

# Overview of the Study of History of the Medieval University

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**Abstract**—The world of today is undergoing different transformations. Some scientists believe these processes to be a part of the so-called globalization. While others see it as westernization or regionalization. In accordance to such views, different theories of modernization exist. Hence, they all try to explain how the process of adapting to modernity actually happens. In fact, quite a big group of scientists believes that the Western countries underwent modernization much earlier than the rest of the World. Consequently, countries, which did not belong to the West, had to use different patterns of the Western modernization experience to adequately adapt to the changing world. Education, especially higher education, is one of the most important spheres, which demands modernization in order to change the whole structure of the modernizing society. The following article explores the bibliography and historiography of the study of medieval universities in order to distinguish particular elements of said social institution, which could have been used by non-Western societies during their own modernization.

**Keywords**—education, middle ages, medieval university, social institution

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, many scientists consider the modern university to be originally a product of a Medieval European society, because most of its roots, including different sets of norms and regulations, exams, various variants of inner corporate structure and traditions of giving degrees, can be traced to this particular period of history. It is believed that the first universities of Medieval Europe had a chance to appear and develop, because of the unique circumstances in the sociocultural context of the XII and XIII centuries. As the university was created within the medieval society of Europe, this also means that it is an institute of the Western society. However, the institutional evolution of the university did not stop there, they continued to develop and adapt for several centuries in a constant struggle with different parties and stakeholders, each of whom had their own vision of the university's future and its role in the greater scheme of things [1].

As a social institution, a medieval university was basically a community of teachers and students, who formulated and maintained a set of certain rules, values and regulations, which, in turn, served to oversee and control their collaborative activity. For instance, the medieval university was actively fighting for administrative autonomy in order to be able to

freely produce and modify their own curriculum. It also sought a certain degree of academic independence in order to be able to choose a subject of study of its own will. The university also required a right to create and establish a publicly acknowledged system of awarding academic degrees. In fact, the university needed such a system, so that it could better regulate its inner hierarchy [1]. Later, the European model of university got modernized with the rest of the European social institutions.

Nevertheless, it is of a particular interest to note that some modern non-Western societies have successfully adapted the concept of the university, which originated in the Western societies, particularly, in Medieval Europe. Modern Japan, being a non-Western society, is a good example of such a process. This rises a set of important questions of how was Japan able to do it so successfully, while still maintaining its own cultural and national identity. Adapting foreign concepts and technologies can be quite a sophisticated task, especially, if said concepts and technologies come with cultural values and norms, produced by another culture. Thus, we can assume that the European concept of the university holds norms and values, indigenous to the Western society; yet, Japan managed to somehow adapt it to its own culture [2]. To research this topic in more detail, it is, firstly, essential to create a historiography and a bibliography of how and when the origins of the Medieval European University were studied. This, in return, will help us to create a more substantial framework for our research, distinguishing certain elements of the university as a social institution.

## II. STUDY OF MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITIES

The first step would be to research the works, which study the history of the Medieval European University. Rashdall Hastings, who was an English theologian and a major specialist in the history of the Medieval Universities of Europe, was also an author of an important work, which is called "The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages" [3]. The aforementioned book was first published in 1895 in the end of the XIX century. As the title implies, the author has compiled a vast amount of valuable information on the subject of the history of the medieval universities. In particular, the first volume of the book seems the most important for the cause of our research, as it begins by telling us the general idea of the definition of the term "university", which comes from the medieval concept of a guild or a corporation, known as

“Universitas”. At first, this particular term could be indiscriminately used to refer to any guild, but, by unknown reason, it remained until today as a way to refer to a certain institution of higher education. In other words, the medieval university was first born as a guild or a corporation of scholars and masters, bound by common interest to protect their rights. It is also crucial that this term referred not to the physical place, for example, the building of the university, but to the community of people itself.

Then, the author of “The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages” [3] explains the logical connection between Abelard and the so-called Renaissance of the XII century. Then, he goes on to describe the history of the first two actual medieval universities in great detail. This work also has a comparative nature, because the author dwells upon similarities and differences of the University of Bologna and the University of Paris, which represent two archetype models of the medieval European university. In fact, the University of Paris provided a model for the universities of masters, and the University of Bologna provided a model for the universities of students. Rashdall Hastings puts an emphasis on his opinion that most modern universities of his time were imitations of the two aforementioned models. He believes that the creation of the concept of the university itself was the most important achievement of the Middle Ages in the intellectual department. Consequently, any study, involving the topic of the medieval university, will also be a study of medieval thought.

