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Libraries and Teaching: Comments on Western Universities in the Middle Ages

Abstract: Medieval learning always relied on written texts. Nevertheless, medieval schools and the universities themselves in the first decades of their existence were usually deprived of libraries. However, university libraries (of faculties, of colleges, of professors) progressively appeared in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, although generally at a limited scale. University libraries reflected up to a certain point the structures and contents of the lectures given in the classrooms. But, as far as they gave masters and students (or at least a part of them) access to a large amount of texts and knowledges otherwise inaccessible through the only means of memory or isolated books, they might also have contributed to the development and orientation of the contents of teaching and teaching methods. Eventually, from a wider point of view, the existence of university libraries probably changed the very relationship to written culture, the image of knowledge, the practical forms of intellectual work for university men and the institutional and financial frame of medieval universities, and paved the way for the emergence of the printing press.

Drawing inspiration from an already abundant bibliography, the following comments are somewhat theoretical and general, despite naturally being based on specific examples, taken mainly from the French case. My intention is to inform the comparative thinking that the current volume supports, for beyond simply listing and describing medieval libraries in the East and the West, it focuses on the role, particularly the educational role, of these libraries during the age of manuscript culture.

Let us start with some facts. Teaching, as practised in the Middle Ages at universities – which appeared during the thirteenth century and subsequently continuously multiplied – as well as at the urban schools that preceded them during the twelfth century, was essentially based on the study of texts. These texts were both ancient and new: ancient because most of them dated back to Greek, Roman, and Christian Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages; but also new because the majority had been rediscovered, reformatted, compiled, translated, annotated, and commented on during the twelfth century. Sometimes this took place in the very same schools where they were used, but often the work was done outside of them, at ecclesiastical institutions, chancelleries, royal courts, and so

on, not to speak of Islamic countries where commentaries and scholarly treatises such as that of Averroes were at times quickly taken to the West and translated.¹

These were of course written texts. None of them, not even the Bible, could simply be entrusted to memory and oral tradition.² Conserving and disseminating them therefore required manuscripts, normally in the form of a parchment codex (as well as paper, from the end of the thirteenth century).³ The best evidence of the importance of these texts, which served as a medium for the scholarly culture passed on through teaching, and of their necessary ties to writing, is the large number of manuscripts which, despite inevitable losses, have survived up until today. For the most important texts, dozens and even hundreds of copies still exist, which is in contrast with the precariousness of the manuscript tradition of many vernacular texts, even the most famous of them.

The question that then arises concerns the concrete use made of these manuscripts in school and university environments. How were they copied? How were they disseminated? How were they conserved? How were they consulted and used? What were the respective place and role of isolated books and libraries – the specific focus of this volume – considered, from the angle not only of their contents but also their establishment, organization, and use by readers?

1 Paradoxes of the twelfth century

From this perspective, the situation was somewhat paradoxical during the twelfth century. As everybody knows, this century, at least at certain privileged institutions, witnessed the spectacular growth of urban, cathedral, canonical, or ‘private’ schools, as well as the discovery or rediscovery of new or forgotten texts, the creation of aids for study, and the translation of ancient or modern works from Greek or Arabic. In short, it was a particularly dynamic period of intellectual revival.⁴ However, at the same time, libraries during this period – as well as the highly productive *scriptoria* – appear still to have been confined to large ecclesi-

1 Regarding the significant textual revival that took place in twelfth-century schools, see the collection of studies in Benson, Constable and Lanham (eds) 1991, particularly Rouse and Rouse 1991 and d’Alverny 1991.

