

Schools of the Middle Ages

Reading and Writing

It is not known how many schools in France provided children with an elementary education during the Middle Ages.

In 1380, there were more than 60 schools in Paris. During the 13th century, schools began to multiply quickly and compete with each other: it was soon forbidden to open a school within 20 doors from another school.

In the 15th century, nearly 100 small schools existed in the capital alone. They welcomed a large number of children since the duration of elementary education was brief: four months to learn to read, two to four months to learn arithmetic.

In a society where reading and writing were indispensable, at least for commercial business, children who could use this newly acquired knowledge were important cultural intermediaries.

Education

School Origins

Charlemagne did not invent the school. Schools existed in Roman times and lived on in Merovingian monasteries. They endured in the towns especially; at the height of the Middle Ages, some fifteen great teaching centers were still active.

The Assembly of Vaison in 529 obligated each priest to teach Latin to one or more young boys, enabling them to read the Bible and the Articles of Faith. Although basically free of charge, this instruction was accessible, nonetheless, to only a minority of the population.

Ego, Charles the Great

Charlemagne emphasized the importance of education in order to manage his loyal followers and to spread faith throughout the country.

His General Exhortation (*Admonitio generalis*) of 789 imposed a reorganization of teaching, but it applied to one or two boys per village, at best.

The Scholarly Map

From the 10th century to the 12th century, monastery schools welcomed children in greater numbers.

The schools were divided into internal schools, reserved for the “lay brother” whose children were “offered” to God and destined to live their lives in the monastery, and external schools, open to young secular laymen who returned to the world at the end of their learning.

From the second half of the 12th century, parents opted more and more for secular schools run by church clergy.

In the 13th century, their numbers grew, even in the countryside. In large cities, every neighborhood had a school, and each small market town opened one. In the 15th century, rural schools sprang up everywhere.

At the end of the Middle Ages, almost all city children had access to an elementary education; it was only a question of teaching them the minimum since they seldom used both reading and writing at the same time, other than to write their name.

Rural citizens were the least able to read and write: it is estimated that only 10 percent of the English population had mastered reading and writing by the end of the 15th century; in France, the situation was hardly different.

Teaching Tools

Book Substitutes

The cost of a book was equivalent to buying a herd of livestock, discouraging to the peasant world.

In order to learn to read and write, the majority of children substituted various objects for books.

Teachers, likewise, used their imaginations to compensate for the lack of teaching tools, especially in rural areas.

Archaeology serves as a witness to these teaching tools: alphabets were used to decorate belts, embroideries, and tile flooring. Children used an alphabet tablet or paddle, a simple wooden board on which they wrote the alphabet or a reading text -- often a prayer.

The School Book

From handwritten to print, schoolbooks were reserved for a few. Alone the children of high ranking aristocrats and the sons of wealthy merchants were able to have them. The invention of printing did not immediately change the aptitude for reading.

Scholarly Establishments

Outside of the monastic school that welcomed, with exception, only a dozen students at a time, children destined for the priesthood received their

instruction in the city's "episcopal" or "cathedral" school, under the bishop's authority.

There, they learned Latin and grammar, studied the Bible and church songs in a strict religious framework.

The fundamentals of reading, arithmetic, or writing were taught to children of craftsmen and merchants in small, specialized schools. It wasn't until the 15th century that several municipal grammar schools opened.

And finally, in the countryside, parish priests continued to hold school in the church or presbytery, but often with only one or two pupils enrolled at the same time.

The Cloistered School

Better Taught Than a King's Son

In monastery schools, children were admitted from the age of 6 or 7. According to one source, the instruction there was so remarkable, and the students progressed with such zeal, "that it would be very difficult to say that a king's son had been taught with more care, in the palace of his father, than those children at Cluny."

A Sense of Discipline

Education combined gentleness and harshness. At the Aubazine Abbey in the 12th century, a student who needed to be disciplined was hit on the head, hand or face with a stick "of such a manner that the noise of it rang in all ears, especially if it was acted upon a small child." Such treatment was meant to keep students in line by terrifying them.

