

Philosophical Learning on the Edges of Latin Christendom. Some Late Twelfth-Century Examples from Scandinavia, Poland, and Palestine

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Summary: By way of four examples of scholars from northern- and easternmost latinity (William of Tyre, Andrew Sunesen, Vincent Kadlubek, Theoderic the monk) it is argued that philosophical learning in the late twelfth century should be seen as a privilege of nobility and as an intellectual means of enhancing an already established social dominance, rather than as a necessary qualification for entering high ecclesiastical offices.

Introduction

Sometime in the late 1160s, the king of Jerusalem, Amaury, was taken ill and lay slightly feverish in a castle in Tyre. He was not in a very bad way though, and he was entertained by his trusted servant William, the archdeacon of Tyre. How can we be sure, the king wondered, that we will actually live a life in the flesh after this one? William was much taken aback by the king's doubts in such a central tenet of Christian belief, and hastened to quote the pertinent passages of the Holy Scripture. Yes, yes – I know those, the king replied, but suppose we were to convince a person who did not share our faith. How would we do that? William now realizes that he must argue dialectically rather than from authoritative texts, and asks the king to assume the position of a non-Christian. He then proceeds: "God is surely just, is he not?"; "Certainly". "And to be just is to give the right measure of good to the good and bad to the bad?"; "Yes". "But that is not what we see happening in this life"; "No"; "So there is bound to be a life after this one where the balance is reestablished?"; "Yes", the king replies with obvious relief.

When William told this story a decade later in his *Chronicle* (19,3) he no doubt put himself in the best possible light. By dialectical skills he had saved the king from grave doubts. In reality, the conversation may not have developed exactly like this, but the

story does, I think, provide us with a good example of how William cherished his own extensive education in philosophy and theology, an education which had kept him almost twenty years in France and Italy before returning to Palestine. And that is my topic in the present article. In the late twelfth century, how was the long French and Italian schooling viewed by those who came from far away, and who returned to their home-countries packed with books and learning in order to enter a key position within the local royal or ecclesiastical bureaucracy? How did they perceive and use their philosophical training? Why was this sophisticated learning accepted lock, stock, and barrel as the ideological framework for largely illiterate societies?

This line of questioning may be useful in several respects. The primary benefit, obviously, may lie in an increased understanding of the role of learning in those outskirt societies. Secondly, one may add a little to our picture of twelfth-century schools by quoting more pedestrian authors than the ubiquitously cited John of Salisbury and a few other famous names. There were other customers in the pre-university philosophical shops of France, and some of them came from the fringes of Latin Christendom.

My main characters are only four in number: two Scandinavians, one Pole, and one Palestinian. But even if we included more material, we would still be talking about very few people from the extreme northern and eastern regions who, in the latter half of the twelfth century, enjoyed a complete ten to twenty years of training in the trend-setting schools. I would estimate roughly that each of my protagonists represents about five to fifteen fellow countrymen in the said fifty years. I have chosen William of Tyre, Theoderic the monk, Vincent Kadlubek, and Andrew Sunesen simply because they left behind writings which mention philosophy and which reflect their firm grasp of the arts.¹

¹ Some contemporary colleagues with comparable education:

Palestine: Heraclius, patriarch of Jerusalem from 1180, studied theology and probably law in Bologna in the 1150s and/or 60s (Hiestand 1978: 359-62).

The Nordic countries (fundamental overviews of medieval Nordic scholars abroad are Jørgensen 1914 and Bagge 1984, but both concentrate on the much better documented later periods): Thorlákr Thórhallson, Bishop of Skálholt (Iceland) 1178-93, studied in Paris and Lincoln c. 1153-59 (Benediktsson 1976); Øystein Erlandsson, archbishop of Trondheim (Norway) 1161-88 probably spent some time

Out of the four, William of Tyre provides us with the best information, namely in his *Chronicle*, in which he often refers to himself, most spectacularly in the famous autobiographical chapter on his education (19,12).² He came from an influential family in Jerusalem, probably of bourgeois stock. He studied in France and Italy between appr. 1145 and 1165, and returned to become archdeacon, royal tutor, chancellor, and archbishop of Tyre, but he failed to achieve the coveted position of Patriarch of Jerusalem. He died in 1186, just in time to avoid seeing Jerusalem recaptured by the infidel. He was used several times as envoy to Constantinople and Rome, and for most of the time he was involved in state affairs at a high level.³

