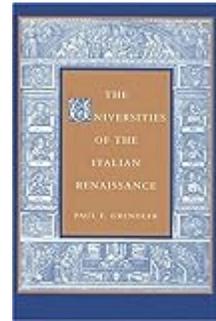




**Paul F. Grendler.** *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xx + 592 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6631-9.



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## The Rise and Decline of the University in the Italian Renaissance

The Rise and Decline of the University in the Italian Renaissance

Paul Grendler's comprehensive, methodical, and immensely learned study of the seventeen universities in Renaissance Italy is an enormous contribution to historians and scholars. In admirably clear prose, Grendler summarizes the development of universities in Italy from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries. The purpose and form of this book resemble his previous work on pre-university education, which won the Marraro Prize and has been justly praised for elucidating the critical role of humanistic schooling in the Renaissance. Grendler's knowledge of Renaissance professors, students, texts, and curricula, combined with careful analysis of university archives and the relevant secondary literature, results in a wide-ranging and authoritative study that will be a benchmark for years to come.

The book begins with a chronological overview of each university, grouped together in four chapters. Bologna and Padua receive pride of place in chapter 1, owing to their early foundation, large enrollment, and significant impact in defining what the Italian univer-

sity would be. Three subsequent "waves" of higher education in the late medieval and Renaissance periods resulted in the establishment of universities in other Italian cities, including (in order) Naples, Siena, Rome, Perugia, Pisa, Florence, Pavia, Turin, Ferrara, Catania, Macerata, Salerno, Messina, and Parma. As Grendler points out, some of these institutions opened and closed their doors frequently on account of internal squabbles, lack of funding, or war. Some were "incomplete universities" or "paper universities"—that is, they might offer instruction but not grant degrees, or vice versa. The early records of these universities—particularly in cities that experienced invasion such as Padua and Rome—are frustratingly incomplete, and Grendler is honest about the gaps in his archival sources. For each university, Grendler lays out the occasion of its founding, his estimates for student enrollment and faculty, and the particular strengths or weaknesses of that institution. After a dozen iterations, this formulaic approach can become tedious. Nevertheless, it introduces the reader to each institution and provides a baseline from which Grendler can offer genuine comparisons. Indeed, one of the strengths of this book is the detailed intellectual and institutional history that

Grendler has woven together. In addition, he goes beyond the recitation of facts and figures to write a kind of cultural history of university life.

My favorite chapter is entitled “The University in Action.” This chapter offers an overview of the chief topics in university life, including (among others) pedagogy, language of instruction, student living, finances, and professorial life. Grendler is too accomplished a historian to be seduced into historical anachronism. Yet one of the pleasures of this book, particularly for those of us who live and work inside a university, is the opportunity to draw parallels between the Renaissance university and our own. For example, Grendler demonstrates how the University of Rome suffered because too many of its faculty were busy “consulting” on outside projects to the detriment of their teaching responsibilities. The changing balance between the faculty of arts and the faculty of law, and to whom the prince or the civil government might award new professorships, easily evokes images of modern departments vying for new tenure lines or additional adjunct faculty. The University of Siena took advantage of civil disturbances and economic troubles elsewhere to poach star faculty like Pietro Pomponazzi from the University of Padua, only to see him return when peace prevailed. Additional comments about town-and-gown relations, faculty pensions, academic dress, or FTEs help us to realize how little the university has changed. Thankfully professors are no longer fined by student rectors if their teaching is deemed inadequate (though the role of student evaluations continues to play an important role now as then).

Another pleasure of this book is the way in which it challenges some traditional assumptions and stereotypes about higher education in Renaissance Italy. The university in Rome (La Sapienza), for example, offered little instruction in canon law, notwithstanding its proximity to the Vatican. Despite Florentine primacy in many Renaissance fields (and in Anglo-American historiography), it was Siena that founded the first university in Tuscany. Italian universities differed strongly from their British counterparts in that Italy offered virtually no bachelor’s degrees, only doctoral degrees. Grendler also recognizes that while many institutions shared common features, they also diverged in important ways. Some universities aggressively courted academic “stars” from distant lands, while others enacted protective legislation that reserved nearly all spots for local residents. Some universities were clearly under the thumb of the Pope or a prince, while others were governed largely by civic agencies. In dispelling some myths and confirming other truths,

Grendler provides the clearest view yet of how these institutions functioned in the context of the Renaissance.

The second half of the book, entitled “Teaching and Research,” adopts a topical approach to different areas of study: humanities, logic, natural philosophy, medicine, theology, moral philosophy, mathematics, and law. For each subject, Grendler explores the principal texts, the major practitioners or theorists, the typical teaching methods, and so forth. It is in this part of the book that his vast reading in both primary and secondary sources is most evident. Numerous bibliographic citations pepper the notes. It is clear that the Renaissance university offered a blend of tradition and innovation. Here too the formulaic approach can occasionally become tedious, and the work sometimes resembles a reference work rather than a scholarly monograph. Given Grendler’s recent stint as editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, perhaps this is not surprising. Nevertheless, the structural clarity of each chapter and the amusing anecdotes about university life make it easier to follow. And unlike an antiseptic work of reference, the author takes a firm stance on several arguments.

Grendler does not shrink from stating his views about humanism and humanists (both new and old). He follows the tradition of Jacob Burckhardt, Eugenio Garin, and Paul Oskar Kristeller in proclaiming the essential role of fifteenth-century Italian humanists in transforming the Scholastic medieval curriculum. In contrast to Robert Black and others who have argued for strong continuity of the medieval intellectual tradition, Grendler sees a “revolution” fomented by the humanists in Italy.[2] This change did not touch all aspects of university life, of course, but Grendler argues that (with the exception of theology) teaching and research by 1600 were very different than they had been two hundred years earlier. This is the same argument that he made in *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, and it is one that he has promoted elsewhere in debates on nomenclature and periodization.[3] It is, in essence, a positive view of the Renaissance and its contributions to the Western intellectual tradition. In this vein, Grendler also argues that Italian (Catholic) universities were often more tolerant than Protestant universities in Britain or parts of the Holy Roman Empire. This argument certainly holds true for Venice/Padua, and Grendler works hard to extend the argument southward. Grendler also argues for a less polemical view of the Catholic Reformation. He takes issue with those who blame every aspect of Italy’s seventeenth-century decline on the Catholic Reformation, pointing out that censorship was not as widespread in university life as has been

commonly perceived.

The final chapter of the book, entitled “Recessional,” analyzes the multiple reasons for the decline of Italian universities in the seventeenth century. Internal weakness and external events combined to eclipse Italy’s leading role, as students began to study elsewhere for their degrees or even to forego a university degree altogether. According to Grendler, it was a combination of persistent inflation, outside competition, declining civic investment, faculty provincialism, and proliferation of other degree-granting institutions that led to a weakened set of institutions. Grendler’s keynote address at the Renaissance Society of America’s annual conference in Toronto in March 2003 echoed many of the ideas presented here, and makes clear why *circa* 1630 is a logical terminus for this study of Italian Renaissance universities.

#### Notes

[1]. Paul F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300-1600* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

[2]. Robert Black, *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Tradition and Innovation in Latin Schools from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Of course Black focuses primarily on pre-university education, not higher education.

[3]. Paul F. Grendler, “The Italian Renaissance in the Past Seventy Years: Humanism, Social History, and Early Modern in Anglo-American and Italian Scholarship” in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Grieco, Michael Rocke, and Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2002), pp. 3-23.

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