2 Riché and Lobrichon 1984.

3 Glénisson 1988, 14–37.

4 Naturally, there exists much literature on the ‘twelfth-century Renaissance’; see my short summary: Verger 1996b.

astical institutions, monasteries, abbeys, or cathedrals.⁵ In the schools, teachers and pupils alike, or at least some of them, could get access to these libraries, but did they find exactly what they wanted? Above all, how did teachers prepare their lessons when they had little access to such resources to establish even the most modest personal library? For example, Abelard, who must have been in this case, mentioned nothing about it.⁶

There is even more uncertainty regarding the situation of students. It seems that teaching was primarily oral for many twelfth-century students. Their difficulty to access real books explains the appearance and success, starting during this period, of a series of improvised substitutes – with a truly promising future – including *reportationes* of varying degrees of accuracy, anthologies, or collections of ‘sentences’, whose somewhat haphazard creation and circulation from one school or monastery to another is evidenced by many accounts.⁷

This situation of a chronic deficiency of books therefore explains the success of intellectual institutions such as the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, home not only to a renowned school but also to a beautiful library and a very active scriptorium which, at the initiative of Abbot Gilduin (1113–1155), systematically undertook the ‘editing’, copying, and dissemination of the works of in-house authors, in particular Hugh of Saint-Victor (d. 1141). Regardless of the specific quality of these works, this editorial organization – which is at times described as a sort of ‘proto-*pecia*’ – ensured that the writings of the eminent authors of the abbey would have a large echo throughout the Western educational world during the twelfth century.⁸ Other monasteries, abbeys, or cathedrals likely played a comparable role, albeit on a smaller scale, to the benefit of some of their teachers.

2 University libraries

Things changed of course from the thirteenth century, with the appearance of universities. Even though this did not completely transform the contents or methods of teaching, it had significant institutional and quantitative effects espe-

⁵ For example, Vernet 2008, 31–43 and 65–91.

⁶ Regarding Abelard’s relationship with the books, see the comments by Clanchy 1997, 41–42, 76–79.

⁷ Regarding the establishment of masters’ collections of theological ‘sentences’ and their circulation during the twelfth century, see the works of Cédric Giraud, in particular Giraud 2010, 185–240 and 339–436.

⁸ Gilduin’s ‘editorial policy’ has been studied for example in his work on *De tribus diebus* of Hugh of Saint-Victor, by Dominique Poirel (Poirel 2002, 27–86).

cially in the largest universities such as Bologna and Paris.⁹ The rapid growth of the university population and the establishment of a structural organization with statutes and privileges transformed the very conditions of the book market, among other things. Apart from a considerable increase in demand, the question is whether these new conditions modified scholars' relationship to books, and whether the newly established universities adopted a proactive policy in this respect. Explicit statutes were adopted rather late, but it is clear that from the beginning of the university period, the need to own or at the very least to consult books containing the curricular texts, preferably with glosses or the canonical apparatus, ceased to be exclusively a problem of teachers, extending to their students as an almost *sine qua non* condition of success in their studies.¹⁰

Up to a certain point, universities encouraged students' access to books. This is evidenced in certain regulations, including the prohibition of dictated classes – which was probably complied with to varying degrees¹¹ –, and verification, during the *examen secretum* prior to public examinations, that the candidate did indeed own or had at least read the books of compulsory curriculum subjects.¹² To make things easier, the university authorities also quickly obtained control rights and jurisdiction in the university city over the book-related professions, which were clearly on the rise. These included parchment makers, copyists, binders, booksellers, and so on.¹³ An effort was also made to maintain prices at reasonable levels, with the encouragement of the development of the *pecia*¹⁴

⁹ On the birth of the University of Bologna, see, for example, Greci 1988, 13–44, and on the beginnings of the University of Paris, see Gorochoff 2012.

¹⁰ The first founding texts of the University of Paris, and namely the statutes issued by the papal legate Robert of Courçon in August of 1215, and the papal bull *Parens scientiarum* of 13 April 1231, already listed a certain number of obligatory readings for students of the arts and theology (CUP, I, nos 20 and 79).

¹¹ CUP, III, nos 1229 and 1697, §17, and CUP, IV, 726 (no. 2690).

¹² We find an account of this verification of books owned or read in multiple statutes on bachelor's degree examinations in Paris: CUP, II, 673 and 678 (no. 1185); CUP, III, 145, nos 1319 and 1704; CUP, IV, 716, 728 and 729 (no. 2690); as well as in Avignon: Fournier 1890–1891, II, no. 1245, §12, no. 1279, §2 and 6.

¹³ On the relations between book professions in Paris and the university, see Rouse and Rouse 1988, 41–114. The first University of Paris document regulating the activities of booksellers dates back to December 1275 (CUP, I, No. 462); a similar regulation appears in the statutes of the University of Toulouse from 1329: Fournier 1890–1891, I, no. 558, §9.