The same holds true for Andrew Sunesen and Vincent Kadlubek. Andrew sprang from one of the most prominent Danish families, probably the richest one in the country.⁴ His studies abroad cannot be fixed with the same certainty as William's, but we do know that he stayed in France, England, and Italy and that

in Paris (and Lincoln and Bologna?) around 1140, his successor Eirik Ivarsson, archbishop 1189-1205, certainly did some decades later (Johnsen 1943-46 & Gunnes 1996: 30-49); Gunner, bishop of Viborg (Denmark) 1222-52, studied in France at some point before 1208, perhaps as early as the 1170s. Andrew Sunesen's brother Peder (bishop of Roskilde, Denmark 1191[?]-1214) stayed in Paris for several years, at least during the early '80s; Andrew's predecessor Absalon, archbishop of Lund (Denmark) 1177-1201 had studied in France in the late '40s and early '50s (Munk Olsen 1996: 57) and Absalon's protégé, the historian Saxo Grammaticus is likely to have studied in Northern France in the late '70s and early '80s (Friis-Jensen 1987: 17); on the Danes in France in the 12th century see further Munk Olsen 1985 and Fenger 1989: 216-26.

Poland: Kadlubek's successor Iwo Odrowaz (bishop of Kraków 1218-29) studied in Bologna (?) and Paris (Breeze 1987: 111 and Zeissberg 1870: 22 & 56-57).

² The chapter is commented upon by Huygens 1962, Southern 1982: 130-31, and Southern 1996: 212-14.

³ For William's biography I rely on – apart from the *Chronicle* itself – Hiestand 1978 who has thoroughly studied charter and other evidence. I am grateful to prof. Hiestand for kindly elaborating some points for me, including a firm restatement of 1186 as the year of William's death (*pace* Edbury & Rowe 1988: 22) and an acceptance of the suggestion that William was most probably well situated in the Jerusalem bourgeoisie and that his self-advertised *paupertas voluntaria* (19,12) simply refers to his clerical status (but if it means more than that, then he must have been well-off before he began to study!).

⁴ For Andrew's biography see the introduction to the edition of *Hexaameron* (1985): 19-33 and the study by Hørby 1985; for his studies in Paris: Munk Olsen 1985.

he appears as Danish chancellor in 1195. The sojourn abroad must have taken place in the '80s and probably the early '90s. We also know that he taught in Paris, and in his long didactic poem, *Hexaemeron*, his learning is on display. It is a careful survey of Biblical exegesis and systematic theology. The kind of learning represented there is characteristic of Parisian schools around 1190, more specifically Stephen Langton's teaching. After having been chancellor for some years, Andrew was installed as Archbishop of Lund in 1201/2 (retired 1224, died 1228). Like William of Tyre he also rendered diplomatic services for the kingdom.

The profile of the Polish historian Vincent Kadlubek is somewhat more blurred.⁵ In 1189 he used the title "magister" in his signature on a local document, and the learning exhibited in his *Chronicle of Poland*, from around 1200, bears the unmistakable stamp of northern French schools of the 1170s and '80s.⁶ If we add Vincent's expertise in canon and civil law, one may picture his *cursus studiorum* to have been much like Andrew's and William's: northern France provided the arts and theology, Bologna law. His further advancement also followed a pattern similar to theirs: he became a member of the cathedral chapter in Kraków and served as chaplain and historian for the duke. In 1208 he became bishop of Kraków (retired 1218, d. 1223). The position of his family is not known directly, but it is agreed that – like his predecessors, colleagues, and successors – he must have belonged to the high nobility.⁷

My fourth and final figure is known as Theoderic the monk, although his real name was Tore and he was probably not a monk, but rather a regular canon at the Norwegian archiepiscopal see in Nidaros (Trondheim).⁸ He wrote a brief *Chronicle of Norway*, and he is almost certainly to be identified either with the later archbishop Tore (1206-14), or perhaps with Tore, the bishop of Hamar (1189/90-96). Both of these Tore's are known to have

5 Having no Polish, I realize how rash it is for me to deal with Vincent. For the older literature I rely on Zeissberg 1870; for the more recent on Bartel 1986, Markowski 1977, Breeze 1987, and Pabst 1994: vol. 2, 919-24. I am grateful to Knut Andreas Grimstad for giving me paraphrases of parts of the introduction to the Polish translation of Vincent's chronicle: Kürbis & Abgarowicz 1974.

6 Kürbis & Abgarowicz 1974: 16-18 & 69-70.

7 Kürbis & Abgarowicz 1974: 11-12.

8 The fundamental study of Theoderic is Johnsen 1939; some of the points made about his biography here will be elaborated in Mortensen forthcoming.

studied in Paris (St. Victor), and the chronicle also betrays familiarity with French libraries and learning. His sojourn in Paris is likely to have taken place in the 1170s, and he may also have studied elsewhere.

