also discusses the nature of angels, the fall of Adam and Eve, and the Crucifixion. At the end of this text, Hildegard appended an original musical composition entitled "Symphony of Heaven."

- In another important work, the *Book of Life's Merits*, Hildegard focused on the conflict between virtue and vice. To accompany this text, she composed a morality play—one of the earliest recorded in the medieval period—which offers a comprehensive description of Purgatory.
- By far the most compelling of Hildegard's visionary theological writings is the *Book of Divine Works*, which reworks the allegorical visions and interpretations of her first two books on a grand scale. It explores such complex abstract concepts as wisdom, love, and mercy in a lengthy vision detailing the historical progression of humanity toward salvation.

Hildegard's Fame and Legacy

- Even though these three major works were written for an elite ecclesiastical audience, Hildegard's fame grew, spreading through the area around Bingen and beyond. Remarkably, she was invited to preach to other monasteries and convents and traveled throughout Germany to do so.
- As groundbreaking as this activity was, especially for a woman, the topics Hildegard discussed were not surprising. She focused mainly on matters of corruption within the church and the need for reform, but her approach to these matters was absolutely orthodox and conservative, rather than revolutionary or confrontational. In other words, the message she imparted came from a place of deep respect and reverence for the church.
- Hildegard's orthodoxy, in combination with the official sanction she had attained of her visions, placed her in an unusual position. By deferring early on to her superiors and expressing a deep humility concerning her visions, Hildegard later managed to achieve an almost unprecedented degree of autonomy and authority.

- Some modern medical professionals have suggested that Hildegard’s visions might be attributed to a certain kind of migraine headache or to epilepsy, but what’s important is that she and her fellows believed that the visions were communications from God. Further, whatever handicaps she suffered, it took a uniquely great mind to transform those handicaps into an opportunity to express profound insights about the nature of God and humanity. Hildegard used her special gift as a gateway for engaging with and enriching such diverse fields as literature, theology, medicine, and art.

Suggested Reading

Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098–1179*.

Newman, *Voice of the Living Light*.

Questions to Consider

1. Many modern scholars have attempted to “diagnose” Hildegard as suffering from various ailments, such as epilepsy or migraine headaches. How significant is it that she may have had one of these conditions, or does it even matter as we attempt to understand her life and work?
2. In what sphere do you think Hildegard has had the greatest influence—religion, politics, gender relations?

Bernard of Clairvaux

Lecture 14

In our last lecture, we discussed Hildegard of Bingen, who is now both a saint and a Doctor of the Church. The latter honor is reserved for those few saints whose teachings are considered useful for all Christians “in any age of the Church.” Although only 35 saints of the Catholic Church bear this title, it’s not surprising that a significant portion of the great minds in this course are among them: Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Jerome, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, and the subject of this lecture, Bernard of Clairvaux. Living much of his life in Cîteaux, France, Bernard was known for the zeal with which he sought to reform corrupt practices of the church.

Background on Bernard and Monasticism

- Bernard (1090–1153) was born into a noble family in what is today the Burgundy region of France. He was sent to study at the school in Châtillon, where he seems to have stood out for the depth of his piety. He became particularly interested in a new monastic movement, the order of the Cistercians, which had been founded in 1098.
- There had been several types of monasticism since the earliest years of the church, but by far the most common form was some kind of communal arrangement in which a group of men lived, worked, and prayed together in a monastery and were ruled over by an abbot.
- In the 6th century, an Italian monk, Saint Benedict of Nursia, wrote a text that offered guidance to those living the monastic life. His Rule of Saint Benedict addresses everything from prayer to clothing to diet. Soon, the dominant form of monasticism in the medieval world was Benedictine. But by the 11th century, a growing number of people in the church voiced concerns about what they saw as corruption that had crept into the order.

- Upon entering the monastery, the brothers took vows that usually included chastity, poverty, obedience, and stability of place. Their days were spent in manual labor, producing food for their own community and, in many cases, for the secular communities just beyond their doorsteps. They frequently received offerings and donations of goods and cash, all of which went to the monastery and remained with it.
- Over time, Benedictine monasteries developed close relationships with the secular communities in which their houses were situated, and in many instances, the monastery was the greatest landholder in a particular region, regularly collecting rents and tithes. Soon, the ideal of an austere life of prayer and poverty became, in spite of itself, a life of comfort and abundance.
- For this reason, at the end of the 11th century, a group of monks founded a new order at the town of Cîteaux in France. These Cistercians sought to return to the original ideal of Benedict, in part by situating their mother houses far from secular communities.
- Young Bernard was fired up with the idea of the Cistercian reform movement and, in 1113, presented himself and 30 other young men to the abbot of Cîteaux to ask for admittance to the brotherhood. Once accepted into the community, Bernard quickly distinguished himself for his fierce devotion to Christian principles. At age 24, he was made abbot of a new Cistercian house at Clairvaux.
- Although it had originally been his desire to remove himself from earthly concerns and live a life of pure monasticism, historical events conspired against Bernard, drawing his attention away from divine matters.
 - Like Pope Gregory the Great, Bernard made his contribution to the church, not through the original quality of his thinking but through the repackaging and explanation of important texts and doctrines. Primarily, his goal was to encourage Christians to

improve their faith and move closer to the divine; in his mind, one of the best ways to do this was to tackle corruption within the church or threats to its power.

- Broadly speaking, Bernard found himself embroiled in three matters: (1) a papal schism in 1130, (2) the calling of the Second Crusade and its ultimate failure, and (3) the need to address potentially heretical teachings that were coming out of the new university system.

Papal Schism

- In 1130, Pope Honorius II died, and there was much infighting among bishops and kings concerning who would succeed him. Some thought Innocent II was the logical choice; others opted for a rival pope, Anacletus II. King Louis VI of France, recognizing the problem, appointed Bernard to sort it out. Bernard was forced to travel throughout medieval Europe, attempting to persuade kings and bishops to support Innocent II.
- Bernard met many leaders in person, and he sought to persuade them through open letters that were addressed to specific individuals but widely circulated to garner support. This letter-writing campaign was so successful that Bernard would return to this strategy repeatedly when he had a cause to support. Ultimately, Innocent II was confirmed and acknowledged as pope.
- This victory enhanced the reputation of the fledgling Cistercian order and was likely connected to the later election of Eugenius III, a Cistercian monk and former student of Bernard's. Between Innocent and Eugenius, however, was Pope Celestine II. During Celestine's brief pontificate, he turned his attention to the Holy Land and offered support for two new monastic orders—the Knights Templar and the Hospitallers—that had come into being with the advent of the Crusades.

The Second Crusade

- When Pope Eugenius III received word in 1146 that the Crusader kingdoms in the Holy Land had taken heavy losses, he ordered Bernard to preach a Second Crusade, but the abbot was reluctant to do so at first.
 - Just as he believed that his own life would most ideally be spent in the monastery at Clairvaux, focused on matters of the next world rather than this one, so he believed that it would be better for Christians to be more concerned with matters of faith close to home than in a distant land. However, he ultimately became convinced that it was his duty to support this new endeavor to reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom.
 - Enlisting Bernard to preach the Crusade was a clever move on the part of the pope because Bernard, much like Saint Augustine, was nothing if not an enthralling speaker. When Bernard began his sermon to the crowd gathered at Vézelay on March 31, 1146, the initial response was lukewarm, but then the mood shifted dramatically.
 - Supposedly, the members of the crowd were so fired up at the end of Bernard's speech that they all agreed to take up the cross en masse. So persuasive was Bernard that nobles and kings also took up the cross, and as Bernard traveled throughout Europe preaching the Second Crusade, stories of miracles sprang up in his wake.
- The Second Crusade was, however, a dismal failure—at least, from the Western European point of view. Just as Bernard had been lauded for his persuasive powers in getting the Second Crusade underway, so he was ultimately blamed for its failure, a criticism that he thought was not entirely without merit.
 - Crushed by the defeat of the Christian forces, Bernard felt compelled to write an apology to the papal curia. In this letter, he was confronted with a familiar problem: If God was good

and Christianity was the one true religion, why would God allow a Christian empire to collapse or permit Muslim warriors to defeat Christian soldiers?

- Bernard's answer was that God had deemed that European society had not yet reached a state of holiness sufficient to allow it to win a holy war. It was not that God was granting victory to the Muslims but that he was not giving it to the Christians—yet.
- This argument brought Bernard back to the point he had initially made when asked to preach the Second Crusade: It was more important for Christians to attend to their problems at home than to seek conflict far beyond the borders of Europe.

Theological Debate and Teachings

- Although it might seem that the Crusade issue would be the most important event of Bernard's career, in fact, his conflict with Peter Abelard was by far the greater source of consternation, self-doubt, and argumentation.
 - Abelard was the greatest intellect of his generation, and his teaching at the University of Paris at times bordered on heresy—at least from the perspective of Bernard and other high-ranking officials of the church.
 - It says something about the rhetorical skills of both Bernard and Abelard that when a public debate was to be held, with Abelard stating his case and the church offering its counterargument, church officials unanimously named Bernard to represent them—although they also acknowledged that the Cistercian monk would likely be no match for Abelard. We'll look at this debate in the next lecture.
- Perhaps what should be most appreciated about Bernard is the body of literature he produced. Again, he was not necessarily an original thinker, but the greatness of his mind is clearly evident in the way

he presented important church teachings. His first significant work, *The Steps of Humility and Pride*, written in the 1120s, was intended for his fellow monks. Other texts included *On Grace and Free Choice*, *On Loving God*, and *In Praise of the New Knighthood*.

- Bernard also wrote one of the most important texts of the 12th century, *On Consideration*, a work explicitly addressed to Pope Eugenius III. The pope was a former student of Bernard's, and the abbot did not believe he had the intelligence required of the position. *On Consideration* was written as a guide to help Eugenius perform his office correctly and effectively.



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On many issues, Bernard seems to have believed that there was much that could be improved locally before expanding the discourse to a global level.

- By far, Bernard's most significant spiritual work came in the form of his letters and sermons. In these, he both explicated scripture and thoughtfully responded to the queries of those seeking spiritual guidance. The picture that emerges is of an erudite, complex man who recognized the seeming hypocrisy of his constant affirmation of a life of prayer and solitude, even as he defied those precepts in his own life and career.
- Bernard made an impact on the 12th-century world in realms far exceeding the religious, but it was in that sphere, particularly the monastic, that his influence would long be felt. He personally founded 163 monasteries during his lifetime, and by the time of his death, these had expanded and divided into 343 Cistercian houses. Just two decades after his death, he was declared a saint, and in the 19th century, Pope Pius VIII elevated his status still further and named him a Doctor of the Church.

Suggested Reading

Bredero, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Between Cult and History*.

Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think it is the combination of Bernard's conservative spirituality with his zeal that makes him a great mind, or is one of these factors more important than the other?
2. Why do you think Cistercianism became so popular during the 12th century at exactly the same time that secular education in the form of the university system began to be standardized and to become popular, as well?

Abelard and Héloïse

Lecture 15

The medieval European university system had its origins and found its greatest support in the infrastructure of the church, and most of the masters who taught at the new centers of education—in Paris, Oxford, Bologna, and elsewhere—were themselves in holy orders. But as new knowledge made its way into medieval Europe from the Muslim world, there was a new emphasis on scholarship for its own sake. At the same time, living conditions and social infrastructure in Europe improved to the point that many people could turn their attention to matters beyond mere survival. Two of those who did are the subjects of this lecture: Peter Abelard and Héloïse.

Abelard and the Emerging University

- Peter Abelard (1079–1142) was born in Brittany, the eldest son of noble parents. From an early age, he was consumed with a desire for knowledge. So deep was this desire that he renounced his rights to title and inheritance and set off for Paris with the goal of becoming the preeminent scholar in the world.
 - During Abelard’s lifetime, some of the greatest minds of the age clustered in Paris to forge what would be the forerunner of the university system.
 - Previously, for those who wanted an advanced education in the Middle Ages or wished to pursue learning as a career, the church was the only avenue.
 - In the late 11th century, however, a rather informal system developed whereby masters would agree to take on students for a fee. Although education was still deeply intertwined with the church, the system became more inclusive than it had been in the past.

- In Paris, Abelard quickly distinguished himself as a master of rhetoric and logic. By all accounts, he loved to argue. Although he had several setbacks, he quickly became the most sought-after teacher in Europe and, in 1113, was appointed master in the cathedral school at Notre-Dame. Among Abelard's students was Arnold of Brescia, who so infuriated Bernard of Clairvaux with claims that the church should not own property that he was excommunicated.