Charles Haskins, an American historian, published his work “The Rise of Universities” [4] in 1923 in the beginning of the XX century. This work first began as a series of lectures, later, edited in the form of the aforementioned book, which is rather short. The book is logically divided into three parts: the earliest universities, the medieval professor and the medieval student. It is interesting that the author explains why the modern university is a product of the Middle Ages, not a product of the Antiquity, despite the importance of its educational tradition. On the one hand, great teachers, like Socrates, did not issue any internationally acknowledged diplomas or certificates, which could be used to physically confirm the act of having received the knowledge. On the other hand, the majority of existing elements of the modern organized education system, including faculties, colleges, courses, exams and academic degrees, began to appear only in the XIIth and XIIIth centuries. Therefore, modern universities of the author’s time were the inheritors of Paris and Bologna, not of Athens and Alexandria.

Later, Charles Haskins wrote a more comprehensive book on a related subject, called “The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century” [5], which was first published in 1927 by Harvard University Press. The main theme of the aforementioned book is the so-called Medieval Renaissance, which took place in the XII century. The author argues that, despite the usual association of the Middle Ages with Dark Ages, the events of this particular century were quite important for the development of medieval culture. The Greek philosophy and science were rediscovered via Arabs, the Roman Law was reintroduced, because of the rapid rise and growth of town life and commerce, which, in turn, required more concrete regulations and norms to function optimally and solve different disputes. In addition, the

basic patterns and foundations of the first European universities were laid.

Lynn Thorndike, an American historian, who specialized in the study of medieval science and alchemy, translated in English and published in 1944 a compilation of medieval documents, letters, laws and texts, regarding the topic of medieval universities in a book, called “University Records and Life in the Middle Ages” [6]. The book was first published by Columbia University Press. The aforementioned book is not a research itself, but it provides a variety of valuable diplomatic, narrative and other kinds of primary sources, which can be used in our research to prove various arguments within its framework. For example, the book contains an English translation of a document, archbishops of Paris and Sens issued to condemn heretics and the natural philosophy of Aristotle, which shows an event, when the Church directly intervened in the academic activity of the university. It is interesting to note that the author is familiar with the works of Rashdall Hastings. In fact, he recommends reading his book along with Rashdall’s “The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages” [3], as it provides more of a historical setting and commentary, explaining the historical context of documents, compiled in the book.

Jacques Le Goff, a prominent French historian of the Middle Ages, wrote a book, called “Intellectuals in the Middle Ages” [7]. It was first published in 1957 in French. The book tells us the general history of the intellectual tradition of Medieval Europe, including the establishment of the university as a social institution. The author mostly concentrates his narrative on the figures of important scholars, theologians, thinkers and other intellectuals, who often had close relations with different universities of their time.

James Weisheipl, an American professor, first published his article “The structure of the arts faculty in the medieval university” [8] in 1971 in British Journal of Educational Studies. In this article, as the title implies, the main topic concerns the concept of the arts faculty. It is notable that the author is more interested in the curriculum of studies, not the legal and administrative structures of this faculty. He argues that the study of arts was like a preparation for higher faculties. In particular, it was a requirement for the study of the Bible and theology.

Kenneth Minogue, an Australian political philosopher, is the author of the book, called “The Concept of a University” [9]. The book was first published in 1973. It is divided into 3 parts: The Problem of Identification, Imitations of the Academic and The Siege of Academe. One of the main themes of the book is a serious scientific attempt to explain the concept of the university and how it differs from other types of intellectual activity. The author is not satisfied with the handbook definition of a university as an institute, which must adhere to certain political and cultural functions. He thinks that such a definition is rather shallow, because this particular approach to the definition cannot provide the whole picture. The paradox happens, when we discover that instead of systematically performing these functions within the national system of the country in a perfect order, the university historically was in a state of permanent conflict with the

surrounding society. Kenneth Minogue also supposes that many experts of his time underplayed the actual importance of the Christianity in relation to the creation of the medieval universities, because they saw the relationship between the science and the Church only as a dichotomy. However, it was, for instance, the Christian religion that provided medieval society with a big group of people, who were not directly connected to the earthly matters. These people were monks, and without monks, there would be no university.

Stephen Ferruolo, an American scientist, first published the article, called “*Quid dant artes nisi luctum?*”: Learning, Ambition, and Careers in the Medieval University” [10], in 1988 in *History of Education Quarterly*. In this article, the author examines the earlier period of the medieval universities, when Paris, Bologna and Oxford were established. However, the main theme focuses on ambitions, which students and teachers of medieval universities had, and how these ambitions influenced the institutional development of the university.