¹⁴ On the *pecia* system, in addition to the classical book by Destrez 1935, see Bataillon, Guyot and Rouse 1988 and in particular, the article by Shooner 1988. Originating in Bologna, the *pecia* was found in Paris during the second half of the thirteenth century, as demonstrated by the library regulation of 1275 cited *supra* note 13, and the rental fees for *exemplaria* as mentioned *infra* note 15. Other universities sought to adopt this book production system with varying degrees of success, in particular in France in Toulouse (Fournier 1890–1891, I, no. 545, §27) and Montpellier (Fournier 1890–1891, II, no. 1053).

and taxed prices for the sale or rental of manuscripts,¹⁵ all in a favourable technical environment (the spread of paper and the development of a specific module of the university text book at the lowest possible price).¹⁶ While it does not appear that French universities attempted to prohibit study books from leaving the university town, as Italian universities did,¹⁷ we do find mentions of free loans of codices to poor students,¹⁸ for example.

One may wonder about the efficiency of this system. As it appears, medieval universities never implemented a systematic policy regarding this subject, designed to directly encourage book production or the creation of translations, even though certain founding statutes or theoretical texts, such as the *Siete Partidas* in Castile (c. 1260) seem to have envisaged this at times.¹⁹ Was the cost of such a policy, which must have been high, the only reason to forgo it? This is uncertain. Moreover, we know that even during the fifteenth century, universities only very gradually opened up to the printing press. Even though the first printing press to be installed in France would be – very briefly around 1470 – at the Collège de Sorbonne, it was not until 1500 that printed books started to replace manuscripts at university libraries, especially for the founding Patristic and Scholastic texts.²⁰ In short, purchasing or ordering books was largely left to the personal initiative – and the financial means – of the scholars who wanted them. It is therefore likely that many students and even teachers, especially young teachers of the arts, still had trouble accessing books and had to settle for a few mismatched volumes. Recurrent complaints around the lack of books and their excessive cost, as well as the theft and damage they suffered, were not simply literary *topoi*.²¹

¹⁵ *CUP*, I, no. 530, list dated c. 1275 and *CUP*, II, no. 642, list dated to 25 February 1304.

¹⁶ Cf. Nebbiai 2013, 117–148.

¹⁷ This practice has been thoroughly studied in Gargan 1994, 385–400.

¹⁸ For example, the medical university in Montpellier in 1240 (Fournier 1890–1891, II, no. 885, §8).

¹⁹ The original statutes of the University of Avignon made it the obligation of the general beadle to act as stationer (Fournier 1890–1891, II, no. 1245, §17); this provision seems to have been respected if we believe the example of beadle Antoine *de Sexto* studied by Léonelli 1977, 115–122. More broadly, the obligatory presence of stationers at every *studium generale* is mentioned in the school legislation proposed by the second Partida, title XXXI, law 11: ‘Cómo los estudios generales deben haber estacionarios que tengan tiendas de libros para enemplarios’ (‘How the *studia generalia* must have stationers that have bookstores for copies’) [López [ed.] 1851, 358].

²⁰ See Chartier and Martin 1989, 186–227, and n. 5, 123 and 333–347.

²¹ The only surviving regulations for French university libraries in the Middle Ages, those of the Sorbonne (dated to 1321) and that of the University of Angers (1431), both contain provisions to combat the loss, theft, or deterioration of books: Glorieux 1968, 214–216 and Fournier 1890–1891, I, no. 469, §14.

In any event, for our purpose it is not enough to note the increased presence of books in university life, attested to in its own way by a rather stereotypical iconography in which books became a compulsory element of the décor of teaching scenes or representations of scholars at work.²² We must now ask whether and how the concept of a ‘university library’ could have been born and taken shape in this context.

Of course there already existed libraries in the West, especially at ecclesiastical institutions, and mainly monasteries and abbeys, but the principles of their composition and operation did not exactly meet the needs of the university population, even though this population could use them when it had the possibility of doing so, such as in the case of the library of the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, or likely more directly useful, that of Saint-Victor for Parisian students.²³ However, to be able to truly speak of ‘university libraries’, the disciplines taught at universities would have had to be well represented, if not predominant, in the libraries. The volumes in their collections would moreover have had to be directly usable – through their contents, presentation, and accessibility – for both the teachers and their *scolares*.

