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# **Why Study the Middle Ages?**

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# Contents

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Introduction: The Middle Ages and the Liberal Arts . . . . .	1
Chapter 1. The Middle Ages and the Humanities . . . . .	21
Chapter 2. The Middle Ages and STEM . . . . .	43
Chapter 3. The Middle Ages and the Social Sciences . . . . .	69
Chapter 4. The Significance of Studying the Middle Ages . . . . .	91
Conclusion: The Connections among the Arts . . . . .	99
Further Reading . . . . .	107



## Introduction

# The Middle Ages and the Liberal Arts<sup>\*</sup>

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[I]f you look at them in the light of the other things to which they are joined, and if you begin to weigh them in their whole context, you will see that they are as necessary as they are fitting. Some things are to be known for their own sakes, but others, although for their own sakes they do not seem worthy of our labor, nevertheless, because without them the former class of things cannot be known with complete clarity, must by no means be carelessly skipped. Learn everything; you will see afterwards that nothing is superfluous.

*Hugh of Saint Victor, Didascalicon<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>\*</sup> Parts of this book have drawn on earlier presentations, in particular at the “Healers and Killers” series at the Tower Hill Botanical Garden in Boylson, Massachusetts, on February 23, 2019; at the University of Central Oklahoma Medieval Society on November 12, 2020; and an article prepared for the Fitchburg State University LGBTQ campus newsletter, Spring 2021. I thank the participants and audience of these and other similar discussions, as too the anonymous peer-reviewer and acquisitions editors from Arc Humanities Press.

<sup>1</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Didascalicon*, trans. Taylor, 137. Short-form citations such as this are given where the work is cited in full in the Further Reading at the end or, if not there, in an earlier footnote. To ease reading, where a work is recurrently cited the pagination is provided parenthetically within the main body of the text.

Students and teachers of the premodern are often asked to answer the question about the relevance of these subjects, particularly by skeptics who might doubt such relevance exists. Relevance, however, has certain associations. In particular, it infers a focus on the modern, indeed sometimes to the point of excluding anything that seemingly doesn't have a readily-obvious "purpose" in modern life or to a presentist point of view. Due to that bias, the more productive conversation is one of significance. Instead of considering whether the study of the premodern is appropriate, rather we should think about its worthiness for study. Instead of defending, we should provide evidence. As Hugh of Saint Victor wrote in the eleventh century, "Nothing is superfluous." We just need to find its meaning.

## **Liberal Arts in the Middle Ages**

In preparing to teach a course focused on the definition and value of the liberal arts and sciences, I began reading Fareed Zakaria's *In Defense of a Liberal Education*. From the beginning, I admired its accessibility for a general audience, but then reaching its second chapter on the history of liberal education, I came across this phrase that followed a paragraph on Alcuin and the court of Charlemagne: "Even during the Dark Ages, medieval monasteries kept alive a tradition of learning and inquiry."<sup>2</sup> My immediate response was one of indignation. First, there was the use of that phrase medievalists despise: the Dark Ages.<sup>3</sup> To add insult to injury, there was that damning addition of "even," as if the very idea of learning in the Middle Ages is impossible to imagine. The chapter continues with a paragraph on the influence of Islam, which is a welcome addition as the contributions of medieval Islamic civilization are not always acknowledged. But then Zakaria returns to the previous theme: "By the late Middle Ages,

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**2** Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, 44–45.

**3** For a debunking of the use of "Dark Ages," see Gabriele and Perry, *The Bright Ages*.

Europe's stagnation was ending" (45). The following brief discussion over-emphasizes what Zakaria calls the "religious influence" (46) of the time that, in his view, *limited* education. This observation is followed by a quick turn to "Renaissance humanism." This assessment—or rather dismissal—of the medieval raises questions about how the Middle Ages is represented in histories of the liberal arts.