Tutor to Héloïse

- Sometime around 1116, Abelard was invited by a man named Fulbert to live in his household in the clerical quarter of the Île de la Cité. Fulbert was a canon of Notre-Dame, and he wanted Abelard to act as a tutor for his brilliant niece, Héloïse (c. 1098–1164). It was a good situation—near where Abelard held classes and in the midst of the power network of church officials who still held sway over the infant world of academia.
- Héloïse was significantly younger than Abelard and was raised in a well-endowed convent, where she procured a first-class education. Fulbert then brought Héloïse to Paris to continue her education.



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At one point in their correspondence, Abelard refers to the fact that Héloïse could read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew—an achievement that would have been stunning for any man at the time.

- As we know, the two fell in love. Abelard, in his account, tells us specifically that it was her mind that seduced him, not her physical appearance. He found in her a true kindred spirit: a mind that loved knowledge for the sake of knowledge and an intellect that reveled in disputation and the application of logical principles to a variety of questions and problems.
- Abelard found in Héloïse a student who pushed him as no other student had. And Héloïse found in Abelard a teacher who not only recognized her amazing intellectual prowess but was able to support and guide her to greater heights. Together, they seem to have thought through many difficult questions, and they may have developed the theory of intentionalism (a cornerstone of Western law), for which Abelard alone is still generally credited.

A Secret Marriage

- Fulbert was incensed when he finally caught the couple engaged in sex. The life of a true philosopher was thought to exclude such earthly concerns as lust, marriage, and children. When the couple discovered that Héloïse was pregnant, Abelard brought her to his family home in Brittany, where she gave birth to their son, Astrolabe. Typically for families of high social status, they turned the child over to Abelard's family to raise.
- When Abelard returned to Paris, he offered Fulbert a deal: He would marry Héloïse, but the marriage would need to be clandestine to protect Abelard's career. At this time in the university system, scholars and teachers were almost always in clerical orders, and even in cases where they were not affiliated with the church, a wife and family was considered a detriment to a scholar's career. Fulbert agreed to the clandestine marriage, and Abelard returned to Brittany to collect Héloïse.
- But Héloïse was opposed to the marriage, concerned that word would get out and damage Abelard's career. She also believed that marriage was unnecessary for those who truly embraced the

higher ideals of philosophy; no institution of man was needed when two people were joined in mind and spirit. To agree to the marriage would be to reject many of the principles she had learned to embrace in her studies.

- Eventually, Héloïse was persuaded to return to Paris, where she and Abelard were married, with Fulbert and a few other church officials as witnesses. Fulbert did not keep the marriage secret, as he had agreed, and rumors started to circulate about the couple. Héloïse returned to the same convent where she had grown up, perhaps in the hope that rumors of their relationship would die down.
- Although Héloïse had not taken holy orders and was simply a guest in the convent, Fulbert became convinced that Abelard was trying to get rid of her. He arranged for servants to break into Abelard's rooms and forcibly castrate his niece's husband. As Fulbert saw it, Abelard had stolen his niece's virginity; he would now steal that with which the theft had been accomplished.

The Aftermath

- Abelard's mind was already brilliant, provocative, and innovative, but the castration focused his intellectual activities with a laser-like intensity. The concerns of the flesh could no longer tempt him; thus, he was free to turn his attention to higher matters.
- The aftermath of this event was dramatic not only for Abelard but for all of Paris. Abelard himself worried about the grief his mutilation caused for his multitude of adoring followers. In his autobiography, the *Historia Calamitatum* ("The Story of My Troubles"), he writes that he was unsure what he should do next with his life. In his shame, he wanted refuge from the public eye, and he wished to turn from being a philosopher of the world to "a philosopher of God."
- He insisted that Héloïse follow him into religious life and take vows as a nun. She eventually rose to become abbess of her own

religious house and founder of several ancillary convents. Given that the world held no more joy for her, a life of contemplation and prayer was not a difficult choice as long as she could retain some contact with Abelard.

- For his part, Abelard still loved to argue and provoke. Later, as an abbot, he famously told lax monks under his control that they must adopt a stricter standard of living than that to which they had become accustomed. After they tried to poison him, he decided to leave that monastery and look for quarters elsewhere.

Writings and Debates

- Abelard provoked many clerics further with his work *Sic et non* (“*Yes and No*”). He believed that of all religions, Christianity was the most logical, and he sought to prove its superiority to other faiths by analyzing many of its contradictions.
 - In *Sic et non*, Abelard collected statements made by church fathers that contradicted one another on many points; his purpose was to study these contradictions in order to strengthen the faith.
 - He was utterly convinced that by using dialectical logic, he could clarify the nature of the Trinity, explain the relationship between free will and God’s omniscience, and make clear the origins and reason for the existence of sin.
- In 1121, the council of Soissons forced Abelard to publicly burn a copy of his tract on the Trinity, and he seems to have agreed to stop writing. But in the end, he returned to the writing of treatises—particularly a work known as the *Theologia*.
 - In the 1130s, he became embroiled in a bitter public debate over this treatise with Bernard of Clairvaux, who found Abelard’s arguments in the *Theologia* both dangerous and offensive. Bernard complained of Abelard to the papal curia and had him brought to trial again in 1140 at Sens.

- When Abelard came face to face with Bernard at Sens, for once, his intellect and his nerve seem to have failed him. He refused to respond publicly to the charges of heresy brought against him, a move he might have made because he had learned ahead of time that the curia had already been convinced to side with Bernard.

The Lovers' Legacies

- Today, Abelard is more famous for his relationship with Héloïse than for his groundbreaking works on theology, philosophy, and religion. Much of what we know of both of them comes from a series of letters from the period after Abelard's castration. But in the first years of the 21st century, another series of letters has been tentatively attributed to the lovers. These come from the period before Abelard's castration and show a different side of the relationship, one in which Abelard seeks to establish a more paternal or brotherly relationship with Héloïse.
- Upon Abelard's death, his body was first buried in the priory of St. Marcel, but later, his remains were brought to Héloïse at her religious house, the Paraclete, for reburial, and upon her death, she joined him. Today, their bones supposedly lie together in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.
- Abelard's legacy to the medieval and modern worlds has long been recognized: He produced treatises so earth-shattering in their conclusions that he was twice accused of heresy; in the early modern period, when there was a new impulse to reconcile faith with reason, Abelard stood as a shining example of how this could be accomplished.
- Among his most significant achievements was the application of Scholastic philosophical thought to matters of theology. Here, he stood out as a great champion of Aristotle. Abelard believed that logic could be used to prove the existence of God and to make a determination about which of two conflicting theological opinions

was correct. His other major contribution to the landscape of medieval philosophy was to stress the supreme importance of intention when judging any act.

- But arguably, none of Abelard's contributions to philosophy and theology would exist had it not been for the brilliant Héloïse. Careful examination of their correspondence reveals a quick wit, a deep intelligence, and a progressive self-awareness on the part of Héloïse that deepens our understanding of what the medieval world was like for women.

Suggested Reading

Brower and Guilfooy, *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*.

Burge, *Heloise and Abelard*.

Clanchy, *Abelard*.

McLaughlin and Wheeler, trans. and eds., *The Letters of Heloise and Abelard*.

Wheeler, ed., *Listening to Heloise*.

Questions to Consider

1. What seem to be Peter Abelard's greatest strengths as a teacher and scholar? What about his weaknesses?
2. What does Héloïse's unusual life story suggest about medieval women in a general sense? Is she utterly unique, or is there some suggestion that she represented a "type" of medieval female scholar?
3. How important, ultimately, is Abelard's relationship with Héloïse if we consider his impact on the medieval world in general?
4. How important is Abelard in the formation of Héloïse's thinking, writing, and stewardship of her convent of nuns?

Peter Lombard and the *Sentences*

Lecture 16

In our last lecture, we met Peter Abelard, one of the greatest thinkers and lecturers of the Parisian university system. Although Abelard seemed to court controversy, the subject of this lecture, Peter Lombard, shows us another approach to education in the Parisian system, one that stands in marked contrast to Abelard's. Lombard was influenced by Hugh of St. Victor, another teacher in Paris, and because he had also studied with Abelard, he was schooled in two oppositional approaches to Christian history and doctrine. The great contribution of Lombard was to find a way to reconcile these two approaches. And as we'll see in this lecture, he succeeded in remarkable fashion.

Approaches to Theology

- In his *Sic et non*, Peter Abelard had gathered together the statements of church fathers that seemed to directly disagree with one another in an attempt to figure out which was correct. In addition to this Abelardian approach to learning, another dominant pedagogical theory was the Hugienne or Victorine approach, based on the theories of Hugh of Saint-Victor.
 - Hugh taught in the Paris system at the same time as Peter Abelard, but his approach was much different. In the two most influential works of his career, *On the Mysteries of the Christian Faith* and *On the Study of Reading*, he explored the basic information that all Christians needed to know, and he worked his way through an explication of biblical time, explaining the meaning of key biblical passages.
 - Hugh's approach to the study of scripture employed a chronological or historical structure, which meant that the incidence of conflicting passages or contradictory ideas to be reconciled was relatively low. This was in direct opposition to Abelard.

- Peter Lombard's great text is the *Sententiae in quatuor libris distinctae*, usually referred to as the *Sentences*. This work is the most commented upon piece of Christian theological writing ever and was the most important theological textbook in the medieval period. The great irony of the work is that Lombard wrote it in part because he was alarmed at what he saw as the professionalization of the religious scholar—the move away from the monastery for religious training and into the urban university setting.

Lombard's Early Education

- Lombard (c. 1100–1160) was born in northwestern Italy into a poor family, but he received a good basic education at the cathedral school of Novara and Lucca. The bishop of Lucca saw in him a bright mind that seemed better suited for the classroom or the cloister than the field. Thus, the bishop sent a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, asking the latter to help Peter advance his educational career.
- Although Lombard never personally studied with him, Bernard wrote letters on the young man's behalf, securing him positions as a student in the cathedral school at Reims and then in Paris, where he arrived sometime around the year 1134.
- In Paris, the combination of Peter's intelligence and diligence helped him move up the ranks, and in 1145, he was accorded the title of magister in the cathedral school of Notre-Dame.

Approach and Structure of the *Sentences*

- It was a desire to offer a useful textbook to his pupils that led Lombard to compose the *Sentences*, but when he approached this task, he found that he had two extreme examples from which to choose: Abelard's work, which was all about opposition and confrontation, with little attention paid to context, or the chronological/historical approach of Hugh of Saint-Victor, which avoided contradiction at almost any cost.

- Lombard hit on a brilliant solution: His approach would be based on an attitude of humility that would neither avoid theological difficulty nor attempt to answer it definitively. In other words, Lombard would acknowledge the problematic nature of certain passages and offer a few possible interpretations but always be ready to admit that he might not know the answer.
- As he began to work out his approach, Lombard turned away from Abelard and Hugh and, instead, looked to the past, specifically to Saint Augustine. He found two of Augustine's theories particularly helpful: (1) his distinction between signs and things and (2) his distinction between things that were useful and those that were to be enjoyed, also known as the *uti-frui* distinction.
- Lombard divided the *Sentences* into four books, organized as follows:
 - Book I is focused on the Trinity, or things to be enjoyed, because to Lombard's thinking, only the Trinity can give humanity true pleasure or enjoyment. Everything that is not the Trinity is useful only insofar as it can bring humanity closer to that state of pure enjoyment.
 - In Book II, Lombard proposes to discuss creation—things to be used.
 - In Book III, he explores those things that are to be both enjoyed and used; this book is particularly focused on men and angels. Here, Lombard makes the point that because angels are divine and can help humans on their quest toward union with God, they can be considered both useful and enjoyable. In a similar way, certain holy men and women can help others on their journey and provide a glimpse of what true enjoyment of the Trinity might be.
 - Finally, in Book IV, Lombard sets out a theological discussion of virtues, which are the means by which we come to the

enjoyment of the Trinity, and he explicates the sacraments of the church, which he categorizes as signs.

- Lombard takes care to note, however, that although humanity should strive toward union with the Trinity, it is not possible for humans to understand the true nature of what they are attempting to achieve. We may come close to understanding the mystery that is God, but we can't ever fully understand God during our lives on earth.
- When he set out to write the *Sentences*, it is clear that Lombard was quite reluctant to undertake such an audacious task. But as the biographer Philipp W. Rosemann noted, Lombard's students were "not willing to accept declarations of humility in lieu of well-reasoned doctrine."

