



# The History of the University

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Sidarth Erat, Spark 2026





# The History of the ~~University~~ *HIGHER EDUCATION*

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# Our plan

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Too many developments to cover, so we shall focus on the following:

1. The birth of writing, books, and schooling
2. Ancient Athenian education and its influence
3. Imperial China's civil service exams
4. The dawn of the modern European university and its humanist reimagining in the Renaissance

# Topics I had to scrap to save time

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Every one of these deserves a Spark class (or multiple) of its own:

- Developments in medieval Arabia: certificates that resembled modern law degrees, forerunners to the European university, rediscovery of Greek learning
- The development of the modern PhD, how academic qualifications have changed over time, the development of academic departments
- Anything “recent” – this is a class about how the basic structure of modern higher learning emerged

# Let's go back to the beginning ...



Bologna, 1088, first  
degree-granting  
institution ever

# No, further back

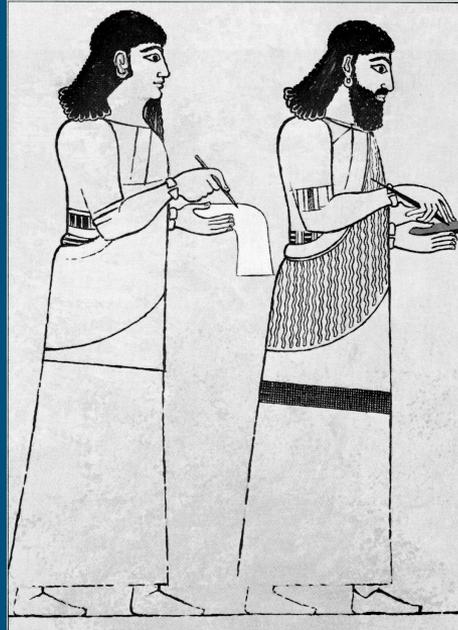
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Plato's Academy: first higher learning institution of any kind in the west

# Even further ...

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Egyptian scribal schools,  
Mesopotamian eduba, practice  
cuneiform tablets and papyri, etc.

# To the very beginning... The Oral Tradition

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- Many cultures had specially trained people (sometimes a hereditary caste) who were tasked with carrying religious traditions/mythology/history through the generations:
  - West Africa: griots
  - India: various, Bhat caste for history, Brahmins for Vedas
  - North America: medicine men and women
  - Siberia, etc.: shamans (could also be religious mediums, healers)
  - Europe: bards

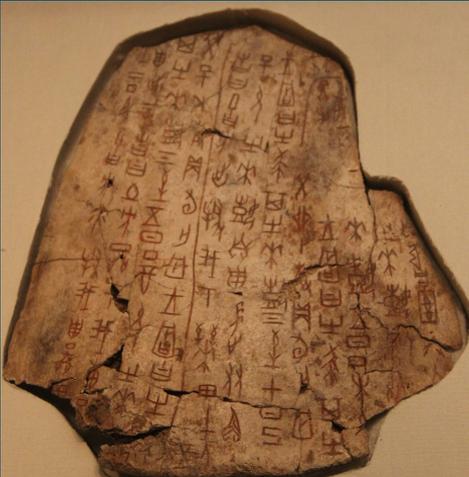
# The Oral Tradition



# The Dawn of Writing

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- Writing first emerged in Egypt and Mesopotamia around 3000 BC, and independently in China in 1400 BC, and in Mesoamerica around 700 BC
- First use of writing: recording business transactions, names, dates, etc.
- Soon, mythology begins to be committed to text



