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SEEKING A STABLE FAMILY LIFE? THE RETURN OF LEONARD COX AND THE END OF THE ACADEMIC PEREGRINATION OF A LAY HUMANIST IN TRANSALPINE EUROPE²

W poszukiwaniu stabilnego życia rodzinnego? Powrót Leonarda Coxa i koniec akademickiej peregrynacji świeckiego humanisty w Europie transalpejskiej

Abstract: In the Renaissance era, lay academics faced distinct challenges compared to clerics, particularly outside Italy and prior to the Reformation. Those who wished to combine academic pursuits with family life while remaining laypersons had to seek patronage and work on the margins of university life. This article aims to examine this phenomenon through the case of Leonard Cox (c.1495 – c.1550), a peripatetic humanist of British descent who maintained strong connections with Central Europe, including universities and schools in Germany, Poland, and Hungary. By analyzing Cox's experiences, this study explores the emergence of a new type of academic and the role of family life in shaping scholarly trajectories.

Keywords: Humanism, Renaissance, Reformation, Leonard Cox, Peregrination, University, Church history, History of education, England, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Kraków, Košice

Abstrakt: W epoce renesansu świeccy uczeni stawali wobec wyzwań odmiennych niż duchowni, zwłaszcza poza Włochami i przed reformacją. Ci, którzy pragnęli łączyć działalność naukową z życiem rodzinnym, pozostając osobami świeckimi, musieli poszukiwać mecenatu i działać na obrzeżach życia uniwersyteckiego. Artykuł ten analizuje to zjawisko na przykładzie Leonarda Coxa (ok. 1495 – ok. 1550), wędrownego humanisty pochodzenia brytyjskiego, który utrzymywał bliskie związki z Europą Środkową, w tym z uniwersytetami i szkołami w Niemczech, Polsce i na Węgrzech. Analiza doświadczeń Coxa pozwala uchwycić narodziny nowego typu uczonego oraz rolę życia rodzinnego w kształtowaniu ścieżek akademickich.

Słowa kluczowe: humanizm, renesans, reformacja, Leonard Cox, peregrynacja, uniwersytet, historia Kościoła, historia edukacji, Anglia, Polska, Węgry, Słowacja, Kraków, Koszyce

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Introduction

During the expansion of the Renaissance beyond Italy and prior to the consolidation of the Reformation – namely, in the first third of the sixteenth century – it was exceedingly difficult, if not nearly impossible, for a lay humanist to reconcile marriage, academic peregrination, and university employment. This challenge is exemplified by the life of Leonard Cox, an English humanist and educator, who undertook a student, academic, and pedagogical peregrination across Central Europe between approximately 1514 and 1528, before ultimately returning to England. Of particular significance to this study is the final stage of Cox's peregrination, alongside the circumstances, causes, and consequences that led to his decision to settle permanently. In making this pivotal choice, Cox undoubtedly weighed intellectual factors (university affiliations, teaching opportunities, academic networks, and publication prospects), economic considerations (patronage and a stable income), social aspects (friendship ties and family life), and ultimately, confessional issues (the shifting dynamics between Catholicism and Protestantism). The following analysis will systematically examine these elements to elucidate the motivations behind Cox's most decisive life choices and to contribute to the broader discussion of the interplay between intellectual life, mobility, and personal stability in the Renaissance era.

A Humanist's Journey: The Academic Life of Leonard Cox

Despite the pivotal role that family played in the life of Leonard Cox, details regarding both his family of origin and the family he later established remain largely unknown or uncertain. Similarly, the exact dates and places of his birth and death are not definitively documented, and as such, they can only be estimated with a degree of probability. Cox was born in the English town of Thame around 1495. After receiving a solid foundational education, he embarked on a student peregrination, beginning his studies at the University of Tübingen in 1514. Two years later, in 1516, he earned a Bachelor's degree. It is presumed that he remained at Tübingen for an additional two years, likely engaging in teaching activities before continuing his academic journey.³ In 1518, Cox embarked on what would become the most successful decade of his career, marked by extensive activity in Poland and Hungary. Following his matriculation at the University of Kraków, he soon began lecturing and quickly established himself among the city's leading humanists and Erasmians. His intellectual stature earned him the patronage of influential political and ecclesiastical figures, allowing him to become an integral part of Kraków's scholarly networks and the broader intellectual circles of Central Europe. Cox later accepted the position of rector at municipal schools in the wealthy Hungarian towns of Levoča and Košice, yet he continued both publishing and teaching in Kraków. In addition to his university engagements, he also educated younger pupils at a private school operated by a prominent Polish prelate. Around 1528, Cox left Kraków, and by the year 1530, records place him as rector of a school at the Benedictine Abbey in Reading, England. With the exception of two brief departures, he remained in Reading almost until his death shortly before 1550. Despite his previous academic prominence, Cox's intellectual and academic influence in England was considerably diminished in comparison to his earlier