Controversies and Legacy of the *Sentences*

- Lombard's humility and reluctance did not save him from critique or even outright condemnation from other religious scholars; indeed, hesitant as he was to make declarative statements of theology, there were a few claims that inspired outrage at the time the *Sentences* first appeared.
 - For example, in the first book of the *Sentences*, Lombard attempted to address one of the thorniest issues of Christianity: the fact that it is a monotheistic religion that has a triune God. The matter of the relationship between Father and Son was the source of much debate in the Middle Ages, and it was even more dangerous to wade into the topic of the Holy Spirit.
 - Lombard made the highly original point that human charity—loving one's neighbor—was not just acting in accordance with the Holy Spirit but was, in fact, the Holy Spirit itself.
 - Lombard says that when someone loves someone else or loves God in *caritas* ("charity"), that person essentially participates in the divine. This comes dangerously close to saying that humans, in performing this act, could actually become God.

- Although Lombard’s view of the Holy Spirit was never condemned, it was never affirmed either, and most medieval Christian and post-Reformation Catholic theologians chose not to address it in depth. A position endorsed by Lombard that actually resulted in papal condemnation is one that has been termed *Christological nihilism*, an idea he explores most fully in Book III of the *Sentences*.
 - Here, Lombard makes the following statement: “*Christus, secundum quod est homo, non est aliquid*,” which translates to “Christ, insofar as he is man, is not something.” One cannot imagine that Lombard was literally suggesting that Christ as man—because he was Christ and, thus, could not really be a created thing—had to be its opposite, nothing, but we can see how the implications here might fire up any number of conservative interpreters of scripture.
 - Lombard actually lays out the contours of this problem quite thoroughly and with what seems to be a remarkably open mind. His rather large and problematic question seems to boil down to this: When God became man, did he become something other than himself? And if so, how is it possible that God could become something other than God?
 - Lombard returned to this question repeatedly in his lectures and engaged his students on the subject—again, seeking to understand from a perspective of humility, rather than to affirm a stance from a position of authority.
- The *Sentences* is the first text to attempt to bring together every piece of writing that could be found concerning theological issues. There is a similar impulse behind Peter Abelard’s *Sic et non*, but Lombard’s text is much more comprehensive in its ambition and its final form. Indeed, the greatness of Lombard’s achievement is attested by the fact that for centuries, his work would be the starting place for every scholar of Christianity.

- The greatness of the *Sentences* lies not only in its depth and breadth but also in its organizing principles, which made theological teaching accessible in a way that it never had been before. Thanks to Lombard, students and scholars had a systematic framework for exploring and reflecting on important questions of Christian doctrine. As a result, Lombard had an enormous influence in shaping many of the great minds that came after him.
- In the years immediately following Lombard's death, Joachim of Flora attempted to have his work declared blasphemous. But in 1215, the officials of the fourth Lateran Council issued a statement condemning Joachim's work against Lombard and affirming Lombard's view of the Trinity.
- There would seem to be no greater legacy for Lombard than that the fourth Lateran Council not only took his side in this dispute but sought to enlarge upon and clarify his teachings on this most important topic in the Christian faith.
 - The nature of the Trinity would be a topic that provoked serious discussions among religious leaders from the earliest days of the Christian faith right down to the present time. Lombard's original thinking was an important catalyst in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.
 - Indeed, his *Sentences* led the fourth Lateran Council to engage the topic with an intensity that produced one of the clearest and most significant Trinitarian statements in Christian history. Not only was Lombard declared right, but his writing helped to clarify one of the fundamental mysteries of the faith.

Suggested Reading

Colish, *Peter Lombard* (Brill's Studies in Intellectual History).

Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (Great Medieval Thinkers).

Questions to Consider

1. Of all the scholars working on theological questions in the 12th century in Paris, why was it Peter Lombard whose work had the most lasting influence?
2. Can we reconcile Lombard's teachings on Christological nihilism with the work of other scholars who make somewhat different suggestions?

Thomas Aquinas

Lecture 17

In our last lecture, we examined the work of Peter Lombard, whose *Sentences* became the standard theological textbook for university students from the 12th century into the 16th. In this lecture, we will continue to explore philosophical and theological developments taking place at the University of Paris. In the 13th century, the European world was grappling with the reintroduction of Aristotelian theory, seeking to either reconcile the pre-Christian Aristotle with Christian faith or to discredit Aristotle entirely. When the faculty of the University of Paris needed someone to work through this question, they turned to Thomas Aquinas, whose writings would eventually surpass Lombard's *Sentences* as a key text for those seeking a theological education.

An Early Turning Point

- Thomas Aquinas (1224/25–1274) was born into a well-to-do Italian family. At the age of 5, he was sent to school at the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, where his uncle was the abbot; his family probably intended for him to someday become an abbot himself. Later, he was moved to a recently established school in Naples.
- Contact with the Islamic world occurred on a regular basis in Naples, and while studying there, Aquinas had his first encounter with such writers as Maimonides, Averroes, and Aristotle. This is also where he had his first real contact with one of the newly founded monastic orders, the Dominicans.
 - As you recall, the Cistercians founded their order in response to what they saw as corruption among the Benedictines. But the Cistercians soon found themselves wealthy and powerful in civic matters despite their professed desire to be removed from worldly affairs.

- Thus, a new monastic reform movement emerged, resulting in the establishment of the mendicant orders. The word *mendicant* comes from a Latin word that means “to beg,” and it refers to the fact that these religious orders relied wholly on charity for their subsistence.
- In addition to embracing a life of true poverty, mendicant orders, such as the Franciscans and the Dominicans, eschewed a life of stability behind cloister walls. Friars in these orders were itinerant.
- The Dominicans quickly established themselves as concerned with matters of learning. One of Thomas’s teachers in Naples was a Dominican, and at the age of 19, Thomas announced his intention to join the order.
- This announcement did not please Thomas’s family. He was kidnapped by his brothers and held hostage by his family for almost two years. Eventually, however, his mother gave in and helped him escape.
- Thomas quickly made his way back to Naples and, from there, went on to Rome. In 1245, he ended up in Paris, where the chair of the theology department was Albertus Magnus, who was also a Dominican. Aquinas studied for some years under Albertus, both in Paris and in Cologne. Interestingly, as part of his studies, Thomas spent three years writing a comprehensive commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences*, which laid the foundation for his own magnum opus, the *Summa theologiae*.

Philosophical and Theological Truth

- Aquinas studied Aristotle and was impressed with the rigor of his theories. He acknowledged the value of an Aristotelian interpretation of the world. Ultimately, this position held that humans could learn all there was to know through careful observation of what their senses revealed about the world around them.

- Aquinas made the distinction that Aristotle’s means of attaining knowledge is what we would call philosophical. But he also said that there were some types of knowledge that could not be had using our senses and intellect alone; some knowledge can only be given to us by God. That kind of knowledge is in the realm of theology.

- In trying to reconcile Aristotelian thought with Christian theology, Thomas confronted what has come to be called the two truths problem: Can something be true in philosophy but not true in theology? By the same token, can something that is held to be true in the theological realm not be true in the philosophical one?
 - For example, scripture and the church seem to hold that the earth is the center of the universe, but philosophy and related sciences prove that the sun is the center of the solar system. How can this contradiction be reconciled?

 - In Aquinas’s thinking, what is true in theology must also be true in philosophy. If science has proven that the sun is the center of the solar system, then that means that we have interpreted the theological viewpoint incorrectly.

 - If we can find the right key—the right way to read the theological—then we will see that the two truths are reconciled.

- Aquinas made his first attempt at reconciling Aristotle with Christianity by suggesting that an Aristotelian approach could lead to some recognition and understanding of God. Our sensible experience can reveal to us the effects of God in the world, but it can never take us to full understanding; only God himself can do that.
 - Aquinas established two categories of truth related to God. First, there were what he called “naturally knowable truths,” including the ideas that God exists, that he is unique, and that he is both omnipotent and immutable.

- In contrast to the naturally knowable truths were what Aquinas called the “mysteries of faith.” These were truths that we could never arrive at on our own using our senses; the only way to come to a knowledge of the mysteries of faith would be divine revelation—knowledge that is a gift from God.

Five Methods of Proof

- Aquinas’s attempts to reconcile theology and philosophy led him to produce his masterpiece of Christian theology, the *Summa theologiae*. In this text, Aquinas delineated his “Five Ways” theory, meaning that there were five ways that the existence of God could be proven, taking Aristotle as a starting point: (1) the proof from motion, (2) the proof from causality, (3) the proof from the contingency of the world, (4) the proof from the grades of perfection, and (5) the proof from finality.
- In the first kind of proof, Aquinas uses “motion” to capture the idea that things can change, but he distinguishes between actual motion and potential motion, or actuality and potentiality, which can’t coexist. Ice, which is actually cold, can make a cup of coffee, which is actually warm, potentially cold, but the coffee cannot be both actually cold and potentially cold. By the same token, the ice is actually a frozen solid, but it could potentially be liquid.
 - How does the ice make the hot coffee cold? Someone must move the ice into the coffee. How did it get to be ice in the first place? Someone had to move liquid water to a place where it could freeze. Where did the water come from? Someone had to get it out of the faucet, and so on.
 - Aquinas argues that for all these movements—changes—to happen, there must be a first mover, one who does not move or change but sets everything in motion.
- In discussing the proof from causality, Aquinas invokes the sensory perception of Aristotle as a starting point: Our senses tell us that nothing can cause itself. Water can’t decide on its own to turn into



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What sets Aquinas apart as a great mind is the almost uncanny focus he brought to the questions he considered; he was capable of following particular arguments for hours.

ice; something must cause this change. But if there is causality, there must be a first cause, similar to a first mover, and that first cause is God.

- Obviously, numerous counterarguments can be made to Aquinas's theory. For example, if everything is ultimately caused by God, what caused God? In a later section of the *Summa*, Aquinas takes up these questions in a long discourse on the difference between existence and essence. Aquinas intended his theorizations to be starting points, to serve as a useful guide for students wrestling with big questions.

- The proof from contingency is related to the first two proofs. At the root of this theory is the idea that it is possible for things not to exist. A flower in a garden exists—our senses tell us that it exists—but it could also not exist; in fact, it is certain that at some point it will not exist.
 - Things pass into and out of this world, but it is not necessary that anything exist. However, it is not possible that nothing ever existed. In other words, for all things to exist, it is necessary that there be a something that produces another something.
 - Because things can't simply spring into existence out of nothing, it must be the case that there is an original something whose existence is necessary, eternal, and not contingent on anything. Otherwise, there would be no way for anything to ever start to exist.
- Aquinas follows similar lines of reasoning in his fourth and fifth proofs. They all lead back to the conclusion that there must be a God who makes all things possible; everything comes from him, and everything returns to him. These starting points of Aquinas sent generations of university scholars on an intellectual quest that, for many of them, would last for years.

Controversies in Later Life

- Aquinas was one of the stars of the Parisian intellectual scene, not least because of how he managed to co-opt Aristotelian thinking into the service of Christianity. But Averroes had also made an attempt to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with faith and had come up with different ideas.
 - The main idea in Averroism that was considered dangerous to the church was that the human race is part of one collective consciousness, a single great intellect. But what does that mean for the individual soul of each human being? Is everyone tainted by everyone else's sin and improved by everyone else's good deeds?

- Aquinas was called on by the Paris faculty to give a formal refutation of Averroism in a public forum, which he did with great success.
- Shortly before his death, Aquinas came under attack for some his views. Most of these attacks came from members of the Franciscan order, who considered Aquinas and the Dominicans a little too worldly. The ensuing debate split the two main mendicant orders largely along two lines: those for Thomas (Dominicans) and those against him (Franciscans).
- Aquinas's work in the philosophical realm is so remarkable that it is sometimes easy to overlook the fact that all of it came out of a deep and pronounced faith. It's not surprising, then, that he was canonized in 1323 and achieved the status of Doctor of the Church. What is surprising is that he never completed the *Summa*. In 1273, he was seized by an uncharacteristic intellectual crisis and left his students and companions to finish his work. He died in 1274 on his way to the Council of Lyons.

Suggested Reading

Copleston, *Aquinas: An Introduction to the Life and Work of the Great Medieval Thinker*.

Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide*.

Questions to Consider

1. Is Aquinas's reworking of Aristotle convincing in a Christian context, or are there gaps or silences in Aquinas's theory?
2. Which of the Five Ways is most persuasive or compelling? Which is the least persuasive?

William of Ockham and John Duns Scotus

Lecture 18

In this lecture, we move away from Paris, where we've spent so much time in the last few lectures, and travel to the British Isles, which produced the two great minds that are the subject of this lecture: John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Although both of these scholars had relatively short lives and careers, what they accomplished—some might say provoked—during their brief time on the world stage had a significant impact on theological and political thought in Europe.

