

LECTIO II: IOANNIS SARESBERIENSIS
EPISTOLAE ET METALOGICON
(twelfth century, late 1150s)

NB: I have lifted the following portrait from Édouard Jeuneau's *Rethinking the School of Chartres*, trans. Claude Desmarais (Toronto, 2009), pp. 77–90.

JOHN OF SALISBURY was born in England in the city whose name he shares. But this Englishman belongs to Chartres, at least by way of the last four years of his life and his burial: he was buried at the abbey of Josaphat, close to the town of Lèves, which is itself not far from Chartres. Four short years before—on 22 July 1176, the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene—the Chapter of Chartres Cathedral elected John of Salisbury bishop at the instigation of the king of France, Louis VII. Immediately, a delegation from that same Chapter made its way to Canterbury to offer John the bishopric of Chartres. By accepting their proposal, John of Salisbury became John of Chartres.

Why go all the way to England to find a bishop for Chartres? Some scholars believe that John of Salisbury had studied at Chartres in his youth and that he had even spent three years there, during which time the bonds of friendship were forged between him and the Cathedral Chapter. If this is the case, when the time came to choose a successor to William of Champagne (1164–1176), the Chartrians would naturally have turned their thoughts to this ‘former student’, who, in the meantime, had solidly established himself as a writer and diplomat of considerable repute. This hypothesis is seductive, but there is no definite proof to support it. The idea rests on upon a passage of the *Metalogicon*, in which John lists the various teachers under whom he had studied while in France between 1136 and 1148. Among them were Gilbert de la Porrée, Thierry of Chartres, William of Conches, and Petrus Helias.

Whatever the case may be, John of Salisbury’s learning had such breadth and depth that no school, no matter how brilliant it may have been, can capture its essence. This humanist gathered his knowledge in a great variety of places, and not just from books. He was, though, inarguably a great lover of books and an avid reader. If he made use of a large number of continental European libraries (in France and Italy), he also made the most of those in his native country, particularly the rich library of Canterbury Cathedral. After spending twelve years of his youth studying, his love of reading remained with him for the rest of his life. Hence his motto, borrowed from Quintilian: ‘The practice of grammar and the love of reading do not end with one’s time in school, but with the length of life’.

John of Salisbury found his master of philosophy not among the Platonists, nor the Peripatetics, nor the Stoics. His tendency toward moderation and the golden mean led him to choose a middle way between the minor philosophers and those giants, Plato and Aristotle. This middle way is that of the New Academy, led by Cicero: ‘our Cicero’. For John, the Roman orator was not only a master who teaches us how to speak, but was also, and above all, a master who teaches us how to think. Cicero taught the future bishop of Chartres a kind of moderate scepticism, the merits of which John took pleasure in praising. Assuredly, John did not blindly follow the Roman master of eloquence, just as he allowed himself to disagree on certain points with Plato and Aristotle. But despite this, the Roman orator remained his favorite guide.