A Timeline of Medieval Universities

David de la Croix   Mara Vitale

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

A timeline

Figure 1 presents our timeline of medieval universities, i.e. universities created before the fall of Constantinople in 1453. To construct this timeline of universities, we used information provided by Frijhoff in his book "A History of the University in Europe" (1996) and by Rashdall in his book "The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages" (1895). We also consulted Hermans and Nelissen (2005) and Verger and Charle (2012). These works attempt to define the dates of the foundation of the different universities.

It is important to clarify what is meant by a university. In fact, even before the year 1000, there were different types of schools (*scholae*) of higher education, such as urban schools of a secular nature in major European cities, monasteries (located in rural areas), or cathedral schools (again in cities. The University of Paris originated in the cathedral school of Notre-Dame de Paris). These schools were characterized by the faculty's strong degree of specialization, the introduction of scholasticism as a teaching method, and their location in major urban centers (Rosso 2021).

The urban nature of these schools is crucial to understanding the transition from *schola* to *studium* (higher education). Indeed, there was an increase in the mobility of students and teachers across Europe, and this led to the development of forms of associationism among students, particularly in the city of Bologna. Initially, students gathered in *nationes* (nations) which were divided by area of origin. The organization and regulation of these guilds of students (particularly in Bologna) and professors (in Paris and Oxford) led to the formation of *universitates magistrorum et scholarium* (associations of masters and students), from which the name "university" is derived. At first, these *universitates* were given statutes, maintaining their autonomy from city and church authorities. However, the growing number of students, the uncontrolled proliferation of schools, and the various kinds of unrest that began to occur in cities prompted the authorities to intervene (Rashdall 1895; Verger and Charle 2012).

For the earliest universities, it is difficult to establish a precise date of foundation, since they were the continuation of *scholae* that had already been present in the cities. Beginning around the 13th century, papal or imperial authorization became necessary for the establishment of a new university.

Foundation dates

In our timeline, we have tried to account for uncertain foundation dates and the gradual transition from *schola* to *studium*. The dark orange line indicates the official period of existence of universities, while the light orange color indicates the period when there was a higher education institution but not a full-fledged university. In this case, we highlighted the existence of an earlier school only when we found the names of a significant number of scholars. For instance, this is the case with the universities of Salerno, Angers, Montpellier, Cologne, Parma, and Aix en Provence.

