

# The History Guide

## Lectures on Ancient and Medieval European History

### Peter Abelard, 1079-1142



Called *peripateticus palatinus* ("our imperial paladin") by John of Salisbury (1115-1180), Abelard was born at Le Palais, near Nantes. Abelard studied the *quadrivium*, probably under Thierry of Chartres, and dialectics, first under Roscelin (c.1050-1120?) and then under William of Champaux (1070-1121), archdeacon of Paris. Abelard set up schools of his own at Melun, at Corbeil, and afterward at Paris. Following his retirement to Brittany because of illness, he turned to theology under the direction of Anselm of Laon (1033-1109) and started teaching it himself at Paris in 1113. After his affair with Heloise, Abelard withdrew to the abbey of St. Denis, where he made his profession as a monk. Although he cared for regular discipline, he was too restless for the monastic life. His theological work, *On the Divine Unity and Trinity*, was burned at an

ecclesiastical council at Soissons in 1121 at the instance of his enemies.

Abelard founded the school of the Paraclete near Nogent-sur-Seine in 1125, left to become abbot of St. Gildas in Brittany, and returned to Paris to lecture at St. Geneviève, where John of Salisbury became his pupil in 1136. Abelard's manner more than his matter caused him no end to debate with his fellow Scholastics. St. Bernard (1090-1153), disliking Abelard's humanism, pushed through his condemnation at a council at Sens in 1141. An appeal to the pope brought another condemnation and an injunction against lecturing. The accusation of heresy, however, was false. Abelard retired to Cluny, where the abbot, Peter the Venerable, extolled his piety, modesty and dignity and also reconciled him to St. Bernard.

Abelard died at the Cluniac priory in St. Marcel-sur-Saône in 1142 and was buried with Heloise.

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Charles Homer Haskins on Abelard  
from *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927)

"Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher," and St. Bernard was first and foremost a preacher, and a fundamental preacher at that. Vain above all to him were pride of intellect and absorption in the learning of this world, and his harshest invectives were hurled at the most brilliant intellect of his age, Abelard, that "scrutinizer of majesty and fabricator of heresies," who "deems himself able by human reason to comprehend God altogether." Between a mystic like Bernard and a rationalist like Abelard there was no common ground, and for the time being the mystic had the church behind him. With Abelard we have another type of autobiography, the intellectual, in that long tale of misfortune which he addressed to an

unknown friend under the title of *Historia suarum calamitatum*.

Abelard, it is true, was a monk and an abbot, but he became such by force of circumstances and not from choice. Even when he retires into the forests of Champagne or the depths of Brittany, he has always one eye on Paris and his return thither; indeed, his *Historia calamitatum* seems to have been written to prepare the way for his coming back, to serve an immediate purpose rather than for posterity. It shows nothing of monastic humility or religious vocation, but, on the contrary, is full of arrogance of intellect and joy of combat, even of the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Its author was a vain man, vain of his penetrating mind and skill in debate, vain of his power to draw away others' students, vain even of his success with the fair sex -- so that he "feared no repulse from whatever woman he might deign to honor with his love" -- always sure of his own opinions and unsparing of his adversaries. He relies on talent rather than on formal preparation, venturing into the closed field of theology and even improvising lectures on those pitfalls of the unwary, the obscurest parts of the prophet Ezekiel. He was by nature always in opposition, a thorn in the side of intellectual and social conformity. In the classroom he was the bright boy who always knew more than his teachers and delighted to confute them, ridiculing old Anselm of Laon, whose reputation he declared to rest upon mere tradition, unsupported by talent or learning, notable chiefly for a wonderful flow of words without meaning or reason, "a fire which gave forth smoke instead of light," like the barren fig tree of the Gospel or the old oak of Lucan, mere shadow of a great name. In the monastery of Saint-Denis he antagonized the monks by attacking the traditions respecting their founder and patron saint. Always it is he who is right and his many enemies who are wrong. And, as becomes a history of his misfortunes, he pities himself much. Objectively, the facts of Abelard's autobiography can in the main be verified from his other writings and the statements of contemporaries. Subjectively, the *Historia calamitatum* confirms itself throughout, if we discern between the bursts of self-confidence the intervals or irresolution and despondency in what he tries to present as a consistently planned career. The prolixity and the citations of ancient authority are of the Middle Ages, as are the particular problems with which his mind was occupied, but the personality might turn up in any subsequent epoch -- "portrait of a radical by himself"! Yet, just as Heloise's joy in loving belongs to the ages, Abelard's joy in learning is more specifically of the new renaissance, of which he is the bright particular star....