Early Career of John Duns Scotus

- Little is known about the early life of John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308), but as an adult, he joined the Franciscans. Sometime in the early 14th century, he made his way to Paris, and there, he embarked on a career that was dominated by lecturing and commenting on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.
- This career was interrupted in 1303, when Duns Scotus and other academics were exiled by King Philip IV of France, who had demanded that the scholars at the University of Paris support him in his conflict with Pope Boniface VIII.
 - This episode demonstrates a problematic overlap between the political, academic, and ecclesiastical realms—a problem that would rear its head repeatedly in the medieval period.
 - Boniface VIII asserted that popes possessed both spiritual and temporal authority. With regard to any issue on which the pope and a king differed, the decision should go to the pope, God's authority on earth.
 - Boniface even issued a papal bull on this matter, known as *Unam Sanctam*, or “*One Holy [Church]*.” In this bull, he declared that salvation would be impossible for any person, king or otherwise, who did not submit to the authority of the pope.

- Not surprisingly, a number of kings objected to this idea. They were even less pleased about Boniface's constant interference in matters of state. At bottom, the conflict between Philip and Boniface was about money: Did the French crown have the right to tax the church and its holdings in France, or did the property accrued by the church belong to the Papal States?
- Eventually, Boniface backed down. In the interim, however, Philip sent into exile those scholars who had refused to support him. When he finally returned to Paris, Duns Scotus also returned to his work on the *Sentences*, and in the process, he came up with some important new theological ideas.

Unique Theological Ideas

- Duns Scotus used the *Sentences* as a base from which he could engage questions concerning the univocity of God. Simply put, univocity is the idea that the properties of things are essentially the same, whether they are attributed to people or to God.
 - As you recall, Boethius had affirmed the unity of God by explaining God's goodness: It is not that God has the quality of being good; rather, God is goodness.
 - But Duns Scotus said that a person could have the quality of goodness in the same way as God; the only difference is a matter of degree. He added, however, that the difference in degree is so great that it is impossible for humans to conceive of it.



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In his writing, Duns Scotus was more restrictive than Thomas Aquinas regarding the truths about God that could be established through reason.

- Thus, in Duns Scotus's theory of univocity, goodness is goodness whether it is present in a dog or a man or God.
- Duns Scotus also had different ideas on the distinction between essence and existence.
 - Aquinas had argued that there was a clear difference; a thing could have an essence, but that essence was recognizable only when the thing came into existence. The only exception, of course, was God, who was a unified essence and existence.
 - Duns Scotus argued that the human mind cannot understand a thing's essence except by means of its existence. For human consciousness, the essence of, say, a rock is impossible to conceive unless the rock is also in existence.
- The term *haecceity* means "thisness." Duns Scotus used the word (which he coined) to articulate a theory about the properties that distinguish individuals from groups and one individual from another. In other words, what is it that makes one person different from any other?
 - To answer this question, Duns Scotus latched onto the idea of *quiddity*, or "whatness." Quiddity helps identify a person, first of all, as part of a group of similar people. In other words, quiddity helps define the genus, or group.
 - Further, haecceity and quiddity can be at work simultaneously; the whatness of the group helps move us toward an understanding of the thisness of the individual person. Eventually, we move through ever-shrinking quiddities to the ultimate haecceity, the unique essence, that makes a certain person who he or she is and not anyone else.
- Duns Scotus was also concerned with developing the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Note that this does not refer to the miracle of the Virgin Birth of Jesus but to the conception of Mary in the womb of her mother, Saint Anne.

- The question that worried medieval theologians was this: If all humans are tainted with original sin at the moment of their conception, doesn't it seem problematic that the mother of God was so stained? How could she have been a fit vessel to carry Jesus if she was a sinner from the moment of her conception?
- Duns Scotus proffered three ways that Mary could have been made free from original sin and asserted that whatever way produced the most honor for Mary was the right one. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was not formally decreed until 1854, but when it was made dogma by Pope Pius IX, he specifically cited the argument of Duns Scotus as one of the main justifications for this decision.
- The main reason that Duns Scotus is considered one of the great minds of the Middle Ages was his interest in questions concerned with the “self-evidency” of God.
 - Aquinas had put forth the Five Ways proof to show that God's existence could be known and recognized by man. But Duns Scotus noted that Aquinas's proof might be used to suggest that there are multiple gods.
 - In the end, Duns Scotus took what we might think of as a kind of middle ground. Humans could, through reason, come to understand certain aspects of the divine nature, but they could not on their own understand the Trinity. That knowledge could come only through divine revelation.

William of Ockham's Theological Thinking

- The scholar William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347/49) is best known in popular culture for Ockham's razor, which is generally stated as follows: Given two possible explanations for something, the simpler explanation is most likely to be correct.
 - This modern interpretation, however, does not seem to convey what Ockham was actually thinking.

- Instead, his work seems to suggest this idea: The truth of something can be arrived at only by means of principles that are self-evident, are derived from personal experience, or are given by divine revelation. In other words, if you are using Ockham's razor you should not begin from anything resembling a hypothetical situation.
- Like Duns Scotus, Ockham joined the Franciscans; he also studied Lombard's *Sentences* and wrote a commentary on it that brought him to the attention of the papal court of Avignon.
 - In the early 1320s, some member of Ockham's intellectual circle seems to have accused him of heresy; in 1324, he was called to Avignon to answer these charges before a papal commission.
 - He traveled across the channel and spent the next couple of years responding to the council's questions. Nothing he had written was ever officially declared heresy, yet he received a stern rebuke.
- Ockham's writings discussed many interesting and complex ideas that existed in fruitful dialogue with other ecclesiastical writings of the day. For example, he held that the truths of theology can be accessed only by faith; one cannot reason one's way to knowledge of God.
 - Along with Duns Scotus, he was deeply concerned with the matter of universalism versus individualism, but he took Scotus's theories of quiddity in relationship to haecceity a bit further, arguing that only individuals exist. If we get any idea of quiddity at all, we arrive at this idea not by first establishing generalities and working our way down to individuals within those general categories but by identifying the group on the basis of the individuals within it.
 - This theory—often called nominalism—has led some to call Ockham the father of modern epistemology. Before Ockham, some would argue, there was an emphasis on universals as the source of knowledge. Ockham was the first to emphatically

insist on the epistemological significance of the individual in a way that would influence thinkers who came after him for centuries.

- This same emphasis in Ockham's writings has caused him to be strongly associated with Scholasticism, that is, the efforts of 12th- and 13th-century academics to seek some sort of equilibrium between classical philosophy and Christian theology.
- Ockham's most famous piece of writing is his textbook on logic, known as the *Summa logicae*. This massive text works through the ways in which logic can help increase the store of knowledge in the world and advance education. Some of the categories that Ockham explores in the *Summa logicae* are fascinating for the way they seem to anticipate modern ideas about knowledge and language.
- Ockham is also associated with one of the earliest theorizations of the separation of church and state.
 - In 1327, Ockham was asked to study the writings of the current pope and earlier ones to render an opinion on the question of whether the Franciscans, by embracing a life of extreme poverty, were engaged in a true *imitatio Christi* ("imitation of Christ"). To his own surprise, Ockham found that the pope's view on apostolic poverty was not only wrong but actually heretical. Even worse, the pope knew that his position was wrong—his earlier writings proved it; thus, he was guilty of heresy. Pope John XXII was, in fact, an antipope.
 - Not surprisingly, this opinion did not sit well in Avignon. On May 26, 1328, Ockham and some other Franciscans left France and headed for Pisa, where they found refuge in the retinue of the Holy Roman Emperor, Louis of Bavaria.
 - For the rest of his life, Ockham stayed in the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, eventually ending up in Munich, where he continued to produce significant pieces of writing until his death in 1347.

Suggested Reading

Adams, *William Ockham*.

Cross, *Duns Scotus*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what areas do the works of Duns Scotus and Ockham seem to be most in agreement with the writings of earlier scholars and each other? Where do you see the greatest difference or innovation?
2. Do you see a shift in how matters of the outside, secular world seemed to effect change in the academic world over the course of the time period discussed in the last six lectures?

Geoffrey Chaucer and Dante Alighieri

Lecture 19

Religion was a strong theme running through our last six lectures, but we will now turn to some great minds whose inspiration came from spheres outside the church. With the subjects of this lecture, we begin to see an assertion of the value of the individual and the delight that could be taken in literature and the arts. We will begin with Dante Alighieri, whose writings have earned him several impressive titles, including father of the Italian language and *il Sommo Poeta*, or “the Supreme Poet.” We will then turn to another writer who has also been given an illustrious title: Geoffrey Chaucer, often referred to as the father of English poetry.

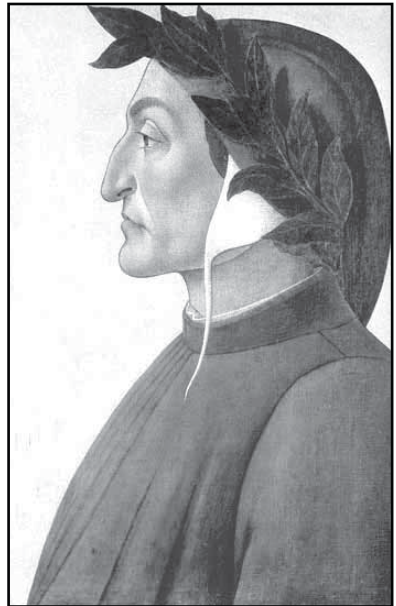
Comparing Dante and Chaucer

- The lives, work, and thought of Dante (c. 1265–1321) and Chaucer (c. 1342/43–1400) share some interesting similarities. Both men were well educated, worked for some of their lives as civil servants, and wrote some of their works in Latin, which was still considered the language of learning in the medieval world. But both men also opted to write some of their works in the vernacular; it is those works that are considered some of the greatest pieces of literature ever composed.
- In addition to their tremendous influence on the development of their respective languages, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* deserve to be discussed together because they both have a view of the world that is more multifaceted than much of what came before.
 - Chaucer attempts to describe the various classes of medieval society and to paint a vivid picture of the world around him. Dante attempts to explore religious belief, individualism, contemporary events, and social history.

- Both works are expansive, ambitious, and quite novel when considered in light of the literary traditions out of which they sprang.
- Each author also made the interesting choice to write in the vernacular rather than Latin.
 - Around the year 1100, only a tiny portion of the medieval world was literate, and those who were had almost without exception been educated by the church; thus, Latin was the language in which they read and studied.
 - But by Dante's day in Italy and Chaucer's day in England, there was a growing middle class of people who could read but were not primarily associated with the church. For authors who wanted to reach the broadest possible audience in late-13th-century Italy or late-14th-century England, the vernacular was the best choice.

Dante's *De monarchia*

- Dante was a true product of the time and place in which he was born. Florence was one of several powerful Italian city-states, and Dante was a prime example of a new breed of prominent citizen who was coming into existence on the Italian peninsula in the 13th century. He combined the interests of a philosopher with the skill of a poet and the shrewd acumen of a politician.



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So influential was Dante that he is sometimes referred to simply as *il Poeta*, or “the Poet,” as if there is only one.

- As mentioned in the last lecture, Dante’s *De monarchia* (“*On Monarchy*”) was a treatise that weighed in on the matter of secular versus religious power.
 - In 1302, Pope Boniface VIII had issued a papal bull, *Unum Sanctam*, declaring that the supreme power on earth belonged to the papacy. Nobles, kings, and even the Holy Roman Emperor were ultimately subject to the pope’s rule.
 - Even though Pope Boniface was Italian and the Holy Roman Emperor was from Luxembourg, Dante sided emphatically with the emperor rather than the pope.
 - Florence had faced its own conflicts as the pope had tried to assert dominance over its political workings, and Dante and many of his fellow Florentines objected.
- In the third section of *De monarchia*, Dante states that humans are engaged in the pursuit of two lofty goals: to achieve happiness while on earth and to achieve eternal happiness in heaven. In no uncertain terms, Dante writes that kings are responsible for helping people achieve the former goal, while popes are responsible for helping people achieve the latter. He also asserts that the two spheres of influence should remain separate.
- We note here a shift in thinking from just a century or so earlier. If Dante had been writing at the beginning of the 13th century rather than the early 14th century, he probably would have articulated the goals of happiness on earth and in heaven in terms of the collective group. In other words, before Dante, such an argument would have been phrased in terms of making things better for society as a whole—on earth and in heaven. With Dante, however, although the collective is still vitally important, the emphasis tends to be on the individuals who make up the group.
- *De monarchia* certainly caught the attention of papal authorities. After Dante’s death in 1321, Pope John XXII declared the book heretical and ordered it burned. Later, the book was placed on the

church's *Index of Forbidden Books*, where it remained until 1881! Dante had the ultimate revenge, however, by placing Boniface VIII, along with some other popes, in the eighth circle of hell in the first part of *The Divine Comedy*, the *Inferno*.