Among the many examples of severity, monastery schools also employed principles of kindness. An instructor of beginning students had to fill three functions: to teach them, to play with them, and to console the homesick child.

In the classroom, three to four instructors encircled a dozen students, never leaving their sides. The pupils were taught the principals of hygiene and basic rules of behavior: to rise when the elderly passed by, to stay in rank, and to march in straight rows, without running, jumping or talking. Elementary students also had recreation time.

Monastery Course Curriculum

A Full Program

Beginning students learned to read using the Bible and through their spiritual exercises. They spent three hours a day revising their lessons from the day

before and from the study of new subjects. Their learning was reinforced through recitation.

Students were required to memorize the 150 psalms from the psalm book, a flurry of texts from the Old and New Testaments, notably the life of Jesus, and were asked riddles to test their intellectual keenness: "Who died though was not born?" Response: Adam.

Students preparing to become monks learned to count using stones (*calculi*, in Latin) and multiplication tables, a method unchanged until the 20th century.

The School

In order to not disturb the administration offices, the school, built of wood, was scattered among other conventional buildings. It adjoined the cemetery or the vegetable garden that served as a yard for recreation. The building housed small classrooms around a central room, and an area arranged with covered latrines. The classrooms were warmed, for the most part, with windows or oil lamps giving off light necessary for reading.

Large High Schools/Small Schools

Community high schools were three-story buildings with a basement containing a vault and storeroom; the ground level housed the dining hall and kitchen; above, classrooms and library with locked bookcases; on the third floor, bedrooms, with four students to a room. Bathrooms were located on all floors.

Small schools were located in ordinary houses that were equipped with bathrooms and a kitchen to feed the children a midday meal.

The classroom was situated on the main floor or in a half basement. At this level were also located the teacher's room and a dormitory dotted with cots for the young pensioners.

An Elevated Position

The difference was huge between the long spacious classrooms of English high schools, and the modest rooms -- like cubbyholes, of small schools.

One common feature -- the teacher's chair, united them. The chair was a sign of his dignity, allowing him to rise about the students and obligating them to look up to him. Even the most inexperienced teacher profited from this piece of furniture in his classroom.

Warmth for Work

Children could be expected to sit still and do their coursework in a heated classroom; it was impossible to constrain them if they suffered from the cold. The chimney or a ceramic stove offered effective warmth.

Beyond the instructor's chair, the classroom contained little in the way of furnishings. A thick pile of straw, spread on the ground, served as chairs for the students, seated according to size, or on low stools.

At the end of the Middle Ages benches came into fashion. They served as seating for students in front and as desks for those sitting behind them.

Instructors and Students

So numerous were the teaching categories that a child's future could benefit from an education *à la carte*: beginning monastery teacher, castle chaplain, parish priest, professor in a Dominican or Franciscan convent, student under the authority of the bishop, mistress or master of small schools, private teacher, and even mother of the family, able to teach the ABCs and the basics of religion, not to mention that university professor, who was sometimes younger than his students.

The Teachers

Future Job

To teach at a school for boys, one had to complete university studies and obtain a "license," or authorization to teach.

Women, not permitted to teach there, were free to hold school at their will, sometimes under surveillance but having the right to instruct only females.

Modest Returns but Secondary Benefits

A teacher earned little money in spite of his title, whether he served as parish clergy, canon at a cathedral school, or as a clerk employed by a municipality. However, he benefited from secondary advantages. When he filled a public function, the municipality that hired him paid his moving fees to the school and offered him a signing bonus.

Flitting About

Itinerant volunteers were young teachers who stayed only one or two years in their posts, then left to return to the university, or to open a school, or both.

The Students

Rich or On Scholarship

In elementary schools and city high schools, students came from all social backgrounds. Lone exceptions were the children of top aristocrats, who were schooled by private teachers, and those at the poorest social level.