³ F.G. Kiss, *Leonard Cox Magyarországon (1520–1525)*, in: *Janus Pannonius, Vitéz János és a humanista hagyomány továbbélése (1450–1630)*, eds. R. Bajáki, E.R. Szilágyi, Budapest 2023, pp. 197–208.

years in Central Europe. Although he pursued patronage at the royal court and published some works, his engagement in the country's scholarly life remained relatively limited. In the final phase of his life, Cox accepted the position of licensed preacher and actively supported the Protestant reforms introduced by Edward VI (r. 1547-1553).

Leonard Cox in Historical Perspective: A Review of Scholarship

Modern historiographical research on Leonard Cox traces its origins to the late nineteenth century. While earlier references to Cox were largely based on tradition and anecdotal accounts, it was not until the studies of Frederic Ives Carpenter, published in 1898 and 1899,⁴ that his life and work underwent systematic scholarly analysis. Carpenter's research primarily focused on Cox's pioneering contribution to English rhetoric, specifically his authorship of the first printed book on rhetoric in the English language, which was composed around 1530. After a lengthy period of scholarly neglect, the 1970s saw renewed academic interest in Cox, particularly in relation to his time in Kraków. Henryk Zins, in a series of articles published in 1972 and 1973⁵ examined Cox's activities in Kraków, shedding new light on his role in Central European humanism. Further significant contributions came in 1988, when Andrew Breeze compiled a bibliography of Cox's published works.⁶ In 1991, he collaborated with Jacqueline Glomski to produce an annotated translation of Cox's pedagogical treatise, *Libellus de Erudienda Iuventute*, originally published in Kraków in 1526.⁷ Glomski continued to analyze Cox's patronage networks, particularly his intellectual relationships with fellow humanists Valentin Eck and Rudolf Agricola Jr. within the Kraków scholarly milieu.⁸ The theme of patronage, this time in an English context, became the focus of Agnes Juhász-Ormsby, whose 2012 study explored Cox's connections with benefactors in England.⁹ Overall, Cox's activities in England, with a particular focus on the conditions and circumstances of his tenure in Reading, were the subject of a study by Martin Murphy, published in 2015. Murphy significantly expanded the biographical knowledge about Cox and his autobiographical texts.¹⁰ In 2019, Gábor Farkas Kiss conducted a content analysis of Cox's pedagogical commentaries, with particular attention to those accompanying Statius's works.¹¹

⁴ F.I. Carpenter, *Introduction*, in: L. Cox, *The Arte or Crafte of Rhethoryke*, ed. F.I. Carpenter, Chicago 1899; F.I. Carpenter, *Leonard Cox and the First English Rhetoric*, "Modern Language Notes," 1898, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 146-147.

⁵ Zins H., *Angielski humanista Leonard Coxe i polscy erasmiańscy*, "Rocznik Humanistyczny," 1972, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 63-82; idem, *Leonard Coxe and the Erasmian Circles in Poland*, "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Sklodowska," 1973, F 28, pp. 153-180; idem, *Leonard Coxe i erasmiańskie kola w Polsce i Anglii*, "Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce," 1972, vol. 17, pp. 27-62.

⁶ A. Breeze, *Leonard Cox, a Welsh Humanist in Poland and Hungary*, "The National Library of Wales Journal," 1988, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 399-410.

⁷ A. Breeze, J. Glomski, *An Early British Treatise upon Education: Leonard Cox's 'De erudienda iuventute'*, "Humanistica Lovaniensia," 1991, vol. 40, pp. 112-167.

⁸ J. Glomski, *Patronage and Humanist Literature in the Age of the Jagiellons: Court and Career in the Writings of Rudolf Agricola Junior, Valentin Eck, and Leonard Cox*, Toronto 2007.