The Divine Comedy

- As many of us know, Dante's *Divine Comedy* comprises three sections: the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, and the *Paradiso*. Dante himself is guided through hell and purgatory by the classical poet Virgil and is then given a tour of heaven by the great earthly love of his life, a woman named Beatrice. Finally, his tour is taken over by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.
- In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante engages contemporary theology, classical philosophy, sociological matters, and political concerns. He mines the writers and texts of the past—particularly the Bible, Virgil, and Saint Augustine—while using real historical figures from his own day to explore some of the same themes and questions the great minds have wrestled with throughout the ages: Why is there sin? How do we continue our lives after a tragedy? What is the impact of an individual's actions on humanity as a whole? How should particular actions be judged? How can literature affect life?
- Given all this, we should not be surprised that Dante is, in addition to all his other titles, often referred to as one of the three fountains of Italian culture. The other two are Petrarch—the subject of our next lecture—and Boccaccio, the 14th-century writer who is the clearest link between the work of Dante and the work of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Chaucer and the Three Estates

- Chaucer was the son of a vintner, and the relative wealth of his family meant that he received an excellent education. He is a prime representative of the new, upwardly mobile bourgeoisie that was coming into its own in 14th-century England.

- Previously, medieval society had been rigidly structured into the three estates model, divided among those who fight, those who pray, and those who work. The idea was that people born into each estate performed a specific function to support the members of the other estates.
- Significantly, there was no mobility between the estates, and of course, this social division was far from equitable. It is estimated that those who fight (the nobility) were 5 percent of the population, those who pray (the clergy) were another 5 percent, and those who work (the peasants) were close to 90 percent.
- For a number of reasons, including a dramatic increase in population starting around the year 1000, the rise of a merchant class, and the demographic devastation of the bubonic plague, the boundaries between the estates had started to break down by Chaucer’s time.
- Perhaps the best means of understanding the weaknesses of the three estates model—and why it eroded so quickly—can be found in an examination of Chaucer’s “General Prologue” to his masterful *Canterbury Tales*.
 - This work participates in a genre of writing known as *estates satire*, in which it was traditional to represent stock characters or stereotypes, such as a dishonest miller, a lascivious friar, a scheming pardoner, and a virtuous knight.
 - Although Chaucer was certainly not the first writer to work with estates satire, he is arguably the one who did it best, elevating his characters beyond mere stereotypes and including figures not typically found in the genre. In particular, the roster of characters in *The Canterbury Tales* includes a significant number of figures representative of the rising merchant class of Chaucer’s day.

The Canterbury Tales

- The premise of *The Canterbury Tales* is that a group of pilgrims meets at a tavern before journeying to Canterbury Cathedral and the shrine of Thomas Becket. The innkeeper proposes a contest, in which every pilgrim will tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back; whoever tells the best story will win a free dinner. Chaucer then offers us various tales told by the characters, a strategy that allows him to share tales that are both religious and ribald, moral and mocking.
- In its basic concept, *The Canterbury Tales* has something in common with Dante's *Divine Comedy* in that Chaucer uses a stratagem that allows him to touch on many aspects of society. For Dante, the long voyage through hell, purgatory, and heaven provided him with multiple opportunities to ruminate on all types of people and all manner of good and ill. Also like Dante, who makes a version of himself the first-person *I* of his text, Chaucer creates an alter ego named Geoffrey who is also among the pilgrims and reports on the actions and stories of the other characters.
- Before the storytelling begins, however, Chaucer gives us portraits of each of the travelers. He begins with the Knight, who along with his son, the Squire, represents the noble estate. Chaucer then proceeds to the members of the religious estate, including the Prioress and the Monk. Next is the Miller, a classic exemplar of the third estate, those who work.
- Interestingly, Chaucer also includes several pilgrims in the "General Prologue" who do not fit neatly into the three estates model, an indication that the estates ideal was no longer an accurate reflection of the social structure of the medieval world. Perhaps the figure who displays this best is the Wife of Bath, whose status as a widow and a merchant contradicts traditional medieval ideas about both gender and class.

- A century after Dante started a literary movement—one focused on the individual, written in the vernacular, and deeply concerned with both the religious and the secular realms—Chaucer brought it to its fullest fruition in vernacular English, leaving a profound impact on the language and its literary tradition.

Suggested Reading

Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*.

Brewer, *A New Introduction to Chaucer*.

Lewis, *Dante: A Life*.

Questions to Consider

1. What aspects of Dante's and Chaucer's lives and careers seem to make them most similar to each other? In what ways do they seem to be most different?
2. What do you think Dante would have thought of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as a literary work? Would he have considered it more entertainment or education or some combination of both? Do you think he would have been impressed or disgusted or felt something in between?

Francesco Petrarch

Lecture 20

In the ability of Dante and Chaucer to write works in Latin and the vernacular, we can glimpse the origins of a significant change. After almost 1,000 years, the medieval world was starting to transform into the early modern period, or the Renaissance. The great mind who is the focus of this lecture stands as an emblem of this growing cultural shift: the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, now known as Petrarch. He was equally famous for his philosophical writings and his love poetry and was acclaimed throughout the medieval world for his innovative thinking. In Petrarch's life and personality and through the influence of his writings, the early modern period began to come into focus.

Launching the Renaissance

- In defining the Middle Ages, most scholars use the boundary dates 500 to 1500, but these are chosen for the sake of convenience more than anything else.
 - Certainly, the ideals of the ancient world had influence long after Rome had fallen, and ideas that we think of as quintessentially medieval would persist well into the 17th century and beyond in some places.
 - At the same time, qualities that many of us associate with the Renaissance, such as the rebirth of knowledge and education and the emphasis on the individual, can be traced back to such figures as Dante, William of Ockham, and others.
- The subject of this lecture, the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch (1304– 1374), was the prime exemplar of the emergence of the Renaissance in the medieval world. But at the same time that he was involved in a social, historical, and literary course correction, most of the rest of the world's currents continued to move in the same channels they'd been running through for hundreds of years.

- On April 8, 1341, Petrarch was crowned poet laureate. This date serves as a handy marker to help us recognize a public shift in the way the medieval world understood and valued literature and the arts. It also seemed to announce to the world that humanism had been reborn.

Father of Humanism and Poet Laureate

- Among his many titles, Petrarch has also been called the father of humanism. This term refers to a philosophy or worldview that is focused on the values, concerns, and activities of individual people; thus, it stands in opposition to what many have seen as the collective or group mindset of the medieval world, with its interest in subsuming human activity to larger spiritual concerns and the power of God.
- The term *Renaissance humanism* suggests that it was in the Renaissance, or early modern period—sometime around the 16th century—that European culture began to value the individual in ways that the medieval world had not. Hand in hand with this new perspective came an emphasis on knowledge, study, the arts, history, politics, social order, and so on.
- Most medievalists consider this idea to be nonsense. Scholars believe that the medieval world had long had a sense of the individual, and such events as the crowning of Petrarch as poet laureate make this fact plain. Indeed, in 1340, Petrarch was offered the position of poet laureate by the cities of both Paris and Rome.
- This offer by two major cities represents an important shift in thinking that had pervaded a significant portion of the medieval world: the idea of the arts and culture as significant components of the social order. Larger social trends had converged to the point that naming a poet laureate seemed the logical next step in the advance of society.

The Italian Peninsula

- Perhaps the most important thing to note about Petrarch is that he was an Italian. As we've already established in several lectures, Italy was, in many respects, far ahead of the rest of the medieval world in terms of economic growth, trade, political innovation, education and the university system, and more.
- The position of Italy on the Mediterranean meant that Italian traders had always had contact with the wider world. For much of the medieval period, portions of Italy were remarkably heterogeneous, with people from all different nationalities, faiths, and cultural traditions living side by side in relative harmony. It was, perhaps, the most tolerant society outside of Muslim Spain.
- Of course, Italy was by no means unified—not by politics, culture, or even language. The Italian peninsula was made up of numerous city-states, including Siena, Milan, Venice, Rome, and Florence, each of which considered itself distinct from the others.
 - Many historians have argued that the unique nature of Italy's geography and landscape is part of what made it different from the rest of medieval Europe.
 - The mountainous terrain and many rivers kept groups of people contained and distinct from one another, and the fertile land meant that cooperative farming styles found elsewhere in Europe weren't necessary for survival in Italy.
- The Italian peninsula is where modern banking had its birth, where Roman numerals were rejected in favor of Arabic ones, and where the first European universities developed. It's also where the first true humanists emerged. In this role, Petrarch self-consciously promoted the recovery of the classical past and celebrated the development of the individual mind. He also advocated travel for the sake of self-improvement, earning him the title of first tourist, in addition to his many others.

Life of Petrarch

- Petrarch was born in Tuscany into a family of lawyers. His father was deeply involved in the household of Pope Clement V, one of the Avignon popes; thus, Petrarch spent a good portion of his youth in the papal household in France. He studied law at the University of Montpellier before returning to Italy to study at the University of Bologna. Social changes of the previous three centuries meant that he was perfectly poised to take advantage of a comfortable economic situation—a career that involved the life of the mind rather than subsistence farming.
- Petrarch had a deep interest in the classical world. As he said on the occasion of his coronation as poet laureate, “I am moved ... by the hope that ... I may renew in the now aged Republic a beautiful custom of its flourishing youth.” That custom, of course, was the appreciation of poetry.
- While Petrarch was working as a clerk in Avignon, he composed an epic in Latin about the Roman general Scipio Africanus. This was a deliberate attempt to connect himself and his fellow Italians with the Roman Empire. It was also a sign of the growing interest in the ancient world that this text made him a celebrity on the European stage.



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Social changes of the previous three centuries meant that Petrarch was positioned to take advantage of a comfortable economic situation, allowing him to engage in correspondence and travel.

- As the first tourist, Petrarch traveled extensively throughout Europe, sometimes just for pleasure, an activity that would have been inconceivable 100 years earlier. Wherever he went, he sought out archives of early texts, particularly those in Latin, and made copies of them or otherwise attempted to preserve them. Among his discoveries was a collection of Cicero's letters that had been unknown to the medieval world.
- Although these activities are representative of the new interest in the past that was sweeping through Europe, we should also note that Petrarch represented a new way of interpreting and valuing that past.
 - For example, 100 years earlier, as a devout Catholic, Petrarch might have sought to subsume his will to the larger will of God. But in the Italy of the 14th century, he saw the possibility of devotion to God fitting together nicely with the expression and cultivation of secular interests and talents.
 - He composed a text called the *Secretum meum*, in which he argued that achievements in the secular world didn't necessarily preclude a sacred relationship with God. Literary creativity and political ability were both gifts from the divine. In this, Petrarch both influenced and was influenced by the idea that the spheres of religious and secular life could overlap.
 - This perspective put Petrarch in the vanguard of European intellectuals, because the medieval world had long seen a mutual exclusivity between the "active life" and the "contemplative life." The idea here was that one form of life was preferable to the other, but both were necessary to achieve the salvation of humanity.
 - Although these two forms of living had long been regarded as mutually exclusive, in the 14th century, the possibility of living a "mixed" life—of combining devotion to prayer and

contemplation with worldly pursuits—became viable. Petrarch was one of the most vocal proponents of this idea, although he himself struggled with reconciling the two modes of life.

Petrarch's Poetry and Artistic Influence

- In a series of poems written in honor of a woman whom he identified as Laura, Petrarch demonstrated how romantic, worldly love could inspire important works of art that would live on for eternity.
- Petrarch claims that he fell in love with Laura when he first met her in 1327. She was, however, already married to another man, although it seems as if she might have returned Petrarch's affection had she been free to do so. The sonnets Petrarch wrote to honor both Laura and his love for her display intense emotion and mastery of poetic forms; thus, they had a deep and lasting influence on Renaissance literature.
- Petrarch's sonnets in praise of Laura were collected in a volume called the *Canzoniere*, or "Songs."
 - These poems are different than the earlier French troubadour poetry, in which the object of the poet's affection was heavily idealized and stylized. In Petrarch's poems, the poet's emotions are much more deeply engaged and tortured than in the rather detached poetry of the troubadours.
 - Some have gone so far as to say that Petrarch offered the beginning of psychological realism in love poetry. The fullest development of this psychological realism would come centuries later in the sonnets of Shakespeare, particularly sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun."
- The career of Petrarch came to symbolize a change in social attitudes toward the arts. As the 14th century progressed, names that are familiar to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with medieval art came to dominate the scene: Brunelleschi, the architect

of Florence's Duomo; the sculptor Donatello; and Ghiberti, the craftsman behind the Florentine baptistery doors called the Gates of Paradise.