In Abelard...we have one of the most striking figures of the medieval renaissance. Vain and self-conscious, as we have found him in his autobiography, his defects of temperament must not blind us to his great mental gifts. He was daring, original, brilliant, one of the first philosophical minds of the whole Middle Ages. First and foremost a logician, with an unwavering faith in the reasoning process, he fell in with the dialectic preoccupations of his age, and did more than any one else to define the problems and methods of scholasticism, at least in the matter of universals and in his *Sic et non*. The question of universals, the central though not the unique theme of scholastic philosophy, is concerned with the nature of general terms of conceptions, such as man, house, horse. Are these, as the Nominalists asserted, mere names and nothing more, an intellectual convenience at the most? Or are they realities, as the Realists maintained, having an existence quite independent of and apart from the particular individuals in which they may be for the moment objectified? A mere matter of logical terminology, you may say, of no importance in the actual world. Yet much depends upon the application. Apply the nominalistic doctrine to God, and the indivisible Trinity dissolves into three persons. Apply it to the Church, and the Church ceases to be a divine institution with a life of its own and becomes merely a convenient designation for the whole body of individual Christians. Apply it to the State, and where does political authority reside, in a sovereign whole or in the individual citizens? In this form, at least, the problem is still with us. Practical thinking cannot entirely shake itself free from

logic, and conversely, logic has sometimes practical consequences not at first realized.... It is not surprising to find that Abelard, like Roscellinus before him, ran into difficulties on the subject of the Trinity, being condemned for heresy at Soissons in 1121 and at Sens in 1141. Such conflicts were inevitable with one of Abelard's radical temper, who courted opposition and combat....

In another way Abelard contributed to the formation of scholasticism, in his *Sic et non*, or *Yes and No*. True, the method of collecting and arranging passages from the Fathers on specific topics has been used before, as in the *Sentences* of Anselm of Laon, but Abelard gave it a pungency and a wide popularity which associate it permanently with his name. Like everything he did, it was well advertised. His method was to take significant topics of theology and ethics and to collect from the Fathers their opinions pro and con, sharpening perhaps the contrast and being careful not to solve the real or seeming contradiction. Inerrancy he grants only to the Scriptures, apparent contradictions in which must be explained as due to scribal mistakes or defective understanding; subsequent authorities may err for other reasons, and when they disagree he claims the right of going into the reasonableness of the doctrine itself, of proving all things in order to hold fast that which is good. He has accordingly collected divergent sayings of the Fathers as they have come to mind, for the purpose of stimulating tender readers to the utmost effort in seeking out truth and of making them more acute as the result of such inquiry. "By doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we perceive truth." The propositions cover a wide range of topics and of reading; some are dismissed briefly, while others bring forth long citations.... Some...., one can almost imagine briefed on either side in modern manuals for the training of debaters. Some such purpose, the stimulating of discussion among his pupils, seems to have been Abelard's primary object, but the emphasis upon contradiction rather than upon agreement and the failure to furnish any solutions, real or superficial, tended powerfully to expose the weaknesses in the orthodox position and to undermine authority generally.

### Internet Resources

[Abelard biography](#) (Jacques Maritain Center)

[Abelard of Le Pallet](#)

[Peter Abelard](#) (Catholic Encyclopedia)

[Biographical Sketch](#) (James E. Keifer)

[Heloise: Letter to Abelard](#)

[Historia Calamitatum](#) (selections)

[Historia Calamitatum](#) (full text)

[Peripateticus Palatinus: The Story of Abelard](#) (Bill East, ORB)

The film, *Stealing Heaven* (1988), dwells on the affair between Abelard and Heloise but also contains details about Abelard's academic life. The film is worth seeing just for the imagery it provides about university life during the 12th century Renaissance.

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