Some peasants' children obtained scholarships, with high school fees paid by a rich benefactor. In this way they learned alongside the sons of nobles, who sometimes had to leave the family castle for a less elaborate education.

Good Students, Bad Students

Teachers of the Middle Ages have left numerous descriptions of errant students, and the punishment they used to correct bad behavior.

One teacher told of a student who, when asked a question, pretended to cough in order to give himself more time to think of a response.

Another student, ignorant of the Latin responses at mass, imitated the hawking cries of Paris newsboys so well that even the priest did not spot the fraud.

Poor academic performance bore no consequences; physical punishment was the only action taken for misbehaving in class. However, a student who skipped class risked expulsion.

Violence and Delinquency

Harsh Punishment

Violence was part of the medieval school landscape. But from the time of the 11th century, numerous educators strongly favored the "kind" method over teacher brutality. "The strict method is able to make children worse and not change them," said Paul Diaconus, spokesman for the rule of Saint Benoît.

Nonetheless, in city schools, even at the end of the Middle Ages, whipping continued, even if high school teachers were prohibited from wounding children until they bled, or breaking their bones. Teachers were encouraged to first use psychological intimidation before striking a blow.

Playing the Truant

In general, teachers kept order by using the cane or the club. Jokesters or pranksters were severely punished; any schoolboy running inside the church or ringing the bells was whipped. The youngsters were not afraid to run away if they found the discipline too harsh.

Vacations and Holidays

All school days were set according to church and farm calendars. And they still are.

The school year was made up of three trimesters, beginning in October after the grapes had been gathered; in addition to the numerous feast days, summer vacation took place in July and August, when crops were harvested. Classes were interrupted equally by religious holidays – a week of vacation for

Pentecost, two weeks at Christmas and Easter. Vacations totaled 150 days a year.

Saint Nicolas and Mardi Gras

At monastery schools, cathedral schools, and high schools, various annual feasts of an irreverent nature took place.

The holiday Saint Nicolas, patron saint of schoolboys, parades and cavalcades, was a day that allowed students to play dice.

On religious holidays, theatrical reenactments under the direction of the schoolmaster were presented: the Miracles of Saint-Nicolas and the Passion Play of Christ at Christmas and Easter, farces for Carnival.

Playing the Fool

On December 28, schoolboys celebrated the Feast of the Innocents or “Feast of Fools” holiday, with refreshments and a parade across town. A choirboy was named “Bishop of Fools” and was allowed to dance in the church, normally forbidden. Reversing the hierarchy, schoolboys took the place of the canons and vice versa. On this day, students had license to parody their teachers, miming religious celebrations and rituals, burning old shoes to produce the smell of incense.

Scholarly Program

Schoolboys had to master the three liberal arts, comprising grammar, logic and rhetoric, and a fourth quadrant: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. But students learned, for the most part, only the rudiments -- the alphabet and several rules of grammar.

Learning to Read

The Alphabet

Children learned the alphabet between the ages of 3 and 5, often before entering school. The teacher introduced, within reason, the alphabet in one week, presenting three or four letters a day, built around a moral story. It also explained the words that began with these letters.

The alphabet began with a small, footed cross, and in reciting the letter, the children made the sign of the cross. Teaching methods by the first apprentices were very playful. Some amusing alphabet poems produced the sounds of letters: the R “growls” like a dog (rrr); the L imitates the “wing” (*aile*) of a capon.

The ABCs

For memorizing the order of the alphabet, children were taught by the syllabic, “abc” method, which was always read aloud. This method produced rapid

results, a necessary thing in a time when students were only in school several months.

It especially worked for deciphering any inscription in French, even if the meaning was not understood, like Latin.

Reading Support

Long ago, the Bible was the only accessible book. The first reading texts were major prayers like “Our Father” and “Ava Maria” that children learned by heart, and The Creed and the Ten Commandments, by counting on each finger.