In defining this concept of a ‘university library’, it is necessary to distinguish between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ libraries.

Without knowing the extent to which they corresponded to real book collections, ‘virtual’ libraries consisted of lists of works considered to be essential references for the various university disciplines; in other words, in the minds of medieval teachers, both the fundamental *auctoritates* and the texts of the glosses and commentaries of ‘modern doctors’ that were essential to properly understand the former, plus the work instruments (tables, directories, *distinctiones*) necessary for an effective use of both.

Because they drew up the curricula and examination programmes of the different faculties in detail, official statutes contained such lists, especially with respect to authoritative texts and textbooks. Examples are the curriculum of the faculty of arts of Paris established in 1255,²⁴ and that of the university of medicine of Montpellier in 1309.²⁵ The lists of *puncta taxata* composed in certain faculties of law (Bologna or Toulouse, for example) to determine the exact contents of civil or canon law lessons, are somewhat similar.²⁶

²² See Von Hülsen-Esch 2006, and Von Hülsen-Esch 2010, 297–320.

²³ For Saint-Germain-des-Prés, see Verger 2015, 63–77, and for Saint-Victor, the observations of Gilbert Ouy in the introduction to Ouy 1999, 26–29.

²⁴ *CUP*, I, no. 246.

²⁵ Fournier 1890–1891, II, no. 910.

²⁶ The first account of the *taxatio punctorum* goes back to Bologna in 1252 (cf. Maffei 1975, 73–101); for Toulouse, it is a list from the end of the thirteenth century or beginning of the fourteenth

In addition to these, there were the less official lists of texts given in certain *accessus* and other ‘student guides’, containing what we can call the fundamental bibliography of each discipline or the works that exam candidates necessarily had to be familiar with, and which had an evident practical aim, even more so than official lists.²⁷ In Paris, the lists of *exemplaria* intended for the *pecia* put into circulation by stationers, the rental fees of which were established by the university, even though they were created somewhat empirically according to the state of the supply, inform us on the main authoritative texts in use as well as the teachers whose commentaries were the most in vogue among students and their professors. We have two copies, from circa 1275 and 1304.²⁸

There were also ‘ideal libraries’, which were more literary: display of scholarship, commented bibliographies, or ambitious reading curricula. The status of these lists of ancient or modern works, with their varying degrees of detail and which certain authors took pleasure in compiling, is clearly ambiguous. One of the first and most famous examples is the *Biblionomia* (c. 1250) of Richard de Fournival, a physician and erudite canon. This list probably drew on his fine collection of manuscripts, but given the number of works recorded and their systematic distribution into disciplines and sub-disciplines, it seems to have been a well thought-out and almost exhaustive presentation of the knowledge theoretically accessible in schools of the time.²⁹ This literary genre extended through to the end of the Middle Ages. Another typical example among many is the list of 136 works drawn up in 1408 by Richard de Bazoques, a modest student of theology in Paris who became a schoolmaster in Normandy. It was likely less of an organized catalogue of his personal collection than a sort of encyclopaedic bibliography that he imagined, probably knowing many of the volumes that he listed by their name only.³⁰

Shifting from these theoretical libraries to real libraries, the picture is less clear-cut. Once again, it is first necessary to agree on what can be called a ‘university library’. The answer to this question is not only quantitative: it is not enough for an individual or institution to have possessed a certain number of books for this to be called a library. As noted above, this collection had to have had some coherence, both in its contents and the use that could be made of it.³¹

century published in Fournier 1890–1891, I, no. 535. A similar device is mentioned in the statutes of the university of law of Montpellier from 1339 (Fournier 1890–1891, II, no. 947, §11).

²⁷ See, for example, Lafleur and Carrier 1997.

²⁸ Cf. *supra* note 15.

²⁹ The *Biblionomia* was edited by Léopold Delisle in Delisle 1874, 518–535, and commented in Lucken 2013, 89–125, and Lucken 2017, 63–96.

