Our knowledge of Parisian scholastic theology around 1200 is uneven. Many works of contemporary masters still await edition. The dates of those securely attributed are often debated. And details of some of the masters’ lives are elusive. At the same time, research in this field of late, if not equally focused on all aspects of the subject, has expanded and has challenged older verities. Given this state of flux, and the gaps remaining, it is no surprise that few current scholars have hazarded an overview.1 Ideally, before proposing one, it would be desirable to read all the works surviving from this period so as to chart patterns of development and to assess whether the topics engaging current scholarly interest are truly representative. Here, we will have to settle for the studies eliciting recent attention. Surveying the present state of play highlights what we know, and also what we do not know, about the theologians and how they viewed and practiced their profession.

As is often noted, King Philip II’s charter of 1200 recognized, and privileged, a University of Paris already in being, whose faculty of theology became the jewel in its crown. Legislation soon followed specifying the status of masters, and curricular benchmarks and standards for academic degrees. It is far less clear whether such norms existed in the last quarter of the twelfth century, and if so, when and how they emerged. In theology, our one datum from that period is Stephen Langton’s inception sermon as master in 1180.2 For Nancy Spatz,
this speech documents the action of a guild of theologians at Paris, signaling Langton’s fulfillment of academic requirements and promoting him to the magisterium, a right distinct from the license to teach granted by the bishop’s chancellor. Alternatively, Jean Longère holds that the bishop’s chancellor alone possessed that right, not only at Notre Dame but over masters teaching anywhere in Paris, since the abbey of Ste. Geneviève underwent a reform in 1147–48 ending its earlier laissez-faire licensing policy. The only other, would-be, intervention Longère finds is Pope Alexander III’s admonitions to masters who offered bribes for a license, and chancellors who accepted them. In any case, itself an example of scholastic praedicatio, Langton’s inception speech refers specifically to the lectio and disputatio also incumbent on theologians. But it does not indicate that mastership entitled him to teach any differently than he had before 1180.

The lack of an acknowledged or prescribed sequence of theological studies in this period is evident in the curriculum vitae and oeuvre of Paris masters however they acquired their magisterium, even accepting the problem of dating their works. Peter of Poitiers, who taught at Notre Dame from 1169 before ending his career as chancellor (1193–1205), launched his pedagogy in ca. 1173 with a five-volume sentence collection. The last example of that genre, it sought to rectify what he found lacking in Peter Lombard’s Sentences. Peter of Poitiers united all the Lombard’s ethical themes in a single book and omitted holy orders from his treatise on the sacraments, assigning it to the canonists. These innovations failed to take root, but his focus on dubitabilia did. His other works, on the genealogy of Christ, on the Acts of the Apostles, and biblical distinctiones, date to the 1180s and 1190s, while no date is assigned to his allegory on the tabernacle of Moses. For Peter of Poitiers, biblical exegesis clearly post-dated the work of systematic theology.

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