The answer to those questions is disheartening. There is no shortage of writings on the definition, the development, and the defense of the liberal arts, as a whole and in its parts; however, in these works, especially those meant for general audiences—as in Zakaria's otherwise excellent book—the Middle Ages is often overlooked, given limited (or limiting) discussion, or summarily dismissed, usually for its supposedly religious exclusivity. Martha Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity*, for instance, relegates medieval education and liberal arts to something that Renaissance humanists "react[ed] against" in order to "promot[e] a more human-centered view of the world."<sup>4</sup> In Mark William Roche's brief introduction in *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?*, he moves straight from Sophocles and the classical thinkers to the Enlightenment. Even when a focus on the Middle Ages is present in books not specifically written by medievalists, it tends to be hyper-focused—and frequently misattributed to the classical rather than the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—on the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric), the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), or the seven arts as a whole, such as in Ravi Jain and Kevin Clark's *The Liberal Arts Tradition*. The history of these subject groupings, while important, are only a portion of the story and sometimes serve more to highlight differences between the medieval and contemporary periods than the continuities.

In his twelfth-century defense of the trivium, *The Metalogicon*, John of Salisbury avers: "The liberal arts are said

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<sup>4</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 103.



to have become so efficacious among our ancestors, who studied them diligently, that they enabled them to comprehend everything they read, elevated their understanding to all things, and empowered them to cut through the knots of all problems possible of solution.”<sup>5</sup> We can note here that all seven of the disciplines in the trivium and quadrivium are called “arts,” speaking to a different understanding of the rather limited use of the word today; the same is true of “sciences.” The understanding of all these categories of knowledge have shifted over time, although preserved in the main concept of the liberal arts. In the *Didascalicon*, Hugh of Saint Victor distinguishes science as a “matter of use” and art as a “matter of rules and precepts”:

All sciences, indeed, were matters of use before they became matters of art. But when men subsequently considered that use can be transformed into art, and what was previously vague and subject to caprice can be brought into order by definite rules and precepts, they began, we are told, to reduce to art the habits which had arisen partly by chance, partly by nature [...] Before there was grammar, men both wrote and spoke; before there was dialectic, they distinguished the true from the false by reasoning; before there was rhetoric, they discoursed upon civil laws; before there was arithmetic, there was knowledge of counting; before there was an art of music, they sang; before there was geometry, they measured fields; before there was astronomy, they marked off periods of time from the courses of the stars. But then came the arts, which, though they took their rise in usage, nonetheless excel it (trans. Taylor, 59–60).

He makes the further distinction that knowledge is “art when it treats of matters that only resemble the true and are objects of opinion; and discipline when, by means of true arguments, it deals with matters unable to be other than they are” (61–62). In the modern American context, the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—would,

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5 John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon*, trans. McGarry, 36.

with the exception of music, fall into the category of STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. To Hugh and other medieval thinkers, music as well as the rest of the disciplines in the quadrivium are part of mathematics.

Islamic thinkers, such as the tenth-century al-Farabi, known as the “Second Teacher” behind Aristotle, had similar approaches to classifications of knowledge, with some key differences. For one, instead of classifying them all under “arts,” al-Farabi identifies them all as “sciences.” His categories are: language (syntax, grammar, pronunciation, and poetry), logic, introductory sciences (arithmetic, geometry, astrology, music, weights, tool-making), physics (nature) and metaphysics (god), and society (jurisprudence and rhetoric).<sup>6</sup> The fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldûn, known for creating foundations in history, sociology, ethnography, and economics, divided knowledge into logic, natural knowledge (medicine and agriculture), metaphysics (magic and the occult), quantity (geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy), the Qur’an and the Hadith, jurisprudence, theology, Sufism, and linguistics (grammar, lexicography, and literature).<sup>7</sup> Music is included with other mathematics as in the quadrivium, and it is also worth noting the inclusion of rhetoric, the art of argument and persuasion such as those often taught in college composition courses, as a science of society by al-Farabi.

Scholars will at times use distinctions to emphasize the differences between the medieval understanding of knowledge from the modern or between different cultures. While true, such an approach does a disservice to the connections that still remain. For instance, there is a parallel to be made between the quadrivium and the movement in K-12 (kindergarten to grade 12 education) to change STEM to STEAM—science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics.