- Across Europe, a humanist or Renaissance impulse that had been germinating for some decades began to flower in the 14th century. Petrarch stands as an emblem of that movement—an indicator that helps us better understand this transformation in the medieval world.

Suggested Reading

Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*.

Kirkham and Maggi, eds., *Petrarch*.

Stokstad, *Medieval Art*.

Trinakus, *The Poet as Philosopher*.

Waley, *The Italian City-States*.

Questions to Consider

1. As we've seen, Petrarch was not utterly alone in the pursuit of his interests and the importance attached to them. What is it about his particular life story and situation that seems to elevate him to the "great minds" category? Why Petrarch as the new poet laureate and not someone else?
2. In your opinion, is it possible to attribute the rise in the importance of arts in 14th-century Italy solely to observable and identifiable social factors, or was there some unknown, unquantifiable factor at work?

Lorenzo de' Medici

Lecture 21

As we saw in our last lecture, 14th-century Italy seemed to be a center of emerging Renaissance thought, particularly the idea that art was inextricable from civic life. No one typifies that interconnection between art and civic life more than the subject of this lecture: Lorenzo de' Medici. Lorenzo was, first and foremost, a statesman, whose greatness came from his charisma and his measured responses to situations that often ranged from the uncomfortable to the downright deadly. He was also a man with a deep sense of responsibility toward his city-state, Florence, and to its citizens, rich and poor, who came to refer to him during his lifetime as *il Magnifico*, “the Magnificent One.”

The Medicis in Florence

- A number of the Medici family members are depicted in Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*: Cosimo, Lorenzo's grandfather; Piero, his father; Giovanni, his uncle; and Giuliano, his brother. The man who commissioned the painting, Guasparre di Zanobi del Lama, a banker with connections to the Medici family, is also visible in the portrait, as is the painter himself.
- This painting is an instructive guide to thinking about the power of the Medicis in Florence. First, three prominent Medicis are depicted as the magi, which was an association that the family had long cultivated. For decades, the family had funded processions through Florence to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, and they belonged to a secret society known as the Magi. Piero had also commissioned another painting of the adoration of the magi by the artist Gozzoli, depicting himself and his family members as participants in the holy story.
- It's also noteworthy that del Lama commissioned the painting, at least in part, because he had been accused of engaging in corrupt practices. It would seem to be an indicator of Medici power and the

values of 15th-century Florence that the way to redeem himself was to commission a piece of artwork and accord the de facto ruling family of the city-state pride of place within it.

- The fact that the painter also places himself in the picture, again, suggests the importance of the artist in this society. Indeed, Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* reveals the links among religion, art, money, social status, and family lineage in late-medieval Florence all in a single image. All of these were important, and all of them were interconnected in important and complex ways.

Lorenzo in Power

- At the time of Lorenzo's (1449–1492) birth, Florence was reaching the heights of its glory, partly because of a kind of “rebirth” of learning that took place there. When Constantinople fell in 1453, many Greek-speaking thinkers who had lived there fled to Florence. This meant that Lorenzo received a first-class education in Greek, as well as Italian and Latin. He also acquired an appreciation for the arts and literature from other members of his family. Indeed, his grandfather Cosimo is often credited with founding the first public library.
- In 1469, when Lorenzo was only 20, his father, Piero, died. Despite his youth, Lorenzo was prepared to assume the mantle of power in Florence, and he recognized that the rather stiff and heavy-handed approach of his father was not effective. Lorenzo would instead model his behavior after Cosimo's.
- Before his father died, Lorenzo had married Clarice Orsini, from a powerful Roman family. This marriage had the benefit of forming a bond with Rome, which had long had a fractious relationship with Florence. From his love poetry, it seems that the true love of Lorenzo's life was a Florentine woman named Lucrezia Donati, but the poverty of her family made her an unfit prospect for marriage to a Medici.

- For a time after the death of Piero, Florence was relatively stable. A new pope, Sixtus IV, ascended to the papacy in 1471. At first, relations between Florence and Rome were calm, but in the north, those between Milan and Venice were deteriorating.
 - Lorenzo tried to establish a new pact among Florence, Milan, and Venice, with Rome and Naples invited to join.
 - Unfortunately, several of the parties involved were suspicious of the motivations of the others, and in the end, the great powers in Italy found themselves split into two rival factions: Florence, Milan, and Venice in the north and Rome and Naples in the south.
- In the midst of these maneuvers, Pope Sixtus asked the Medici bank for a loan to purchase territory over which Florence wanted to maintain control. When Lorenzo refused to make the loan, the pope retaliated by pulling all the church assets out of the Medici bank and transferring them to the bank of the Medicis' greatest rival, the Pazzi family. The head of the Pazzi family decided that now was an opportune time to try to wrest power from the Medicis.

Conspiracy and Its Aftermath

- Matters came to a head on Easter Sunday of 1478 in the Duomo, the great cathedral of Florence. With the blessing of the pope, a group of conspirators attempted to assassinate Lorenzo and his brother, Giuliano, at the moment the sanctuary bell began to ring. Giuliano died in the cathedral, and Lorenzo suffered a stab wound to the neck but managed to make his escape.
- An army of Medici supporters rose up to fight off the conspirators, and the citizens of Florence became an unruly mob, killing anyone who was suspected of having anything to do with the plot. One of those killed was Bishop Salviati, a papal official who had been one of the prime orchestrators of the plot. Francesco Pazzi was also executed. Once Lorenzo was back on his feet, he hunted down all the known conspirators—270 in all—and killed, exiled, or ruined them as revenge for the murder of his brother.

- Remarkably, Pope Sixtus IV demanded that Lorenzo come to Rome and ask forgiveness for having killed Salviati, an official papal delegate. When Lorenzo refused, the pope excommunicated him and placed all the citizens of Florence under interdict, meaning that if any of them should die before the interdict was lifted, they ran the risk of going to hell. Lorenzo then offered himself up to the pope in exchange for the pardon of the Florentines. But the people of Florence refused to allow Lorenzo to offer himself as a sacrifice. The result was a declaration of open war, with Rome calling on Naples to join in attacking Florence.
- Rather than orchestrate the defense of his city against Roman and Neapolitan forces, Lorenzo traveled to Naples in 1479 to try and broker a truce on behalf of his republic. Over the course of 10 weeks, he used all his powers of charisma and the rhetorical strategies gleaned from his years of study to persuade King Ferrante of Naples that the two of them could, in this one instance, re-create something of the glorious unity of the Roman Empire.

Patronage of the Arts and Education

- When Lorenzo returned to Florence after securing a successful treaty with Naples, he was more popular than ever. He now had a bit of breathing room to strive after the higher pursuits of civilization. Following the lead of his grandfather, who had established the first public library at San Marco in Florence, Lorenzo set out to acquire great works of literature. He purchased 200 manuscripts from the monastery of Mount Athos in Greece, many of which had been unknown in Europe or known only through Arabic translations.
- Lorenzo was a patron of all forms of art. He supported young sculptors, hired the best musicians, and financially supported the work of important painters. Botticelli became more or less the “official” artist of the Medici family. Lorenzo also turned some of his family’s property into a school for sculptors. According to legend, it was there that he discovered a young artist from the Buonarroti family: Michelangelo.

- In addition to supporting the arts, Lorenzo took an active role in promoting what we might think of today as continuing education.
 - During his day in Florence, learning was viewed as a lifelong process. Prominent citizens attended lectures, seminars, and academic discussions. Indeed, civic duty was bound up with the pursuit of knowledge.



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- Lorenzo himself fueled this drive for lifelong learning. He sought out the company of some of the most brilliant men of the day. Under his sponsorship, what started out as a series of informal gatherings to discuss philosophical and other issues soon evolved into a more formal group that came to be called the Platonic Academy. The people who made up this group included doctors, lawyers, musicians, politicians, and others.

In the recurring conflicts among Italian city-states, Lorenzo de' Medici always seemed to work for the greater good of the people.

Threats to Medici Power

- Lorenzo also continued to play an active role in Italian politics. In 1480, a group of Ottoman Turks attacked Italy. Lorenzo recognized that the Italian city-states could defend themselves better in an alliance. He managed to negotiate a truce with Pope Sixtus, and in 1481, Rome and Florence worked together to quell the invasion.
- Unfortunately for him and for Florence, Lorenzo's amazing abilities did not extend into the realm of banking. Toward the end of his life, he made poor economic decisions that undermined his personal stature.

- Another threat that appeared in the 1480s and 1490s was the preaching of the monk Savonarola, who spoke out against some of Florence's cultural activities and interests, as well as the Medici family itself.
 - Savonarola argued that the people of Florence were heading into sin because they were too invested in the ideals and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. He managed to persuade many citizens to turn their backs on the arts, culture, and what we might consider a broad, humanistic education and renew their faith through acts of devotion.
 - Although he did not invent the practice, Savonarola has come to be associated with a recurring event called the bonfire of the vanities, during which luxurious clothes, cosmetics, and books were burned in a public square.
- As Lorenzo was aging and Savonarola was gaining influence, the great first age of the Italian Renaissance began to wane. Lorenzo died in 1492 and was buried in San Lorenzo. Although in the short term, the power of the Medicis faltered, it was restored in subsequent generations. One of Lorenzo's sons became pope, most of his children made important marriages that would strengthen the family's power, and despite the best efforts of Savonarola and others, the power and impact of Lorenzo's love of the arts and his people could never be undone or erased.

Suggested Reading

Hancock, *Lorenzo de' Medici*.

Unger, *Magnifico*.

Questions to Consider

1. Which event in Lorenzo de' Medici's life seems to be the most significant or character shaping? Which one seems to be the one that marked him out as destined for greatness in posterity? Are they the same?
2. What aspect of medieval Florentine life seems most unusual or striking when we compare it to the cultural contexts of other great minds we've discussed? Are there consistent similarities between and among the lives and times of the people we've discussed thus far?

Christine de Pisan

Lecture 22

In our last three lectures, we shifted away from the religious sphere and examined some great minds who were concerned with matters of humanism, who appreciated art for art's sake, and who were living in a world where civic duty, politics, economics, and patronage of the arts were all intertwined. Other shifts were also occurring throughout the medieval world, including the rise of the merchant classes and an increase in the number of women who were literate and were engaged in matters of trade and business. The subject of this lecture, Christine de Pisan, the first professional female writer in Europe, stands as an example of these women.

Christine's Education and Marriage

- Christine de Pisan (1364/65–c. 1430) was born in Venice, the daughter of Tommaso di Benvenuto da Pizzano. Shortly after Christine's birth, Tommaso was invited by King Charles V to join his court. There, Christine received a similar education as her two older brothers.
- Building on this basic foundation of learning, Christine continued her education on her own. She immersed herself in the massive library of the court, reading voraciously, especially those rediscovered works of antiquity that were starting to circulate throughout the medieval world as it transitioned into the early modern period.
- As was typical of women of her day and class, Christine married when she was in her teens; her husband was Étienne du Castel, a secretary in the royal court. She then gave birth to three children, two of whom survived past childhood. There would have been no reason for the world to ever know of her intellectual curiosity, impressive learning, and original thought if disaster hadn't struck.

- In 1390, Étienne died unexpectedly while away on a diplomatic mission. This tragedy transformed Christine from a wife and mother living a quiet and secure life to a woman on the brink of poverty, with children, a mother, and a niece to support. Her brothers had long since returned to Italy to claim lands and positions they were due as the sons of Tommaso de Pisan.
- In the first months after Étienne's death, it appeared that Christine and her family would be financially secure. But she soon found herself embroiled in a number of lawsuits concerning the estate, and the situation quickly turned desperate. There were few options available for women in Christine's position at the end of the 14th century, and it is a mark of her great mind that after considering what path she might choose, she opted for one that no woman had yet considered: professional writer.

