

Albert of Saxony (c. 1316–1390)

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Sometimes nicknamed Albertucius to distinguish him from Albert the Great, [Albert of Saxony](#) was born in Rickensdorf in the region of Helmstedt ([Lower Saxony](#)), in present-day Germany. He did his early studies in his native region, then most likely took a trip to Elfurt. He later went to Prague and Paris, where he earned his master of arts degree in 1351. He was rector of the university in 1353. He taught the arts there for a decade, while studying theology at the Sorbonne, apparently without earning a degree. After a few years as a diplomat mediating between Pope [Urban VI](#) and the Duke of Austria, he was called on to found the University of Vienna, becoming its first rector in 1365. He was appointed canon of Hildesheim in 1366 and became bishop of Halberstadt the same year. He served in that capacity until his death on July 8, 1390.

[Albert of Saxony](#) left behind no theological writings and is known primarily for his works in logic and natural philosophy. He also composed commentaries on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Economics*, as well as a short mathematical treatise on the squaring of the circle.

In logic, his masterwork is a summa titled *Perutilis logica* (Very useful logic). He also composed a voluminous collection, the *Sophismata* (Sophisms), in which he examined many statements that raise difficulties of interpretation because they contain syncategoremes. In addition, he wrote *Commentarius in Posteriora Aristotelis* (Commentary on Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*) and a collection of twenty-five questions (*Quaestiones circa logicam*) relating to semantic problems or the status of logic. He also commented on Aristotle's writings in logic. During Albert of Saxony's career, [Jean Buridan](#) enjoyed great renown at the faculty of arts in Paris. Albert's writings, however, attest to the influence exerted in Paris by English ideas. His *Very Useful Logic*, while developing treatises on obligations, insolubles, and consequences—topics that were becoming increasingly important during the period—was modeled after [William of Ockham](#)'s *Summa logicae* (Summa of logic). Albert of Saxony adopted the Ockhamist conception of the sign and based signification on a referential relationship to a unique thing. He also subordinated the oral sign to the conceptual sign. He was an Ockhamist in his conception of the universal and, for the most part, in his theory of the supposition. In particular, he retained the notion of the simple supposition—that is, the reference of a term to a concept to which it is subordinated, even though it signifies an extra-mental thing. Finally, he was Ockhamist in his theory of categories. Unlike [Jean Buridan](#), he refused to consider quantity an absolute reality and relegated it to a disposition of the substance and the quality.

On a few points, however, Albert departed from [William of Ockham](#). Hence he rejected the idea that an ambiguous proposition ought to be assigned multiple meanings. Such a proposition can only be conceded, rejected, or called into doubt. In the *Sophisms*, [William Heytesbury](#) often served as his guide (for example, in the analysis of epistemic verbs and the study of the infinite). He grants the proposition a literal meaning, which is not that of its terms. Like the syncategoreme, the proposition signifies a "mode of being." Nevertheless, Albert of Saxony avoided accounting for these "modes of being" and, in the last analysis, transferred

them to relationships between the things to which the terms referred. But he used the idea of a proposition's meaning to define truth and to deal with "insolubles," that is, semantic paradoxes. By virtue of its form, every proposition signifies that it is true; for that reason, the insoluble is false, since it signifies both that it is true and that it is false.

This analysis of language was combined with a gnoseological realism that stemmed in part from an analysis of the void. It is possible to imagine that the void exists by divine omnipotence, but no science of nature can integrate the existence of the void as a hypothesis. Albert refused to extend the referent of physics terms to supernatural possibilities. For him, physics cannot develop into a study of imaginary cases, despite what was being done at Oxford at the time. It must account for the natural course of things.

In addition to commentaries on Aristotle's *Physica* (Physics), Albert composed a commentary on [Johannes de Sacrobosco's](#) *De sphaera* (On the sphere) and a treatise on relationships inspired by [Thomas Bradwardine](#). In pursuing the work of the Oxford Calculators and of Nicole d'Oresme in Paris, he created a compendium setting out the elements of the theory of relationships and their application to different motions, adopting the rule elaborated by Bradwardine on the relationship between powers of propulsion and resistance. In his physics texts, he also displayed a curiosity for many natural phenomena, taking an interest in motions of the earth, tides, and geology.

It was undoubtedly in the field of dynamics, however, that Albert's role was most important. To account for the motion of projectiles and the acceleration of falling objects, he adopted the Buridanian theory of impetus, a quality acquired by the body. He drew clearly the consequences of extending that notion to celestial movements, rejected the notion of a propulsive intelligence, and followed the same principles in studying celestial bodies and earthly bodies. His commentary on Aristotle's *De caelo* (On the sky) exerted a great influence in northern Italy. Albert of Saxony thus played a role in developing a vision of the cosmos that departed from conceptions inherited from Greco-Arab Peripateticism.

See also [Bradwardine, Thomas](#); [Buridan, Jean](#); [Heytesbury, William](#); [Impetus](#); [Oresme, Nicholas](#); [William of Ockham](#).

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