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More than Resources:

Landscape, Memory and Resilient Institutions in Rural Emilia.

This paper seeks to understand how rural commons and their environment changed over time, and it focuses on the formation and the reinforcement of collective identities and memories as a key element that influenced the resilience of the commons. In doing so, I will argue the need of a long-term perspective, in order to grasp the complexity of the relation between the environment and the commons. The concept of ‘good’ or ‘resource’, in particular, often leads our attention exclusively to the economic function of the commons, which is of course very important, but not the only one. On the contrary, I will argue that we should take into account the social life and the cultural biography of the commons if we really want to understand their resilience. In doing so, I will focus on a case study, peculiar of the rural landscape of Emilia.

Today Emilia is part of Emilia-Romagna, a region in Northeast Italy; its capital city is Bologna. Nearly half of the region (48%) consists of plains, while the rest is hilly and mountainous. Today it is a wealthy, highly populated region, with the third highest GDP per capita in Italy. Such results have been achieved by developing a balanced economy that comprises one of Italy’s biggest agricultural sector, as well as a long tradition in mechanics manufacturing. But if we look at the history of its landscape, and in particular at the flat area between the Apennines and the Adriatic Sea, we get a completely different picture of the region. Emilia’s plain was formed by the gradual retreat of the sea from the Po river basin and by the detritus deposited by the rivers. In ancient times

it was almost entirely a marshland, and only from the second half of the 20th century the wetlands have disappeared – with few relevant exceptions of lagoons and saline areas.

The management of this environment has always required collective efforts, and Emilia has a long tradition in cooperation, being still a region with a high number of successful cooperative experiences in Italy. The interest in reconstructing the history of the rural landscape of Emilia is thus motivated by the peculiar presence in this region, since the late Middle Ages, of one of the few forms of rural commons still present in Italy, called *partecipanze*. They generated between the 11th and the 13th century from ecclesiastic leases, whose purpose was the improvement of marginal and uncultivated areas where wetlands and woods were widespread. Six of that commons are still present in the low lands not far from the cities of Bologna, Modena and Ferrara, but in the past there were at least three more. The commoners have for centuries concentrated their efforts on land drainage, a better control of the rivers and the improvement of agriculture. In addition, they also had – and still have – an obligation of permanent residence within the boundaries of the *partecipanze* in order to take part in the common management of the land.

Since they have been established, the main characteristic of these commons was the periodical division of the common land in many parts, depending on the number of the members – or the households – present each time. The division was made by drawing lots, so every user or family could benefit from a different part of the common land after each division. Choosing this form of cooperative solution had two main advantages: sharing the costs of the uncertain and risky management of natural resources, especially in a marginal and less fertile environment, and an advantage of scale for investments – such as land drainage – achievable at a lower price, compared to private property (De Moor, 2015). Thus while on the one hand these commons have been among the protagonists of the past management of forests and wetlands, on the other hand they have been important actors of environmental change.

If we look at the history of the *partecipanze*, we notice that they have been perceived over time in very different ways. A long period of criticism towards the commons started in the second

half on the 18th century, particularly in France, with the rise of the Physiocratic economic theory. For the physiocrats, the individual had to be the central unit of society and private property was an essential condition for economic growth. Therefore the commons were perceived as useless remnants of a medieval and backward past. When Napoleon conquered Emilia in 1796, these ideas involved also the *partecipanze*, that didn't fit any category of the French cadastre and thus were closed. They were restored in 1815, but the statal criticism towards them didn't stop until the Second World War and the end of the Fascist regime.

Despite all the attacks against them, some of the *partecipanze*, as I have mentioned, are still active in Emilia, and they have proved not only to be stable and solid enough to resist several waves of privatisation, but to be resilient. I am interested in the concept of resilience because these institutions started as feudal agreements – ecclesiastic leases in particular – and nevertheless they proved to be willing to change their structure and functions every time that external factors – ecologic, economic, demographic, or socio-political – threatened their existence. I will give a few examples.