⁹ A. Juhász-Ormsby, *Leonard Cox and the Erasmian circles of early sixteenth-century England*, "Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Upsaliensis," 2012, vol. 14, pp. 505-514.

¹⁰ M. Murphy, *Thame, Tübingen, Kraków and Reading: The itinerary of Leonard Cox, humanist and schoolmaster (c. 1495-1550)*, "Humanistica Lovaniensia," 2015, vol. 65, pp. 75-95.

¹¹ A. Juhász-Ormsby, F.G. Kiss, *Leonard Cox's Pedagogical Commentaries*, "Neulateinisches Jahrbuch – Journal of Neo-Latin Language and Literature," 2019, vol. 21, pp. 169-193.

Kiss later expanded this research, presenting an in-depth study of Cox's Hungarian period in 2023.¹² Beyond these foundational academic studies, Cox has been referenced in numerous other works and has been the subject of several biographical entries. A comprehensive analysis of the historiography concerning Cox is provided in articles published in 2018,¹³ while a concise biographical profile focused on his pedagogical activities appeared in 2023.¹⁴ His role in the Reformation was further examined in a 2024 study.¹⁵

Lay Humanism and Women

Gender studies today constitutes a broad and highly differentiated field of historical research, shaped by the expansion and diversification of its subdisciplines over time. The aim of this study is not to revise existing findings, as this process naturally unfolds within the discipline itself, but rather to contribute a modest addition to the study of women (wives) of intellectuals – albeit, due to the scarcity of primary sources, only indirectly. In keeping with the historical context, this examination necessarily approaches the topic through the figure of a male scholar and his family. The wife of Leonard Cox, Margaret Devon, remains almost entirely unknown, much like his children and many other less prominent men of his time. Historical records tend to preserve only the most successful individuals, particularly those who actively sought self-promotion and lasting renown. Even Cox himself posed a historiographical challenge, with centuries passing before serious scholarly attention was devoted to his life and work – a process that remains incomplete to this day. Given the lack of sufficient data on Cox, it is even more difficult to scientifically examine his wife and family. Nonetheless, the purpose of this study is to highlight the importance of marriage and family life for certain intellectuals, using Leonard Cox as a case study. This topic is closely interwoven with several broader themes, including academic peregrination, university traditions, patronage, and the Reformation. All of these aspects, which are fundamental to the study of humanism, are often marginalized when viewed through the lens of marital commitment and family obligations.

Women were by no means absent from the lives of clerical academics, yet their presence often carried profound personal and professional consequences. The famous case of Peter Abelard¹⁶ exemplifies how such relationships could exert a decisive – if not nearly tragic – impact on an academic career. Similarly, Petrarch, another cleric, experienced the influence of romantic love, albeit in a less dramatic manner.¹⁷ The monastic attitude toward women is exaggerated to grotesque proportions in the works of François Rabelais, particularly in

¹² F.G. Kiss, *Leonard Cox Magyarországon (1520-1525)*, op. cit., pp. 197-208.

¹³ P. Fedorčák, "More Eminent in Foreign Countries than at Home:" *The Humanist Leonard Cox on the Edge of National Historiographies*, "Terra Sebus. Acta Musei Sabesiensis," 2018, vol. 10, no. 10, pp. 111-127; idem, *Obraz humanistu a pedagóga Leonarda Coxa vo svetovej historiografii*, in: *Cassovia Docta: Osobnosti vedy a školstva*, eds. P. Fedorčák, P. Fogelová, Košice 2018, pp. 7-44.

¹⁴ Idem, *Extraneus non de facultate: Život a pedagogická činnosť Leonarda Coxa*, "Historicko-pedagogické forum," 2023, vol. 12, no. 1-2, pp. 3-10.

¹⁵ Idem, "Lupi rapaces?" *Vývoj a formovanie postoja humanistu Leonarda Coxa k reformácii*, "Notitiæ historiæ ecclesiasticæ," 2024, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 54-65.

¹⁶ J. Le Goff, *Intelektuálové ve středověku*, Prague 1999.

