

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Strasbourg (1621–1795)

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This note summarises our research into the group of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Strasbourg.

## 1 SOURCES

Our main source was the comprehensive list presented in Berger-Levrault (1890) and Berger-Levrault (1892) of the professors teaching in Alsace. Strasbourg is in the county of Alsace. The source can be misleading because it mixes scholars from the two different institutions in the region. There was the Protestant University of Strasbourg, and the Catholic University of Molsheim. Molsheim is a little city next to Strasbourg. To complicate matters, the university of Molsheim moved in 1701 to the city of Strasbourg, to become the Episcopal University of Strasbourg. This summary covers the Protestant University of Strasbourg. We also used contextual information from Guénée (1978).

## 2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Strasbourg was officially established in 1621, but was preceded by schools that commenced operating a century earlier. The first school, created in 1523, was designed to educate the future pastors of the reformed religion. The school became a gymnasium in 1536, an academy in 1566, and a university in 1621. As Strasbourg was a free city of the Holy Roman Empire, all of the decisions concerning the transformation of the school into a gymnasium, then into a university were approved by the Magistrate (the municipal council) of the city and the Emperor. Here, we consider the professors who taught in all three antecedents of what eventually became the University of Strasbourg.

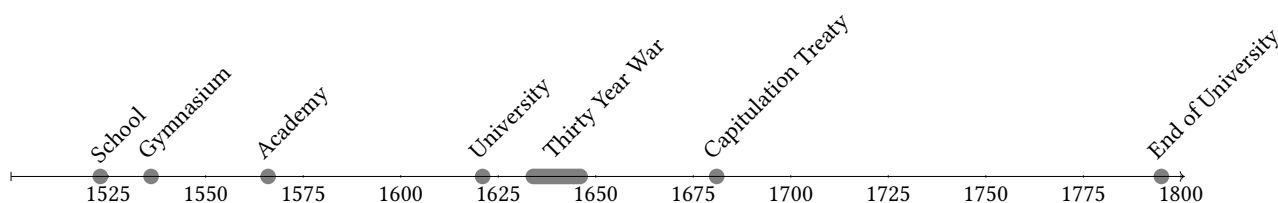


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Strasbourg

Before the end of the eighteenth century, the university and the city of Strasbourg suffered two major events. First, during the Thirty Year War, the city was protected by modern walls, but still the university lost many students, especially during the period 1632-1648. Second, the city was captured by the French army in 1681, and was incorporated into the Kingdom of France. It received some special rights in the capitulation treaty, including freedom of religion, and the autonomy of the protestant university, which remained under the control of the Magistrate of the city. These generous rights were given in exchange for the conversion of the famous cathedral to Catholicism.

When, in 1793, the French revolutionaries decided to close all of the universities and academies in the country, the University of Strasbourg was saved by its 1681 Treaty. From our understanding of Berger-Levrault (1892), Strasbourg appears to be the only university in France to have escaped the dismantling of 1793. Regardless, its situation became unsustainable during the Revolution and, after having lost its financial resources, the University slowly disappeared around 1795.

The university was re-established under the German Empire in 1872 and was declared the legal successor of the old university. Still, it is fair to recognize that there is no continuity between the old university and the university as it exists in present-day Strasbourg.

### 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. Overall, we link 274 scholars to the University of Strasbourg. We observe the year and place of birth for more than 80% of them.

The average age at first appointment was around 34 years, except at the beginning when older scholars were recruited. Longevity is low and stagnating. Having averages of less than 60 years for the mean age at death is rare.

The median distance between the place of birth and activity is high for the first periods, but then drops to zero, reflecting that more than half of the scholars are from the city of Strasbourg.

The coverage of scholars in Wikipedia is average, but the coverage in Worldcat is high. Overall, 85% of the scholars appear in Worldcat, with a maximum of roughly 98% over the period 1618-1685. Hence, most of the scholars published, and these publications have survived until now.

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1523–1526	6	66.7%	83.3%	37.8	60	26	66.7%	83.3%
1527–1617	117	70.9%	88.0%	34.9	60.5	155	35.9%	80.3%
1618–1685	51	96.1%	94.1%	34.4	57.2	0	39.2%	98.0%
1686–1733	41	95.1%	95.1%	34.5	59.1	0	19.5%	92.7%
1734–1800	59	84.7%	84.7%	33.3	62.3	0	35.6%	78.0%
1523–1800	274	82.1%	89.4%	34.4	59.9	0	34.7%	85.0%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

### 4 FIELDS

Figure 2 shows the balance between the different fields. The four faculties of a full university were covered (theology, medicine, law, arts (= humanities + sciences)). Sciences had a higher than usual share.