³⁰ Bignami-Odier and Vernet 1952, 124–153.

³¹ On the subject of books and university libraries, refer to the regional overview that I presented in Verger 1995, 403–420.

In that case, could we say that there were student libraries during the Middle Ages? I hesitate to use this term, but we do know that some of the most well off, fortunate, or persevering medieval university students were often able to acquire a small collection of study books, possibly an average of between ten and fifteen volumes.³² These minimalist libraries were however most often limited to fundamental authoritative texts (the Bible and the Sentences for theologians; the *Corpus iuris canonici* or the *Corpus juris civilis* for jurists), and potentially a few mismatched ‘reportations’ of lectures, questions, or sermons.

In the case of teachers, or at least those with fairly long careers who ended up bequeathing their books to an ecclesiastical institution or a college – which is how we know they existed –, we find the appearance of real libraries from the thirteenth century. These collections, composed with a certain degree of coherence, contained several dozen volumes, including the basic teaching texts, the most authoritative commentaries, and compendiums of ordinary or quodlibetic questions that had some impact.³³ To give only one relatively early example of such an authoritative library, I can mention that of Gerard d’Abbeville (d.1272), a Parisian theologian who was well known for his hostility to mendicant religious orders, who inherited a large portion of the books owned by Richard de Fournival (mentioned above), which he in turn bequeathed to the Collège de Sorbonne.³⁴

The Collège de Sorbonne library typified the most interesting type of library with regard to the subject of this article: school, college or university libraries, institutional libraries intended for collective use and guaranteed to last. Once again, while ‘institutional’ libraries had admittedly existed for a long time in the West, but those intended for teaching (including the libraries of study priories or convents in university cities) were a novelty during the thirteenth century. Many of them have already been the subject of studies or at least monographs.

Without going into detail, it is fair to say that during the Middle Ages, non-university schools, with the exception of cathedral or monastic schools, usually had no library or had at best a modest collection of books in addition to the handful of grammar textbooks normally owned by the teacher.³⁵ More surprisingly, the same can be said for medieval universities and university faculties, which rarely had their own library. When they acquired one, which was often at a

³² See the brief summary in the chapter by Jullien de Pomerol 2008, 93–111, especially 93–94; a few specific examples in Verger 1995, 409–410.

³³ Cf. Verger 2010, 101–116.

³⁴ See Angotti 2014, 29–70.

³⁵ Unfortunately, this subject has not been studied in depth in France; for England, see Orme 2006, 152–155.

late stage, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it was generally a small library created from a single bequest and which does not appear to have been very useful for students.³⁶ It was not until the fifteenth century that we see certain universities make an effort, albeit one that was not always sustained, to develop their library. Cases of university libraries that were truly worthy of the name, such as the famous *Amploniana* library in Erfurt,³⁷ were rare. The largest university libraries of medieval times were actually found at secular colleges, such as the Sorbonne or Navarre in Paris, or at what were somewhat incorrectly called ‘regular colleges’, that is, priories, abbeys, or mendicant, monastic, or canonical convents in university cities provided with a *studium* and integrated within the university. However, the general orientation underpinning the composition and functioning of these libraries depended not only on their educational purposes but also on the spiritual and liturgical requirements of everyday life. That is why I have treated them as secondary in this article.³⁸

Yet not all of these secular or regular institutions, and especially not the most modest of them, actually had a library. Their founder or the first people responsible for them had to have had the idea and desire to have one. Moreover, college libraries were generally established by an initial donation, at times followed by subsequent bequests, as opposed to being the result of a consistent policy to purchase or order manuscripts, which would not have been considered because it probably exceeded the financial means of colleges.³⁹

The largest and best known college library was that of the Sorbonne.⁴⁰ From the late thirteenth century it stood out, not only for the number of volumes it contained – bordering 2,000 during the first half of the following century – but primarily because of its organization, which is also exceptionally well known to us and has been studied extensively. The elements of this include its precise cataloguing, detailed numbering, distribution of volumes by discipline, distinction between the ‘large’ and the ‘small’ *librairie*, consultation and loan libraries, multiple copies of the most sought-after works, detailed internal regulations,

36 On the medieval libraries of French universities see Jullien de Pomerol 2008, especially 96–100, and more specifically, for the southern universities of Avignon and Montpellier-medicine, Verger 1996a, especially 100–102.