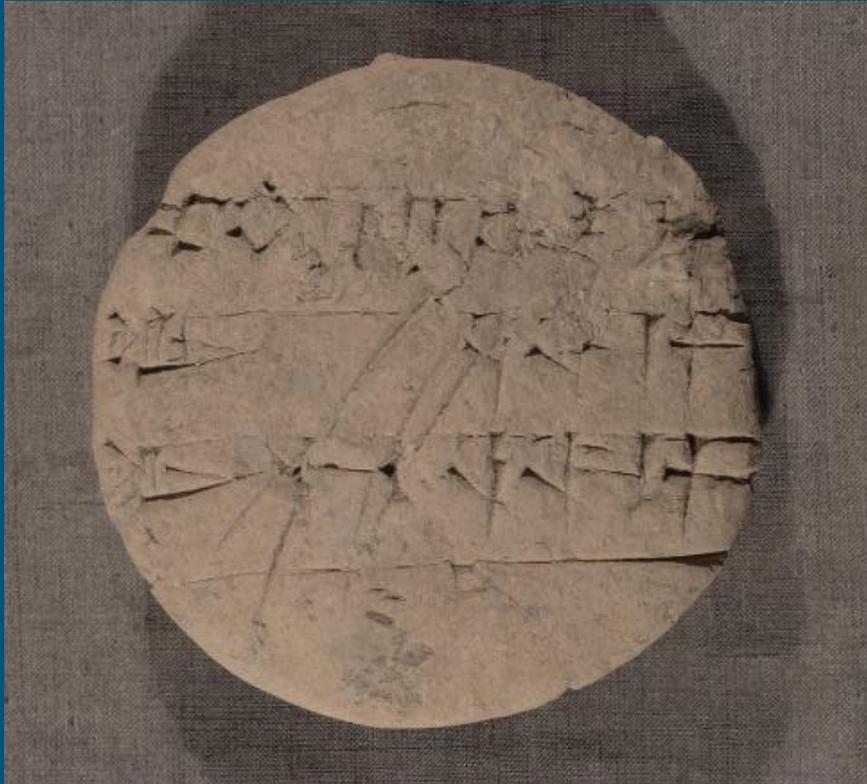
# The first schools

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- It was at this point that writing acquired a cultural and religious significance, becoming more than simply a trade
- For the first time, schools were constructed to train the carriers of oral tradition to read and write

# A practice tablet from a Sumerian school

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A practice clay tablet, held in the palm of the hand, used by Sumerian students around 1600 BC

# The first schools

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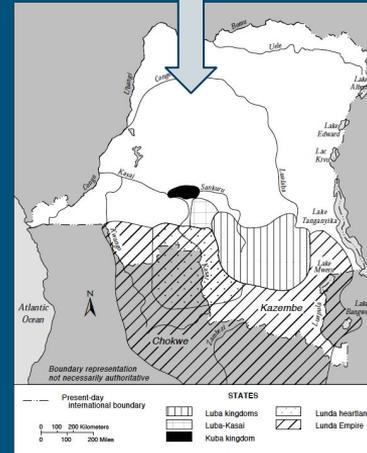
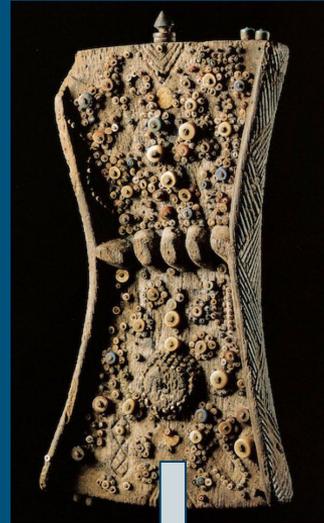
- Main focus was still on scribal ability = penmanship, not literary ability
- Repetitive exercises of copying text: “Urash urash urash ...”



# “Edge cases”

Exceptions to the rule:

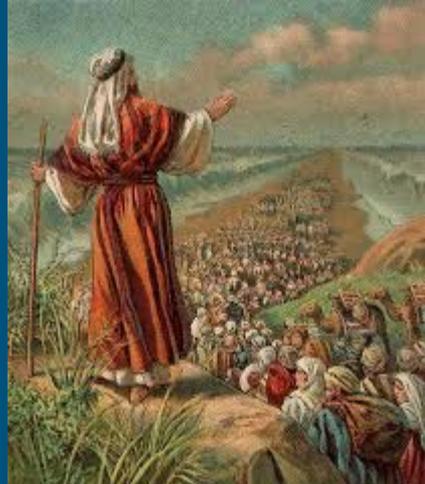
- Rongorongo (Rapa Nui script): either a script or a mnemonic device that was used primarily to commit folklore/history to memory.
- Lukasa memory boards (Luba, C. Africa). Used as writing alternative by members of the secret societies.