Early Career

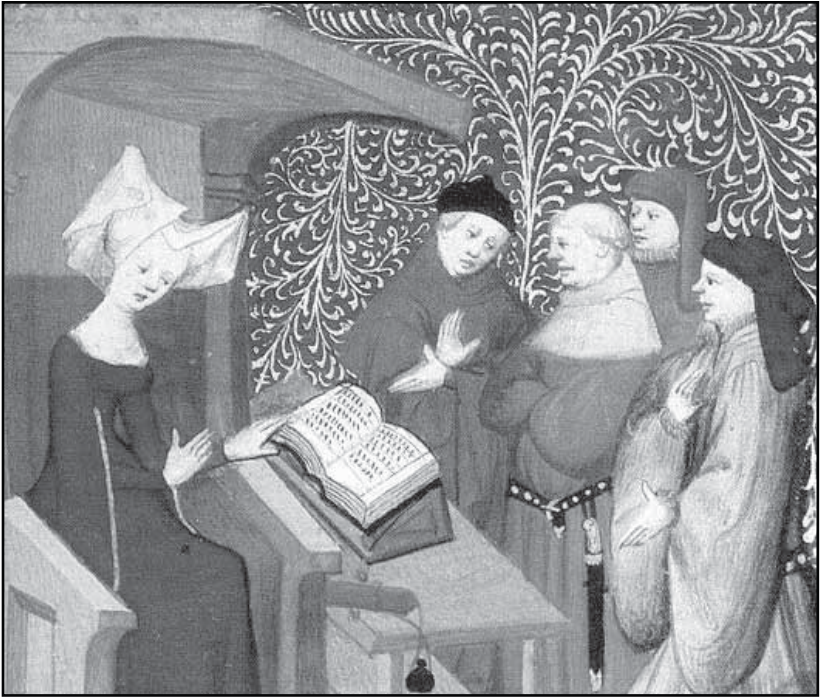
- Christine may have started working as a copyist—a professional scribe who was commissioned to make copies of popular works for those who wanted their own texts. From this point, she made the transition into composing her own works.
 - Given her impressive education, Christine could have written religious commentary or works of philosophy, but at the end of the 14th century in France, taste at court ran toward lyric poetry, especially love ballads.
 - Christine immediately set out to showcase her abilities in this genre, taking care to emphasize, rather than hide, her gender. She soon acquired a number of patrons, who commissioned her to compose poems based on their romantic exploits.
- Mastering poetic forms at the end of the 14th century in France was no small feat. Such forms as the *virelai*, *rondeau*, and *ballade* all had strict rules for structure, meter, and rhyme. It was a skilled writer indeed who could give to a subject an original and compelling treatment while adhering to the rigid requirements of a particular form. But Christine proved from the beginning that she

was just such a writer. From 1393 to 1412, she earned her living by composing poems and actively sought out wealthy patrons to support her writing.

- Toward the end of the 14th century, Christine turned her attention away from love poetry to deal with themes beyond courtly love.
 - Sometime in 1400 or 1401, she composed her first significant prose text, the *L'Épître d'Othéa à Hector* (“*The Epistle of Othea to Hector*”), which was written as a letter from the goddess of wisdom to a young man who wished to know how he could become the perfect knight.
 - In this text, Christine draws from a number of great works and stories of the medieval and ancient worlds. Here, we find references to the fall of Troy, to works of theology, and to technical manuals of knighthood. The *Epistle* was one of the most popular works of the day, and it raised Christine’s profile significantly.

Roman de la Rose

- In 1401, a great humanist of the day, Jean de Montreuil, approached Christine to get her response to his commentary on a popular poem, the *Roman de la rose* (“*Romance of the Rose*”).
 - This work had been begun as an allegorical dream vision, with the first 4,000 or so lines composed by Guillaume de Lorris in the early 13th century.
 - At the end of the 13th century, another writer, Jean de Meun, co-opted the poem and added almost 20,000 lines to it, turning it from a pleasing poetic allegory to a sort of encyclopedia concerning courtly matters, chivalry, and love.
 - The later additions to the poem had made it overtly cynical and blatantly misogynistic. Thus, when Jean de Montreuil sent his commentary on the poem to Christine, what he really wanted was to find out what a woman thought about this text.



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In a series of letters regarding the *Roman de la rose*, Christine took Jean de Meun's section of the poem apart almost point by point.

- Christine then became involved in one of the greatest intellectual debates of the day, known as the *Querelle de la Rose* (“Quarrel of the Rose”). She wrote a lengthy response to de Montreuil, and soon, other intellectuals became involved in the debate, including Jean de Gerson, the chancellor of the University of Paris.
- Eventually, the debate moved beyond the *Roman de la rose* and became concerned with the representation of women in literature generally. The fact that this topic was discussed by the great minds of the day—including the faculty of the University of Paris—offers an indication of just how much medieval society had shifted in its concerns.

The Book of the City of Ladies

- The work for which Christine is perhaps best known is the allegorical dream vision entitled *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In this text, Christine describes her dismay by what she sees as the unfair characterization of women in the literature of her day. In a clever rhetorical move, she suggests that she is ultimately persuaded by the texts she reads, stating, “I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman, and I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned to make such an abominable work.”
- Christine then falls asleep and has a dream in which three great ladies appear: Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. Over the course of the text, they help Christine physically construct a city of ladies, the materials of which stand as allegorical representations of the virtues of women.
 - Lady Reason instructs Christine to pick up the “spade of her intelligence” to start digging the foundations and protective moat for her city. The stones of the city wall symbolize the virtues that can protect women from their detractors.
 - Lady Rectitude then explains that she will help Christine build the structures—houses, civic buildings, and religious institutions—that will fill the city. Rectitude makes her points about the virtues of women by drawing examples from pre-Christian, Jewish, and Christian stories.
 - Lady Justice helps Christine add the final touches to the city and brings in a ruler, the Virgin Mary. In this section of the work, Christine shows off her knowledge of Christian traditions, especially the lives of female saints.
- At the end of *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine addresses her populace. It’s interesting to note that the first professional woman of letters advises other women to be subservient to their husbands and to endure those who are mean or even abusive.

- In this apparent contradiction, we get a glimpse of the social structure of the medieval world and a suggestion about Christine’s own feelings concerning her particular situation.
- Although some scholars have characterized Christine as a kind of proto-feminist, in fact, she seems deeply conservative. She writes because she must do so to survive, but if society were properly ordered, her career would be unnecessary.
- It was the nobility who supported Christine, and it was among their ranks that she found her greatest opportunities for education and patronage, but she filled her city with women of all classes. She is, thus, a true emblem of her times and of her dual nationality.

Catalogue of Christine’s Works

- If we examine the catalogue of Christine’s works, we see a fascinating combination of subjects, themes, and sources. She wrote several religious poems, a biography of King Charles V, a treatise on politics, and *Le Livre des fais d’armes et de chevalerie* (“*The Book of Feats of Arms and Chivalry*”), which explicated the military arts. In addition to these texts, she composed her own allegorical autobiography, *L’Avison de Christine*, which also discussed the political problems in France of her day.
- Another of her writings, *Epître de la prison de vie humaine* (“*Letter of the Prison of Human Life*”), was meant to console Frenchwomen who had suffered in the series of uprisings and battles that troubled French society after the death of Charles V. She also wrote a much more uplifting poem, the *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc* (“*Song of Joan of Arc*”).
- In her poem extolling Joan’s virtues, Christine expands on the ideas of women’s virtues that she had asserted and explored during the *Querelle de la Rose* and in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In commenting on the *Ditié de Jehanne d’Arc*, scholar Nadia Margolis wrote that Christine “reverses Joan as the ultimate realization of

the poet's belief in women as saviors and redeemers of men—and indeed, of an entire kingdom.”

- Without a doubt, even the briefest survey of Christine de Pisan's life and work demonstrates that she truly had a great mind. She wrote with assurance on matters of military technique, politics, faith, gender, allegory, philosophy and more, and she displayed a remarkable degree of fortitude and courage in taking up her pen.

Suggested Reading

de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*.

Margolis, *An Introduction to Christine de Pizan*.

Willard, *Christine de Pizan*.

Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers*.

Questions to Consider

1. Most scholars who consider Christine's career fall into one of two camps: those who consider her a proto-feminist or those who consider her a deeply conservative member of society who regarded her own writing career as a necessity because society has failed to do its job of protecting and supporting young widows. After this lecture, which camp do you find yourself in?
2. How essential do you think Christine's heritage as an Italian woman raised in France was to the success of her career?

Sir Thomas Malory and *Le Morte Darthur*

Lecture 23

In this lecture, we examine the great mind of a minor nobleman, Sir Thomas Malory. Malory is, in many respects, an unusual candidate for a great mind: He wrote only one text, *Le Morte Darthur*, a retelling of the King Arthur legend, and this book seems more concerned with entertainment than with matters of faith or philosophical questions. Yet *Le Morte Darthur* reflects and comments on Malory's age in unique and subtle ways. The work reveals to us the dream of a social order in which loyalty, chivalry, and valiant behavior triumph over numerous evils. At the same time, it identifies the greatest threats to this idealized social order and mourns the impossibility of maintaining such a fantastic world.

Malory's Achievement

- *Le Morte Darthur* is the most comprehensive single-author treatment of the legend of King Arthur composed prior to the modern period. Written during the years 1468–1470 while Thomas Malory (fl. c. 1470) was in prison, this massive work draws on multiple sources to both retell and expand the story of King Arthur.
 - Arthur's story had been a medieval bestseller since Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* appeared in the 12th century, spawning a huge body of literature—especially in French—that dramatized the exploits of Arthur and his knights.
 - Malory was the first medieval author who made a sustained effort to sort through the various strands of this literary tradition, with the goal of synthesizing a cohesive narrative. More specifically, he relied on the history, chronicle, and romance traditions—sources in both French and English—that apparently were supplied to him by a friend or patron during his imprisonment.

- The result of Malory's labors is a stunning achievement that brings together all the major plot threads of the Arthurian tradition: the story of Arthur's rise to power and tragic fall; the individual adventures of such knights as Lancelot, Gawain, and Tristram; the machinations of Merlin; Arthur's conquest of Rome; the quest for the Holy Grail; the illicit love of Lancelot and Guenevere; and the deeds of the incestuously conceived Mordred.
- Although most of the characters and adventures encountered in the book were already well known, *Le Morte Darthur* is the only medieval text that tries to tell the whole of this story in one continuous narrative. Malory carefully manipulated, rewrote, and stitched together the stories in his sources to create something that was at once both deeply familiar and entirely new in the canon of Arthurian literature.

Malory's Theme

- It is no accident that Malory's impulse to create such a narrative manifested itself during the turbulent Wars of the Roses. This was a decades-long contest for the throne of England between the royal houses of York and Lancaster. During this conflict Malory, like many other Englishmen of his day, switched sides depending on which party was in power.
 - Malory is thought to have been a Yorkist supporter at first but later was implicated in a Lancastrian plot that may have been the ultimate cause of his imprisonment.
 - Although many of the charges leveled against him were likely trumped up and political in nature, there is evidence to suggest that he often acted as a less-than-law-abiding citizen and that, at times, his behavior approached that of an outright scoundrel.
- It is somewhat surprising, then, that during his incarceration, Malory chose to devote himself to composing a text that is, in part, a celebration of the very chivalric ethos he seems to have ignored. Arthur was, after all, the greatest of kings, and with the founding of the Round Table, he established a code of conduct that set the

highest of expectations for the nobility. At several moments in the text, Malory appeals directly to his readers, asking them to consider Arthur's story as an ethical model for their own behavior.

- Although *Le Morte Darthur* begins on an affirmative and hopeful note, as the narrative progresses, the ethical distinctions between Arthur's time and Malory's begin to collapse. Eventually, the decline of Arthur and his kingdom becomes unavoidable. What began as a celebration ends as a kind of condemnation, and the notion of Arthur's story as an ethical model for Malory's own time becomes largely untenable.

- Still, even as *Le Morte Darthur* draws to a close with the deaths of Lancelot and Guenevere—now reformed and living separate lives as a monk and a nun—there remains a positive note. Chivalry may have failed, but the attempts of Arthur and his knights to create and uphold such a value system remain praiseworthy.



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- It is the constant effort of striving toward nobility—even when achieving that goal is impossible—that proves, in the end, to be not only the driving force of the narrative but also its final ethical lesson. Malory's text looks on the Arthurian past with a nostalgia that is, by turns, resigned and hopeful. It simultaneously mourns chivalry and exalts it, reveling in the exploits of Arthur's knights while also critiquing them.

Malory's text follows familiar tales, such as the love story of Lancelot and Guenevere and the quest for the Holy Grail, across England, to the continent, and even into the Middle East.

The Pentecostal Oath

- Many readers would hold that Malory's greatest contribution to the Arthurian tradition is primarily that he molded the mass of material about Arthur into a manageable form that allows the story to be enjoyed from start to finish. It's true that many elements of the Arthurian legend were present in the literature before Malory began composing his text, but when he put all the pieces together, he made some significant and original contributions, including the addition of the Pentecostal Oath.

- After Arthur has established his Order of the Round Table and after his knights have tested themselves in a few adventures, Malory describes the Pentecostal Oath. First of all, he says that the king "established" his knights, meaning that he provided for them by giving them titles and land. This was a necessary component of the ruler-subject relationship, and one that was seen more frequently in the breach than in the observance in Malory's day.
 - The throne in 15th-century England moved back and forth between the houses of York and Lancaster. Henry VI, of the Lancastrian branch, had ascended to the throne when only a nine-month old infant. Worse, as he grew up, it became clear that he had inherited the propensity to insanity that had marred the reign of his grandfather, King Charles VI of France.