37 Speer (ed.) 1995.

38 On the libraries of mendicant orders, see the studies collected in Bériou, Morard and Nebbiai 2014.

39 On the establishment of libraries at southern colleges, see for example Verger 1995, 414–416 and Verger 1996a, 102–106.

40 The medieval library of the College de Sorbonne has been the subject of many works, both ancient and recent, the list of which would be too long to include here. The most recent, which will allow us to go through the prior bibliography, is Angotti, Fournier and Nebbiai 2017.

and so on. All of this suggests an operation that was already similar to that of a modern library, and attests to a direct link between the structure of this library and the theology studies of the *socii* at the Sorbonne. It is nevertheless clear that, however fascinating it may be, the case of the College of Sorbonne library is exceptional – we can ask why –, and not only because of the surviving documentation on it. While certain colleges likely drew inspiration from it, the majority were most likely content to provide their fellows with a collection of a couple of dozen books varying in their heterogeneity, with no rules other than those aimed at limiting risks of the loss or excessively fast deterioration of volumes.⁴¹ The services that these libraries could provide for their users were therefore not negligible but were certainly limited: there were too few books; collections were not renewed adequately; and use by readers was disorganized.

3 Libraries and teaching

This informal overview ultimately brings us back to our initial question: what did libraries, as we have defined them, contribute to teaching at medieval universities?

The first element of the answer to this question is that teaching was able to emerge and develop to a certain extent, not without written texts and books, but without libraries. Libraries were almost non-existent during the twelfth century. They remained relatively rare during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and were often inadequate or inconvenient. It was only at the end of the Middle Ages and especially in the modern era, with the invention of the printing press, that we witness the ‘sacralization’ of libraries which really set them at the heart of intellectual life and of the creation, conservation and transmission of knowledge – a position that they are undoubtedly losing today due to the upsurge of digital technology.

How was it possible to study and teach without libraries – or virtually without them? This question raises multiple lines of thought: the considerable place granted to the oral tradition and memory; the highly active circulation of people and manuscripts (correspondence, book loans); and the capillary diffusion of occasional writings, which were light and inexpensive (*reportationes*, sentences, anthologies, *excerpta*, etc.), are all factors to take into account.⁴²

⁴¹ Regarding these libraries, see the typewritten thesis of Rebmeister-Klein 2005, and by the same author, Klein 2017. For colleges in the Midi region, I have suggested an average of 79 volumes (containing 88 works) per library (Verger 1995, 415).

⁴² Even libraries held these types of productions, even though they got rid of them periodically: the regulations of the Sorbonne speak of *multi libri parvi valoris, non ligati, occupantes locum*,

As noted above, things started to change in the university era, gradually, not radically. In non-university schools in particular, and often in universities themselves, the difficulty of accessing books continued and the solutions mentioned above remained relevant. Even when the books existed, it was never possible to be sure of receiving the required text in time, or of obtaining a complete volume in good condition. Overall, however, the greater number of books in circulation in university environments certainly modified and improved the conditions for teachers, and even more so for their audiences. This resulted in better training of students, which went hand-in-hand with the statutory formalization of curricula and the precise definition of examination procedures.⁴³

In this respect, we may wonder whether differences in the degree of access to books constituted a discriminating factor in the success or failure of the studies of medieval *scolares*. All prosopographical studies have shown that medieval universities had high 'dropout rates'.⁴⁴ Naturally, there are multiple possible explanations for this, but the inability to own or consult the required books was certainly one of them.⁴⁵ By contrast, one of the reasons for the success of college institutions was likely that many – but not all – of them offered to their fellows the services of a library, thus contributing to the success of their studies, which was on average greater than that of students studying outside the colleges.⁴⁶ Moreover, the exceptional fortune of the College of Sorbonne, which ultimately absorbed the entire theology faculty of Paris in modern times, is certainly closely tied to its equally exceptional library. Access to this library was also a highly

sicut reportationes et antiqui sermones that will be distributed to poor students (Glorieux 1968, 215); and those of the University of Angers of *voluminum, librorum, textuum, lecturarum, quaternorum, sisternorumve atque peciarum* collected by the library (Fournier 1890–1891, I, no. 469, §3).

