

**Culture and university in the late Middle Ages:
a recent Italian study and its European dimensions**

by Peter Denley

Reti Medievali Rivista, 19, 2 (2018)

[<http://www.retimedievali.it>](http://www.retimedievali.it)



**Scuola, cultura e società nel Medioevo:
a proposito di Paolo Rosso,
*La scuola nel Medioevo. Secoli VI-XV***

a cura di Gian Maria Varanini

Firenze University Press



Reti Medievali Rivista, 19, 2 (2018)

<<http://rivista.retimedievali.it>>

ISSN 1593-2214 © 2018 Firenze University Press

DOI 10.6092/1593-2214/5961

Scuola, cultura e società nel Medioevo:

a proposito di Paolo Rosso,

La scuola nel Medioevo. Secoli VI-XV

a cura di Gian Maria Varanini

Culture and university in the late Middle Ages: a recent Italian study and its European dimensions*

by Peter Denley

This short essay considers Paolo Rosso's book as a contribution to the history of medieval universities; it discusses the feasibility and merits of works of synthesis by single authors, and reflects on the Italian perspective it offers and the European dimensions of the book.

Questo intervento prende in considerazione il libro di Paolo Rosso in quanto contributo alla storia delle università medievali; discute la praticabilità e i meriti dei lavori di sintesi condotti da singoli autori e ragiona sulla prospettiva italiana e le dimensioni europee del libro.

Middle Ages; Europe; Italy; Education; School; University; Historiography.

Medioevo; Europa; Italia; istruzione; scuola; università; storiografia.

In this forum discussion of Paolo Rosso's highly stimulating new book, it falls to me to discuss the last section, his treatment of higher education, and the rise and development of the medieval universities.

Research on medieval education is vast and burgeoning – and nowhere more so than for the history of universities. The institutionalisation of higher learning, with rules, procedures and hierarchies for a sector that was strongly inclined to the use of the written word (and indeed highly dependent on it), generated an astonishing quantity of evidence. Medieval academics are among the best documented members of society, and centuries later many of their successors have yielded to the temptation to study them in minute detail and in all their sometimes dubious glory (a phenomenon which should give us pause – even unease; the genre was dismissed brusquely by my late supervisor as “dons writing about dons”). Just keeping up with the constant stream of new publications is an almost impossible challenge. How can all this be brought together? Relatively few have made the attempt single-hand-

* Discussion of Paolo Rosso, *La scuola nel Medioevo. Secoli VI-XV*, Roma, Carocci, 2018 (Quality paperbacks), 311 pp.

edly. From the late twentieth century the tendency has been to try to capture the whole picture through collaborative volumes; the clear perception that many heads are bound to be wiser than one has come to dominate¹. In Italy this trend has been especially strong, nurtured by infrastructures such as the Centro Interuniversitario per la Storia delle Università Italiane (CISUI)², the growing role of academic conferences as vehicles for research, university centenaries (a mini-industry which has been a speciality of Italian historiography since the extensive but spuriously dated Bolognese “foundation” celebrations of 1888), and changes in patterns of research funding which have increasingly channelled humanities in this direction, in emulation of models from the hard sciences.

To the outside world, of course, this has just confirmed the old stereotype that academics know ever more about less and less. Yet there remains a need for shorter synthetic work, where the reader’s attention is engaged and guided by a single voice, which can select and prioritise, and at the same time speak with authority. Those of us who engage in teaching alongside research know how vital this is. When it is done well, the risks of partiality, incompleteness, and error are easily outweighed by the coherence and force of what is presented. For me, the appearance – for the first time, to my knowledge – of such a work from an Italian perspective is of particular interest given how different the development of the peninsula’s educational system was to the rest of Europe, but also how influential the Italian university *Sonderweg* appears to have been. Paolo Rosso is admirably suited to the attempt at synthesis. A scholar of phenomenal energy and versatility, Rosso has written extensively about the medieval universities of north-west Italy from all angles, as well as demonstrating formidable cultural range and depth in other works of local history. These qualities are clearly demonstrated in what is presented here.

The first thing to say is that Rosso succeeds entirely in his effort to integrate the narrative of education at different levels. It was a wise decision to leave the universities to the end; Part 3, covering schools in urban society from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, contextualises them most effectively by discussing ecclesiastical and lay schooling (and the relationship between the two), forms and levels of education, the spread of education and “intellectual professions” (from church to state – rhetoricians, notaries, judges, medics), and finally the evolution of the figure of the teacher. With this section the potential role of the universities has been delineated and contained. In Part 4, when Rosso gets to the universities themselves, he has no further need of qualification, and can treat the origins of these institutions without laying down parameters. The design of this section too is masterful. Of course all the

¹ A landmark was the initiative in 1982 of the Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents, and Vice-Chancellors of the European Universities (CRE) which resulted in the recent four-volume *A History of the University in Europe*.

² The Italian equivalent of the synthesis mentioned in the previous footnote is CISUI’s *Storia delle Università in Italia*.

standard themes have to be there; so Chapter 13 is a general introduction to the origins and growth of the *studia generalia*, outlining the key features in their development and the constitutional and practical characteristics which emerged. Next he focuses on relations between these new institutions and the sources of power, papal and princely, on which they were ultimately all dependent for approval and support; and finally – since this is an Italian expert at work here – there is a specific section which discusses the implications of the Bolognese model of university with its emphasis on student power – an experiment which, however short-lived and doomed to failure, nonetheless proved deeply influential across much of southern Europe. In Chapter 14 Rosso discusses the organisation of teaching, starting with a helpful section on pedagogical practices and proceeding to consider the major disciplines in turn. This ambitious task is carried out effectively. Rosso has relatively little to say about law (and nothing beyond Italy), but more on arts and medicine (which are combined, reflecting the organisation and curriculum of the teaching of these subjects in Italy), and he offers particularly detailed and perceptive insights on theology, where a broader European perspective is taken. The chapter concludes with some brief but informative reflections on the university book trade.