“*A History of the University in Europe. Vol. I: Universities in the Middle Ages*” [1] is the first book of a series, which consists of 4 volumes, describing the history of European universities. The first book is of a particular interest to our research, as it dwells upon the origins of the European university. It was first published in 1992 by Cambridge University Press. The aforementioned book can serve as a comprehensive guide on the topic, as it incorporates a holistic approach, covering the development of the European university as a social institution in general through its different medieval iterations. Actually, many specialists of this particular historical field, contributed by writing different chapters of the book, but as a whole it was edited by Hilde De Ridder-Symoens, a Belgian historian. The combined effort of many scientists affect the comprehensive nature of the book. In fact, it is considered one of the most important comprehensive works on the university’s history since Rashdall’s “*The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*” [3]. In the foreword of the book, another main editor Walter Rugg also underlines the modern university to be an European social institution, which originated in the Middle Ages and managed to preserve its fundamental role and functions within society.

The book also dwells upon the expectations of different parties, involved with the university. For instance, the Church had three particular reasons to be interested in the university. In fact, it needed a stable supply of new educated recruits to run its offices. It also wanted to further develop and organize the doctrines of the Christianity, so they would be more rationally structured and easier to understand, which would help to put a stop to ideological disputes and contradictions between various religious orders and individual religious thinkers of the Christian world. In addition, organizing the Christian doctrine would also help to fight heresy on an ideological level. Moreover, the elites of the Church wanted to use universities as a means to strengthen their position against the ambitions of feudal lords [1].

Medieval European monarchy, on the other hand, expected universities to provide them with intellectual aid in the process of establishing and maintaining governmental and administrative institutions, which kings of Spain, France, Italy,

England and other European countries required to better control their kingdoms and the ambitions of local feudals and municipalities. For instance, kings even had a tendency to establish their own universities, as Fredrick II did with the University of Naples in 1024 [1].

As for towns and municipalities, initially they did not need universities as providers of basic intellectual knowledge to support town’s economic activity. However, later, they found universities to be especially useful in formulating more stable and continuous regulative mechanisms than the ones, based on ad-hoc agreements. Furthermore, the town got interested in that the sons of its citizens, who wanted to choose an intellectual vocation, would study at the local university. Thus, the university proposed a partnership with many advantages, and city-states, which recognized the value of universities, began making efforts to play more important role in controlling them [1].

As for teachers and students, their main motivation came from the vague and unstable nature of their status within the medieval society. Hence, they created first universities in order to collectively represent their interests [1].

Marcia Colish, an American historian of the Middle Ages, wrote a book, called “*Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition*” [11], which was first published in 1997 by Yale University Press. The book encompasses a period of time between A.D. 400 and 1400. It is logically divided into 7 parts and 26 chapters. The main theme of the book is quite similar to the idea, Charles Haskins voiced in his “*The Rise of Universities*” [4] that the modern university is based off the medieval model and tradition, instead of the Antiquity. However, Charles Haskins was mostly speaking only about the university, when Marcia Colish takes on a much broader topic, speaking not only about universities, but also about the roots of the Western intellectual thought in general. Therefore, she argues that the fundamentals of said thought were established in the Middle Ages, not in the Antiquity. Nevertheless, this is not a simple topic. The closer connection between the Antiquity and the Middle Ages in the intellectual department is revealed via various references to the influence of antique authors and intellectual traditions of said period.

Marcia Colish also states that the medieval universities were similar to other guilds and corporations of the feudal Europe in the aspect of seeking the right to self-rule. They created rules for membership and climbing the hierarchical ladder within their guild. In case of universities, they needed autonomy to insure that promotion of members to higher forms of activity would be based on their academic competence, which, in turn, would be checked by specialists with required knowledge [11].

Olaf Pedersen, a Danish historian, is the author of the book, called “*The First Universities: Studium Generale and the Origins of University Education in Europe*” [12], which was first published in 1997 in Danish. It was translated and published in English by Cambridge University Press. The aforementioned book focuses its attention on the origins of the first European universities, which are described as sophisticated social institutions, shaped by the sociocultural factors of the Middle Ages.

The book, called “Rethinking the Future of the University” [13], is a compilation of articles, edited by David Lyle Jeffrey and Dominic Manganiello, on the topic of the future of the university’s concept. It was released by University of Ottawa Press in 1998. The book is not only about the future; it also dwells upon the university’s origins. For example, in an article by Carlos Bazan, the author states that universities appeared in the course of evolution of the feudal society, when actors of said society started to form groups or associations, based on common interest for the purpose of protecting their rights and liberties within the unequal system of the Middle Ages.

