

The Formation and Development of The University of Oxford: From A Medieval School to A Global Center of Academic Excellence

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Abstract: In the context of modern scientific progress, globalization, and digitalization, higher education has become one of the key factors of social development. This article examines the history of the establishment and development of Oxford University. As one of the oldest higher education institutions in the English-speaking world, the university has a history of nearly a thousand years of continuous academic activity. Originally founded as a center of religious and philosophical education, the university developed a structured educational system during the 11th and 12th centuries and became one of the leading academic centers in Europe. Today, it not only preserves its traditional educational values but also serves as one of the world's most prestigious centers of science and scholarship through innovative research, international cooperation, and high-quality academic programs.

This study analyzes the main stages of the university's historical development, the distinctive features of its educational and scientific activities, and its international and academic significance in the modern era.

Keywords: University of Oxford, college system, Edward III, "Oxenaforda", River Thames, "the ford where oxen crossed", Normans, Robert D'Oyly, Paris, Henry III, Vacarius, Polychronicon, William Camden, Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, Alfred the Great, Franciscans, Dominicans, College Annals.

Introduction: The University of Oxford is located in the city of Oxford, England. The city itself emerged as a settlement during the Saxon period, between the 8th and 12th centuries. The name "Oxford" is derived from the Old English word Oxenaforda, meaning "a ford for oxen" or "a place where oxen could cross a river." This name originated from a shallow crossing point on the River Thames where oxen could easily pass. The city was situated on the upper reaches of the River Thames, near its confluence with the River Cherwell.

Following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, the political and military administration of the country underwent significant changes. In 1071, Robert d'Oyly, one of the Norman lords, ordered the construction of Oxford Castle to establish control over the city. The

castle enhanced Oxford's strategic importance and transformed it into a major administrative and military center during the Norman period. Consequently, Oxford began to develop as a center of national significance in the early years of Norman rule.

Although there are no surviving documents confirming royal charters or official academic privileges for the Oxford schools during the twelfth century, Oxford had effectively developed into a scholarly center approaching the status of a university. The University of Paris exerted a significant influence on Oxford's development, and the exchange of intellectual traditions across Europe accelerated this process. In 1229, conflicts between students and townspeople in Paris led many scholars and students to relocate to

other centers of learning, including Oxford. King Henry III took advantage of this situation by supporting the consolidation of Oxford University, while the influx of students from Paris further stimulated its growth.

One of the earliest well-documented references to Oxford's academic life concerns the Bolognese scholar Vacarius, who is believed to have delivered lectures on Roman civil law at Oxford around 1149. During this period, King Stephen was on the throne, and although certain fields of study were temporarily restricted by both royal and ecclesiastical authorities, Oxford had already begun to establish itself as an important center of learning. Historical sources also indicate that Robert Pullen had delivered regular lectures on the Holy Scriptures at Oxford even before Vacarius. Furthermore, in 1186–1187, Giraldus Cambrensis publicly presented his work on the Topography of Ireland in Oxford. According to his own account, these events demonstrated that Oxford had already become a gathering place for some of the most learned clerics and scholars of the age. [1, pp. 5–6]

The Benedictine monk Ranulf Higden, in his work *Polychronicon*, recorded a tradition claiming that Oxford University had been founded around the year 1000 by King Alfred of Wessex. This view was later repeated in William Camden's *Britannia* and remained widely accepted to some extent until the eighteenth century. However, subsequent historical research demonstrated that this claim lacked reliable evidence. According to modern scholarly consensus, no formal institution of higher education existed in Oxford before the late eleventh century, and the university's emergence as a corporate academic body is generally dated to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. [2, pp. 3–5]

Many medieval historians attempted to trace the origins of the university to the reign of Alfred the Great. However, subsequent scholarly research has not fully supported this view. According to modern historical interpretations, the emergence of academic centers in Oxford began during the period following the Norman Conquest. There is no conclusive historical evidence confirming the existence of a university or colleges in Oxford during the reign of Alfred the Great. Likewise, contemporary biographies of Alfred written by Asser make no reference to a system of "schools" in Oxford. For this reason, some historians argue that the university's formal development was not clearly documented in written sources before the reign of King Edward III.

The origins and formation of the University of Oxford have been interpreted in different ways within historiography. The earliest official references to

Oxford University are found in chronicles dating from the reign of King Edward III of England.

In its early years, Oxford students did not possess a fixed campus. Instead, they lived in rented houses throughout the town and frequently moved from one residence to another. During the thirteenth century, students resided in various locations within and around Oxford that they secured for themselves. Many lived independently with little supervision and were known as "chamberdeacons," a term referring to students who rented and occupied private rooms.

Over time, some students began living together with their teachers. This arrangement became known as the system of "halls" and gradually gained popularity. Within this system, the teacher served not only as an instructor but also as a supervisor responsible for overseeing the daily lives and conduct of the students.