Ancient wisdom and modern masters

As should now be clear, none of the writings left behind by these authors belong to philosophy proper. Still it makes sense to briefly outline the image of philosophy found in those works. Theoderic and Vincent here fall into the same category: philosophy is first and foremost ancient pagan wisdom. In Theoderic's small *Chronicle* one finds quite a number of digressions, some of which deal with such problems as the age of the world, the ever decreasing size of human beings (ch. 18), and various themes belonging to moral philosophy (e.g. ch. 26). Moreover he likes to quote opinions of poets and philosophers. The term 'philosopher' is applied to figures such as Pliny, Lucan, and Chrysippos, and he tells us that Origen based a lot of his knowledge on books by philosophers. This view of philosophy as the wisdom found in the Latin *auctores* (and the Greek sources quoted by them) is implemented on a grander scale in Vincent's *Chronicle*, which takes the unusual form of a dialogue: one speaker narrates bits and pieces from Polish history, the other moralizes, gives illustrative examples from ancient literature etc. The work is loaded with direct and indirect quotations from Seneca, Cicero, and Boethius, and the dialogic and prosimetrical form of the *Chronicle* is also borrowed from the latter.

William of Tyre very rarely uses the term 'philosophy', but when he does so, he is speaking about contemporary masters and about theology (i.e. celestial philosophy, see the autobiographical ch., 19,2). Of course William's memory is also stocked with quotations from the *auctores*. Andrew Sunesen does not talk directly about philosophy, but he applies an up-to-date logical training in his versified *quaestiones*.⁹ In practice he focuses on the Christian use of philosophical techniques.

This range of connotations of 'philosophy' is not untypical of the period before the firm establishment of the Aristotelian three-fold partition of philosophy into moral, natural, and metaphysi-

⁹ Ebbesen 1986.

cal, i.e. before the thirteenth century. As described in a survey article by Luscombe (1992), one concept of philosophy is dominated by the powerful image of Boethius' Lady Philosophy. In addition, we have the pairs, Sapientia vs. Eloquentia and Philosophia vs. Theologia. But philosophy could equally well include everything from the trivium (dialectic, logic) to divine speculation itself. Most authors referred to philosophy with reverence, and, one could add that, more often than not, the concept included an element of ancient wisdom.

Furnished with such a copious stock of authorities in philosophy – consisting of ancient wisdom and modern methodology – William, Theoderic, Vincent, and Andrew all went home to wield archiepiscopal or similar powers. It is hardly viable to isolate the role of philosophy in their exercise of office. We have to take into consideration the entire educational package including arts, theology, and law, – keeping in mind that their philosophy instruction would have been confined mainly to the trivium. Thus prepared we can enter into the relations holding between education, career, and position in society.

Education of the elite

It is generally agreed that the massive growth of bureaucracy and written culture during the twelfth century created a new demand for training, especially in law. This can hardly be contested, but controversies have arisen about two important points, which, to my mind, are linked: (1) How should we account for the meticulous and time-consuming drilling in philosophy and theology which is less readily explained in terms of practical needs? This problem is often debated in relation to theories about the development of the sciences, but that aspect can safely be put aside here, because for now we are only worried about a few distant consumers of twelfth-century learning, not the producers of it. (2) In what sense were people making careers through the expanding systems of higher education?¹⁰

¹⁰ Some scholars have emphasized the rise of a new (bourgeois) class of people educated to meet the needs of growing bureaucracy; the classic statement of this "education-for-immediate-use" thesis was made by Classen 1966; Others have

Let us look at the second problem first. In the modern literature on the subject, with the partial exception of Andrew Sunesen one mostly reads that the persons in question went abroad to study in order to qualify for a job at the higher end of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹¹ This way of explaining things must have been prompted by our much better knowledge of social mobility in the university period, i.e. in the thirteenth and especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But for the twelfth century I am convinced that one should avoid what could be called the “meritocratic fallacy”. This is at least the case for the outlying regions I am discussing here, but seems also to be true for Germany.¹² Hardly anyone reached the position of bishop or abbot before 1200 without belonging to the nobility or, in the case of the more urbanized crusader states, to the patrician bourgeoisie – in short to the elite. And the elite in twelfth-century Europe was not looking for jobs. It was looking for new ways to dominate society, and in northern and eastern Christendom the church was an important new structure to be run by the local elite. The link between education and position was a very loose one indeed, which is e.g. evident from the fact that one finds scores of bishops who had no higher education worth mentioning. Moreover, in clan societies such as those we are dealing with here, it is very unlikely that any-