As mentioned above, the foundation dates of some universities remain uncertain. The University of Bologna, considered the *alma mater studiorum* (nourishing mother of studies), conventionally has 1088 as its foundation date. A commission of historians established in 1888 and chaired by the
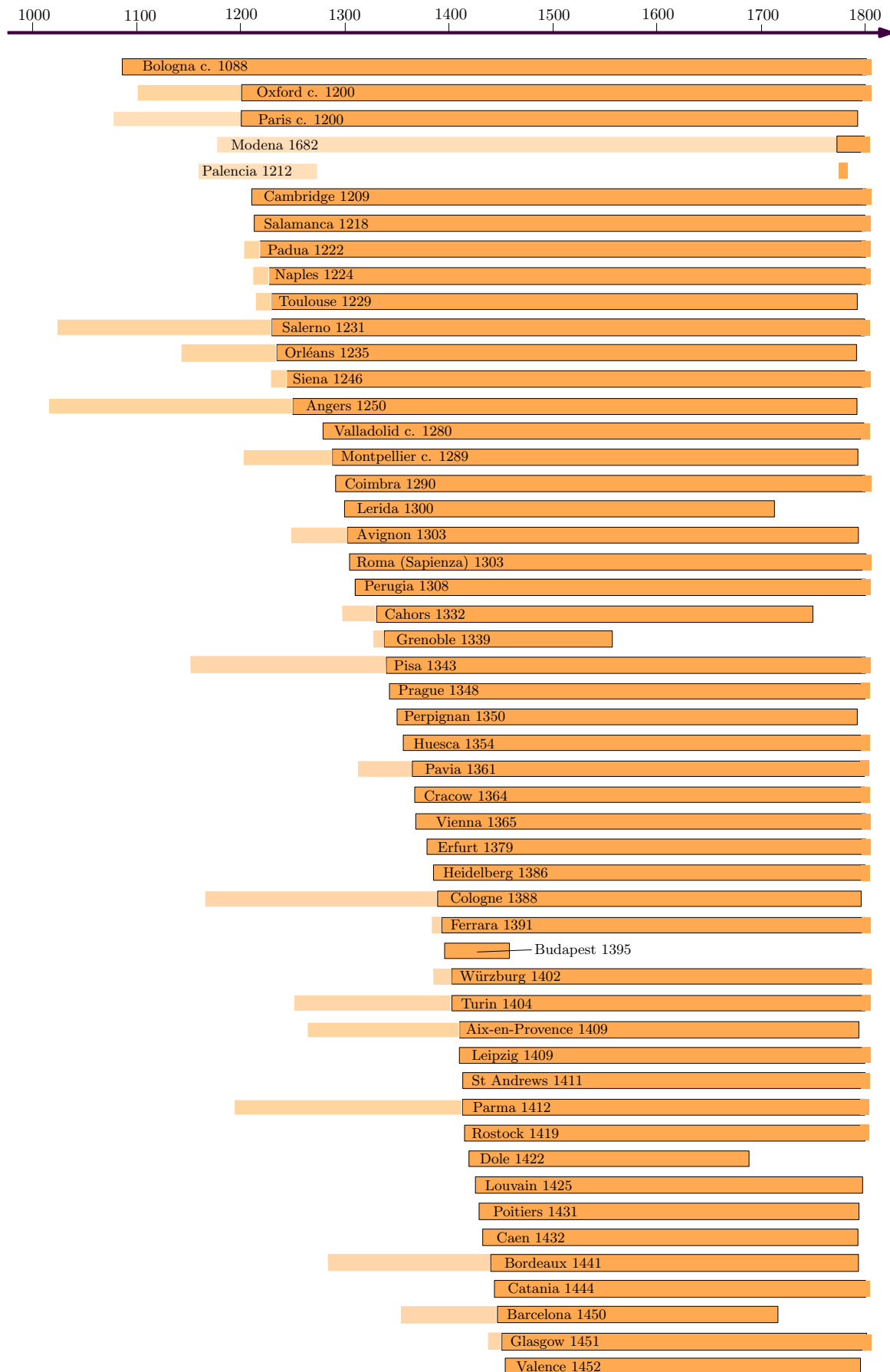
Figure 1: Timeline of Universities Founded during the Middle Ages

poet and man of letters Giusué Carducci (Nobel Prize for literature in 1906) determined that date, although the first statutes of the university date back to 1252. The origin of the Salerno medical school is shrouded in legend. Some anecdotal accounts attest to the existence of a medical school there as early as the 9th century Kristeller (1945). In 1231,with the promulgation of Frederick II's constitution, the medical school's ability to practice medicine and teaching was confirmed De Renzi (1857).

Cologne is another interesting case. The city's cathedral school welcomed many scholars who had to leave Paris because of the instability of university life there in its early decades (student strike of 1229). In the period before the foundation of the university, such illustrious names as Thomas Aquinas, John Dun Scotus, and Albertus Magnus can be found in the records. Modena is rather an example of a university that experienced a long period of discontinuity before receiving an official status. In fact, in 1175 the *Studium mutinenisis* existed (Mor and Di Pietro 1975), but it was closed in 1338 and replaced by schools that did not award degrees. These schools were closed in 1590 due to a lack of funds. It was not until 1682 that the *studium* was reestablished, obtaining an imperial authorization in 1685 (Grendler 2002).

1   A Eurocentric approach?

Should European universities be considered the first universities in the world? Answering this question is not simple (Chambers and Greenville 2017). We do know that in the East and in the Islamic world there were already renowned higher education institutions of a religious nature as early as the 5th century. The Buddhist monasteries (mahāvihāra) of Nalanda (operating from 427 to 1197), Odantapuri and Vikramashila (founded in the 8th–9th century) in India, the medersas Al-Nizamiyya in Baghdad (1062), Al-Azar in Cairo (920), al-Qarawiyyin in Fez (857–859), and the Pandidakterion (425 – c.1400) in Byzantium are among the best known examples. All these institutions drew large numbers of students and teachers. The teaching covered a broad range of subjects, including astronomy, mathematics, logic, grammar, law, and theology.