In two different periods, during the 16th and the 19th century, there was an evident increase of the population in rural Emilia. In the first half of the 19th century, the communities of the *partecipanze* became the most populous rural towns near Bologna, especially because living there was enough in order to have a part of the common land. For the management of the land this had become a severe issue, because each commoner's part became smaller and smaller. The strategy adopted to avoid the so-called 'tragedy' was to change the composition of the commoners' group, by closing it into a patrilineal system: becoming a user of the common land was not any longer just a matter of dwelling, but also of inheritance. Only the members' sons – in some cases daughters too – could become users themselves once reached adulthood. On the one hand the patrilineal system protected the commons from overpopulation and it increased the rate of endogamy, with commoners marrying other commoners to preserve their rights on the land. On the other hand, after almost two centuries, the commoners have become a small minority in their rural towns, and today

the *partecipanze* are perceived by the outsiders as a rural élite that doesn't correspond to the community as a whole, as it was in the past. However thanks to these institutional changes, adopted in times of demographic growth, the *partecipanze* proved to be capable of a strong control on the local population and the commoners' collective action let them overcome periods of economic crisis and political hostility, adapting to new contexts.

We would expect that the debate on the legitimacy of the commons, especially during the 19th century, focused on the economic aspects of the *partecipanze*, such as their degree of performance, their efficiency, profitability and sustainability. But this was only a part of the argumentation used by the commoners to defend their institutions. Much effort was made to convince the statal authorities that the capacity of the *partecipanze* to control the demographic pressure, together with the continuous presence of certain families and groups on the same territory, was the condition for the economic growth, not a consequence.

Another important point of the commoners' defence, especially after the Italian unification and during the Fascist period, was to insist on the social functions of the commons. In their appeal to the king in 1927, for instance, the *partecipanze* underlined that they had never limited their action to the management and the reclamation of land. They also had reinvested their wealth in healthcare and education, by helping their poor or sick members, as well as students. Likewise, they were paying the salary to the local doctor and teacher, and they had invested considerably in the construction of churches, houses, and even theatres. For decades the members of the *partecipanze* have fought legally to defend their institutions, even if they were full of debts. Even today they are investing in activities that we would define as 'social' or 'cultural', for example with education programmes in schools.

There were and there are economic reasons to be a commoner of the *partecipanze*, of course. Their resilience, however, can be attributed only in part to economic factors. The *partecipanze* – at least some of them – have proved to be capable of sustainable management of their common-pool resources, but also social and political motivations must be taken into account. Moreover, an

increasing number of ethnographic and experimental studies have shown that culture has a strong influence on reciprocity, cooperation or antisocial behaviour (Mauss, 2002; Aime – Cossetta, 2010; Gächter – Herrmann, 2009), and this is why we should not forget the cultural impact of the commons on this region. Thus I will now proceed to show how the cultural background and the strong connections between the collective identity of the commoners and their environment have supported the resilience of their institutions.

Part of my research aims to understand in which ways several physical elements of the rural landscape of Emilia generated or were connected to collective memories and identities, in particular regarding the *partecipanze*. The same elements, once become ‘traditional’, can be meaningful to the local communities even when they are no longer present.

I started this research by comparing several maps of Emilia dated from the 16th to the 20th century. We all know very well that maps are representations of the landscape, not the landscape itself. Because of this, they become interesting cultural and political devices that can show us the perceptions of their makers and of the communities that lived in that environment. Their function is very closely related to the formation of collective memories and identities: by drawing on a map objects, names and places we know how we are supposed to see, to think and to remember the world. As anthropologist Angèle Smith pointed out: «what is marked on the map exists; what is not marked does not. [...] How names are recorded [...] is also a process of choice and selection» (Smith, 2003: 73).

A famous example is Danti’s map of Emilia, one of the forty maps frescoed on the walls of the so-called Gallery of Maps, now part of the Vatican Museums. It represents Emilia’s low plains at the time of pope Gregory XIII and it was painted in 1580-81 basing on drawings by Egnazio Danti, the papal cartographer who came from the University of Bologna (Gambi – Milanesi – Pinelli, 1996). In this map the most important pictorial elements are clearly the rivers and the wetlands. The reason is simple: at that time, and at least until the 19th century, rivers and canals were the principal communication and trade routes that linked Bologna to Ferrara, Ravenna, Venice

and the sea. Water was essential for the production of silk, which was the principal economic sector in Bologna until the 17th century. Through the canals and the wetlands, the silk could reach Venice and the international market in France, the Flanders, Germany, England and the Othman Empire (Poni, 2009). But at the same time water could also be perceived by the local rural communities as a threat: rivers and wetlands – which were widespread in the area of the *partecipanze* – created quite often dangerous floods and became the perfect setting for the spreading of malaria and other diseases, which kept a high rate of infant mortality until the 1918 flu pandemic. By comparing the various maps of the following centuries, we can see that the wetlands and the forests almost entirely disappeared, leaving space, by the half of the 20th century, to the agricultural landscape of Emilia that we know today.