### 5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces of scholars and literati active at the University of Strasbourg per period. During the first two periods, the university attracted scholars across long distances. In particular, the period 1527-1617 saw scholars coming from the Holy Roman Empire, France, and Northern Italy. With the onset of the Thirty Years' War, scholars' birth places were basically limited to the north-east of Strasbourg. In the last two periods, the distance of birthplaces decreased significantly.

### 6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from Worldcat and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. We also compute

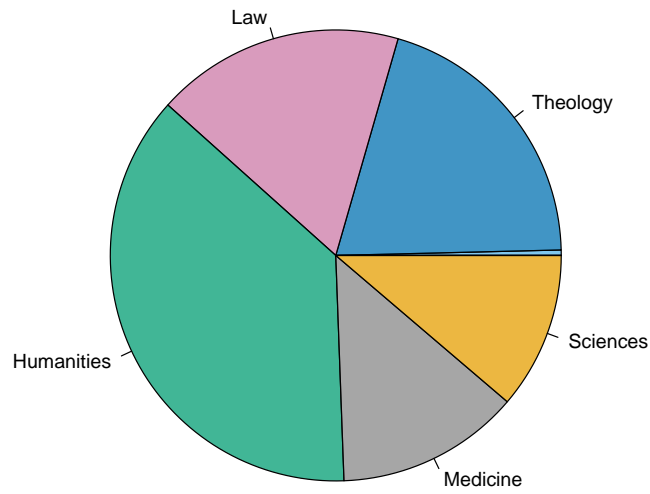


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Strasbourg (published scholars only)

