Book Review

Communities of Learning: Networks and the Shaping of Intellectual Identity in Europe, 1100-1500

Ed. by Constant J. Mews and John N. Crossley.
Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011. 366 pages.

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At the high school history level or in world history manuals, the topics under Middle Ages evoke a rather structured society: feudalism, emerging towns, guilds, monastic orders, scholasticism, and the universities. In this volume edited by Constant J. Mews and John N. Crossley, a group of scholars has chosen to focus on one historical field—the intellectual world—and study less explored or less obvious practices of transmitting knowledge. Instead of centering on institutions like the school of translators of Toledo, the cathedral school of Chartres, or the University of Paris, the contributors to *Communities of Learning* have delved into the knowledge practices of individuals, some of whom might have been connected in one way or another with medieval corporations. These performances take the form of translation work, philosophy or music treatises, letter writing, or book buying, to mention a few examples. And each instance of knowledge production is always the consequence and the origin of further ripples of knowledge-sharing, creating what we can reasonably call "communities of learning." What comes out is a new understanding of the spread of intellectual culture in the Middle Ages and, more importantly, in other periods or cultures.

The tome is organized around several learning centers and themes: Toledo and other learning networks in the twelfth century, Paris in the thirteenth century, Aristotelian language, female communities, and Renaissance Florence. The contributors have become the Virgil guiding us as we embark on time travel. The readers join medieval or Renaissance scholars and witness how they connected to other like-minded individuals via reading, translating, writing, or sharing their work or that of others in a variety of ways. *Communities of Learning* has widened the field of intellectual history.

The first three authors converge in twelfth-century Christian Toledo. It became the focal point of the revival of classical learning in Europe, accomplished by means of translation of classical authors from Arabic translations or from secondary Arab sources. Much of the work was done in the ambit of the cathedral chapter. Mozarabs, Franks, and Jews created an informal community of learning, which Charles Burnett studies, as they all engaged around the same time in translating works on science and philosophy of science. Alexander Fidora chose two of those characters mentioned by Burnett, the canon Gundissalinus and Jewish scholar Avendauth, to describe not just their parallel translation work but even their collaboration in the more difficult field of religion and philosophy. Such collaboration evinces how Toledo then was a tolerant community open to religious dialogue. Nonetheless, networking by means of translations was not restricted to this period or even to Toledo. In his study, Amos Bertolacci traces a tradition of translating the *Book of the Cure* by Avicenna spanning more than a century, based mostly in Toledo and Burgos in Spain.

The next three chapters revolve around intellectual exchange in Europe and how scholars from different fields ventured into interdisciplinary studies in the twelfth century. Willemien Otten writes about two philosophers connected to the School of Chartres, Alan of Lille and William of Conches, who around the same time explored the topic of creation and its consequences on nature with the aid of philosophy, theology, and science. Their ideas may sound outlandish now but we must credit their daring and originality in finding rational explanations to difficult questions, like how original sin affected nature. The next two contributors explore how letter writing could be an effective means of sharing knowledge. Cary J. Nederman studies the *amicitia* letters of John Salisbury whereby he not only practiced and taught friendship to a large variety of correspondents, but also informally educated them on moral virtue. Jason Taliodoros analyzes the correspondence of the French cleric Peter of Blois. The letters displayed his wide range of knowledge as he combined legal matters, both secular and ecclesiastical, with spiritual and theological considerations in structured ways.

In the thirteenth century the University of Paris had become an important center of intellectual exchange, but it did not hold the monopoly of new knowledge in Paris. To begin with, it is somehow presumptuous to consider the University as an already established institution at that time. Constant J. Mews paints a much more colorful landscape of what we generally call the University of Paris: the reality was that it consisted of several emerging colleges, with faculty of not so rigorous scholarship, where bishops were trying to assert their authority, and the curriculum on Aristotle was experiencing birth pangs.

