Dictionary of the Middle Ages

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Volume 13
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Prepared by Wm. J. Richardson Associates, Inc.

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS • NEW YORK
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SCHOOLS, PALACE


CHARLES W. JONES

[See also Anchorites; Arts, Seven Liberal; Brethren of the Common Life; Calendars and Reckoning of Time; Canterbury; Carolingians and the Carolingian Empire; Cato's Distichs; Chivalry; Church, Latin; Clergy; Com- putus; Dictamen; Franciscans; Hermits, Eremitism; Historiography, Western European; Medicine, History of; Mendicant Orders; Merovingians; Mirror of Princes; Monasticism, Byzantine; Monasticism, Origins; Pepin III and the Donation of Pepin; Quadrivium; Rhetoric; Sex Actes Mundi; Trivium; and individual personalities.]

SCHOOLS, PALACE. Schools (scholae) were a prominent feature of court life in many barbarian monarchies during the early Middle Ages. Schola seems not to have had a precise, fixed meaning. Most historians prefer to translate schola as "the group or corporation of young people at court." Many ecclesiastical and secular officials received their early training at court. Children usually joined the palace entourage shortly after puberty. To judge from some of the school texts created by the masters, instruction was quite elementary. Riddles, jokes, and question-and-answer dialogues between masters and students seem to have been the chief pedagogical methods employed.

The training dispensed at the palace was essentially vocational. Young princes and the sons of nobles who were sent to court for instruction and to cement the ties of their families to the king were schooled in the military and bureaucratic duties they would later assume. In the early Frankish courts, supervision of the young people was entrusted to the mayor of the palace. The atmosphere in the palace schools was quite informal. There was no fixed curriculum. Instruction could take place anywhere in the palace, including in the baths, and at any time. Relationships among students and their mentors was quite convivial. Some texts complain of excessive drinking. Some parents worried about the immorality at court.

The best-known palace school was that of the Carolingians, particularly during the reign of Charlemagne (768–814), when masters such as Alcuin and Einhard were among those who directed the school. Royal patronage made the palace a magnet that attracted poets, grammarians, and liturgists from Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, Spain, and Italy. It was the most literary of the early court schools. The notaries in the royal chancery, the manuscript illuminators, the scribes responsible for disseminating Carolingian minuscule, and medical practitioners were all linked to the school. Later Carolingian kings continued to draw scholars to their courts. In the Carolingian view, the school served a sharply defined function: to establish norms of behavior and practice and to produce individuals capable of realizing the ideal of a Christian society.

Later in the ninth century, the Anglo-Saxon Alfred the Great established a school at his court, while on the Continent some tenth-century nobles in France and Germany continued the tradition of the palace school. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the academic functions of the palace school had been taken over by the monastic, cathedral, and municipal schools, and, later, by the universities. The courts continued to remain centers of artistic and literary patronage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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[See also Alcuin of York; Alfred the Great; Carolingians and the Carolingian Empire; Charlemagne; Einhard; Mayor of the Palace; Universities.]