At the end of the Middle Ages, approved readings for the young were diverse: fairy tales, ancient fables of Aesop, moral essays, daily devotional books and even novels, those written in French.

Learning to Write

Promoting Writing

The teaching of writing was not tied to reading because:

- modest peasants did not have the need to write
- aristocrats hired secretaries and scribes
- women, according to certain educators, could profit by their ability to draft love letters and poems of love!

Writing was passed along through craftsmen and city merchants who had sons enrolled in specialized schools.

Exercises

Learning to write was not very evident in a world where writing tools were expensive.

Schoolboys earned the right to work with ink and on parchment only at the close of their education. They learned how to carefully select their pen: the straight wing of a goose was preferable since its curve conformed to a right-handed individual.

If a student was barred from scribbling on parchment, he did it on the bark of a birch tree, on a charred wood paddle, with a carbon pencil, or on a waxed tablet.

For apprentice writers, metal tablets with sunken letters of the alphabet were used: they slid their pens across each letter until all coils and flourishes materialized.

Learning to Count

Everyone Counts

To know how to count was considered indispensable in the 13th century: “Without the science of numbers,” said the encyclopedist Barthélemy the English, “we are not able to know the weather, the time, or the month. (...). There is no difference between a man who does not know how to count and an animal.”

With the ability to count, all peoples were served: the worker could count his pay, the peasant could better manage the selling of his products in the marketplace, the craftsman could calculate proper measurements, and of course, the merchant could run his business.

Mathematics Apprentices

Mathematics included the teaching of geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy.

Teachers taught children to count using simple methods and basic, ordinary objects: marbles, rings, tokens, and dice for mental figuring.

They taught the numbers tables and how to count down, thanks to “digital computing” -- counting on one’s fingers...up to a million!

Roman Numerals or Arabic Numbers

Until the 15th century, only Roman numerals were used for counting. During this period, “the nine Hindu numbers” and the number 0, invented by Arab mathematicians, came into existence. Only the children of big business merchants knew how to use them.

Learning to Sing

Music was one scientific discipline of the four subjects of the quadrant. Religious song apprenticeship was established in specialized city schools, dating from the year 1180 in episcopal schools, and taught in long perpendicular buildings at the cathedral, known as the choir school.

Choir Children

Beginning at a very young age, boys were chosen for the clarity of their voice as well as for their good manners. They were grouped either for pre-cantorship or for mastery of voice, under the direction of a chorister. The boys stayed a dozen years at most, until their voices changed.

Their role in the choir was essential. Since women were excluded from the ecclesiastical framework, choirboys alone were able to provide the soprano voice.

The Rhythm of Lessons

To learn to sing in harmony, the children repeated the notes, standing with their arms across their chests. Lessons included breath control, taught using rhythmic patterns, such as hands on shoulders.

Musical Hand

Musical sequences were memorized, thanks to the mnemonic method of the “musical hand,” invented in the 11th century. Notes were transcribed with the help of the first seven letters of the alphabet, the A being the “la.” *Do, re, me, fa, sol* were coded CDEFG. At the end of the 13th century, the writing of music was rationalized and notes were written on musical staves.

The Professional Teacher

Boys were obligated to learn a profession.

When a boy could not take over the family business, simply because he was the youngest child, or was orphaned, he was “leased” or “farmed out” to a third party.

To put children to work was certainly character building. It was also, at the end of several months, a way of profiting from free labor.

Boys were taken as apprentices more than girls, who learned a skill most often at home through the mistress of the house, except when they were orphaned.

The Apprenticeship

Apprentices of All Ages

At the core of the family, work began at an early age: age 10 for the potter’s son, age 8 for farm work. The child began by guarding geese, pigs, then cows, until he was able to guide the oxen plow, a dangerous job.