Now I would like to draw your attention to a second type of useful information: toponyms, or place names. The importance of place names lies in their ability to give an identity to a place and to define its borders. Place names are also mnemonic codes for local stories, activities and traditions. Thus they become important for two reasons: first, they can tell us something about physical elements of a landscape from centuries ago – thousands of years ago, in some cases. Second, they give us an idea of the perceptions and memories of the local communities, even when those physical elements are no longer present. The area taken into account for this research is characterized by the presence of many place names related to specific physical features of the landscape, and to human activities connected to them. I collected all these place names and I divided them into two macro semantic fields, the first one linked to the subject of WOOD and the second one to WATER. These elements are even more relevant because all the *partecipanze* were formed to manage forests and wetlands.

I. Wood

I.1. **Wood.** In the first semantic field we find place names which mean ‘wood’. Examples of this first group are toponyms like *Selva*, *Selva Malvezzi*, *Palazzo della Selva*, *Chiesa della Selva* (all coming from Latin SILVA), *Boschi*, *Madonna dei/di Boschi*, *S. Giovanni del Bosco*, *Molino del Boschetto*, *Chiesa del Bosco*, *S. Maria de Boschi*, *San Bartolomeo in Bosco*, *Boschi di Bagnarola*, *Bosco Mesola* (from Medieval Latin BUSCUS, loanword from West Germanic *BUSK-; or from POSTICUM, ‘back door, space at the back of the house’: Benozzo, 2015, p. 257; 2016, p. 503).

I.2. **Tree.** We can also find toponyms which mean ‘tree’, like *Fossadalbero*, *Albersano*, *Alberlungo*, *Alberino* and *Alberone* (from Latin ALBUS, ‘white’), or specific species of trees, such as elm, durmast, hazel and birch. It is the case of place names like *L’Olmo*, *Chiesa dell’Olmo*, *Olmi Secchi* (from Latin ULMUS, ‘elm’ [*Ulmus campestris*]), *Madonna della Rovere*, *Rovereto* (from Latin ROBUR, ‘sessile oak’ or ‘durmast’ [*Quercus petraea*]), *Valle della Corla*, *Corlo* (from Latin CORULUS, ‘hazel’ [*Corylus avellana*]), *Dugliolo* (from Latin BETULA, loanword from Celtic *BIDW-, ‘birch’ [*Betula alba*]), and *Prunaro* (from Latin PRUNUS, ‘plum tree’ [*Prunus domestica*]).

I.3. **Timber.** Finally in the same field we find place names which mean ‘timber’, like *Marrara* (from Latin MATERIES, ‘timber’).

Such place names are important because they provide us useful information for the reconstruction of the past landscape of Emilia. We can learn, for instance, that woods and forests were widespread in areas where now we can only find rural towns and arable fields. We can also learn about the typical plant species of this plain region – like elm, durmast or hazel – or about other species that have become rarer. Moreover, we can notice that many toponyms connected to the subject of WOOD denote sacred places: churches, sanctuaries, shrines that link Mary or a Catholic saint to a specific element of the landscape, usually a tree. Sacred trees, places of apparitions of gods, spirits, the Virgin or saints near trees are well recorded for the European rural landscape:

Fatima in Portugal and Loreto in Italy are just the most famous examples of a widespread religious phenomenon. In particular the so-called *Madonne arboree*, sacred trees or wooden icons usually linked to a miracle or an apparition of Mary, are widely present in Italy (Eliade, 1958; Dini, 1980; Seppilli, 1989; Salvatore, 2002). Several *Madonne arboree* are scattered across Emilia, mainly in the marginal areas of the Apennines and the low wetlands of the past. It is possible to assume that some of these Catholic sacred places have arisen on ancient pre-Christian shrines – sacred woods or temples – as we know that every culture has attributed sacred meanings to the vegetation, water, the weather and agriculture. Place names like *Minerbio* (from Latin MINERVIUM, temple of the Roman goddess Minerva) witness the presence of Roman shrines in the low plain of Bologna. However, coming from pre-Christian cults or from ‘folk religion’, all these sacred places have made the landscape meaningful for the local communities, and in many situations these sacred trees have become a centre of the local peoples’ social life.