Alan Cobban, a historian, wrote a book, called “English University Life in the Middle Ages” [14]. It was published in 1999 by Ohio State University Press. The book is divided into 7 chapters. As the title implies, the book is mostly about the English Medieval universities, in particular, about Oxford and Cambridge. However, it does not only provide a valuable insight into the daily life of the English university and its academic community, it also draws some comparison between the English universities and the universities of continental Europe. For instance, the author explains how the monk community’s ethos influenced the lives of students and teachers, so that the medieval university was primarily a corporation of males, who lived in interaction with the prevailing Christian culture, which is logical, as many universities of the Middle Ages evolved from the cathedral schools.

In addition, Alan Cobban shows the difference between the average student of Southern Europe and the average student of Northern Europe. In the South, many of the students, who studied law, were descendants of the wealthy social groups. Some of them also were from nobility, and had already participated in professional activities even before coming to the university. They were mature people, who saw studying at the university as a contract. Moreover, the universities of Southern Europe had more foreign students than the Northern ones. These students, should a conflict arise, felt unprotected against the local community and their own teachers, so that they began to form defensive student guilds, which became a new kind of a corporation within the corporation of university itself [14].

In the article, called “The Mission of the University: Medieval to Postmodern Transformations” [15], John Scott, an American historian, concentrates on the conceptual problem of the university’s mission. This article was first published in 2006 in the *Journal of Higher Education*. John Scott points out that the definition of the institutional mission is usually used in an attempt to describe the institute’s main purpose, for which it was supposedly created. For instance, the institutional mission can also be described with the help of the notion of aspiration. Thus, the institutional mission is the representation of generalized aspirations; certain parties have for the institute in question. In other words, what are their expectations of this institute? As far as this logic goes, the author of the article attempts to examine and analyze how the mission of the medieval university developed and transformed throughout the history.

The book, called “Crossing Boundaries at Medieval Universities” [16], was first published in 2010 by Brill. The

content of the book was edited by Young Spencer, and it is virtually a compilation of different articles, written by various authors. As the title implies, all the articles of the book are thematically connected by the notion of “boundaries”, which were an important part of the medieval society. The medieval university of Europe also possessed a multitude of these boundaries. Some of them were real, others were imagined. For instance, the boundaries of the institutional nature existed between faculties of the university, as the boundaries of the intellectual nature distinguished between various disciplines. There was also a distinct difference between “town” and “gown”, in other words, between the university and the town, in which it resided. However, such boundaries were not always impenetrable. Consequently, one could cross, for example, a boundary between faculties, and study or teach in several faculties throughout his life. The interactions of the university and the town were also not always of a hostile nature. This means that crossing of such boundaries could theoretically result in creation of something new or a fruitful cooperation between various parties involved.

In 2010 David Sheffler, an American historian, published an article, called “Late Medieval Education: Continuity and Change” [17] in *History Compass*. As the title implies, the article concentrates on the development of medieval education in the late Middle Ages, and how the education of this period was different from the education of the earlier period. For instance, the author claims that the dramatic expansion of pre-university education in the late Middle Ages affected medieval universities, as the pool of potential students was substantially increased. In addition, the literacy of general medieval population also improved. It is also notable that medieval universities of this period started to be more interested in their own history, increasing the amount of materials and literature on this particular subject, including university records. In turn, this provided modern historians with more material to work with. However, this interest was mostly correlated to the institutional pride of the universities.

Brian FitzGerald, an English historian, in his article “Medieval theories of education: Hugh of St Victor and John of Salisbury” [18], published in 2010 in *Oxford Review of Education*, agrees that the medieval origins of the modern concept of university are known and accepted. Nevertheless, he argues that the modern academic society is less familiar with what major theorists of education of the Middle Ages considered the education exactly to be, as they were writing theoretical works about it. Two such medieval thinkers, described in the aforementioned article, are, as the title implies, Hugh of St Victor and John of Salisbury. Both men belong to the XII century, which is well known for the rise of intellectual activity.

### III. CONCLUSION

It is believed that the success of the Japanese modernization during the Meiji Restoration partially depended on the country’s unique ability to adapt the achievements of other civilizations for its own use. Talking about the education system, we can assume that initially Japan adapted the educational model of the Chinese civilization, which played an important role in shaping various aspects of the Japanese

culture and mentality for many centuries. For instance, medieval Japan used a modified form of the Chinese education. The import of the Chinese education had practical reasons, because Japan needed a system to adequately react to a multitude of different social and political problems. However, with the arrival of the so-called “Black Ships” in 1853, Japan, which had been isolated for about 200 years, was faced with a threat of the Western invasion. In order to properly modernize their country, Japan had to import different technologies and social institutions, which originated in The West [2].