The treatise on music that Johannes de Grocheio wrote in Paris in the thirteenth century is the subject of study of John N. Crossley and Carol Williams. Modern scholars have reached the conclusion that Grocheio expected his readers to be acquainted not only with theoretical and practical music but also with arithmetic and astronomy, thus indicating that his students must have been already taking the *quadrivium*, and illustrating the interdisciplinary training of both faculty and students. When Groechio wrote his treatise on music, the Faculty of Arts was the teaching center for music in the University of Paris. However, Catherine Jeffreys has discovered that it was far from being the only one. Her study on Guy of Saint-Denis, Johannes de Groecheio, and Peter of Auvergne, three of the main writers on music, shows that they were based in Saint-Denis and the Faculty of Theology, not Arts, of the University of Paris.

After having learned how flexible the environment for intellectual sharing could be in thirteenth-century Paris, Earl Jeffrey Richards expands the understanding of community of learning by exploring an apparently unrelated topic: Marian fabliaux in France and Spain during the same century. Intellectual exchange happened, Richards contends, in the two distinct traditions or communities of creators of Marian poetry in France and Spain, both in Latin and in nascent vernacular literature. The French fabliaux were markedly anti-Semitic while the

Spanish Marian hymns exhibited a more inclusive approach to the Jews. Thus those poems mirrored the political tendencies of their respective monarchies. More learning communities got involved when contemporary theologians, and even Dante, took issue with the suitability of such poetry. Richards sees one more interface in the political undertones of kings and popes in the fabliaux they sponsored.

Mary Elizabeth Sullivan retakes Aristotle as a common ground for intellectual development; however, she goes outside the university circles and focuses on political writers of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Ptolemy of Lucca and Dante, two thinkers with differing political views, shared the political vocabulary and principles of Aristotle. Hence, even if there was no personal interaction among them, it is possible to speak of a common training and an exchange of political ideas between them.

The next two chapters look into female communities of learners, introducing fresh air into what looked like a world made up only of men. Karen Green asks well-known medieval writer Christine de Pizan to escort the reader among the women in the French court of the late Middle Ages. Those women had created, unwittingly perhaps, an informal female community of learners by means of books either borrowed or inherited. Equally engaging is the study of Julie Hotchin on the German *reformatrices* or reformer abbesses in the fifteenth century, who were concerned with expanding the libraries of their respective convents for the education and piety of the nuns. Hotchin has found connections and influences among the reformed monastic leaders, whether female or male, and among various communities, similar to what happened among the female courtiers.

Dealing with the same period as the German *reformatrices* but with its setting in Renaissance Florence, Peter Howard enters the world of the *studia* or study houses attached to each monastery of the religious orders in Renaissance Florence. At first sight they may seem just islands of theological work in the city but Howard argues that they were authentic laboratories of learning communities, as they were the places where preachers in the many churches in Florence prepared their teaching and admonishing pieces. Their theological work touched on the interests of the most progressive city in Europe, from governance, usury and banking, to poor relief and civic virtues.

The collection of essays ends with a chapter that brings the eastern Greek religious culture of Constantinople to Ferrara and Florence at the time that the Council was held in the latter city. For a brief time the Council united the Churches of the West and the East. Frankie Nowicki describes the two traditions or communities, the Latin and the Greek, with parallel religious and civic customs, music and ritual styles, and approaches to dealing with "the other." The union was achieved in spite of the divergence, but it was also due to the lack of mutual understanding that the union proved short-lived.

Who can draw most from *Communities of Learning*? Anyone with enough curiosity to question established assumptions about the Middle Ages will surely gain much from this volume. Those who teach the Middle Ages and the Renaissance at the college level will expand their ways of looking at traditional corporations. Perhaps it will mostly benefit scholars researching on intellectual history and related cultural studies. As a case in point, in relation to the Philippines which is my field of historical research, I wish to cite the records of the moral assessments of Fr. Juan de la Paz, Dominican theologian, written in late seventeenth-century Manila. The documents are found in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Manila and the Archives of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. Fr. de la Paz was a professor at the University of Santo Tomas, the school of the Dominican order in Manila. He was consulted on hundreds of issues, ranging from doctrinal queries to secular matters such as the indigenous population, marriages, commerce, profit, and a lot more. De la Paz represented a very active community of learning working in the University, and the new approaches in this book can prove very helpful to anyone intending to write about the traditions behind and surrounding the work of this Dominican and his associates. *Communities of Learning* becomes a reference point for future work on informal and structured networks of knowledge. It goes to show that it takes one community of learning to study other communities of learning.

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