Moreover, some of these sanctuaries of *Madonne arboree* arose next to the *partecipanze* – it is the case of the sanctuary of *Madonna dell’Olmo* (‘Madonna of the elm’), nearby the disappeared forest of the *Partecipanza di Budrio* – or other commons of Emilia – like *Madonna dell’Acero* (‘Madonna of the maple’) or *Madonna del Faggio* (‘Madonna of the beech’), popular places of pilgrimage in the Apennines, nearby the common forests property of the *Consorzio degli utilisti di Vidiciatico* and the *Consorzio degli utilisti di Pianaccio*. The tight link between the commons and these sacred places has always been strong and deeply rooted in the memories of the commoners, as witnessed today by the agrarian cults (*rogazioni*) that are still performed in this rural area.

II. Water

II.1. **Swamp** and **wetland**. The second semantic field is much richer and it underlines the importance and the ambivalence of water for this territory. Given the abundant presence of marshlands in the region, the first and the largest group is composed of toponyms which mean

‘swamp’ or ‘wetland’, often with a negative connotation. It is the case of several place names that contain the term *Valle* (from Latin VALLES or VALLIS), which is used in this region in a peculiar way, with the meaning of ‘wetland’ instead of the more frequent ‘valley’. Examples of this group are *Valli di Argenta*, *Valli di Medicina*, *Valle della Corla*, *Valli di Dugliolo*, *Valli di Buonacquisto*, *Valli della Pegola* (‘wetlands of mud’) *e del Tedo*, *Valli del Poggio e di Malalbergo*, *Valli della Barigella*, *La Valletta*, *Miravalle*, *Vallazza*, *Valle Durazzo*, *Valle Santa*. Other toponyms with the same meaning are *Mar Morto* (from Latin MARE MORTUUS, ‘dead sea’), which has later become *Marmorta*; *Chiesa della Palude* (from Latin PALUS, ‘swamp’), *Lagosanto* and *Ponte Lagoscuro* (from Latin LACUS OBSCURUS, ‘dark swamp’).

II.2. **Spring** and **bath**. To this field belongs a second group of toponyms that show a more ‘positive’ aspect of water, that of ‘spring’ or ‘bath’. Here we find place names like *Villa Fontana* – which is also the name of one of the *partecipanze* – *Fontana* and *Fontane* (from Latin FONTS, ‘spring’); it is also present the alternative form *Sorgente* (from Latin SURGERE, ‘to rise’ or ‘to spring up’). Other toponyms of this group are *Bagnarola*, *Bagno*, *Bagnolo* and *Bagneto* (all coming from Latin BALNEUM, ‘bath’).

II.3. **River**. The massive presence of water in the form of rivers and canals is witnessed by place names that mean ‘river’ or that were named with the nearby rivers’ names. Examples of this group are *San Pietro Capofiume*, *Santa Maria Co’ di Fiume* (from Latin CAPUT + FLUMEN, ‘end of the river’); *Volta* (from Latin VOLVO, ‘to turn’, in this case with the meaning of ‘turn of the river’); *Idice*, *Quaderna*, *Sant’Antonio della Bassa Quaderna*, *San Lazzaro di Savena*, *Ponte Samoggia*, *Casalecchio di Reno*, *Poggio Renatico*, *Calderara di Reno*, *Trebbo di Reno*, *San Vitale di Reno*, *Corpo Reno*, *Renazzo*, *Lavino di Sopra*, *Lavino di Sotto*, *Lavino di Mezzo*, *San Martino in Soverzano* (*sovra Zeno*), *San Felice sul Panaro* – towns and villages that took the name of the rivers that crossed them.

