CAMBRIDGE: SYMBOLS, DEVELOPMENT, UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: Getting to know Cambridge, no matter if it is the university or the old town, usually creates a great connection with the place, even if rarely people have enough knowledge about the development and evolution of this special location.

More than eight centuries ago, people started to make use of the major privileges that the town had. Considered a wealthy, reachable and economically stable area, competitors such as the medieval universities Stamford and Northampton had its role in helping the place to develop magnificently.

The purpose of the hereby article is to present the way in which the University of Cambridge managed to turn itself into an institution of worldwide eminence, even if the times and the harsh national events weren't always extremely favourable.

Keywords: history, trade, scholars, university, success

The history of Cambridge people reaches back far beyond the foundation of the university to at least the Iron Age. The earliest known areas of occupation were on the high ground the castle mound to the north of the town and alongside St. Bene't's Church by King's Parade; one was defendable, the other a good place from which to trade. In due course, its position in the richest part of medieval England, on a major river leading to the North Sea and the country's main trading partners, made it **an important town of business**.

Thus, for centuries Cambridge has been **a place that people could**, by the standards of the time, **easily reach and leave**. Such good communications would prove essential to building a university community. Even before this, however, the importance of Cambridge to the country's military network and trade attracted the attention of the country's kings. Soon after the Norman Conquest of 1066, William I had a castle built near the area once occupied

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by the Romans; its remains survive as the castle mound. In the early 1070s, William raised his standard at the castle before subduing Hereward the Wake in fens.

By the early 1200s Cambridge had become an important trading centre from which the Crown derived customs revenue. By the fourteenth century the town possessed substantial leather and wool industries. Grain was collected and dispatched through King's Lynn to London and abroad; wine, salt, fish, timber and metals were typical imports.

Cambridge remained a significant inland port up to 1700s. These were centuries when inland ports were crucial parts of the country's distribution network, as they were both safer from marauding foreigners and easier for English traders in central England to reach than were coastal ports. Cambridge was at the centre of a web of waterways which stretched through its rich hinterland. Centuries before logistics consultants theorized about optimal distribution networks, Cambridge operated as a distribution hub at the centre of the richest part of England.

This **trading background** explains what must be a mystery to many of those in modern Cambridge who notice the emblems within the city's **shield of arms** on the Guildhall in the Market Square. Drawn up in 1575, the charges on the shield include three ships in full sail with two enormous seashores as supporters on either side. Such vessels would have been capable of navigating both the River Cam and the North Sea. From the mid-1100s to the late 1400s, the majority of England's foreign trade was conducted from its east coast with the Hansa towns, along the north-west coast of continental Europe, and the Nordic countries. When the English went south in this period, it was as often to fight the French and Spanish as it was to trade with them. At this time the east coast was more peaceful. The benefit to the town of this trading pattern was similar to that which Liverpool derived in the nineteenth century from trade with America. This increase in prosperity, like its good communications, was an important factor in attracting a community of scholars in the town.

A town with a healthy pre-existing economic structure was an essential prerequisite for an economically unproductive group of scholars, in order that they had access not only to the necessities of life but also to the more esoteric requirements of their lifestyle, such as parchment, ink and clerical clothing. The wealth was important for another reason; it attracted monastic houses. The Benedictines had been in eastern England since the seventh century; they valued the tranquility and isolation of the Fens, and built up substantial landholdings in

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this area after the Norman Conquest. Monasteries were established in the heart of Cambridge in the twelfth century, before the university existed. From 1092 the Augustinians took over the site in Cambridge that was destined, after occupation by the Benedictines, to become Magdalene College in the sixteenth century. In 1138 the Benedictines preceded the nuns of St Radegund in the area later adopted by Jesus College. By the 1230s the Franciscans had moved into the area just south of the Round Church and the Dominicans had purchased space to the cast of the old town. Carmelites, White Canons and the Friars of the Sack all followed by the end of the fourteenth century.

Some of the religious orders, particularly the Dominicans and the Franciscans, had a tradition of teaching and there was a small community of monk-scholars already established in Cambridge before the Oxford scholars arrived. It is probable that some people in the medieval town visited the friars as much for instruction as for confession, even before the advent of the university.

Good communications, wealth and an emerging tradition of learning were all significant in ensuring that a successful university was established. **Chance** also had an important part to play, however. When the England of King John was under Papal Interdict, the burghers of Oxford were emboldened to try and hang under civil law two scholars for the rape of a woman by a third scholar whom they could not apprehend. This was doubly illegal. Even had they apprehended the right scholar the civil authorities did not have the legal right to punish members of the university; scholars were obliged to take minor orders within the Church, giving them the legal protection of clergy. The Church alone thus held the right to try them and to determine their punishment under canon law.