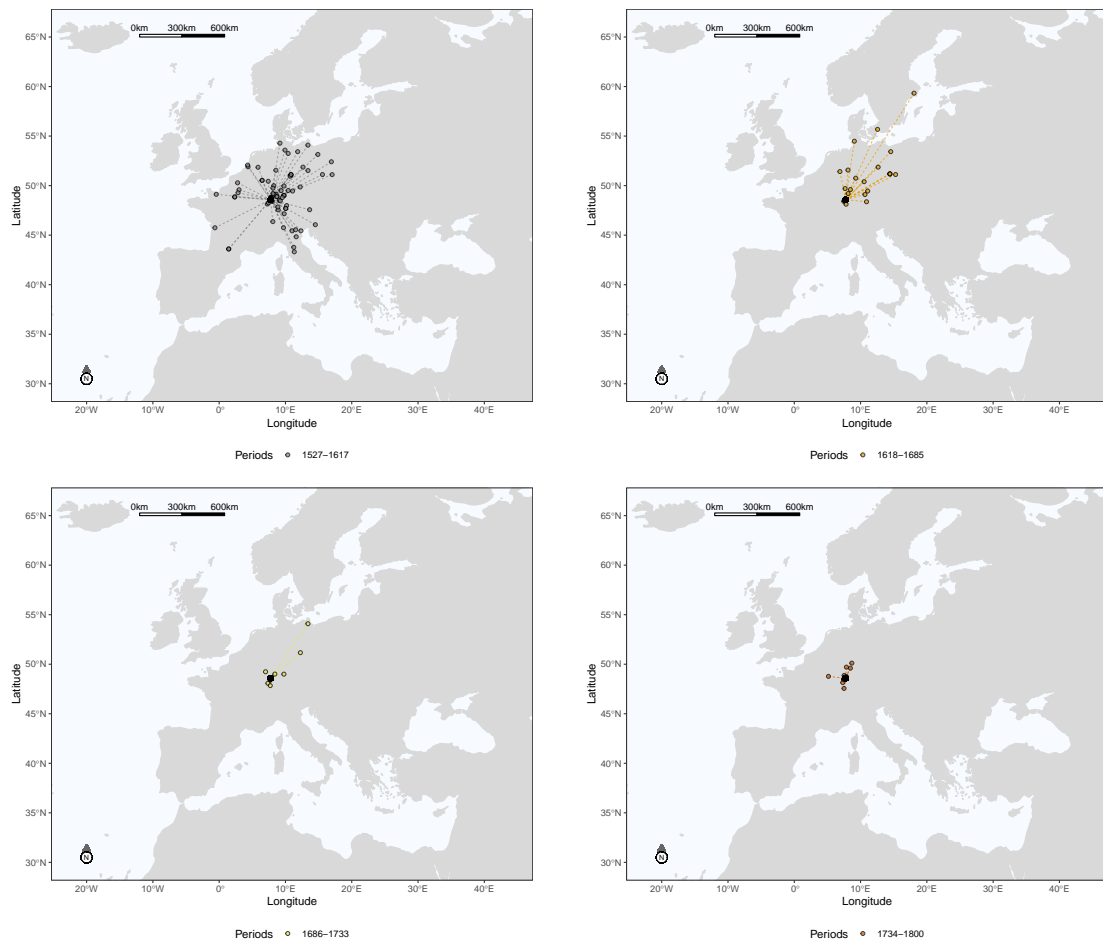


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Strasbourg

the notability of the university at each date by averaging the human capital of the scholars active in Strasbourg 25 years before that date. Details are given in RETE in volumes 1–5. Figure 4 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index.

The orange line plots the notability of the University of Strasbourg and its antecedents. The aggregated notability rose quickly to a level above 6 when it was not yet a university and fluctuated around a slowly decreasing trend until the Industrial Revolution. The top 5 scholars, according to our measure, were all active in the early days of the institution. They were: Calvin, Bucer, Hotman, Vermigli, and Sturm.

## 7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

**Johannes Calvin** (Noyon 1509 – Geneva 1564) was a French theologian, pastor, and reformer whom we described in the RETE on Geneva (Debois and De la Croix 2020). In Strasbourg, he taught theology from 1538 to 1541, before moving to the University of Geneva (Genève). In Strasbourg, he also served as a pastor of the French Church, and he married there in 1540. According to Calvinism, the doctrine initiated by Johannes Calvin, God chose from the beginning some people for salvation and others for damnation. People are assumed to be unable to influence their own salvation, hence they need self-confidence to be reassured (self-confidence took the place of priestly assurance of God’s grace, in Catholicism). Worldly success together with austerity in terms of spending became one measure of that self-confidence, paving the way for the rise of capitalism, according to Weber (1930).

**Martin Bucer** (Strasbourg 1491 – Cambridge 1551) was a German Protestant reformer from Strasbourg who influenced the various lines of thought in the Reformation. He was originally a member of the Dominican Order, but quit after meeting Martin Luther in 1518. He taught theology in Strasbourg from 1523 to 1549, before being forced to leave to England, where he took the position of Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. He is remembered as an early pioneer of ecumenism.

**François Hotman** (Paris 1524 – Basel 1590) was a French lawyer who taught at eight different universities (see Debois and De la Croix 2020 and De la Croix and Fabre 2021). In Strasbourg, he taught law from 1551 to 1563. He had a deep knowledge of Roman sources and made a significant contribution to sixteenth century jurisprudence.

**Peter Martyr Vermigli** (Florence 1499 – Zürich 1562) was an Italian Calvinist theologian. As a young man he entered a religious order and made his way up the hierarchy of the order. Upon reading the works of Martin Bucer and Ulrich Zwingli, he accepted Protestant beliefs about salvation and left the order. To avoid persecution by the Roman Inquisition, he fled Italy for Protestant northern Europe. He ultimately arrived in Strasbourg in 1542 where he taught the Old Testament. In 1545 he married a former nun from Metz. She knew no Italian, and Peter very little German, so it is assumed that they communicated in Latin. He was soon invited to Oxford, where he taught from 1548 to 1553. Finally, he moved to Zürich, where he taught for the 6 years leading up to his death.

**Johannes Sturm** (Schleiden 1507 – Strasbourg 1589) was a German humanist, who was the founding father of the gymnasium in Strasbourg. A former student of the University of Louvain, he taught for ten years at the University of Paris before moving to Strasbourg. He spent his life organizing the curriculum of the gymnasium. He was also professor of eloquence, and rector of the gymnasium until 1581. According to the Mathematics Genealogy Project (2022), Johannes Sturm had 4 doctoral students, giving rise to a total of 163743 descendants.

