

## Chapter 1

# The School of Chartres and Its Historical Context in the First Half of the Twelfth Century

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### **INTRODUCTION: A RENAISSANCE BY ANY OTHER NAME**

By some accounts, the twelfth century in Europe was a century of renaissance. Other historical analysts see the twelfth century as part of a continuum of a centuries-long search for meaning and understanding. Still, when we look at some of the accomplishments of the people of that age, we must acknowledge the enormous changes that took place. The twelfth century witnessed the Crusades and the cultural, linguistic, religious, and artistic links that this opened to the East. It saw a rapid development of urban Europe, the systemization of Canon Law, and the foundation of the civil bureaucracies that would later evolve into the states and countries of early modern Europe. In the realm of the arts, the twelfth century revealed the height of Romanesque art and the foundations of the Gothic style, whose cathedrals still dominate the landscape of much of the European continent. The twelfth century chronicled not only the revival of Latin classics and the use of Latin verse and poetry, but it also saw the flowering of vernacular literature and poetry, and the formal study of history. Finally, the twelfth century gave birth to the universities that would dominate the intellectual world for several centuries, and whose walls would house the recovery of Greek and Islamic science and philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key aspects that characterized the minds of the teachers and students of the twelfth century was the realization that advances, discoveries, and recoveries in all fields of learning were part of a single whole. The many new discoveries and changes that took place did not displace the old. They saw various forms of development not only as connected to each other but as connected to the past. Indeed, they strove to bring the new and old together.

**THE RENAISSANCE OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY:  
STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS**

Much has been written on the twelfth century since Charles Homer Haskins' work (from which the first part of the title of this section takes its name) first explored the transformations that took place then in European history. Haskins, however, revealed that one way to demonstrate the movement that took place in the twelfth century is to "compare a library of 1100 and one of 1200."<sup>2</sup> In the former we find the Bible, Ambrose, Bede, Augustine, Gregory, Carolingian commentators on these works, Church service books, the lives of the Saints, some textbooks (most notably those of Boethius), and scattered parchments of local history—mostly that of the monastery, or church school itself. One might perhaps find parts of Latin classics, like Cicero, Priscian, and Horace, and, in a few places, Calcidius' translation of Plato's *Timaeus* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the twelfth century we find a much different scene. Added to the above list, we find works on law including the recently recovered Codes of Justinian, and the newly compiled *Decretum* of Gratian, the basis of later Canon Law. We also find the writings of contemporary popes, the theological writings of Anselm, Peter Lombard, and Bernard of Clairvaux, and some of the newly translated works of Aristotle with their Muslim commentators, along with some recently translated works of Greek and Islamic sciences. To this list one could also add chronicles of history, personal and official correspondences, numerous contemporary commentaries on philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, music, grammar, rhetoric, and logic, as well as an ever increasing amount of vernacular poetry and prose.<sup>4</sup> In most places, courtly love poetry sat comfortably alongside pious prayer books. This was a very different scene indeed. As Haskins pointed out, similar comparisons might be made of the centuries to follow, but not of the centuries that preceded the twelfth.

The writers of the twelfth century were not merely concerned with recovering lost works and writing new ones. It was also not just about building cathedrals and establishing the rule of law. There was, on the part of the