¹⁷ Idem, *Kultura středověké Evropy*, Prague 2020.

his depictions of monks, where relationships with women are often satirized.¹⁸ However, a different perspective emerges from the renowned work *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,¹⁹ attributed to an erudite Venetian Dominican. This text underscores that, despite the intellectual, philological, and even architectural sophistication of its author, love for a woman – without the possibility of marriage – was just as central to the concerns of many clerical humanists as their devotion to classical literature.

In the first third of the sixteenth century, lay humanists faced a fundamental challenge – how to reconcile scholarly pursuits with married life. Setting aside the already mentioned aspect of male-female relationships, which were not uncommon among university students and perhaps even some clerical academics, including professors, it is clear that such relationships did not hinder academic peregrination. On the contrary, they often accompanied it as a natural phenomenon. Marriage, however, was primarily a matter of social status and the legitimate transmission of lineage. Its significance was acknowledged in antiquity, as seen in Plato's philosophy – or more precisely, in the teachings of Plato's Socrates – where marriage was regarded as an honorable institution to which every adult man was expected to conform, primarily for the benefit of the state.²⁰ Socrates himself served as an example in this regard, though his deepest affections were directed not toward his wife and children but rather toward philosophy and his students.²¹

Can we discern a similar dichotomy in Leonard Cox? Certainly not. No evidence suggests such an inclination. On the contrary, Cox appears to have made a firm decision to lead a virtuous life and fulfill his social obligations. In Italy, the predominant model of intellectual life was Plato, whereas north of the Alps, Erasmus – to whom Cox remained a devoted disciple – served as the greater inspiration. From 1518 onward, Cox's commitment to this ideal becomes increasingly evident. This does not mean, however, that he neglected other ambitions. Second only to his personal virtue, Cox valued patriotism and service to his homeland. Economic security followed as a pragmatic necessity, enabling him to function as a humanist, scholar, and educator. Ironically, the very element that defines Cox and other humanists most profoundly – their intellectual endeavors – is the one that, in reality, influenced him the least. At the very bottom of his hierarchy of priorities was confessional allegiance and his stance on the Reformation.

The Pivotal Year 1518

For Leonard Cox, the year 1518 marked a decisive turning point. It was also a watershed moment for Kraków, though not due to Cox's arrival, but rather because of the marriage of King Sigismund I of Poland to the Italian princess Bona Sforza.²² This event ushered in an influx of Italian artists, scholars, and entrepreneurs, significantly shaping Kraków's cultural and

¹⁸ M.M. Bachtin, *François Rabelais a lidová kultura středověku a renesance*, Prague 1975.

¹⁹ F. Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, aneb Poliphilův boj o lásku ve snu*, Prague 2018.

²⁰ *Antológia z diel filozofov. Zväzok 1., Predsokratovci a Platón*, ed. J. Martinka, Bratislava 1998, pp. 383-419.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 293, 318.

²² See works written by Patrik Paštrnák, *Bona Sforza's Bridal Journey to Poland as Imaginary Traveling and Jagiellonian Propaganda*, "Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie," 2020, vol. 76, no. 2, pp. 289-315; *idem*, *The Bridal Journey of Bona Sforza*, "Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU," 2018, pp. 145-156.

intellectual landscape.²³ There is no direct evidence suggesting that this royal wedding influenced Cox's decision to move to Kraków, nor can we entirely rule out the possibility. More likely, Cox was drawn by the prestige of the University of Kraków, which was experiencing one of its most prosperous periods at the time.²⁴ The year 1518 was a defining moment in Cox's career because Kraków provided him with nearly ideal conditions for a decade of scholarly and academic development, as well as intellectual networking. This period ultimately proved to be the most successful phase of his life. By this point, Cox had already received a strong foundational education in England and had earned a Bachelor's degree from the University of Tübingen. In the interim – perhaps on his return journey to England – he may have also spent time in Paris, as indicated by his connections with leading French humanists, his fluency in French, and an early biographical reference to his presence in France. A critical question remains: Did Cox intend to settle permanently in Kraków, or was he merely passing through? If he had planned to continue his peregrination, what was his ultimate destination, and how long did he intend to remain on the move? Most importantly, what led him to end his academic peregrination and establish himself in one place?

