



## The Beggar and the Professor

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In contrast to the usual history of kings and conquerors, in 1975 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote about a thirteenth century French village and its peasants in *MONTAILLOU: PROMISED LAND OF ERROR* (1978). In *THE BEGGAR AND THE PROFESSOR: A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FAMILY SAGA* Le Roy Ladurie tells the story of the sixteenth century Platter family and its rise from rural peasantry to the urban bourgeoisie.

Thomas Platter was born in 1499. His father died of plague, his mother abandoned him when she remarried, and Thomas became a wanderer, beggar, and occasional student on the roads of Switzerland and Germany. The archetype of the self-made man, his ambition, abilities, and the increased mobility of the early modern era enabled the one-time peasant to join the ranks of Basel, Switzerland's burgeoning middle classes.

Felix Platter, Thomas' son, received a more formal education, and in 1552, at the age of sixteen, was sent to Montpellier, France, to study medicine, returning to Basel after five years where he became a prominent physician. Thomas' wife and Felix's mother died in 1572. After three months Thomas remarried, fathering several more children before his death ten years later at the age of eighty-two. Felix and his wife, who were childless, took his father's children from his second marriage into their household. Thomas, Jr., Felix's half-brother and thirty-eight years younger, became the family heir. He, too, studied medicine at Montpellier.

Le Roy Ladurie presents the Platters against the broad historical canvas of the Renaissance and Reformation and its religious, political, and social upheavals, although John Calvin was the only famous figure they encountered. Were the Platters and their rise to middle-class status typical or unique? That question is perhaps unanswerable, but unlike the majority of their contemporaries, they left memoirs, and Le Roy Ladurie makes excellent use of these in telling a fascinating story.

## Sources for Further Study

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