The university granted its members—including masters, students, clerks, and other officials—special rights and privileges. These privileges distinguished them from the jurisdiction of the town courts and provided them with a separate corporate status. The university possessed the authority to examine students, confer academic degrees, and grant permission to teach at other universities. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Oxford had developed a complete faculty structure consisting of the faculties of Arts, Theology, Law, and Medicine. The Faculty of Arts functioned as the preparatory stage for all higher fields of study.

The Franciscan and Dominican orders played a crucial role in the university's development. They introduced new scholarly methods, Aristotelian intellectual traditions, book culture, and library systems to Oxford. In particular, scholars such as Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon contributed significantly to the establishment of empiricism and experimental approaches within Oxford's intellectual tradition. [1, pp. 8–10]

The translation movement of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries played a particularly significant role in the intellectual development of medieval Europe. During this period, the works of Arab, Greek, Indian, Persian, and Jewish scholars were translated into Latin and became widely accessible within the European academic environment. As a result, scholars at major centers of learning such as Bologna, Paris, and Oxford became engaged in the study and interpretation of new and complex scientific and philosophical texts.

These works contributed not only to the advancement of philosophy but also to the development of mathematics, astronomy, natural history, and

medicine. However, much of this knowledge had not yet been fully integrated into Christian theology. Consequently, there emerged a growing need for new analytical approaches and methods of intellectual inquiry.

The continuous influx of translations from Toledo, Sicily, Antioch, and Southern Italy demonstrated the limitations of cathedral and canon schools. Because these texts required sophisticated logical analysis, innovative teaching methods, and new forms of scholarly investigation, the existing educational system was unable to meet these demands adequately. As a result, the historical foundations were laid for the emergence of a new type of intellectual institution in Europe—the university.

In the late Middle Ages, Oxford possessed five faculties: Arts, Theology, Civil Law, Canon Law, and Medicine. In practice, however, the Faculty of Medicine remained relatively underdeveloped. The largest group consisted of Masters of Arts, who were generally younger than members of the other faculties, since study in the Faculty of Arts was a prerequisite for admission to the higher faculties.

Various estimates have been proposed regarding the number of students at Oxford during the medieval period. Before the establishment of colleges, several hundred students may have lived in monastic buildings. When those residing in private accommodations are also taken into account, the total student population is generally estimated to have ranged between 2,000 and 3,000. By contrast, claims that Oxford had as many as 30,000 students are historically unfounded and inconsistent with the city's demographic conditions and physical capacity during that period.

At that time, students who were not affiliated with religious institutions resided in special halls and dined communally. These halls were typically established in houses rented from local townspeople and, in some cases, were administered by individuals who lacked full academic qualifications. Nevertheless, all halls were licensed by the Chancellor or his representatives and were required to comply strictly with the rules and regulations imposed by the university.

Despite challenging social conditions, intellectual activity at the University of Oxford remained remarkably vibrant. Although the overall body of scientific knowledge was still limited by modern standards, the scope of scholarly inquiry was exceptionally broad and philosophically profound. Academic work during this period focused primarily on theology, philosophy, logic, and the interpretation of natural phenomena.

Although disputations occupied a central place in

university life during the medieval period, they differed considerably from modern examination systems. Candidates were not assessed through formal written tests; instead, their academic standing was evaluated on the basis of recommendations from their masters and their performance in scholarly debates. Students whose abilities were considered inadequate occasionally failed to obtain a degree. Upon receiving the Master's degree, a student formally acquired the status of a "master" and gained the right to lecture within the university. Initially, he delivered ordinary lectures to small groups of students and could later progress to teaching in the higher faculties.

Early interpretations concerning the origins of Oxford's colleges were closely associated with religious traditions and customary beliefs. In particular, texts recited during college prayers referred to various historical figures as founders of these institutions. These prayers invoked "the merciful God and the loving Father" and associated the establishment of the college with figures such as King Alfred, William of Durham, Walter Skirlaw, Henry Percy, Simon Bennet, and other benefactors. Although such texts served to present the history of the colleges within a religious and moral framework, their historical accuracy was later called into question.

By the eighteenth century, the emergence of critical historical scholarship led to a re-examination of these traditional views. William Smith, Rector of Melsonby, attempted in his work *Annals of the College* to demonstrate, on the basis of historical evidence, that King Alfred was not the true founder of the college. According to Smith, Alfred's name began to appear regularly in college prayers only during the reign of King Charles I. Furthermore, a remark made by Dr. Clayton, the head of the college, during a prayer service in 1665—stating that "King Alfred is not here"—suggests that this tradition developed at a relatively late date rather than originating from the earliest history of the institution. [3, pp. 1–8]

In 1229, conflicts between students and townspeople at the University of Paris prompted many scholars to migrate to other regions. This movement of intellectuals provided a significant stimulus to Oxford's development as a center of learning. On 14 July 1229, King Henry III issued a charter granting privileges to university masters and scholars, thereby strengthening their status and legal position within the town.