Cox provides us with a crucial clue in answering the question of his long-term intentions. Upon his arrival in Kraków in 1518, he openly declared to the local academic community that he had no intention of remaining permanently in the city. At the same time, however, he lavishly praised the university and its faculty, including both humanists and scholastics alike. Cox, who had only just arrived – seemingly drawn by the prestige of the university – immediately announced his plans to return to England, where he would purportedly promote the reputation of the University of Kraków. Whether he actually fulfilled this promise remains uncertain. Was this simply a diplomatic statement to reassure his colleagues that he would not claim a permanent position at the university? Academic peregrination, in Cox's case, is somewhat ambiguous – was he primarily a student or a teacher? His role blurred the lines between the two, a common phenomenon in the early modern university system. At the time, constant movement between universities and lower-ranking schools was not an exception but the norm. While modern readers may be surprised by the extent of academic migration, it was a fundamental aspect of medieval, late medieval, and early modern European scholarly life, despite the economic and logistical hardships it entailed. Yet Cox dedicated only half of his career to academic peregrination; the other half he devoted to his family and homeland. Although this may sound sentimental, it is clear that Cox willingly sacrificed the advantageous conditions he had enjoyed in Central Europe. However, the political and academic landscape there was not static. The political climate in Hungary changed dramatically after the catastrophic defeat of the Hungarian army against the Ottomans in 1526, and intellectual attitudes at the University of Kraków began to shift in response to new reformist ideas.

Despite these developments, there is no compelling evidence that such factors directly influenced Cox's decision to leave. He had already departed from Hungary before 1526, and in Kraków, he enjoyed the favor of ecclesiastical authorities. He maintained cordial relationships

²³ The entrepreneurial activities of Italian merchants were described in both a positive and critical light in *Kraków: History and Art*, eds. J. Purchla, J. Ziętkiewicz-Kotz, Kraków 2019. The royal entry into the city was among the last that Kraków witnessed and likely followed previous ceremonial patterns, as outlined in Dorota Żurek's study: *Ceremonial Entries into Late Medieval Kraków*, "The City and History," 2024, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 37-54.

²⁴ From the latest works: P.W. Knoll, *A Pearl of Powerful Learning: The University of Cracow in the Fifteenth Century*, Leiden 2016.

with both factions of the academic community, whose debates were increasingly shaped by discussions of Reformation thought. Notably, Cox appeared highly resilient to the transformations occurring at Kraków's university, showing no visible reaction to the shifting intellectual currents. The most plausible explanation for Cox's departure – supported by the available evidence – is his desire to marry and establish a family in England. More than any political or religious changes, it was this personal ambition that determined his trajectory. Cox's case demonstrates how marriage played a decisive role in the careers of humanists, academics, and intellectuals. The choice to marry naturally limited one's ability to continue peregrination, whereas remaining celibate was traditionally associated with clerical status. A third option – remaining unmarried but outside the clerical order – was neither widely desirable nor socially accepted in the long term.

Polish Bishops and Cox's Circle of Friends

Following his speech before the university faculty in December 1518, Cox began lecturing at the University of Kraków within just a few weeks, officially teaching during the summer semester of 1519. However, he did not hold a formal faculty position, as he was a layman and not a cleric, which disqualified him from securing a permanent academic post. Instead, he was listed as an external teacher (*extraneus non de facultate*).²⁵ Since lay scholars were excluded from regular salaried university positions, it remains uncertain whether Cox received any form of payment for his teaching. More likely, he relied on financial support from patrons, which was the standard mechanism for lay humanists in similar positions. In Cox's case, his patrons were high-ranking clerics – Polish bishops. These ecclesiastical benefactors had a history of supporting lay intellectuals, including Valentin Eck and Rudolf Agricola Jr., both of whom had previously taught at the University of Kraków and were close associates of Cox. From the moment Cox left England, his travels through Europe took the form of an academic peregrination. Notably, by 1518, he was open about his intention to eventually return to England, which explains his frequent relocations. He spent four years in Tübingen, two years in Kraków, one year in Levoča, three years in Košice, and another three years in Kraków before finally returning to England. Along the way, it is highly probable that he also stopped in Paris, Prague, and Vienna, although direct evidence for these visits remains circumstantial. Unlike his close friend and fellow humanist, Valentin Eck, a former professor at the University of Kraków, who eventually abandoned his academic career, settled in Bardejov (Hungary), and married, Cox deliberately postponed marriage and permanent settlement until his return to England. His decision appears to have been strategic, as he sought to maximize the opportunities presented by his peregrination. Shortly after returning to England, Cox finally married and established himself in Reading, marking the end of his itinerant academic career.