Most apprentices began around age 14 or 15, sometimes older, especially for more specialized professions like medicine or goldsmith, or difficult work conditions, like construction or ironwork. Depending on profession, apprentices stayed at least three to six years.

The Apprentice Contract

A notary legalized the arrangement between the parents and the skilled master, with parents reimbursing the master for his knowledge and training.

In the exchange, the master took on the task of molding the child. For the first year, at least, the youngster served often as free labor. The workday was long, between 9 and 13 hours, six days a week, depending on the season.

The apprentice was bound by his obligations. He did not have the right to leave, except in the case of the plague. The master could not beat him, unless he was authorized to do so in the contract! He also had to promise not to wound him, to give him sufficient rest, to clothe and feed him, lodge him, allow him to hunt, and care for him as if he were his father.

A Career in Arms/Gun Career

Little Aristocrats

Children of nobles received a compulsive education from their earliest years. Placed in homes as pages between 7 and 10 years of age, the boys also learned good manners, service, duty, the language of heraldry and how to use weapons. The youngest aristocrats were only entrusted with wooden swords, teaching them to handle armor from the age of reason!

The Profession of Noble

Young nobles' training took into account their future job: that of using weapons. They were also schooled in music and dance, courtly manners, and especially gymnastics to increase their strength and nimbleness.

Numerous contests involved wrestling, jumping, boxing, archery, using customized weapons, hunting, raising falcons and especially horsemanship: "Nothing succeeds like beginning early," said a court teacher of the 13th century.

Apprenticeship of the tournament was accomplished by a gradual progression involving athletic play: first using a mock horse on small wheels before passing to tilting with targets mounted on posts in the castle tilt yard. A constraining, sometimes dangerous program, the apprenticeship exposed young nobles to discomforts like sleeping on the ground in the cold, and to pain and suffering.

"An Illiterate King is Like a Crowned Ass"

This proverb, dating to 1,000 A.D., acknowledged that education, as much as title or physical strength, was part of becoming a noble.

Intellectual Development

Classes took place at the castle, with clergy, sometimes the chaplain, acting as schoolmaster.

Lessons were taught in the student's room, or in a classroom specially created for children of lords and pages.

Based on the wealth of the family, educational materials varied: often a footstool for the student and a bench for his books, or sometimes real desks. A modest Book of Hours was used by the student of lesser nobility, a book

painted with gold leaf for the sons of kings. All adolescents read “novels” in French, from warrior fiction (adventures of Ulysses, stories of chivalry) to the writings about politics and the art of governing.

Teaching Applied to War

In spite of the riches bestowed on educational programs at the castle, instruction had a less formal side than might be imagined: a young noble often came to class with his puppy or his falcon, all part of his ongoing training of animals that was integrated with his military education. At the end of the class day, boys could play “war” using marionettes or little toy soldiers to test their knowledge, illustrated by pictures of fortifications and weaponry.

All young aristocrats learned the noble game of chess that provided a good background for military strategy.

Educating Girls

No Boys?

Young girls, whether from noble or peasant stock, were not exempt from lessons of a physical nature in their course of learning.

Girls needed to know how to ride a horse and to hunt. At the castle, they were schooled in lessons of etiquette, dancing and singing. Girls also studied reading and enjoyed novels as much as boys.

Girls were taught the traditional values concerning women: obedience, modesty, kindness. One prepared them, above all, for motherhood.

But it wasn't until the 13th and 14th centuries that they were able to enroll in classes at the lesser schools, and only to pursue basic studies. Said Christine of Pizan in the early 15th century, “If it was the custom to send little girls to school and to methodically teach them the sciences like one did for the boys, they would learn and understand the difficulties of all the arts and all the sciences as well as them.”

Female Professions and Learning

In all social settings, girls learned to sew and spin. They knew how to count, useful as an adult in checking the finances of home or shop, or in selling their artisan husbands' products at the market.