II.4. **Port, ferry, riverbank, gutter, and watermill.** A more heterogeneous group connected to the subject of ‘water’ consists of place names related to the human presence on the landscape, with the existence of buildings or activities that revolve around the concept of water. The importance of rivers and canals as communication and trade routes is confirmed by several toponyms with the meaning of ‘port’ or ‘ferry’. It is the case of *Porto, Capo del Porto, Porto Maggiore, Portoverrara, Portorotta, Portonovo, Porto Vecchio, Buonporto* (all coming from Latin PORTUS, ‘port’) and *Traghetto* (from Latin TRAIECTUS, ‘ferry’). The constant threat of flooding was countered by building dams and riverbanks, or by digging gutters and ditches, and for this reason we find place names like *S. Martino in Argine* or *Argiolo, Argine del Lupo* (from Latin AGGER, ‘riverbank’), *Fossatone, Chiesuol del Fosso, Fossanova, Torre della Fossa, Fossalta* (from Latin FOSSA, ‘gutter’ or ‘ditch’: Poni, 1982) – *Le Budrie* and *Budrio*, the last one being also one of the *Partecipanze*, may have a similar etymology. The abundance, in the past centuries, of watermills not only in Bologna (Poni, 2009) but also scattered in its rural territory, is witnessed by toponyms like *Molinella, Molinazzo* and *Molini* (from Latin MOLO, ‘to mill’).

II.5. **Snow.** Probably a unique case in this area is the sanctuary of *Santa Maria della Neve* (from Latin NIX, ‘snow’: Monari, 1996), situated in the countryside of Medicina and also known as *Madonna del Piano* (‘Madonna of the plain’). It was built in the 17th century, but the origin of its name is uncertain – due to a sudden and unusually abundant snowfall or more likely because it was dedicated to Our Lady of the Snows, worshipped in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. The icon of Mary preserved inside the shrine is still carried in procession during the *rogazioni*, the agrarian rituals celebrated every year in May.

Far from being exhaustive, this list of toponyms should be sufficient to show that the landscape is not just a mute ‘nature’ that lies beneath and separated from the dominion of ‘culture’,

but it is deeply interwoven with human as well as non-human practices and social life. As I have already shown for what concerns woods and trees, also water can be perceived in very different ways and can assume several meanings for the local communities. Far from being just H₂O, water is the centre of social relations, not only as a symbol, but due to its own materiality (Breda, 2005; Mangiameli, 2010; Van Aken, 2012; Favole, 2013). Water is the source of life itself, it flows, washes, and irrigates the fields. But it can also be a dangerous threat: rivers and canals, in fact, formed in these low lands large marshes of backwater; in addition, the irregular path of the rivers created – as it still happens today – quite often dangerous floods, making it risky or almost impossible to cultivate large areas of land. The aforementioned toponyms witness that water and woods can't be reduced to the concepts of 'goods' or 'resources' that should just be used and exploited: they have meant a lot more than that for the communities that engaged with them. These elements of the landscape have always been multidimensional, being at the core of the local communities' social life, in a territory where the majority of people have been involved with agriculture until a few decades ago.

Moreover, forests and trees are not the only elements of the landscape that have been connected to sacred places and charged with religious meanings. Here is another example linked to the commons. The boundaries of the *Partecipanza di Villa Fontana* are delimited by four parishes, according to the limits of the old municipality that disappeared in 1796, after the French conquest of Emilia. The importance of the wetlands and the rivers for the commoners of Villa Fontana is quite evident just by looking at these parishes' names. Two of them – *Santa Maria del Garda* and *Sant'Antonio della Bassa Quaderna* – were dedicated to the rivers that crossed those villages, standing as a protection against their floods. The third parish was dedicated to *San Donnino*, whose cult was usually associated with water and who was invoked against the rabies (Dini, 1980). The fourth one was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and it preserves an icon of Mary called the Virgin of the Graces – also known as *Madonna del Voto* – painted and remembered for having saved the commoners from an epidemic during the 17th century.

A focus on the place names enables us to understand much better that the landscape is always multidimensional and relational, and that what we use to call ‘nature’ shapes the ways in which humans relate to each other, but at the same time it is built on those relations (Ligi, 2011). But this approach also shows some limits. The main problem is that on the maps that I have mentioned we can only find ‘official’ names, that sometimes are given by the local communities without any doubt, but that in other cases come from statal authorities. If that is the case, how can we know that these toponyms really reflect the local perceptions on the landscape?