In an intellectual environment where clergy overwhelmingly dominated – including secular priests, canons, bishops, and members of religious orders – Cox made it clear that he intended to marry and remain a lay academic. He demonstrated this commitment by rejecting ecclesiastical benefices, which were typically conditioned on priestly ordination. Traditionally, due to the origins and structure of medieval universities, professorial positions

²⁵ J. Glomski, *Patronage and Humanist Literature in the Age of the Jagiellons*, op. cit., pp. 37, 40–41.

were reserved for clerics. Even Erasmus, as well as Cox's patron in Hungary, the humanist and parish priest of Levoča and later Košice, John Henckel, were members of the clergy. It is therefore remarkable that Eck, Cox, and Agricola were able to hold academic positions at the university, despite the prevailing restrictions favoring clerics. Their access to academic roles was made possible by two key factors: They remained unmarried (thus satisfying the condition of celibacy, at least temporarily). They benefitted from influential patrons and the emerging Italian humanist trends, which saw an increasing number of lay scholars among the ranks of intellectuals. However, their Polish patrons – high-ranking ecclesiastical figures – urged them to take holy orders. By doing so, they would become eligible for benefices, securing financial support for their academic and pedagogical work without having to rely on private patronage. Toward the end of his life, Agricola even considered ordination, recognizing that an ecclesiastical benefice could provide financial stability and allow him to focus solely on scholarly pursuits without the constant need to seek external sponsorship.²⁶ Entering the clerical estate would have also granted lay humanists greater freedom within the university system.

Cox, however, sought to balance a layman's married life with his academic, teaching, and scholarly ambitions. Ultimately, he only partially succeeded in this endeavor. While he fulfilled his goal of marriage, he simultaneously distanced himself from his former academic prominence. After settling, his career never reached the same heights as it had during his years of academic peregrination.

Cox's Return to England and the End of His Peregrination

This study does not aim to explore Cox's aspirations to enrich England's cultural landscape upon his return. Regardless of his intentions, his reintegration into English academia was far from triumphant – at times disheartening, and in certain moments, even dangerous to his well-being. Without a warm reception among English scholars, Cox could have resumed his academic peregrination, seeking a more favorable intellectual environment by returning to Central Europe. As a student of Philipp Melanchthon and a friend of Erasmus, he would have had ample opportunities to secure prestigious positions on the continent. However, what ultimately ended his peregrination – and prevented its renewal – was family. Cox's decision to marry marked the conclusion of his itinerant academic career. With his scholarly mobility curtailed, his intellectual trajectory stagnated, and his once expansive career began to narrow.

Little is known about Cox's family, just as little as about his family of origin. The only available information, which remains neither confirmed nor refuted, dates back to the earliest historiographical studies on Cox from the late nineteenth century.

According to these (and modern) sources, Cox had two sons, one of whom, Francis, managed to achieve what his father could not – he graduated (as a Doctor of Theology²⁷) and later taught at the University of Oxford (New College).²⁸ Cox spent much of his later career in close proximity to Oxford. If the enrollment records from Tübingen accurately reflect his place of origin, he was born in Thame, a town near Oxford. Yet, despite this geographical

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 5, 38-39.

²⁷ T. Cooper, *Cox, Leonard*, in: *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. L. Stephen, vol. 12: *Conder – Craigie*, London 1887, pp. 411-412.

²⁸ M. Murphy, *Thame, Tübingen, Kraków and Reading*, op. cit., pp. 73, 76-77, 90.

proximity, Cox was never fully accepted into Oxford's academic establishment. Instead, he found greater recognition at the University of Cambridge, which formally recognized his Bachelor's degree upon his return to England. However, his petition to Oxford's scholars to acknowledge his Master's degree was unsuccessful. Cox's own professional ties to Oxford never fully materialized, despite the fact that the university and Reading – the town where Cox settled and taught – maintained strong connections throughout the period. Reading is located just a short distance from Oxford, linked by the River Thames, and lies directly on the route from Oxford to London. In 1209, a group of Oxford scholars had moved to Reading (as with other cities, such as Cambridge, where a new university was established) for not a long period but without creating a new university in Reading, relocating to the Benedictine Abbey there as a form of protest (the reason was a woman – a trial case involving a girl).²⁹ It was at the school of this very abbey that Cox later taught. By the seventeenth century, Oxford continued to honour its historical connection with Reading by granting a scholarship to the most outstanding student from the Reading school to support their studies at Oxford.³⁰ Conversely, the mayor and burgesses would request a recommendation for a new master for the school from the University of Oxford (St John's College), as was the case in 1636.³¹ Also, the University made a visitation to check the work of their alumni, as it happened on the request of the city council in a decade later.³² In the nineteenth century, the University of Reading was created from The University Extension College, the branch of the Oxford University, established in 1892.³³