been more sceptical of such a “utility” argument, e.g. Murray 1978: 317ff. who, drawing on Schulte 1922 stresses the dominance of nobles within the new studies; the link between nobility and education is also firmly documented by Jaeger 1985 for the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Germany; Köhn 1986: 206-21 has also opposed the idea of education for purely “practical” purposes (see there for further references to a vast debate). In the recent survey by Southern 1996 the problem is not attacked head-on but the utility of the new studies is often stressed and a social-mobility interpretation seems to be favoured, see especially pp. 142-45, 159-63, and 181-85. However, the elitist background for 12th-century learning does show, e.g. p. 50. The main strength of Southern’s treatment, to my mind, lies in his beautiful descriptions of how intimately linked the “ideological” and the “practical” sides were to contemporaries.

¹¹ E.g. Fenger 1989: 218, Edbury & Rowe 1988: 14-15, Markowski 1977: 271-72.

¹² The noble origin of Germans studying in France in the twelfth century is clearly brought out by the examples adduced by Ehlers 1986. Southern 1996: 208-12 is not really entitled to treat Otto of Freising as an aristocratic exception among students.

one chose to go abroad himself; it must have been a family decision.¹³

If we accept that higher education abroad was being orchestrated by the local elite, new possibilities open up for determining the function of time-consuming philosophical and theological studies. Nobles have plenty of time and money. It does not matter whether the training lasts five or fifteen years – in fact one gets the impression that it often lasted until the posts they were to have in any case became vacant.¹⁴ Thorough learning may in this way be described as a noble pastime, much like hunting where an expertise much beyond the “necessary” also developed. This is not to say that learning was not taken seriously, nor that canonists were uncalled for by the growing bureaucracy nor that men of the world with command of French and Latin were not needed in the general acculturation and internationalization of outlying regions, but by and large the system of, say, Danish government could run on much less than the erudition of Andrew Sunesen and his few kindred spirits.¹⁵

The literatissimi

Contemporaries saw the matter differently, especially, of course, those who considered themselves amongst the most learned like William, Theoderic, Andrew, and Vincent. They must have seen themselves as local gurus who, if anyone, could unveil deep and

¹³ As cautiously implied by Bagge 1984: 7-8 and suggested by Ehlers 1986: 104; cf. Hørby 1985: 15 on the planning done by Andrew Sunesen's family (Andrew had six brothers of which one other was sent to Paris; the rest remained landowners and warriors).

¹⁴ It is reasonable to assume that e.g. both Gerald of Wales and Stephen Langton took up teaching in Paris when they were in a waiting position; Gerald in fact betrays as much in his autobiography when telling about his resolve to return to Paris after being passed over in an episcopal election; on Langton's career and teaching before 1206 see Baldwin 1970: 25-31 and the references there. The (brief?) teaching career of Andrew in Paris could be explained in a similar manner (cf. Mortensen 1985: 166-67).

¹⁵ Some training in canon law was probably a must, but as the sources for the twelfth century allow no statistics and as we know of no formal exams or entry qualifications for high ecclesiastical offices, we can only argue on general grounds that this was so. Of the four people treated here, all except Theoderic display thorough training and active use of canon law in their writings.

hidden truths, whether in canon law, ancient wisdom, or modern theology. As bishops and archbishops they were in charge of small but locally significant libraries, consisting to a large degree of books they had used in the foreign schools, books they had brought copies of, books they had inspired others to compose or had even written themselves. They were in control of the best knowledge locally available, stored in the cathedral library and in their own memories. I do not think we go far astray if we say that they were perceived as privileged persons with access to the arcane.

In the fourth book of his *Chronicle*, Vincent puts a long speech into the mouth of his one-time employer, Kasimir the Just (1177-94). The duke elaborates on the theme of a ruler's proper *prudencia*. Part of his duty is to be informed by intellectuals:

Ideoque vir sapiens operae pretium habet, eorum non imprudenter experiri prudentiam, quibus penitiora consiliorum arcana comittat. [...] Scitis, quo pacto stipatur interim literatissimorum lateribus altrinsecus, quorum tam sobrietas, quam scientia paucis est incognita. Cum his, nunc Sanctorum Patrum exempla, nunc virorum gesta illustrium, vicaria relatione retractat. [...] Theologicis nonnumquam exercetur inquisitionibus, utramque partem quaestionis utrimque argutissimis urgens rationibus, rerum subtilium indagator sagacissimus.