These types of educational institutions played an important role in the dissemination of knowledge in the Far East, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean area with Spain and North Africa, and all the way to sub-Saharan Africa. Their structure resembled in many respects the *scholae* (secular and religious) that developed in Europe before the 11th century. However, we think that the mode of formation and the spirit in which the early European universities emerged is different. As seen above, the concept of *universitas* refers to a corporation, a group of individuals (students and professors) that was self-governed, bound by the same interests, and sought to defend their right to knowledge by consorting. The corporation is grounded in Roman law which recognizes juristic persons (non-human legal persons). In the beginning, they had no buildings, no auditoriums, only men. The terms that connote institutions of learning outside Europe do not carry this concept. In fact, the Arabic term "medersa" refers to a building or a place of learning (Pedersen et al. 2019). "The madrasa, unlike the university, was a building, not a community," according to Makdisi (1970). The Indian (Pali language) term "mahāvihāra," on the other hand, refers to a monastery. The teachers at Indian higher education institutions were all monks residing in monastery-schools (Monroe 2000).

Another decisive difference is the awarding of degrees (Rüegg 1992). European universities immediately began to institutionalize knowledge, issuing certificates at the end of the course of study, something that was not found elsewhere. Giving a legal value to the course of study brought about a major cultural and social change. This is perhaps the reason behind the success of the European model of universities, which can be found all over the world today.

Some lessons

Some simple lessons can be learned from this picture.

  1. Universities are amazingly persistent institutions. Most of them survived for centuries, and

went through a series of crises, such as wars, pandemics, political unrest, and changing politics. In some sense, these universities have been more persistent than states themselves. For example, the University of Louvain was created under the Duchy of Brabant, before belonging to the Spanish low countries, then the Austrian rule, and later being abolished by the French Revolutionaries in 1797. It reopened under the Dutch rule, and eventually became Belgian in 1830.

2. Some universities ceased to exist. Some were closed due to lack of quality (Cahors), some were moved to other cities (Dole), some were replaced by other universities (Barcelona), and all the French universities were closed down by the French Revolution.

3. Teaching sometimes occurred long before the official creation of the university. This is the case for example in Paris, where schools providing higher education predated the official creation of the university in 1200.

4. Taking into account official dates only, Bologna is the oldest university. This status is however challenged by places like Angers, Paris, and Salerno when taking into account informal higher education provision preceding the official start of the university.

5. Most universities emerged in non-capital cities. Oxford, not London, Salamanca, not Leon (capital of the Kingdom of Leon), and Bologna (a free city), not Rome initially. Paris, Rome, and Naples are exceptions.

6. Over the period 1000-1348, most universities were located in the former territories of the Roman Empire. Only from 1348 onward did new universities start proliferating in the rest of Europe. The creation of the University of Prague initiated the expansion of universities in the countries of Central Europe (Riché and Verger 2013).

Acknowledgments

First version September 25, 2022

References

Chambers, Crystal Renée, and NC Greenville. 2017. Discovering nalanda and other institutions of higher education before solerno. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education* 2:195–205.

De Renzi, Salvatore. 1857. *Storia documentata della Scuola medica di Salerno.* Nobile.

Frijhoff, Willem. 1996. Patterns. Chap. 2 in *A history of the University in Europe. vol. ii: Universities in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800),* edited by Hilde de Ridder-Symoens. Cambridge University Press.

Grendler, Paul F. 2002. *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance.* Baltimore: JHU Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/3738338.

Hermans, Jos MM, and Marc Nelissen. 2005. *Charters of foundation and early documents of the universities of the Coimbra Group.* Leuven: Leuven University Press.

Kristeller, Paul Oskar. 1945. The School of Salerno: Its development and its contribution to the history of learning. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 17 (2): 138–194.

Makdisi, George. 1970. Madrasa and university in the middle ages. *Studia Islamica*, no. 32, 255–264.

Monroe, Paul. 2000. *Encyclopaedia of history of education.* New Delhi: Cosmo.

Mor, Carlo Guido, and Pericle Di Pietro. 1975. *Storia dell'università di Modena.* Vol. 1. LS Olschki.

Pedersen, Johannes, Goerge Makdisi, Munibur Rahman, and R Hillenbrand. 2019. Madrasa. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2.

Rashdall, Hastings. 1895. *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511722325.

Riché, Pierre, and Jacques Verger. 2013. *Maîtres et élèves au Moyen âge.* A. Fayard-Pluriel.

Rosso, Paolo. 2021. *Le università nell'Italia medievale. cultura, società e politica (secoli xii-xv).* Vol. 1273. Carocci editore.

Rüegg, Walter. 1992. Foreword. the university as a European institution. In *A history of the university in europe,* 1:35–76. Cambridge University Press Oxford, UK.

Verger, Jacques, and Christophe Charle. 2012. *Histoire des universités: xiiie-xxie siècle.* Presses universitaires de France.