During the reigns of King Edward II (1307–1327) and King Edward III (1327–1377), the collegiate system at the University of Oxford became considerably more firmly established. The foundation of new colleges during this period marked an important stage in the

university's academic and institutional development.

In post-Renaissance England, the University of Oxford developed under the influence of profound political and religious transformations. During the reign of King Henry VIII, monasteries were dissolved and their revenues were confiscated by the Crown. The colleges, however, were preserved because, unlike monasteries, they served as institutions for educating secular clergy and intellectuals loyal to the state. At the same time, the dissolution of the monastic system weakened some of the university's traditional social foundations. During this period, academic freedom also began to face increasing restrictions. The execution of prominent humanist scholars such as Thomas More, along with the limitation of freedom of thought through religious legislation, had a negative impact on the intellectual climate. Consequently, scholarly activity declined at the university, while religious debates became more intense.

Significant events in Europe—including the fall of Constantinople and the resulting migration of Greek scholars to the West, the invention of the printing press, the discovery of the Americas, and the Protestant Reformation—provided new impetus for the development of science and learning. These factors contributed to the revival of the University of Oxford.

In the Middle Ages, universities were of unparalleled importance as centers of knowledge. Since manuscript books were rare, education was largely concentrated in universities. Teaching was conducted orally, and learning was primarily controlled by the clergy. Latin remained the dominant language of science and scholarship. However, the invention of the printing press, the expansion of education, and broader social changes gradually reduced the relative importance of universities. By the early sixteenth century, this process had become clearly visible. The dissolution of the monasteries, political changes during the Tudor period, and the emergence of new professions led to a sharp decline in student numbers at Oxford.

During this period, several renowned humanist scholars were active at Oxford. Among them, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas More, John Colet, William Grocyn, and Thomas Linacre occupy a prominent place. They played an important role in the development of classical education and in the widespread study of ancient Greek and Latin literature. However, their activities faced resistance from defenders of traditional scholastic views. According to the historian Anthony Wood, the level of education at the university in the early sixteenth century remained relatively low and was largely based on unproductive disputations and debates.

From 1878 onwards, educational institutions for women began to be established, and from 1920 women were gradually admitted as full members of the University. By 1986, all-male colleges at Oxford had revised their statutes and began admitting women as well. Since 2008, all colleges have admitted both men and women without restriction. [4, pp. 5–6]

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the University of Oxford has remained a center of scientific innovation. One of the university's most notable achievements during the Second World War was the development of the antibiotic penicillin by a research group led by Howard Walter Florey. Florey succeeded in transforming the substance discovered by Alexander Fleming into a practical medical treatment. This breakthrough saved millions of lives and marked the beginning of the antibiotic era. For this achievement, Florey was awarded the Nobel Prize, demonstrating Oxford University's capacity to translate scientific research into practical outcomes.

Research conducted at the University of Oxford addresses pressing issues in fields such as religion, politics, technology, healthcare, climate, and the arts. One of the university's key missions is to engage the public in scientific activity and to improve the quality of human life through research.

The university actively promotes collaboration between researchers and society. This process facilitates the exchange of ideas on important issues, the formation of new concepts, and the strengthening of public trust in science. To this end, the university provides extensive opportunities for members of the public to interact with researchers.

Many research projects at Oxford are carried out with the participation of volunteers from various countries around the world. In particular, thousands of volunteers took part in COVID-19-related studies, contributing to scientific progress and improvements in public health.

Research findings are communicated to the public through seminars, lectures, public events, and the Futuremakers podcast. This enables both young people and adults to become more closely engaged with scientific activity. [4, pp. 49–50]

CONCLUSION

The historical formation process of the University of Oxford, its stages of development from the Middle Ages to the present day, and its role in the modern scientific and educational system have been comprehensively analyzed. During the research, it was determined that the transformation of the university from a simple religious educational institution into a

leading global center of science was a complex and multi-stage historical process.

In addition, the educational system of the Middle Ages and the lifestyle of the population were examined. In medieval Europe, the education system was mainly associated with the activities of the Church and monasteries, and knowledge was predominantly of a religious nature. Within this context, the development of literacy, the establishment of Latin as the language of scholarship, and the tradition of manuscript copying played an important role in preserving intellectual heritage. These processes later served as a crucial foundation for the formation of the university system.

In the modern era, the University of Oxford is recognized as one of the most prestigious higher education institutions in the world. It continues to make a significant contribution to global science through international academic cooperation, innovative research, and high-level academic programs. The scientific environment and research traditions established at the university continue to sustain its leading status today.

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