⁴³ The gradual increase in the number of manuscripts available at the end of the Middle Ages was highlighted by Bozzolo/Ornato 1983 (see in particular the first essay, 'La production du livre manuscrit en France du Nord', 13–121).

⁴⁴ I presented the example of the universities in France's Midi region in Verger 1986: 313–332; other studies have given different rates, but the very existence of the phenomenon is not globally challenged, in my opinion.

⁴⁵ In Verger 1995, I mention, according to a document conserved in the Toulouse Departmental Archives (Archives of the Château de Pinsaguel, deposited at the Haute-Garonne Departmental Archives, 6 J 164, f. 207r-261v), the proceedings that took place between 1409 and 1423 when a former Toulouse student, Jean de Roaix, sued his guardians, which he reproached for not having provided him with the money necessary (which he evaluated as a minimum of 150 francs) to purchase the books the absence of which caused him to completely fail his legal studies, not allowing him to obtain any degree.

⁴⁶ The hypothesis that college fellows would have had better grades than other students has been carefully advanced with respect to the universities of Toulouse and Cahors by Foissac 2010, 381–418.

sought-after advantage among Parisian students, who could be admitted there based on a recommendation from an exercising fellow.⁴⁷

Furthermore, we can justifiably assume that by offering the possibility of not only possessing isolated volumes but also of individually or collectively establishing book collections of varying sizes, but always with a minimum of internal consistency – in other words, libraries –, the development of the book market during the university era modified the very relationship between scholars and knowledge.

First of all, the existence of libraries – whether real or virtual – made studies more systematic in nature by allowing to impose curricula that were themselves defined by a coherent series of books, which theoretically could be found in libraries or with stationers: the *Organon* and Aristotle's philosophy, completed by the commentaries of Averroes, the two *Corpus iuris* and their ordinary glosses, the *Articella* and Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*, and so on.⁴⁸

We can go even further and say that disciplines themselves were increasingly identified with corpuses of canonical books and authorized commentaries. Richard de Fournival's *Biblionomia* is characteristic of this tendency to identify knowledge with libraries,⁴⁹ as is the catalogue of the library of the Sorbonne, from a few decades later, because of what it reveals regarding the internal structure of this library and its numbering system, which reflect an analogous desire to embrace all of the exegetical and theological knowledge in the specific varieties of a vast collection of books.⁵⁰

Libraries were collections of books that varied in their coherence and size, but were not infinite. They contained some books but excluded others, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, which were ignored, refused, excluded, destroyed, censored, or cast aside. As an instrument for defining disciplines, they also established what was orthodox and censured doctrines that were considered deviant or dangerous. The history of censorship at medieval universities has shown that it mainly concerned the actual teaching, but also affected the books associated with it. Certain texts that had been condemned or deemed suspicious – with varying degrees of effectiveness – nevertheless remained quite widespread. The

⁴⁷ This system is perfectly described in the introduction to Vielliard and Jullien de Pommerol 2000, 21–50.

⁴⁸ On the relationship between collection of books and university curricula, for the faculty of arts, see Weijers 1996, 9–37; the same demonstration could easily be carried out for other faculties.

⁴⁹ Cf. *supra* note 29.

⁵⁰ Fourteenth-century catalogues for the Sorbonne library were published by Delisle 1881, 8–114. In a presentation that is sometimes criticized, Palémon Glorieux attempted to reconstruct the exact contents of this library according to the first thirteenth- and fourteenth-century catalogues, in Glorieux 1968, 237–289.

