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Rainer Christoph Schwinges, who was Professor of Medieval History at the University of Berne until 2008, is among the most knowledgeable experts on the history of universities and education during the late Middle Ages. The book under review brings together important essays of recent decades which have already been published elsewhere and in which the arguments of his pioneering Habilitationsschrift of 1986 are to some extent prepared, but largely developed further. In addition, gaps in the research are identified and the recently begun long-term project of a Repertorium Academicum Germanicum (RAG) is outlined.

This collection of essays is divided into five sections. The title of the first is simply ‘The University’. In it, Schwinges identifies the basic outline of how universities developed in the Holy Roman Empire and their typological peculiarities (pp. 3–17), and discusses their corporate constitution (pp. 19–33) and how they were financed (pp. 35–55). His comments on ‘Results and State of University History’ (pp. 57–84) show how his social history approach responded to certain deficits of research on education that had long been strongly shaped by the history of ideas. In this tradition, the medieval university was interpreted as an egalitarian scientific community to which status thinking was irrelevant. Schwinges, by contrast, stresses that the universities were ‘faithful mirror-images of the society . . . of which they were a part’ (p. 61). Consequently, he argues, any attempt to study them must also be an ‘analysis of inequality’, which can best be achieved by an evaluation of ‘large-scale serial sources’, in other words, various student registers (p. 64). The German-language area provides a highly favourable situation in this respect, as student registers have survived relatively intact for a long period. In them, students were often entered according to their social rank, revealing a social range corresponding to medieval society from peniless pauper to aristocratic student.

If we see the university as a social body, the phenomena of ‘Fre-
quency, Recruitment and Migration’ are crucial, and they are the subject of the second section of this volume. With the topic of fluctuating numbers of university students over time (‘frequency’) Schwinges touches on the work of Franz Eulenburg, but uses a much more sophisticated methodology. The complex procedure of a time series analysis allows him to demonstrate that university attendance in the Holy Roman Empire during the fifteenth century (Reichsfrequenz) followed a cyclical structure. Upswings can be discerned in the period from 1385 to around 1430, and again from 1450 to 1480, while phases of stagnation can be observed from about 1430 to 1450 and again from 1480 until into the sixteenth century. It could be objected that the statistical analysis of medieval student registers is a tricky matter, given that by far not all students were entered in these registers, and conversely, not everyone who was enrolled at a university was a student. Schwinges, however, points out rightly that despite these problems, university registers are among ‘the best serial sources that have ever been preserved’ (p. 97). He suggests that a degree of uncertainty should not prevent this sort of fundamental research from being undertaken (pp. 87–118). The general findings concerning Reichsfrequenz are confirmed in the essay on Franconia (pp. 159–90). This example also casts light on the regional catchment areas of German universities. The University of Leipzig, in particular, attracted students from Franconia, as did the universities of Vienna and Erfurt. Findings on the ‘migration’ of German students in general are informative. It transpires that they were much less mobile than the popular image of the ‘wandering scholar’ might suggest (pp. 119–34). More than 80 per cent of students only ever travelled between their homes and their universities. Only 10 to 20 per cent of students attended a second university, and no more than 2 to 5 per cent went to a third one, while the chance to travel to a foreign university remained the preserve of a tiny percentage of especially well-to-do students.

The next section, ‘Groups, Classes, Estates’, looks first at the pau-
peres at universities (pp. 237–63). Their most important distinguishing features were not only a low income of less than 12 to 16 Gulden per annum, but also a lack of connections. Even among themselves, they generally networked less than students from the middle and upper classes. They received reductions on the fees they paid, but this hardly compensated for the other disadvantages they suffered, such as being allocated seats in the back rows at lectures. Their share
of the student population was remarkably constant throughout the whole fifteenth century, although their distribution across the German universities differed. While even less mobile than the other students, they more often completed an academic degree. A further essay in this section deals with students at the other end of the social scale, those from aristocratic families (pp. 317–37). They could also be exempted from paying fees, but as a mark of respect and in the hope that they would voluntarily donate larger amounts. Schwinges demonstrates that the percentage of aristocratic students attending universities in the south of the Holy Roman Empire was higher than in the north. This may have been connected with the fact that universities in the south were closer to the legal universities of Italy, which offered the most attractive options for aristocratic students.

The fourth section looks at important aspects of ‘University Culture and Student Life’, starting with the organizational units of medieval Bursen (students’ hostels, pp. 341–87) and Kollegien (courses of lectures, pp. 389–99), and at the formal procedures associated with admitting students to university (pp. 401–29). The sometimes extreme initiation rituals practised by the student body and other ceremonies at the universities are also discussed (pp. 489–512). The essay on ‘Student Education, Student Life’, finally, sums up many of these themes and provides a concise account of the content of courses and accommodation and living costs (pp. 431–88). It also asks what place women could have at university. The examples cited from Italian universities are explicitly presented as exceptions to the rule (p. 439).

The fifth and final section is devoted to the themes ‘Studies, Career, and Profile’, and asks what career chances there were for university graduates. First it should be noted that the majority of university students in the Holy Roman Empire attended the arts faculty (Artistenfakultät) which had little weight within the university compared with the other faculties (pp. 609–36). Even after attending university, its graduates did not have good prospects as the demand for their services was not big enough either in the Church or the gradually professionalizing secular institutions (pp. 553–78). On the basis of two ego documents, Schwinges demonstrates that only the interplay between academic qualification and patronage could guarantee a secure livelihood. He analyses the personal notebook and account book of a student and later clergyman from Cologne, who was
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patronized by his uncle and, in turn, supported his own nephew (pp. 529–51). Here, as a change from the otherwise dominant quantitative methods, new methodological paths are trodden. Comments on the career patterns of a group of university students from Cologne demonstrate once again that the Church, above all, offered a suitable field of activity for scholars. Lawyers, in particular, often found well-paid livings at collegiate churches (Stiftskirchen) (pp. 512–28). Beyond this, much remains to be clarified concerning the significance of scholarly knowledge and its bearers for the processes of change in late medieval Europe. The long-term project of a Repertorium Academicon Germanicum,¹ which aims eventually to assemble data on all graduate scholars in the Holy Roman Empire between 1250 and 1550, will undoubtedly make it possible to take prosopographical approaches to a new level (pp. 579–607).

Even if a certain amount of repetition is inevitable whenever collected essays are reprinted, this publication is welcome. It allows quick orientation within the social history research on education of recent decades, which was largely influenced by the studies assembled here. Given the high price of the volume, however, the editorial sloppiness of the publisher in some of the sections is irritating. In addition to a number of printing errors in German texts (pp. 128, 179, 321, 440) and in Latin quotations (p. 443), something seems to have gone badly wrong in the scanning-in of an English essay (pp. 443 ff.) We can put up with the fact that the page numbers of the first edition, which appear in the margin, wander in one instance (p. 472), but it becomes very confusing when the number moves into the text straight after a date (p. 174).


GEORG STRACK’s dissertation on a prominent German student and learned counsellor of the fifteenth century has been published as Thomas Pirkheimer (1418–1473): Gelehrter Rat und Frühhumanist (2010). He is coordinator of the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the University of Munich, and is currently preparing a second book on papal oratory in the Middle Ages.