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Sorbonne

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Introduction

The Sorbonne is neither a single building nor a single moment in history. It is an idea, an institution, and a powerful symbol, woven into the very fabric of intellectual life in France and, arguably, Europe. For centuries, its name has evoked a rich legacy of scholarship, debate, and discovery—a meeting point for ideas, disciplines, and people that have shaped the course of Western thought. The story of the Sorbonne is inseparable from the story of Paris, of France, and of the modern world, influencing not only the development of higher education but also the trajectory of scientific, political, and cultural revolutions.

The origins of the Sorbonne can be traced to the lively, bustling Paris of the Middle Ages, a city transforming into one of Europe's greatest intellectual centers. The university that emerged from the cathedral schools of Notre-Dame would soon become a crucible for theological debate, philosophical dispute, and the exploration of new knowledge. At its heart was the Maison de Sorbonne, founded in 1257 by Robert de Sorbon, as a place where impoverished students could pursue their studies without the burden of want—a revolutionary mission in its own right. Quickly, this college achieved a preeminent position, so much so that “the Sorbonne” became synonymous with the University of Paris as a whole.

Over the centuries, the institution faced both triumphs and tumult. It was at the vanguard of major intellectual movements: medieval scholasticism, the Renaissance's rediscovery of classical learning, the Enlightenment's inquiries into reason and nature. It withstood religious wars and political upheaval, and became a stage for figures ranging from Richelieu to Marie Curie. The Sorbonne's libraries amassed treasures rivaling those of royalty and popes, and its teachers shaped generations of students from across Europe and beyond.

The modern era brought profound change, as the Sorbonne navigated the turmoil of the French Revolution, the rigid reorganization of Napoleonic France, and the sweeping reforms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its halls have borne witness to waves of student activism, most dramatically in May 1968, when the university became a focal point for a national movement demanding social and academic change. The resulting transformation saw the historic University of Paris dissolved and replaced by a network of new institutions, forever altering the landscape of French higher education.

As the story enters the twenty-first century, we see another act of rebirth. The present-day Sorbonne University—formed by the merger of historic faculties—stands as a testament to both tradition and innovation. Its pursuits span the full range of

knowledge, from the humanities and social sciences to physics, medicine, and engineering. It attracts students and researchers from all corners of the world, upholding the values of curiosity, critical inquiry, and engagement with the challenges of our age.

This book is the story of this remarkable university and its impact on society, culture, and knowledge itself. From its medieval origins to its contemporary revival, the Sorbonne offers a window into the evolution of the university as an institution and as an ideal. Its history reminds us that education is never static: it is a living, dynamic force, capable of inciting both tradition and revolution. The Sorbonne's journey, across eight centuries of intellectual adventure, is above all a testament to the enduring power of ideas.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Idea of the University: Education in Medieval Paris

The concept of the university, as we understand it today – a self-governing community of scholars dedicated to teaching and research, granting recognized degrees – was not born fully formed. Instead, it emerged gradually from the intellectual ferment of medieval Europe, and nowhere was this process more dynamic than in Paris during the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Before the grand structures and formal faculties, there were simply masters and students, drawn together by a shared thirst for knowledge, creating an informal yet powerful scholarly hub.

Imagine Paris in the 12th century. It was a city undergoing rapid transformation, burgeoning in population and importance. The Île de la Cité, with its majestic Notre-Dame Cathedral nearing completion, was the spiritual and administrative heart. Around it, on the Left Bank, a cluster of schools began to flourish, distinct from the monastic institutions that had previously dominated intellectual life. These were the cathedral schools, overseen by the chancellor of Notre-Dame, offering instruction beyond what was typically found within the cloister walls.

These early schools were less about brick-and-mortar buildings and more about the gathering of minds. A master, having received a license to teach, would set up shop – perhaps in a rented room, a public space, or even simply on a street corner – and attract students eager to learn. This itinerant nature was common; masters and students often traveled across Europe, seeking out the most renowned teachers or the most promising intellectual environments. Paris, with its growing reputation for dialectic and theology, quickly became a prime destination.

The curriculum of these cathedral schools was largely based on the liberal

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