This is where an ethnographic approach becomes relevant. Thanks to a period of field research – particularly in the Eastern low plains of Bologna, in the area of the municipalities of Medicina and Budrio – and to participant observation, in fact, a lot of oral and ‘informal’ place names suddenly appeared. Not only it is true that the lands, the rivers, the trees have names, but very often they can have more than one. These names, that belong to a long oral tradition that we can’t find on maps, at least until recent times, are particularly connected not only to familiar jargon, but also to the commons present in this area.

All the common estates of the *partecipanze* have names that usually denote their original characteristics. Examples of these oral toponyms are *Vallona*, *Portonovo*, *Boscosa*, *Malaffitto* and *Morafosca*, and they refer to the two semantic fields already mentioned or, more in general, to the uncertain conditions of the common lands. The wetlands and the woods were indeed at the centre of the economic and the social life of the commoners, as well as their struggle to drain the common lands, making them fertile and arable fields. Nevertheless, even today the commoners usually refer to these estates using such names, even if the landscape has now almost completely changed.

It is true that “anything ‘wild’ in Romance languages (*sauvage*, *selvaje*, *selvaggio*, and so on) comes from the *silva*, the great European forest that Roman colonization was gradually to erode” (Descola, 2013: 35) – and the rural landscape of Emilia is a classic example of this erosion – as opposed to the domain of the ‘domesticated’ or ‘civilised’. But the historical commons also witness that the *silva* and the wetlands have always been a social space, that can’t be assimilated to the

concept of Romantic ‘wilderness’ characterised by a pristine Nature where the human presence is totally absent, but at most a place that “is simply lacking in attraction and fit only to shelter a few peripheral specimens of humanity in its bushy darkness” (Descola, 2013: 35).

The historical rural landscape of Emilia that I have tried to picture has undergone substantial changes, especially since the second half of the 19th century. The slow but constant process of land drainage in these low plains was at least as old as the commons, but it speeded up after the Italian unification also thanks to the mechanization of agriculture, to reach its conclusion during the Fascist agrarian policy, which propaganda also led to the last state attack against the commons. The ‘traditional’ landscape, of which we find traces in the toponyms, has given way to the agricultural landscape of our days, characterized by intensive agriculture even in the common lands.

By the end of World War II, the process of land drainage and agricultural mechanisation and innovation was almost completely done. Wetlands were drained and flooding rivers became easier to control thanks to the formation of land drainage consortia. Even the commons’ lands became fertile and arable lands. Was it the end of the wetlands? Not really. During the Nineties, favoured by the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, all the *partecipanze* of Emilia started a process of ‘deactivation’ of parts of their estates, meaning the conversion of land use from agriculture to the reconstruction – but the term ‘reinvention’ would be more appropriate – of the past landscape (Van der Ploeg, 2008, p. 7). Small wetlands reappeared in all these commons’ lands, and in this process of ‘reinvention of the tradition’ all the collective memories that I have mentioned have been of great importance. Far from being ‘nature’ itself, this landscape tried to represent a pastoral and idealized vision of the past environment, but the functions and the context of the past wetlands as a social and embodied space have been replaced. These new wetlands, in fact, are conceived as environmental heritage or natural reserves: they are now protected areas whose main purpose is the conservation of biodiversity. The human presence, when allowed, is limited to sport hunting or educational tours.

To conclude. The wetlands that we still can see in Emilia are the result of a process of remembrance, selection, and resignification of the environment. I argued that a long-term perspective allows us to better grasp the processual character of the landscape, avoiding at the same time artificial oppositions between 'nature' and 'culture'. The commons of Emilia have played an important role in this process by producing a tight link between the local human population – at least a part of it – and the environment. The resilience of these institutions can be tested not only on their ability to keep themselves efficient and convenient for their members, or to keep their functions economically sustainable, but also on the capability to make their landscape meaningful even in a time of changing population and uncertain ecologic and economic conditions. If the environment is not just a 'resource', if it has a meaning for the people who dwell in it (Ingold, 2000) then these Medieval commons can still be – more or less successful – examples of sustainable communal management in an environment that required, for its own characteristics – floods, marshes, woods, etc. – collective efforts in order to gain new arable land. And it is probably not a chance that, for centuries, Emilia has hosted experiments of cooperative experiences, with agricultural commons, credit unions, cooperative banks, and the first university in Europe.

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