One of the few surviving records concerning Leonard Cox's personal life is a rare but crucial document from the parish accounts of St Lawrence Church in Reading. This record states that in 1529 (or, less likely, in 1530, as the accounting year typically started in September 1529), Cox paid for a seat in the church for his wife, Margaret Devon.³⁴ Despite his prominent role in the town, Cox is otherwise absent from financial and parish records. Local church finances, which were traditionally managed by churchwardens rather than priests even before the Reformation, do not contain any other mention of Leonard Cox – even though he had led the town's school for two decades and was undoubtedly one of Reading's most educated and distinguished figures. The absence of municipal records further complicates our understanding of Cox's life. Many sources from Reading's civic administration did not survive the English Civil War (seventeenth century), and the monastic archive, like the monastic buildings themselves (except for the school), was destroyed during the Reformation. As a result, this single parish account is the only surviving mention of Cox's wife Margaret, and one of the very few references to his engagement with the local community.

²⁹ L. Harman, *The History of Christianity in Reading*, Reading 1952, p. 15.

³⁰ J.M. Guilding, *Reading Records: Diary of the Corporation*, vol. 3: 1630-1640, London 1896, p. 73.

³¹ The Berkshire Royal Archives, R – Reading Borough Records; Z – Miscellaneous; 9 – Papers relating to Reading School; R/Z9/5.

³² The Berkshire Royal Archives, R – Reading Borough Records; Z – Miscellaneous; 9 – Papers relating to Reading School; R/Z9/8/1 and R/Z9/8/2.

³³ Oxford and the Birth of Reading University, *Archives and Manuscripts Blog*, [online] <https://blogs.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/archivesandmanuscripts/2022/05/16/oxford-and-reading/> (accessed: 12.03.2025).

³⁴ J. Dils, *Reading St Laurence Churchwardens' Accounts 1498-1570. Part I. Introduction and Accounts 1498-1536*, Reading 2013, p. 165.

At the time, St Lawrence Church was the main parish church in Reading, standing at the heart of a town that lacked a defined urban center – its main market square was located just outside the abbey gates. The town itself grew around the Benedictine Abbey, one of the most significant monastic institutions in England, whose influence shaped Reading's development and daily life. The abbey was also a major pilgrimage destination, attracting large numbers of pilgrims who came to venerate the relic of St. James's hand. This relic was donated to the abbey by its founder, King Henry II, son of William the Conqueror, who (Henry II) also chose to be buried there. As a result, Reading's true intellectual and spiritual center was the abbey, and within it, the (not truly monastic) school that Cox directed. In the pre-Reformation period, the high clergy and monasteries began reforming their schools into a more broadly accessible system with a greater number of students, an initiative supported by the English king. As a result, monastic schools, such as the one in Reading,³⁵ became more open to all pupils and evolved into a type of school known as a "free school," while still being managed and led by the clergy.³⁶

Cox's close ties to Reading Abbey were further demonstrated during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII. The last abbot of Reading – a close friend and supporter of Cox – was executed by royal decree, and the monastery was dissolved. Despite this turmoil, Cox retained his position. King Henry VIII, by a special decree, reappointed Cox as rector of the school, ensuring that all his previous privileges and generous financial provisions were preserved.³⁷ Cox was known to the king and, without doubt, to Thomas Cromwell, the king's chief minister. However, his legacy in Reading remained largely unacknowledged in subsequent centuries – a fact that continues to this day.