Therefore a wise [ruler] prudently takes care to draw on the experience of those to whom he has assigned the more secret depths of council. [...] You are aware of the way he surrounds himself on all sides with very learned men who are renowned for their moderation as well as their knowledge. With such people he engages in various debates: now going through examples set by the holy fathers, now treating the deeds of famous men [...] Sometimes he is being trained in theological inquiry, and he shows himself to be a most keen investigator of subtle matters when arguing for both sides of a *quaestio* with well-supported points.¹⁶

In their own eyes these *literatissimi* were set apart from a much larger group of bishops, abbots, and lay nobles who, at best, could only boast a superficial learning. William's small portrait of his predecessor as archbishop of Tyre illustrates my point well:

[...] dominus videlicet Fredericus Aconensis episcopus, vir secundum carnem nobilis, corpore procerus admodum, natione Lotaringus, modice litteratus sed militaris supra modum.

16 *Chronica* 4, 5 (p.393).

[...] Lord Frederic, bishop of Acon, a man of noble extraction from Lotharingia, quite tall, not very learned, but truly a warrior.¹⁷

The *litteratissimi* must have experienced a certain self-gratifying feeling of exclusivity, and they knew that in the eyes of their immediate surroundings they were in a class of their own, acting as local authoritative encyclopedias. In fact, for all their differences, the works of our four authors have a certain encyclopedic quality to them, despite the fact that Andrew Sunesen's *Hexaemeron* and the William of Tyre's *Chronicon* are more polished products than the typical encyclopedia, keeping better to their respective genres and using sources and allusions in a more systematic way. Theoderic the monk and Vincent Kadlubek display encyclopedic ambitions more directly, but within a less rich context and more clumsily; the first by digressing at length on various philosophical and theological issues, the second mainly through an overwhelming Latin style covering the spectrum from historical narrative to philosophical aphorisms to tortuous Boethian poetics. The authors put their foreign learning at show locally. They had accumulated a capital of wisdom and heavenly insight on top of the social standing they already enjoyed. In fact these few persons embodied a guarantee that local habits complied with the order of the world as far as it could possibly be known.

Conclusion

More than a decade ago I had the privilege of participating in a research project on Andrew Sunesen, launched and directed by Sten Ebbesen at what was then called the Institute of Greek and Latin Medieval Philology. A group of scholars were put to work on different aspects of the subject, and many of us went around quoting a passage from the chronicler Arnold of Lübeck – a contemporary of Andrew's – in which he gives a flattering description of learned Danes returning from Paris. For me, at that time, Arnold's words simply served as a nice corroboration of something we already knew, i.e. that a few Danes, including Andrew, did go to Paris to study. Now, I am going to quote the paragraph again, but, in the light of the above, I hope with a difference.

17 *Chronicon* 19, 6.

Scientia quoque litterali non parum profecerunt, quia nobiliores terre filios suos non solum ad clerum promovendum, verum etiam secularibus rebus instituendos Parisius mittunt. Ubi litteratura simul et idiomate lingue terre illius imbuti, non solum in artibus, sed etiam in theologia multum invaluerunt. Siquidem propter naturalem lingue celeritatem non solum in argumentis dialecticis subtiles inveniuntur, sed etiam in negotiis ecclesiasticis tractandis boni decretiste sive legiste comprobantur.

They are also quite accomplished in the study of letters, because the nobler families of the country send their sons to Paris not only to promote the clergy, but also to have them instructed in secular matters. There they gain skills in literature and in the language spoken in that country, and they proceed to become very able in the arts as well as in theology. Indeed, as a result of their sharp wits, they emerge not only as subtle dialecticians, but as experts in canon or civil law they also enjoy respect in the handling of ecclesiastical affairs.¹⁸

Most aspects I have highlighted in this paper are actually present here: education abroad as a privilege of the elite, the family planning of careers, the equal praise of skills in the arts, theology, and law as well as the proficiency in languages, including French. All these qualities naturally enhanced the usefulness as well as the authority of such top academics in their home country. There is one thing that Arnold does not state explicitly, and which tends to escape us moderns so used to the ways of meritocracy: not only did these few well-educated heads grow personally and socially on their arcane knowledge won by no mean efforts, it also worked the other way round: the contents of their education were *ipso facto* legitimized and given authority by their social standing. Christian learning – with its pagan foundation – could only successfully enter new regions through the same channel as Christian sanctity had already done: through the highest echelons of society where authority was already focused.

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18 *Chronica Slavorum* III,5.

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