1. Origins

After more than 120 years of historical research we still lack a detailed knowledge of the life of Meister Eckhart. On the contrary, modern research has given rise to unfounded hypotheses and even to fantasies. The main reason for this is that most sources that could give us firsthand information have perished over the course of six centuries due to wars, fires, and the dissolution of monasteries. So only some fragments of the acts of the annual provincial chapters of the German Dominican provinces have been preserved. They contain decisions and dispositions including assignations for studies and for offices such as lector (teacher in a priory). Yet none of them contains anything on Meister Eckhart.

The first certain biographical date we have for Meister Eckhart is from Easter (18 April) 1294, when, as lector Sententiarum, he preached a sermon in Paris. This gives us a secure date from which to infer the curriculum of studies that he had to pursue in order to reach this position. The position of lector Sententiarum at the theological faculty of the University of Paris—also called baccalaureus formatus—was a two-year teaching assignment.
to lecture on the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard. This was the set handbook for systematic theology. The *lector Sententiarum* also assisted the *magister* in disputations. The task of lector was the decisive qualification for a theologian to advance to become a *magister* at this faculty himself—the most prestigious position in occidental theology.\(^3\) The Dominican order assigned only the most promising members to this office and only after they had already had a long teaching experience. As the Faculty of Theology at Paris had fixed the minimum age for promotion to the position of *magister* at the age of 35,\(^4\) it has commonly been assumed that Eckhart may have been born around 1260. This, however, is just a hypothesis, since it is possible that he was older when he was promoted, or even that he was a few years younger, as had been the case with Thomas Aquinas. In this chapter I will show that it is more probable to suppose that Eckhart had been born some years before 1260, perhaps in 1250 or even some years earlier. In any case, we cannot be sure of the year of his birth.

A Paris university sermon on the Feast of St Augustine (28 August) or the translation of his relics (28 February) was reported “*ab ore magistri Echardi de hochheim.*”\(^5\) Heinrich Suso Denifle, who found this document and was the first to critically investigate the sources of Meister Eckhart’s life and work, inferred from this that Hochheim, according to medieval naming conventions, was his birthplace.\(^6\) Today there are several places with this name. Denifle found a document, where, in 1305, 19 May, *Magister Eckardus* attests to a donation made by the late “*Dominus Eckhardus miles dictus de Hochheim*” to the Cistercian nuns’ abbey of the Holy Cross at Gotha.\(^7\) He concluded from this that the Meister was a son of that knight and thus came from the village of Hochheim north of Gotha.

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\(^3\) Palémon Glorieux, “L’enseignement au moyen âge: techniques et méthodes en usage à la Faculté de Théologie de Paris au XIIIe siècle,” *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 43 (1968), 65–186, see 98–100 and 141. On the duration of the lectures on the *Sententiae*, see Appendix 1 of the present volume.