 - In 1461, Henry's cousin, the duke of York, was made protector of the realm. In 1470, Henry was restored to the throne, but in 1471, Lancaster was out again, and York was back in. Nobles who had switched sides during this period might find themselves stripped of land and titles and even imprisoned.

 - In contrast, Malory's Arthur inspires unswerving loyalty in his knights and rules over what is essentially all the known world. *Le Morte Darthur* displays a breathtakingly ambitious dream of social and political unity.

- After establishing his knights, Malory's Arthur details what they should and should not do to remain in good standing as Knights of the Round Table. They must commit no outrage, murder, or treason, and they should grant mercy to those who ask for it. Further, they should help women and refrain from rape. From this last directive, it seems clear that members of the knightly class were, in fact, guilty of this crime.
- It seems that Malory intended the Pentecostal Oath as a social critique, a corrective for the dark, corrupt, and chaotic age in which he found himself. He may have viewed his imprisonment not as a punishment for his own bad actions but as a consequence of the degraded times in which he was living.
- With the Pentecostal Oath, Malory seems to offer an explicit guide for noble behavior, and as he moves through his massive text, he seems to test this oath to see if it could function as a useful guide in a variety of situations. Unfortunately, Malory discovers that the oath doesn't work as a corrective for the social ills of the day.

Testing the Oath

- This testing of the oath as a guide for noble behavior is made plain by the source Malory used for the story of the quest for the Holy Grail. We know that he had available a version of the grail quest that was similar in tone to what had come before: stories of knights and ladies who were preoccupied with matters of courtliness and chivalry and not too terribly concerned with religion. But curiously, Malory chose as his source for this adventure a French text known as the *Queste del Saint Graal*.
- This work is more an allegory than it is a story of knightly adventure. The forests are not peopled with damsels in distress but with hermits who offer prophecies or biblical tales and who are willing to hear confessions and provide absolution. Having set out a code of conduct and deployed it on a series of adventures, Malory now seems to test how it would function in a landscape of theology and allegory.

- Again, he finds that the code fails. On the quest, ladies who ask for help might also be the devil in disguise. When Lancelot sees two groups of knights fighting against each other, he assists the black side because it seems to be the weaker group. He later discovers that in trying to be a good knight, he had actually helped the forces of Satan and had acted as a bad Christian. The only knight to truly succeed on the grail quest is the saintly Sir Galahad, who is actually a rather boring character.
- Malory's code of conduct fails the test of faith, but he seems to recognize that even if his chivalric code does not completely work as a means of maintaining social order, it is still admirable in its aims. Despite the fact that Arthur's realm is beset by troubles, Malory seems to regard knightly values as respectable goals for which to strive.
- In the end, those who tried their best to adhere to the code of conduct in Malory's text get their reward. When Lancelot dies, his fellow knights are given a dream of him ascending through the gates of heaven, and Malory tells us that his corpse emits a sweet smell—a detail that evokes one of the tests for sainthood.
- Malory's great gift to posterity is that he holds up a mirror to his own age and shows that though the era is passing away, there is still much about it that should be valued. Malory envisaged a world similar to his own but superior in many ways; he reflected both the great strengths and the great weaknesses of his time and place, and he did so in a form that entertained and delighted even as it instructed.

Suggested Reading

Armstrong, *Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte Darthur*.

Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*.

Hardyment, *Malory*.

Questions to Consider

1. Do you think Malory's Pentecostal Oath could have functioned successfully as a guide for proper behavior at any time or place in the medieval world?
2. How does Malory's text demonstrate the idea that literary works that at first appear to be intended for purposes of entertainment can teach larger lessons?

William Caxton and the Birth of Printing

Lecture 24

In our last lecture, we discussed how Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* both reflected and commented on the realities of what it meant to be a knight or a nobleman during the fractious decades of the 15th century. When Malory composed his text, he wrote for an audience that he believed to be essentially like him: members of the aristocracy. In 1485, just 15 years after Malory had completed *Le Morte Darthur*, a man named William Caxton would print that same text on England's first printing press, but he envisioned an audience quite different from the one that Malory had in mind, one that included members of the large, upwardly mobile merchant class.

The Emergence of Printing

- Up until the 15th century in Europe, books had to be copied by hand, a process that could take more than a year for deluxe manuscripts. Indeed, manuscripts were quite valuable, often bound in wooden covers that were embossed with jewels.
- But printing made texts more affordable, and changes in social structure had made a much larger portion of the population literate. The members of the new bourgeoisie were eager consumers of all kinds of writing; recognizing this, William Caxton (c. 1422–1491) established the first printing press in England to take advantage of this new opportunity.
- Although he was not the inventor of movable type, Johannes Gutenberg was responsible for its initial and eventual mainstream use in medieval Europe. Originally trained as a goldsmith, Gutenberg set up his printing press in Mainz, Germany, by 1450. He is perhaps best known for the 42-line Bible he produced, almost 50 copies of which survive.

- There had been experiments with printing in Europe prior to Gutenberg’s foray into the business, but in these earlier experiments, pages were usually printed using the woodblock method. This process was fairly labor intensive, but it was still quicker than writing out a particular text by hand if one wanted to produce several copies.
- Faster still was printing using movable type, in which individual metal letters could be assembled into whatever order was needed and, thus, could be used repeatedly for a variety of different texts—an obvious advantage over entire pages carved into a block of wood. Because the letters were made using metal, they were also fairly durable. Scholars estimate that printers could turn out 300 pages a day using movable type and a press similar to Gutenberg’s.
- What’s interesting about the introduction of the printing press is that some portions of medieval society embraced this new technology, looking ahead to the future, while others resisted, refusing to relinquish many of the hallmarks of past bookmaking.
 - For example, some printers still used vellum, even though it was expensive to obtain. At the same time, many were eager to use paper because it was so affordable. Unfortunately, this benefit to society has been, in some respects, a tragedy for scholars because many texts printed on paper did not survive.
 - This is one reason that texts known as *incunabula* (those printed before 1501) are valuable today. They offer us a glimpse of a world in transition, at a moment when writing existed in what we might call a continuum between script and print.

A New Breed of Entrepreneur

- Although many entrepreneurs were eager to learn the new printing technology and make use of it for both personal profit and the greater good, many also recognized the power of the past and were not about to give up the manuscript tradition overnight. This is the case with William Caxton, the first printer in England. When

Caxton set up his printing press, he also maintained a brisk trade in manuscripts, catering simultaneously to a wealthy, traditionally minded clientele and a less wealthy and newly literate public, hungry for reading material.

- Caxton learned printing on the continent, probably in Germany, and he first turned his hand to printing in Bruges, where he printed the first text in English—a work that Caxton himself had translated from French. After returning to England, he set up that nation’s first printing press in the town of Westminster around 1476. His life and career represent a wonderful example of the continuity between the medieval and the early modern.
- A commoner, Caxton came from the countryside of Kent to London, where he was apprenticed to a mercer, someone who dealt in cloth. In this business, he traveled to the continent, where he was first exposed to printing. While in the town of Bruges, he advanced to a senior position in a group known as the Company of Merchant Adventurers of London—sort of an expatriate group of businessmen. This post brought him into the orbit of the noble house of Burgundy, whose duchess, Margaret, was sister to the king of England.
- Caxton attained the favor not only of Margaret but also of other nobles in England. He dedicated any number of books to members of royal and noble families, but he also mentions several well-connected commoners in his prologues and epilogues, among them, several powerful but non-noble London merchants.
- Interestingly, Caxton also wrote prologues and epilogues telling readers how they should approach or interpret the books he printed. From his selection of texts to print and the content of his prologues and epilogues, it’s clear that Caxton recognized the power that remained with the traditional social elites, as well as the increasing power of the bourgeoisie. The output of his print shop suggests that he was a shrewd businessman who cleverly exploited the potential of both groups of consumers.

Caxton's Output

- Caxton is perhaps best known for printing the works of Geoffrey Chaucer, but he also introduced many less familiar works to English readers. Among these were texts in Latin or French that he often translated on his own initiative and printed for an audience that he gauged would be receptive to them.
- In his many prologues, Caxton often cites the Pauline dictum “All is written for our doctrine,” meaning, essentially, that all knowledge that can be gleaned through reading can be useful and instructive. Caxton seems a curious mix of devoutly religious conservative and radically innovative entrepreneur, and he is just one example of how the turning point of the printing press directs us back to the lessons of the past, as well as forward to the possibilities of the future.

- Consider, for example, the first book that Caxton chose to print: the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, which he printed while still in Bruges. It seems symbolic that the first book printed in English was produced on the continent in Belgium, was translated out of French by its printer, and was concerned with the story of the fall of Troy, one of the great matters of literature from the ancient world.



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In a sense, Caxton “made up” the rules for the new profession of printer as he went along, writing prologues and epilogues to inform readers about how they should interpret his printed works.

- Caxton seems to have worked on three other texts while still in Bruges, and the diversity of subject matter presaged his future choices. In addition to his history of Troy, he printed a collection of penitential psalms and another work entitled *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, which is an allegory about social order. He also translated and prepared another work for print, known as *The History of Jason*, but it seems likely that he didn't print that text until he was back in Britain.
- In 1476, Caxton returned to his home in England and set up his print shop in Westminster, just outside of London. There, his shop printed and sold several works of Chaucer, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the *Chronicles of England*, a medieval romance called *The Siege of Jerusalem*, the *Dictes and Sayenges of the Philosophers*, another history of England called the *Polychronicon*, some Cato, collections of sermons, the *Speculum vitae Christi* ("Mirror of the Life of Christ"), and much more.

Shaping Tastes and Language

- In instructing his audience how to read the books he produced, Caxton proved himself a master at fashioning an authoritative yet humble persona. In his preface to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, for example, he manages to both advertise the kinds of books he had printed and suggest that he was acquainted with "many noble and diverse gentlemen," who had asked him to print the story of King Arthur and the Holy Grail.
- In the preface to another of his texts, the *Eneydos* (a version of the *Aeneid*), Caxton offers explanation for taking on the burden of translating and printing in English so many important texts: He signals a desire to help standardize the English language, which had multiple dialects and was, in the second half of the 15th century, undergoing significant linguistic changes as a result of the Great Vowel Shift.

- In addressing these challenges, Caxton specifically states that when he is rendering a foreign text into English, he tries to make it as accessible as possible to as broad an audience as possible. In the end, Caxton's influence on the English language was enormous. Because of the choices he made, his print shop had a hand in freezing and standardizing spelling at exactly the moment that it was undergoing a series of changes.
- Although Caxton's spelling and orthography looked back to the past, the ambitious project of his print shop sought to drive his country toward the future, and it did both: It upheld the great manuscript traditions of the past while looking forward to a new era in which printing would make knowledge available on a scale the likes of which the world had never known.
- At this time of his death, Caxton had printed more than 100 works of various kinds. Of this output, at least four-fifths was in English, and Caxton himself had undertaken to translate into English some 25 or so of the works he ended up printing. His apprentices carried on the work of the print shop, and the imprimatur of Caxton's press would continue to have a significant influence on early modern society well into the 16th century.
- Caxton stands as one of the great minds of the medieval world not only because he made a shrewd business move when the opportunity presented itself, but also because he took quite a risk in pursuing this endeavor. And once he set up his press, Caxton both responded to and shaped audience demand. We might even argue that Caxton's decisions as an arbiter of print culture helped to shape the Renaissance in England and what texts would serve as the foundation for this new cultural movement.

Suggested Reading

Echard and Partridge, eds., *The Book Unbound*.

Kuskin, *Symbolic Caxton*.

Questions to Consider

1. What is most surprising to you about Caxton's desire to become a printer? Does it seem to be a logical step from his earlier profession?
2. How might the medieval world have been different if print had come into use a century or two earlier?

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into the everyday life of the commons in the Middle Ages. This book relies heavily on legal documents and coroners' reports to make the claim that medieval peasant families enjoyed warm and affectionate relationships.

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Stokstad, Marilyn. *Medieval Art*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004. A good overview of artistic traditions and developments in the medieval period, with particular emphasis on the Gothic.

Trinakus, Charles. *The Poet as Philosopher: Petrarch and the Formation of Renaissance Consciousness*. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Belou Press, 1979. A short overview of Petrarch and his world, with special attention paid to ideas concerning Renaissance humanism.

Tyerman, Christopher. *The Crusades: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Discusses the phenomenon in broad strokes; assumes a fair amount of prior knowledge on the subject.

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