NATIONES AND OTHER BONDING GROUPS
AT LATE MEDIEVAL CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

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In the institutional evolution of the universities of medieval Europe, one of the most distinctive aspects of their institutional structure was the natio. As Pearle Kibre has shown in her classic study of the “nations” in the medieval universities, and as subsequent work by others, especially Jacques Verger and Olga Weijers, has revealed, these organizational and administrative units had their roots in associations of students formed on the basis of region or country of origin. At Bologna, the first natio was that of the Ultramontani—most of them Germans, but by the thirteenth century there were fourteen nationes within the collective unit—the universitas—of the ultramontani, with another four “nations” in the university of the Citramontani.

At the other great archetypal university of the middle ages, Paris, there were four nations in existence by the middle of the thirteenth century, that of the German-English, of the French, and those of Normandy and Picardy. Unlike Bologna, however, these nationes were not student unions but were rather constituted by masters of arts, many of whom were also students in the higher faculties. And at Paris, they had real power, for they exercised strong influence upon university policies as a whole. Each was represented by a procurator who served as one of the chief advisors of the university rector.

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3 As for terminology, Weijers, *Terminologie des universités*, p. 58, has noted that “At the University of the Citramontani, the nationes were divided into smaller units, represented by their so-called consiliarii, who were to advise the rector of the University. These smaller units were named accordingly: consiliariae. Thus a natio at the University of the Ultramontani corresponds roughly with a consiliaria at the University of the Citramontani.”
4 See the comments on nations by Aleksander Gieysztor, “Management and Resources,” in *A History of the University in Europe*, gen. ed. Walter Rüegg, vol. 1:
There was no systematic reason for the number of nations at medi-

eval universities. Some, like Toulouse, had none, while Orléans had
ten, Padua four, and Oxford two: the boreales and the australes, with
the river Trent the dividing line. (About 94% of the students at Oxford
were English; the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish and the occasional con-


nential were forced without option to be part of one natio or the other.)

As with the difference between Bologna and Paris, some nations were
associations with fundamentally social functions—for example, to
help students from abroad cope with life in a foreign environment.
Other nations were powerful corporate entities within the larger cor-


poration of the university and exercised, as at Paris, their influence at
even the highest levels of the institution.

As Mariken Teeuwen has concluded, summing up the results of the
CIVICIMA Project (the International Committee on the Vocabulary
of Institutions and of Intellectual Communication in the Middle Ages
[Comité International du Vocabulaire des Institutions et de la
Communication Intellectuelles au Moyen Âge]), masterminded and
mentored by Olga Weijers, “in the context of the medieval university…
natio becomes not only the region of origin, but also an association of
people of a common region of origin, or who have the same mother
tongue.” Thus looking at the natio in either context—the externally
influential corporate entity or the association of common origins—
helps us to understand something of the role the nationes played in
the universities of central and east central Europe. Thus the natio became
one of the institutional elements that bound individuals within the
academic community together, though, as we shall see below, not the
only one.

As the university movement spread in Europe, the phenomenon of
nations took on a variety of forms. The experience in central and east
central Europe was a particularly complex one. And it is on this that
I wish to focus in this essay. I will be brief and cursory on some matters
and places, treating others, especially Prague and Cracow, more fully.