We can assume that the European university was one of the social institutions, which had to be imported and adapted into the Japanese society during the Meiji Restoration. It is also clear that Japan did not import the actual medieval European university, because it was already modernized and modified within the Western society itself long ago. However, as it was already stated, the modern Western concept of university, which Japan adapted, has its origins in the medieval university of Europe. The majority of experts in the field of the medieval education agree that the fundamental patterns of the modern university and the university of the Middle Ages are practically the same. This means that Japan had to import and adapt the exact same structures and patterns, present in the medieval university.

Therefore, in order to better understand the modernization process and the reason of Japan’s success in the modernization, we should more critically examine said patterns and structures, in other words, elements, which are a part of the concept of the medieval European university. As we have researched a number of major comprehensive works, written about the medieval university, we can try to highlight the most important of these elements.

We should begin with an attempt of a general definition. Hence, as we can see, the fundamental nature of a medieval university is a medieval corporation or a guild, a social institute, formed by a community of teachers and students to better represent their collective rights and interests, directly related to their collaborative activity, which is of an academic nature. From this, we can conclude that medieval university is not a “one man army”, because the academic activities of the university, involving studying, teaching and conducting a scientific research, are performed by the members of this guild cooperatively. In other words, it is not a business for an individual man, because such activities require a combined effort, which, in turn, happens, because the actors, involved in said activities, share common interests.

The first European universities of the Middle Ages appeared, because of the unique circumstances of the Renaissance of the XII century, when the growth and development of towns, the rise of trade and commerce, combined with the resurgence of the antique science, philosophy and law, demanded formulation of new norms and regulations. These are now needed to stabilize and optimize new kinds of relations and interactions between different actors of the medieval society. In other words, these actors needed new rules to properly function. We can assume that the changing sociocultural context of this particular century essentially required new social institutions, and the

university turned out to be one of them, basically fulfilling a social mandate of the medieval society.

As for the structure of the university, we can see that it is not a monolithic organization, since it is divided into faculties, colleges, defensive student guilds and other kinds of inner corporations. The educational process itself is divided into various disciplines and courses.

The medieval university was created within the medieval society, yet, it was also in the state of nearly permanent conflict with said society. For instance, different parties and stakeholders of various social backgrounds had their own expectations from the university, in accordance with their interests. We can divide these parties into 4 general categories: the monarchs, the town, the Church and the members of the university themselves. As we can see, aforementioned parties have somewhat sophisticated relations, as they could either struggle with each other or they could also cooperate. For example, the university and the town could form a successful mutually beneficial partnership, but they could also have a dispute, resulting in a bloodshed during the town and gown incidents. Moreover, the Church could benefit from the theological research, done in the university, but it could also violently intrude into the academic activity and ban certain topics, thus, infringing upon the autonomy of the university.

The notion of autonomy seemed rather important for the medieval universities, as they were constantly fighting against various medieval authorities, including municipalities and the Church, to gain the right to self-rule. Like any other medieval guild, the university desired to be able to configure and regulate its inner structure, including hierarchy. As for hierarchy, one could advance his academic career by passing exams and receiving a degree, based on his competence. The autonomy in this case was needed, so the judge of the competence would be an independent expert, not the person, who would just award degrees without the trial or would be prone to bribes. The inner hierarchy also required certain rules of behavior. The freedom to choose any subject of the scientific inquiry was also crucial, as the Church could intervene, as it did with the natural philosophy of Aristotle, thus, once again infringing upon the independence of the university. Inner corporations of the university, like the defensive student guilds, also hoped for some kind of limited autonomy within the university.

We also cannot deny the role, the Christian religion played as one of the fundamental elements of the concept of university. In the context of the Middle Ages, the Christianity encompassed virtually every aspect of the medieval society. It was the world itself. It was a prevailing worldview and an inseparable part of said society. Therefore, this nature of the Christianity implies its constant interactions with the university, both cooperative, mutually beneficial and hostile. In addition, the academic ethos, born in the university, retained certain elements of the ethos of the monk’s community, as early universities developed from the cathedral schools of medieval Europe. Regarding the religion, we can assume that the university must have certain Christian values, interwoven in the fabric of its fundamental patterns.

Thus, we have highlighted the most basic patterns and structures of the medieval university. The next step of the

research would be to study the history of the Japanese modernization in the sphere of the higher education. We should look for the elements, the Japanese society adapted from the Western concept of university to see how exactly they were modified or if they were modified at all. Then, we can compare the adapted patterns and structures with the originals from the medieval university. However, this task requires additional research, and should be continued in another article.

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