The Oxford academic community left their town in protest at this action and the university closed for five years. Most of the scholastic community travelled to Paris, Reading or Cambridge, each of which had a tradition of learning. The educated elite in Europe was already itinerant in the thirteenth century. The choice of Cambridge as one of the scholars' destinations was not just because of the town's wealth or because of the tradition of learning already established by the religious houses. Rather, as a further example of the chance surrounding the university's foundation, it happened that one of the leading Oxford scholars, a Dr John Grim, came from East Anglia and possibly Cambridge itself; indeed, he was accompanied by others with East Anglian names, such as Blunt. For some, at least, of the

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scholars this was a homecoming. This influx of Oxford students to Cambridge in 1209 is generally accepted as the foundation date of the university, although there was certainly a self-constituted and self-governing monastic community by that time which could attract and absorb the migrating scholars. There are, however, other credible foundation dates. It was only in 1233 that the Pope granted the scholars' community the status of a 'studium', a recognized centre of learning, but one without the charters which gave vital legal privileges. The more important status of a 'studium generale', which signified possession of several faculties with accredited masters teaching scholars from outside the immediate neighbourhood, was not achieved until 1318. It marked the transition from a loose association of local scholars into the equivalent of a recognized guild with a legally defined character and the full support of the Church. **Degrees from Cambridge** would henceforth be recognized throughout Christendom.

These are, however, less appealing dates to those raising funds for the university today. Eight hundred years later, the university used the 1209 anniversary to trigger a major fundraising effort. A foundation date of 1209 places Cambridge eighth, just after Oxford, in the list of the Europe's oldest universities. In 1233 there were thirteen European universities; by 1318 the number had risen to nineteen.

Among the universities of medieval Europe neither of the two English universities could therefore claim notable longevity or indeed intellectual leadership. English scholars were sensitive for centuries about the young age and modest reputation of both Cambridge and Oxford. Ludicrous claims about ancient lineage were made to counter these perceived weaknesses; for example, even in the 1550s one important member of the university, Dr John Caius, wrote that the Spanish prince Cantaber, a governor under King Arthur in the sixth century, had founded the university. Oxford's claims were equally farcical.

After the chance arrival of Oxford scholars, there was one further essential condition on which the long-term success of a medieval academic community depended; the ability of its leaders to attract the Crown's support. The country's rulers had long been aware of the **military and trading significance of Cambridge**, but for the place to become of intellectual relevance was a new challenge. It was still uncertain in the thirteenth century that Cambridge would secure the necessary support, as King John's interest in Cambridge was only

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commercial. He had granted licences for the renowned Garlic and Stourbridge Fairs of Cambridge, but made no significant impact on the scholars' community.

In addition, there were other rich and accessible places whose academic credentials rivaled those of Cambridge. Hereford, Exeter, Lincoln and York, as well as London, Stamford and Northampton, were such towns. Most of these also had cathedral schools of high repute. However, in medieval times neither Oxford nor Cambridge possessed a cathedral and this, perversely, helped attract monarchs' interest. During an era when there was no more critical issue than the balance of power between the supra-national Catholic Church and the state, the twenty-mile distance of Cambridge from the diocesan seat in Ely would have appealed to the secular rulers of the kingdom. Similarly, there was no tradition in the area of dominance by a feudal magnate who might have subverted a university's independence.

Even if the bishop was at some distance from Cambridge, academic communities could always be vulnerable to local traders and merchants who more possessions and economic power. So, in order for a university to prosper, the monarchy granted privileges which, in the case of Cambridge University, permitted its academics to control rents, weights and measures, to own property which was exempt from death duties and to be responsible for law and order.

More concrete support for the scholarly community was forthcoming later in the thirteenth century. By the time John's grandson, Edward I, had succeeded to the throne the need for educated clerics to run the state was recognized and in the 1290s Edward issued a charter confirming the secular privileges of the university. The next king, Edward II, supported the petition to the pope for recognition of the university as a 'studium generale' in 1318. A year earlier, this king had established the Society of King's Scholars, which Edward III later endowed as King's Hall. This was effectively a fixed branch of the itinerant Chapel Royal whose younger members, in return for lodging and education, helped tend to the spiritual needs of the king. The role of the Society in Cambridge was to train young court protégés, known as the 'Kyng's childer', the best of whom could in due course be royal and public servants. The idea of a community of scholars at Cambridge that could serve the country's interests had emerged.