1366 reform of the University of Paris established a committee of theology teachers responsible for examining – and eventually rejecting – the texts of commentaries on the Sentences liable to be copied to become *exemplaria* available to scribes.⁵¹ The library of the Sorbonne, in its composition and the operation of its loan service, gives some idea of the succession of doctrinal movements and the suspicion that fell on certain authors.⁵²

So as not end on this negative note, I can furthermore posit that university libraries might well also have been factors in intellectual expansion and growth. This might have been the case by permitting, sometimes on the borders of Christian orthodoxy, a certain doctrinal eclecticism, sometimes considered characteristic of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These libraries provided teachers and commentators with a variety of information that was at times contradictory and would not have been possible without their collections of books.⁵³

This could also have been the case by enabling the dissemination of university texts outside of the academic environment *per se*, whether by providing non-university people with access to university libraries, which in reality has little evidence to support it, or by having enabled former students and teachers to conserve their own personal library after having left the university, thus continuing to make use of it when practising a ‘professional’ activity (preacher, judge, lawyer, doctor, etc.) or allowing the members of their social circles to use it.⁵⁴

Lastly, this could also have been the case considering that, for a variety of reasons, these libraries contained – albeit in a minority and marginally – works that did not belong to university disciplines *stricto sensu*. While these disciplines accounted for the majority of the books contained in university libraries – those that were the most sought out, most used, and most expensive –, many libraries also had a few varied volumes which historians classify today under the category

51 CUP, III, 144, no. 1319; on the censorship of books at the University of Paris in general, see Bianchi, 1999, 23–32.

52 The unpublished thesis of Fournier 2007 and subsequent articles by the same author (e.g. Fournier 2017) have shown that the acquisitions and loans of manuscripts at the library of the Sorbonne were not neutral; they reflected clear ideological choices. From another point of view, I have noted that apart from the works of local teachers, the legal and medical libraries of the colleges of Southern France were filled with writings of Italian authors, but almost completely overlooked the works of scholars from Paris and Orléans, which is once again a reflection of obvious doctrinal choices (Verger 1996a, 111–112).

53 De Libéra 1993, 420 and 471, describes the philosophy of the fourteenth century through its capacity for ‘continuous innovation’, and that of the fifteenth century through its ‘diversity’.

54 Autrand 1973, 1219–1244, has shown, for example, that the libraries of the members of the Parlement de Paris at the end of the Middle Ages were mainly those that they had established at the beginning of their legal studies.

of ‘miscellaneous’, for want of a better term. These included devotional books, chronicles, astrology or magic books, encyclopaedias, books in vernacular language (secular literature, customary law), and so on.⁵⁵ It was possibly through these volumes likely to spark their curiosity that students were at times able to escape the strict disciplinary framework established by statutes and become informed in intellectual domains as varied as history, popular devotion, vernacular poems and novels, occult sciences, the classics of Antiquity and of the early Italian humanists, and so on. As we know, the College of Navarre at the end of the fourteenth century and the Sorbonne fifty years later were among the first centres of French humanism. The Collège de Sorbonne appears to have housed the first French printing press in 1470. Their libraries may have played a role in the emergence of these innovative developments.⁵⁶

4 Conclusion

To briefly conclude, we know that medieval universities consecrated the primacy of written material in teaching, and by doing so, the need to use books. This is evidenced in the regular presence of books, despite the high price of some of them, and in a certain prestige expressed through flattering iconography and repeated literary praise. Yet the libraries of medieval universities and colleges had not yet become the intellectual working spaces *par excellence*, the emblematic images of knowledge, or the privileged beneficiaries of religious or secular patronage that they would become during the modern era, following the invention and spread of the printing press. It is however clear that the milestones leading to this ‘sacralization’ of libraries, by making it possible and desirable, were laid during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. Alongside the princes and prelates who collected beautiful books, the universities and colleges of the time played an essential role in this process.

⁵⁵ At the Sorbonne, according to Savoye 2017, 185–201, there were only very few books in vernacular language: a few translated scientific texts (geometry, optics) and a few spiritual treatises (*Somme le Roi*, *Evast et Blaquerne*, *Miserere* by the Reclus de Molliens, etc.). In the libraries of colleges in Southern France, the proportion of ‘miscellaneous’ books not belonging to university disciplines was a bit larger, with up to 16% of the total (cf. Verger 1996a, 110–111 and 121).

⁵⁶ See Verger 2006, 63–75.

Abbreviation

CUP = Heinrich Denifle and Émile Chatelain (eds), *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, 4 vols, Paris: Delalain, 1889–1897.

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