# Enter: Books

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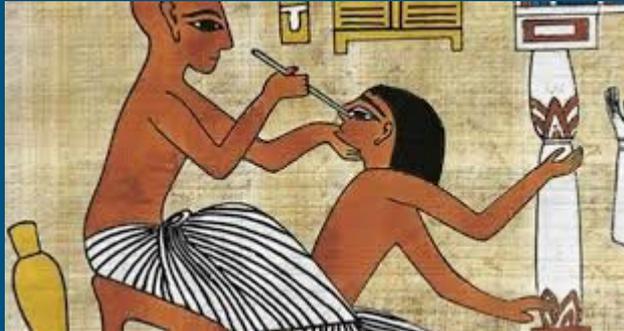
- At some point, in various societies, people started compiling canonical writings into books, starting with religious books + epics ... (e.g. *Gilgamesh*, *Mahabharat*, Old Testament, etc.)



# Enter: Books

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- ... and, later, practical guides (Kikkuli's horse-training manuals, the Ebers medical papyrus, Rhind mathematical papyrus)
- Writing ceases to be a skill for scribes and becomes a skill for all upper-class people

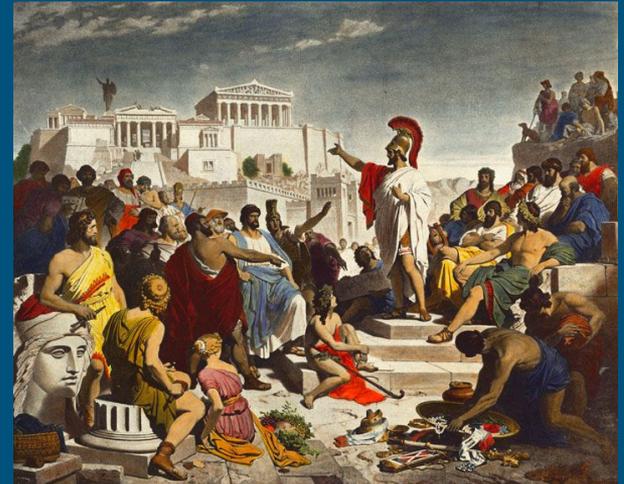


# Enter: Books

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So in the history of schooling, we now have:

- Mostly upper-class students
- Schoolbooks
- Schooling in mainly religious epics ...
- ... But some opportunities to learn about mathematics, science, rhetoric, astronomy, and just about any other topic



## PART II

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# Ancient Greece and its influences

# Athenian education

- Due to wealth from the colonies, after the Persian Wars, Athens became a center of arts and learning with (for the time) very high literacy
- So young men (but few young women) in Athens became educated in literature (i.e., epic poetry) along with physical education and music
- Similar trends played out in other city-states, though to a lesser degree



# Higher education

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- Due to Athenian democracy, there were now reasons for higher education outside of apprenticeships
- Upper-class boys studied rhetoric until their military service, so that they could become statesmen when they returned



# The Sophists

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- A great number of wandering teachers roamed the Greek city states to train the sons of politicians
- They also provided instruction on such topics as virtue and ethics
- Outlines of modern university education?



# The Academy

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- At the same time, philosophers who didn't "sell out" were interested in the search for truth and challenging power
- Eventually, Plato and other skeptical thinkers start a school at the Akademeia outside Athens for discussion



# The Academy

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- No real “student”-“teacher” differentiation, though senior members were recognized as “scholarch.” All members were “friends” of the Academy.
- Some women joined (unlike many other Athenian institutions)
- Frequent readings of Platonic dialogues
- Lectures were generally uncommon



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AND NOW FOR  
SOMETHING  
COMPLETELY  
DIFFERENT



## PART III

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# Ancient China and the Imperial Examination

# Conditions in China

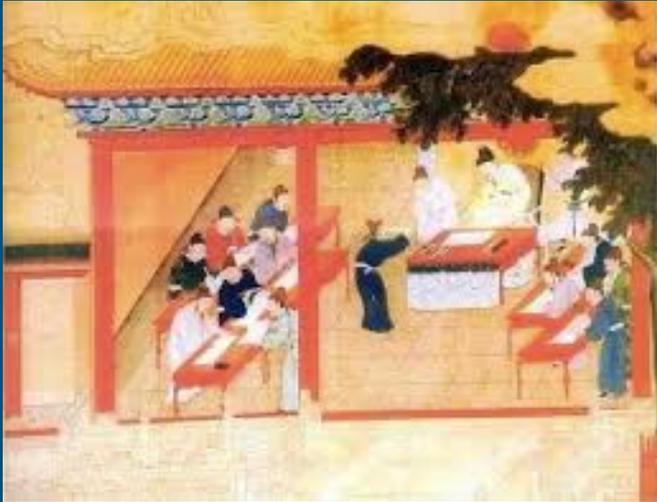
In the 1st millennium, China, unlike Europe, Japan, or India had:

- A less strict feudal system
- Explanation: rice cultivation? (Kwang Hyun Ko, 2017)
- An existing Confucian culture, which emphasized strong central government and virtue among officials
- More organized education (compared to, say, wandering Sophists in Athens)



# State Confucianism

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- So, in the 600s AD, under the influence of Confucianism, Imperial China began holding examinations for civil service roles
- The examinations focused on Confucian texts (4 Books and 5 Classics) and generally involved writing rigidly structured essays and poems

# But why no universities?

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- Scholar-officials were incentivized to climb the palace social hierarchy
- Most scholars did not spend their time teaching younger scholars
- Many schools for the Classics emerged, but true universities never formed



# The Hanlin Academy

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- Something similar to a “research institution”
- Prominent scholars and poets who set the state’s interpretation of the Confucian classics
- Supported by Imperial Department of Rites



# Influences

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- The imperial examination profoundly influenced British colonial officials, who carried over the examination system to their own country
- Eventually, the European university would adopt final written exams as well



## PART IV

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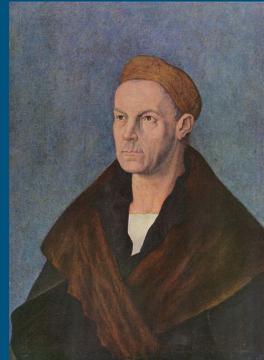
# The European University

# Medieval European Developments

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A series of developments occurred in the High Middle Ages in Europe:

- A growth in commerce and maritime trade, intensifying after the Crusades
  - Guilds, complicated contracts, banking, etc.
  - End of customary traditions
  - The growth of the legal profession



# Medieval European Developments

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- Powerful Catholic Church
  - Expansion of canon law
  - Increased need to educate lawyers in complicated codes
- (lesser extent) Growth of medical profession to serve rich



# The first European universities

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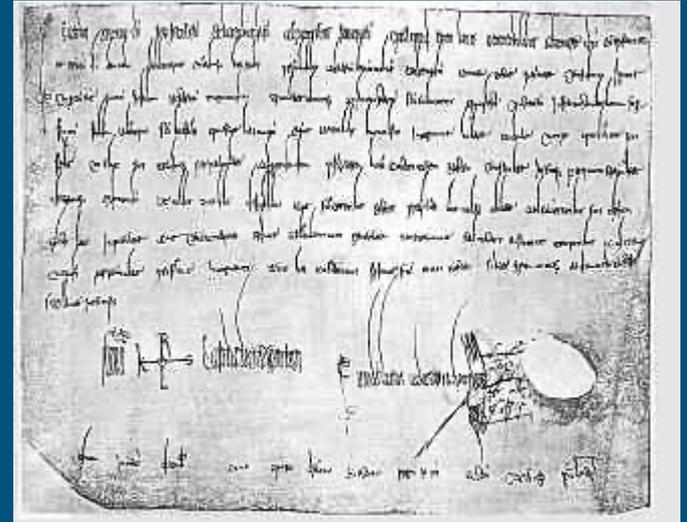
- Bologna (1088)
- Oxford (1096)
- Paris (1150)
- Cambridge (1209)



# The Degree

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- The real innovation of the European university was the arts degree
- Originally a license to teach
- Not by exam: by oral exam and participating in *disputatio* (institutionalized debate of scholars)



# The Renaissance Arrives

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- In the 1400s, in part due to this accumulation of scholastic talent, there was increased interest in the old Greek and Roman learning
- Importantly, there was a growth in *humanism*: a philosophy that prioritized individual worth and ability to reason
- This weakened the institutional power of the Catholic Church over the universities

# The Humanist University

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- Less theology, more opportunities to study other fields
- Less explicit Church influence → Copernican theory, etc. rapidly accepted
- U. Wittenberg played key role in Protestant reformation
- Ultimately led to modern university



Thank you!

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