On 18 April 1294, on Easter day, a young academic rose to preach in the Church of Saint-Jacques in Paris. The solemn sermon which he pronounced on that occasion was noted down by a member of the public, and a few years later a finished copy of the text was deposited in the library of the convent of Kremsmünster in Germany, where it is still preserved today. A marginal note in the codex reveals the name of the Dominican who had been given such an honorable status: he was “Brother Eckhart, lecturer on the Sentences.” This document, which has survived by chance, is the first witness in documentary history to the one who was to become famous by being named “Meister Eckhart.”

The Easter sermon of 1294 is significant for a reconstruction of Eckhart’s life, for it enables us to make a series of biographical deductions. He is designated as “Lecturer on the Sentences” and we know that Peter Lombard’s Sentences were commented on by the bachelors of the Faculty of Theology. Given that the Parisian statutes prescribe for this office the minimum age of 33, we can conclude that Eckhart was born before 1260. His family belonged to lower nobility, coming from Hochheim, and had moved close by, to Tambach, near Gotha, in Thuringia. Eckhart must have entered the Dominican order when he was at least 18 years of age, having already mastered Latin and with a basic culture whose breadth is indefinable. During his studies in Germany and in Paris, Eckhart must have successfully gone through the typical academic career of a Dominican student: three years of study of the “artes liberales,” two years of natural philosophy (centered around Aristotelian science), and three years of theology in a Studium particulare. We do not know where and with whom he studied. He may have known Albert the Great in Cologne. Albert died in 1280. The influence of Albert—who was then the greatest scholar and cultural organizer of the German Dominican province—on the initial education of Eckhart was, in any case, decisive. In the sermon, Eckhart attributes to the philosophers a rather important role, following explicitly Albert’s program which consisted of integrating the science of antiquity
and of the Arabs into Christian thought. Eckhart even appeals explicitly to the authority of Albert in a central passage of his sermon: “Albertus saepe dicebat...” With these words, the young bachelor proudly proclaimed the school to which he belonged.

The first document concerning Eckhart refers us to the most important cultural center of the medieval West (i.e. Paris), revealing a particularly significant aspect of the life of a Dominican intellectual, namely the characteristic mobility, also at an international level, which is utterly different from the *stabilitas loci* of the monastic intellectual belonging to the Benedictine order. We shall return further down to the doctrinal movements and the professors of the University of Paris in Eckhart’s time. But first, a Dominican priest had a local point of reference, namely the convent, which he had entered and of which he was a “son.” Eckhart belonged to the convent of Erfurt.

Erfurt was in Eckhart’s time one of the most important cities in Germany. It was situated at the crossroads of three commercial routes of first-rate importance; a bishopric, endowed with schools, monasteries, and libraries, it also hosted a Jewish community of considerable dimensions. The Dominicans founded a convent very early on. In 1229 construction was initiated by a member of the local aristocracy, and from there the Dominicans began their work of “colonizing” East Germany. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the importance of this convent remained central. This is confirmed by the fact that, as we shall see below, when the territories of northeast Germany were severed from the German province in order to create a new province (“Saxony”), the central seat of this new province was Erfurt. Eckhart thus grew up in a circle which, though situated at the outskirts with respect to the famous French or Italian universities and the papal curia, had a cultural dimension of a certain importance, however difficult it is for us to understand. But, especially, from the point of view of politics and religions, his convent was a strong and active propulsive center of cultural activity.

It is to his convent in Erfurt that Eckhart, on completion of his studies at Paris, returned, for we know with certainty that, between 1294 and 1298, he was elected prior of the convent in Erfurt. It is an election that indicates, most certainly, the man’s charisma, but which has nothing surprising about it, for in the Dominican order, the principle of alternation of the cultural and administrative roles was common practice. On his return from his Parisian experience, it was almost inevitable that the convent acknowledged a member who had had such a prestigious appointment with his election to the office of prior. Eckhart, however, was not only a