

# INTRODUCTION

## **The premodern university in motion. Mobility, innovation and conflict in Europe (15th–17th centuries)**

La universidad premoderna en movimiento.  
Movilidad, innovación y conflicto en la Europa  
de los siglos XV–XVII

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The history of the European university is inseparable from movement. From its medieval beginnings, the university was never merely a clearly bounded institution of teaching and learning, but a space shaped by the circulation of people, texts, practices, and forms of knowledge. Students, professors, members of religious orders, diplomats, books, legal texts, symbols, and institutional models moved across geographical, linguistic, political, and social boundaries. In doing so, they contributed decisively to defining what university was and what it could become.

The present Dossier, which grew out of the Atelier Héloïse meeting held in Warsaw in 2024, examines the university as such a dynamic and multifaceted space. Atelier Héloïse has long provided a forum for the comparative study of university and knowledge history, with particular attention to mobility, prosopography, institutional networks, and the circulation of knowledge in Europe, as well as to digital methods. The contributions gathered here continue this perspective by examining academic life between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period through three interconnected fields: mobility and networks; innovation in teaching and symbolic practices; and the entanglement of the university with diplomacy, urban society, and conflict.

The first three contributions are devoted to academic mobility and networks. Mobility was one of the defining features of premodern universi-

ty life. It connected distant regions, enabled scholarly careers, and allowed knowledge to circulate between people and institutions. At the same time, mobility depended on political circumstances, religious affiliations, institutional opportunities, financial resources, and personal or collective strategies. To study academic mobility therefore means analysing both the circulation of knowledge and the conditions that made this circulation possible.

Mlada Holá and Martin Holý open this part with their study of the academic mobility of Prague university professors from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period. Their contribution situates Prague within a broader Central European university landscape and examines how professorial careers were shaped by institutional change, political transformations, and confessional developments. Prague was one of the most important university centres of medieval Central Europe, yet its history was marked by profound ruptures. By tracing the movements of professors between 1458 and 1622, the chapter shows how academic careers responded to larger historical changes. Mobility was not merely an expression of individual ambition; it reflected the changing position of the university within regional and transregional networks of power, education, and confession.

Stefania Zucchini's contribution shifts the focus to the *peregrinatio* of Hungarian friars to Perugia between the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth century. Her chapter highlights the importance of religious orders as agents of academic mobility. The movement of members of religious orders to Italian centres of study formed part of a wider ecclesiastical and intellectual geography in which theological education, institutional discipline, and transregional networks were closely connected. Perugia appears here not only as a place of study, but also as a contact zone between local academic structures and broader religious networks. The *peregrinatio* of Hungarian friars makes clear how deeply mobility was embedded in the structures of monastic and mendicant education.

Franco Benucci's chapter on ultramontane students in Padua develops the theme of mobility further by focusing on those students who, from an Italian perspective, came from beyond the Alps. Padua was one of the great international universities of premodern Europe. It attracted students from many regions and created a complex social world of nations, privileges, scholarly expectations, and everyday encounters. The category of the *ultramontani* was not merely geographical. It also designated a social and institutional position within the university. Students from beyond the Alps had to navigate local customs, academic regulations, group identities, and the practical demands of life in a foreign city. Mobility therefore appears here not as a

single event, but as a process that shaped academic identities before, during, and after study.

The second part of this special dossier of CIAN turns from mobility to practices of teaching, communication, and symbolic representation. Universities were always institutions of tradition and, at the same time, places of innovation.

Kaspar Gubler's contribution examines Thomas Murner as an innovator of university teaching. Murner, who was active around the turn of the sixteenth century, developed didactic games and connected his teaching of law with vernacular translation and explanation of central legal texts. In doing so, he sought to make learned knowledge more understandable and accessible to a wider circle of learners. His didactic games introduced visual, material, and playful elements into the learning process. They made complex legal knowledge more intelligible and opened up new possibilities for memorisation, participation, and conceptual ordering. At the same time, the translation of legal texts points to a broader challenge in the history of education: how could learned law be made comprehensible and useful for different audiences? Although Murner's innovations in the field of didactic playing cards did not find a lasting place in regular university teaching, his translations into German were of enduring importance for the development of the German legal language.

Francisco Javier Rubio Muñoz's contribution examines rectors, nations, and student graffiti at the universities of Bologna and Salamanca in the sixteenth century. The chapter shifts the focus from formal teaching to symbolic culture. Graffiti, inscriptions, names, and visual signs reveal how students inhabited and appropriated academic spaces. At the same time, they point to shared forms of representation at different universities. Bologna and Salamanca were distinct institutions with their own specific histories, yet student practices created comparable symbolic worlds. Nations, rectors, and student communities were not only administrative units or offices; they were also represented, remembered, and spatially materialised. Graffiti therefore provide access to a dimension of university life that is difficult to grasp through statutes and official records alone: the everyday presence of students, their desire for visibility, and their participation in a shared academic culture.

The last two contributions examine the university in its relationship to political authority, diplomacy, and urban life. Universities were never isolated from the societies in which they existed. They depended on privileges, patronage, protection, legal frameworks, and urban infrastructures. At the same time, they could generate tensions. The presence of students, the auto-

nomy of academic communities, and the claim to university freedom repeatedly came into conflict with urban order. The university was therefore both a partner of political power and a possible source of unrest.

Massimo Galtarossa's chapter on the ambassadors of the Republic of Venice as agents of knowledge circulation highlights the diplomatic dimension of academic networks. Ambassadors were not only political representatives. They also moved information, books, observations, contacts, and reputation. In the Venetian context, diplomacy and knowledge were closely intertwined. Ambassadors could observe academic institutions, maintain relations with scholars, and participate in the wider circulation of learned culture. Their activity shows that knowledge did not circulate only through students and professors. It also moved through political channels. Universities and learned milieus mattered to diplomacy because they were places of expertise, prestige, and information; conversely, diplomatic networks contributed to the movement and evaluation of knowledge.

Alessandro Benedusi's chapter on the *scolari* provides a counterpoint by approaching university life from the perspective of brawls, books, and *libertas*. The title already captures the ambivalence of student existence. Students were learners and readers, but at the same time social actors whose presence could disturb urban order. The idea of *libertas* was central to academic identity, especially at a university such as Padua, where privileges and freedoms formed part of the institution's self-understanding. Yet freedom could also become a source of conflict. Student violence, tensions with residents, and disputes with authorities point to the fragile balance between academic autonomy and urban control. Benedusi's contribution thus places everyday conflicts at the centre of analysis, showing how the boundaries of the university were tested in practice.

Across its three parts, this volume presents the university as a mobile, innovative, but also contested space. It thus argues for a broad understanding of academic history. Universities should not be studied solely as formal corporations or as sites of curriculum and graduation. They were also networks of movement, places of pedagogical innovation, symbolic landscapes, and social zones of contact and conflict. In this sense, the contributions gathered here reflect the wider aims of Atelier Héloïse: to understand European university history comparatively and from the perspective of mobility, networks, and the circulation of knowledge. They show that, even in the premodern period, the university was not a closed world, but an open and multifaceted space. Universities shaped premodern Europe not because they stood apart from the world, but because they were deeply embedded within it.