So far, so traditional. In his final two chapters Rosso breaks way from this institutional mould and surveys social aspects of the university world in the broadest possible sense. Chapter 15 returns to the church and examines the penetration of graduates into its higher echelons, before expanding the approach to cover secular disciplines as well. This brings him back to Bologna again; its hold over legal studies of both kinds lead him to describe the student universities as «il “brodo di cultura” della classe dirigente tardomedievale, in ambito sia laico, sia ecclesiastico»³. The chapter goes on to develop the theme of universities as key training grounds, first for communal office and later for princely government. In the final brief section Rosso explores the social affirmation of doctors as a class immediately below knights. Chapter 16 develops such social themes further. A crisp but wide-ranging summary of the many factors at work in the relationship between universities and their host towns is followed by a discussion of ritual aspects of university life (*Rappresentazione e autorappresentazione dello Studio*), and finally sections on academic *peregrinatio* and, closely related to it, student colleges and the changing role they played.

In a work of this range, synthesis for a wider public must always be an act of compromise. Key aspects of the narrative have to be there; structure is everything, and on top of that, convincing evidence, crisply presented, is also essential. On the first point, I am full of admiration; Rosso has arranged his material in a way that allows him both to fulfil the necessary task of explaining the institutional history of medieval universities, and to reflect the chang-

³ Rosso, *La scuola*, p. 256.

ing preoccupations of current scholarship and historiography. On evidence, the challenge is even more formidable, and there are real limits to what can be achieved in 275 pages. Some sections are stronger on argument and assertion than on information; in others, the choice of well-known episodes mean that the discourse is rock-solid rather than innovative. However it is really difficult to see what more could have been done in this respect – that old story needs to be told (and evaluated), and synthetic writing simply does not allow the space for radical revisionism as well.

Works of synthesis are easy targets for reviewers who can weigh in effortlessly with lists of omissions and specific points of disagreement from their own area of expertise. Reviews as vehicles for turf wars are undignified and unhelpful, and happily there is no temptation towards that approach in the case of this excellent survey. However it must be stated that there is one respect in which this book – or at least the section on universities – does not quite capture the whole picture. Although it sets out to cover European education, in practice it often falls short of that aspiration. It is surprising how many sections end up talking largely about Italy, sometimes to the exclusion of other evidence. (Actually it is not even Italy that is being foregrounded; universities to the south of Bologna merit only passing references, if that). Across the Alps, Rosso reaches out to Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Orléans, Montpellier and Toulouse, old institutions with undeniable features that are relevant to his arguments. But where is the wider landscape? The index shows that Salamanca is mentioned twice, Palencia, Prague and Vienna once. Yet where are Cologne, Leipzig, Erfurt, Heidelberg, Freiburg, Basel and Tübingen – let alone Crakow, Uppsala, Coimbra...? The whole of what Peter Moraw dubbed “younger Europe” – universities which he elevated to being in a category of their own⁴ – is all but ignored – in striking contrast to the short-lived university experiment at Vercelli which is brought up no fewer than four times. Like all schematisations, Moraw’s can of course be subjected to legitimate challenge and debate; however, I find it regrettable that Rosso does not see fit to mention it at all. For a work that claims to speak on medieval education as a whole, there is a serious geographical imbalance here.

This is a small blemish to a bold, articulate and deeply considered survey. A second edition of this magisterial work might easily take the opportunity to remedy the deficiency; failing that, a less all-embracing title might be considered as a way of managing the expectations of the reader more effectively. There are so many points in this valuable book that I would love to be able to debate with my students. A translation into English would be most welcome!

⁴ Moraw, *Einheit und Vielfalt*. His argument is most widely accessible in English in Moraw, *Careers of Graduates*, pp. 251 seq.

Works Cited

- A History of the University in Europe*, eds. H. De Ridder-Symoens and W. Rüegg, Cambridge 1992-2010, 4 vols.
- P. Moraw, *Careers of Graduates*, in *A History of the University in Europe*, I, *Universities in the Middle Ages*, ed. H. De Ridder-Symoens, Cambridge 1992, pp. 244-279.
- P. Moraw, *Einheit und Vielfalt der Universität im alten Europa*, in *Die Universität in Alteuropa*, eds. A. Patschovsky and H. Rabe, Konstanz 1994 (Konstanzer Bibliothek, 22), pp. 11-27; reprinted in P. Moraw, *Gesammelte Beiträge zur Deutschen und Europäischen Universitäts-geschichte. Strukturen - Personen - Entwicklungen*, Leiden 2008 (Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, 10), pp. 55-75.
- P. Rosso, *La scuola nel Medioevo. Secoli vi-xv*, Roma 2018 (Quality paperbacks).
- Storia delle Università in Italia*, eds. G.P. Brizzi, P. Del Negro and A. Romano, Messina 2007, 3 vols.

Peter Denley
Queen Mary University of London
p.r.denley@qmul.ac.uk