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**6** Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, 61–62.

**7** Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, 63–64. See Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, accessed April 15, 2022, <http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ik/Muqaddimah/>.

Non-Western views are far more acknowledging of the medieval in the history of the liberal arts. In addition to the Arabic influence mentioned previously, which is echoed by the representation of premodern Islamic education by Malika Zeghal in “The Multiple Faces of Islamic Education in a Secular Age,” African influence was also essential, particularly that of the Amazigh, Augustine of Hippo. Grant Lilford focuses heavily on precolonial African universities and traditional knowledge that “blur[red] the disciplinary boundaries that have been a feature of European education since Aristotle.”<sup>8</sup> Lilford argues that the specialty-focused modern African education system would be better served—“at its best, it engages with the precolonial past, across the national boundaries that are the most pernicious colonial legacy” (208)—returning to its medieval roots, one that “supplies writing, analytical, lifelong learning and creative skills that apply to a number of work environments,” (189) which stems from the precolonial focus on “general technical and cultural knowledge while providing for specialist skills in such areas as metallurgy, medicine, poetry, music, and the arts and crafts” (191). Despite that the “liberal arts” today is regarded as an American education phenomenon,<sup>9</sup> Lilford rightly notes that “the conversation [about the liberal arts] has flowed around and across continents” (194). There is a significant medieval moment to this flow among continents that contributed to the shape of contemporary liberal arts.

The development of the liberal arts in the Middle Ages is intertwined with the creation of the university. “Every soci-

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**8** Grant Lilford, “The Liberal Arts in Anglophone Africa,” *The Journal of General Education* 61, no. 3 (2012): 189–210 at 190. A similar version appears in “The African Liberal Arts: Heritage, Challenges, and Prospects,” in *The Evolution of Liberal Arts in the Global Age*, ed. Peter Marber and Daniel Araya (New York: Routledge, 2017), 150–63.

**9** Kara A. Godwin, “Precis of a Global Liberal Education Phenomenon: The Empirical Story,” in *The Evolution of Liberal Arts in the Global Age*, ed. Peter Marber and Daniel Araya (New York: Routledge, 2017): 87–105 at 88.

ety,” according to John Van Engen, “has devised means to educate its young and to prepare a next generation of leaders. Not every society has had universities. These guilds of scholars and students, the invention of twelfth-century Europe, receive the highest acclaim from modern scholars.”<sup>10</sup> This common assertion that the university was born in medieval Europe is contested by the historical evidence of universities in medieval Africa. UNESCO identifies the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, as the oldest university in the world.<sup>11</sup> This university was founded by Fatima bint Muhammad Al-Fihriya Al-Qurashiya in 859, demonstrating the role of women benefactors. Madrasas, educational institutions, systemized in Islamic communities in the eleventh century “taught Islamic sciences—which were intended to foster the study of Islamic religious law—through a professional body of teachers, and were equipped with a structure for lodging their students.”<sup>12</sup> Essentially, they became colleges. In the eleventh century, Nizam al-Mulk, Vizier of the Seljuq Empire, created madrasas in Baghdad, Naishapur, and other cities.<sup>13</sup> Madrasas issued written documents (diplomas), called *ijaza*, that signified a student’s accomplishments,<sup>14</sup> and the University of al-Qarawiyyin is considered by many to be the first degree-granting institution.

What about the influence of the institution of the Church, especially as it was heavily involved in and heavily invested in the European university’s production of students versed in theology? There is no doubt that the Christian Church

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**10** Van Engen, “Introduction,” in *Learning Institutionalized*, ed. Van Engen, 1.

**11** “Medina of Fez,” United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, accessed April 15, 2022, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/170>.

**12** Malika Zeghal, “The Multiple Faces of Islamic Education in a Secular Age,” in *Islam in the Modern World*, ed. Jeffrey T. Kenney and Ebrahim Moosa (New York: Routledge, 2014), 125–47 at 128.

**13** Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, 71.

**14** Zeghal, “The Multiple Faces of Islamic Education,” 129.