There were always job openings for maid-servants, especially for orphan girls, placed at very young ages to offer them shelter; to do housework was a typical female activity. Nonetheless, many other professions were open to women, notably careers of housekeeper or those related to textiles. Weavers and embroiderers were legion in medieval cities.

High Schools

“Good Children”

High schools of the Middle Ages differ from those of today: from the very beginning, they were associated with universities devoted to accepting poverty-stricken students, the “good children,” to feed and lodge them.

Schoolboys not on scholarship lived at their master’s house or rented a room in the city.

Students at Ava Maria of Paris

The Ava Maria High School, founded in the 14th century by a counselor of the king, enrolled twelve boys between the ages of 8 and 12.

They learned Latin grammar, useful for reading their prayer books and for borrowing books at the library, where the most valuable works were locked away. They were equally expected to perform acts of charity: to distribute firewood, food, clothing and shoes to the poor, and to sit with the dead at wakes.

The household tasks that made up part of their privileges (the awarding of a grant), were shared on a weekly schedule; evenings, light the lamp before the Virgin Mary statue, each Saturday, sweep the chapel, clean the bird cages...

In the dining room, the high school students ate a simple and unvaried meal, cabbage soup, tripe, bread and herring. Evenings, they slept in a well-ventilated but unheated room, with two to four boys per room.

Certain high schools were converted to teaching places, with classrooms and libraries. The richest gift, given by Robert of Sorbon of Paris in the 1250s, became an entire university: the Sorbonne.

The University

A “Latin” Neighborhood

Since the founding of the first university in Paris, status confirmed in 1215, education of the upper level was the sole responsibility of the pope. High schools and universities were grouped in a “Latin” neighborhood, so named because Latin was the only language permitted, even by children, in the quarter.

More than 10,000 university students lived there during the 15th century. All were clergy scholars with shaved head, no matter how young. Many were foreigners, but despite their origin, they communicated easily in their common language.

Students at 10 Years Old

The age range of students was very broad. Boys could enter the university at age 10, the minimum age for the oath of entry.

In general, most young men began their university studies between 16 and 20 years of age. The course of study was long: up to 15 years for theology.

Students came from different social backgrounds: the majority were city children and young peasants with scholarships. Nobility were few in number; those who opted for a university career and were supported financially by their families had the best chances of successfully completing their studies.

The Qualified Young

The baccalaureate, or first diploma, was a simple exam defended before a restricted jury. A student could pass it at the age of 14, after three years of study, but had to wait at least a year before pursuing his "license," or authorization to teach.

Some age exemptions were granted. Rarely could the student who had obtained his master's or doctorate degree, giving him the right to teach at a university, teach before the age of 30.

The Students

University of Straw

In Paris, classes were held in modest establishments, often in simple homes with a yard and garden, from the highest floor of a building to the ground floor, from which prostitutes operated.

Academics gathered at the foot of St. Genevieve Mountain. The best taught at Rue du Fouarre, named for the straw bales on which the first students sat in the classrooms, or outside on public paths.

The Course of Study

The day began in the early morning with an authoritative lesson, was then followed by a "discussion," theological debates that were privileged to offer all at once duly memorized Biblical verses, commentary and oratory talent.

One objective of university studies for students was the mastery of speaking: they earned their diplomas by taking an oral exam. The Baccalaureate was scheduled right before Easter Thursday and the Master's right before the summer holiday.

Wandering Students

Student mobility was strong during the Middle Ages. Students from countries that did not yet offer a university education, and conscientious academics, anxious to diversify their knowledge or to benefit from knowing celebrated masters in foreign countries, traveled across Europe. Sometimes en route, they stopped one or two years, opening a small school in a large village or a city, to earn enough to continue their journey. Their experience as student traveler enriched their teaching and broadened the horizons of children living in the countryside.

“*Scoale, scalae*”: one characterized the school of the Middle Ages as such: “the school, a social ladder – even if it was not yet for all.”

Translation by Peggy Linrud, Public Programs Department, June 2010