Even less is known about Cox's wife Margaret, as historical records offer no additional information about her. However, despite the lack of documentation, it is clear that marriage and family played a decisive role in shaping Cox's later life. The question of clerical marriage was one of the most defining issues of the Reformation. The ability of priests to marry not only contributed to the split between Protestants and Catholics, but also shaped the lives of generations of Protestant clergy, their children, their peregrinations, and their academic careers. The case of the Utraquist University of Prague, which emerged from the Hussite revolution, provides a striking example of how these debates influenced academia. Anticipating the Reformation by nearly a century, the university explicitly prohibited married men from holding academic positions, a policy it maintained until the seventeenth century.³⁸

While in Poland, Cox closely collaborated with high-ranking members of the clergy, and upon returning to England, he continued to do so under the patronage of Abbot Hugh Faringdon. Throughout this period, his writings contain no traces of anticlericalism. However, as the atmosphere in England shifted with the Reformation, and as monasteries were dissolved under Henry VIII, followed by a more radical wave of reform under Edward VI, Cox gradually adopted a more critical stance. With intensified anticlerical rhetoric sweeping the country, he too began to voice his critique of the clergy, condemning it as superfluous and

³⁵ L. Harman, *The History of Christianity in Reading*, op. cit., p. 15.

³⁶ The Berkshire Royal Archives, DQI – Records of the John Isbury Charity; Q – Ecclesiastical and Charity; D/QI/Q3.

³⁷ M. Murphy, *Thame, Tübingen, Kraków and Reading*, op. cit., p. 91.

³⁸ P. Hlaváček, *Kacířská univerzita: Osobnosti pražské utrakvistické univerzity 1417-1622*, Prague 2013.

idle – with the notable exception of “a select few.”³⁹ By leaving room for these exceptions, Cox allows himself – and us – to place within this select group figures such as Abbot Faringdon, John Henckel, the Polish bishops, and ultimately Erasmus himself – an “astronomical clock” of rare and distinguished clerics whose contributions Cox continued to respect, even as the broader institution faced unprecedented scrutiny.

Cox was not entirely marginalized within the English humanist and academic community. On the contrary, his willingness to align himself with the ever-changing policies of the royal court – in both political and religious matters – enabled him to become part of two influential groups. First, he was involved with a select circle of scholars working on educational reform in England, and later, he joined a different but closely related group of Protestant preachers, many of whom were also distinguished humanist intellectuals.⁴⁰ Cox was far from alone in this transition. A significant number of English humanists abandoned their careers in education to pursue ecclesiastical appointments. This trend included his friend John Palsgrave, among others. The expansion of opportunities for lay humanists within the Church was largely a consequence of the deepening entrenchment of the Reformation, particularly under Edward VI. The ecclesiastical reforms introduced by both Henry VIII and his son Edward led to the vacancy of numerous clerical positions, which were subsequently filled by lay humanists – a development that significantly reshaped the intellectual and religious landscape of England.⁴¹

Conclusion

Leonard Cox’s life and career offer a compelling case study of the complex interplay between academic peregrination, patronage, intellectual ambition, and personal life choices in the early sixteenth century. His trajectory – from a mobile scholar in Central Europe to a settled academic and preacher in England – reflects the broader challenges faced by lay humanists in an era when clerical dominance over university positions and intellectual life remained strong. Cox’s decision to remain a layman and pursue marriage ultimately shaped the course of his career, setting him apart from many of his contemporaries, who either entered the clergy or continued their itinerant academic paths. While his marriage and family life provided personal stability, they also contributed to the stagnation of his scholarly influence, as he failed to reclaim the prominence he once held in Central Europe. At the same time, Cox’s adaptability allowed him to navigate the shifting religious and political landscape of England, aligning himself with both educational reformers and Protestant preachers. His trajectory exemplifies how the English Reformation created new opportunities for lay humanists, even as it reshaped the structures of patronage and academic life. More broadly, Cox’s story illustrates a defining dilemma for humanists of his era: the tension between intellectual mobility and personal commitments, between academic freedom and the constraints of institutional affiliations. His experience highlights the extent to which life choices – particularly regarding marriage and clerical status – were not merely private decisions but pivotal factors in shaping the professional and intellectual paths of early modern scholars.

³⁹ A. Juhász-Ormsby, *Leonard Cox and the Erasmian circles*, op. cit., pp. 510–511.

⁴⁰ M. Murphy, *Thame, Tübingen, Kraków and Reading*, op. cit., p. 93.

⁴¹ A. Juhász-Ormsby, *Leonard Cox and the Erasmian circles*, op. cit., pp. 511–513.

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