Through to the fourteenth century Oxford and Cambridge still faced competition from other scholars' communities in England; Northampton and Stamford were the most

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threatening. Northampton had an established tradition of learning and attracted Cambridge scholars from time to time, occasionally in unfortunate circumstances. In 1260 a violent dispute between the townspeople of Cambridge and university members resulted in the hanging of sixteen townsfolk, while in an early demonstration of how the university community was always to be treated differently, the twenty-eight students found guilty were pardoned. Some, nonetheless, decamped to join the academic community at Northampton. In 1261, despite Cambridge and Oxford pleading for it to be closed, Henry III recognized Northampton's academic community. Henry did close the university four years later, but only as a punishment for Northampton's support for the de Montfort insurrection; the town was forbidden in perpetuity to have a university within its boundaries. It was not until 2005 that a university reopened at Northampton, and, astonishingly, serious consideration was given to whether there was an enduring legal obstacle from Henry's III perpetual ban. It was concluded, however, that the protection granted to Oxford and Cambridge was no longer needed and so the ban was irrelevant. Lingering doubts were dispelled by the pedantic argument that the university would in any event be located outside what would have been the town boundary of 1265.

Similarly, Stamford in Lincolnshire also contained a medieval community of scholars with the potential to rival Cambridge. The town had nurtured several monastic communities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Both oxford and Cambridge universities complained in the mid-1300 to Edward III that a university in Stamford would be 'to the disadvantage and dishonor of both (their) universities,' demonstrating, along with the protests over Northampton's status, that even at this early stage in their existence Oxford and Cambridge were capable of closing ranks in defence of their elite status. Stamford issued degrees for only a short period in the 1330s and its main role may even have been as a cramming centre for Oxford and Cambridge. Despite its suppression in 1334 it concerned Oxford University sufficiently for its leaders to insist up to the late fifteenth century that all its scholars took an oath not to study at Stamford. In another echo from medieval England, Stamford tried in the 1990s to rekindle its academic aspirations through attempting to host the University of Lincolnshire; however, a site near Lincoln was chosen instead.

From the 1330s until the 1830s England had only two universities on which the benefits of royal protection were conferred; other European countries, less unified than

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England, had far more. By 1600, to England's two, there were thirteen universities on the Iberian Peninsula and a further fifteen in France. Those amongst the German States numbered thirteen; even Scotland had three by the late 1400s, with a fourth, Edinburgh, founded in 1582. The states of Italy led the field with twenty-two. The independent states within France, Italy and Germany each jealously protected their regional cultural identity through their own universities. It was not until the nineteenth century, through the ambition of Napoleon, that the French system of higher education was nationalized in the manner in which the English had nationalized theirs in the Middle Ages; Italy and Germany had to wait until their countries were unified in the late nineteenth century for a national system of higher education. By this time regional universities on the European continent were too deeply established for a single national champion of higher education to emerge. The focus of the English state on just these two universities played a significant part in their eventual emergence as the two most outstanding European seats of learning. Furthermore and in contrast to the educated English elite, virtually all of whom came out of two very similar moulds, elites elsewhere in Europe were nurtured in disparate ways. This has had profound historical and cultural implications. The reconciliation required after every period of civil war is much more easily achieved if the former antagonists had once been schooled together. It might also explain how the negotiations of the ruling coalition, which began its government of Britain in 2010, between Cameron (Oxford) and Clegg (Cambridge) could apparently be concluded over a weekend. The negotiations of an Italian coalition between potential members of a government typically linger over six months.

Charles de Gaulle touched on this point after his difficulties in the 1960s with the students and workers: with a Gallic shrug he wondered aloud 'how any one man could rule a country with 258 varieties of cheese.' This was an eloquent reference to the problems of ruling a country with such immense cultural diversity, a diversity in part maintained by the large number of universities which had long protected the distinct cultural traditions of their regions.

The peace and quiet of the Fens, the wealth of eastern England and the patronage of the Church and of the state were factors which combined to ensure that a university thrived in Cambridge. Nonetheless, there were occasions, such as the periods of religious revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when its prestige and existence were at stake. During

the 1540s, for example, Henry VIII was only just dissuaded by advisors from purloining the wealth accumulated by the colleges; yet, after this traumatic period, Cambridge University flourished from the mid-sixteenth century, showing that as an institution it had truly passed into maturity and was able to handle the rough-and-tumble of the real world beyond its ivory towers.

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