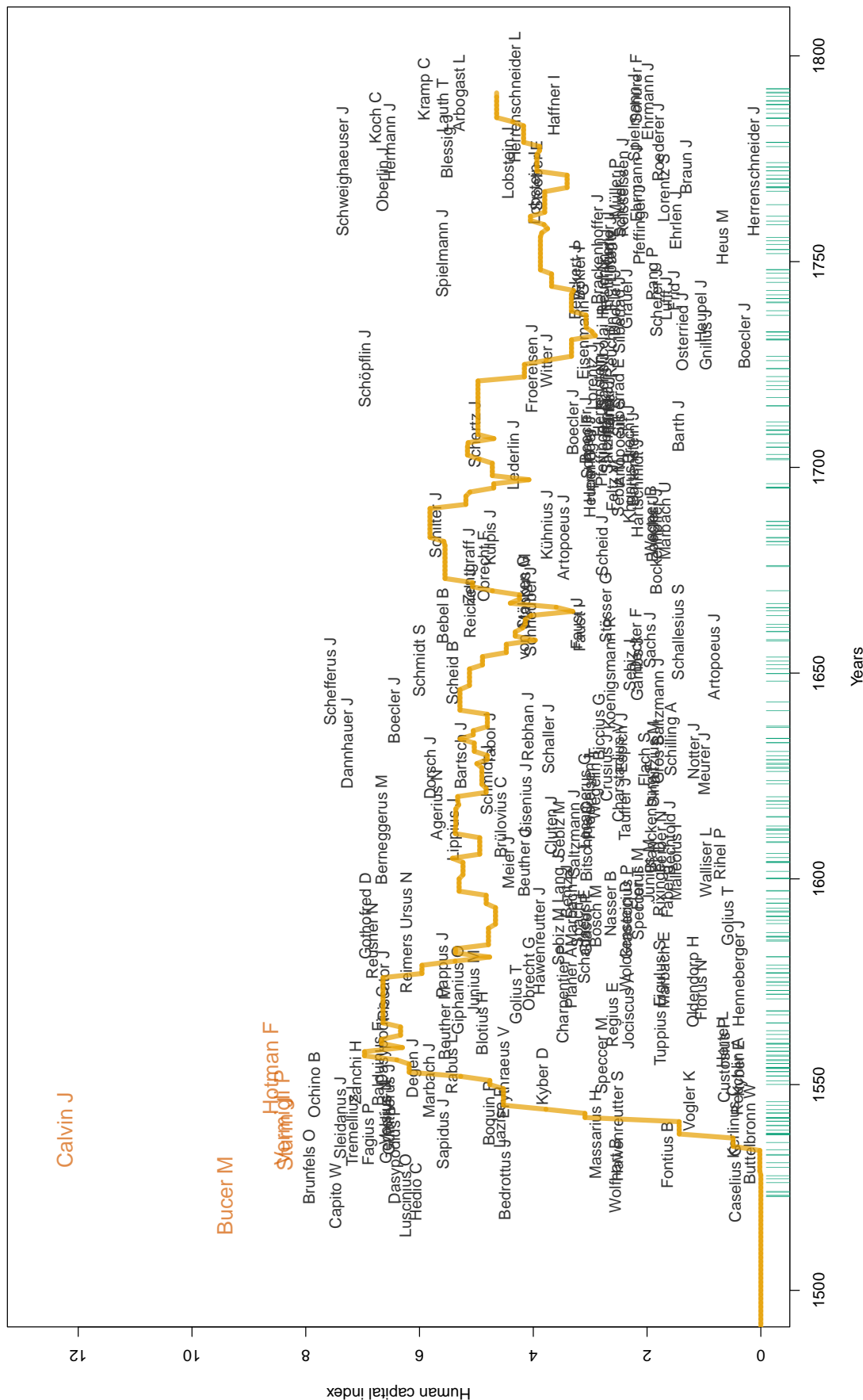


Figure 4: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

## 8 WHO'S WHO ON THE MOON

Another way to measure the notability of individuals is to look for signs of recognition such as street names, names of schools, research institutes, prizes and lunar crater names. Craters on the moon were named after one professor from the University of Strasbourg, in recognition of his contribution to the advancement of sciences.

**Nicolaus Reimers** (Hennstedt 1551 – Prague 1600) was an autodidact German astronomer and imperial mathematician. From 1587 to 1591, he taught mathematics at the University of Strasbourg. In 1591 he was called to Prague to fill the chair of Mathematics. Reimers was the first to translate Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* into German.

## 9 FAMILIES OF SCHOLARS

We counted 22 father-son pairs among the professors at the University of Strasbourg. Among them is the Sebisch (or Sebiz or Sebisius) family. This lineage spans four generations, all professors of medicine. The first Sebisch in this branch of the family was born in Falkenberg; all the other generations were born and died in Strasbourg. Figure 5 shows a simplified genealogical tree of this family.

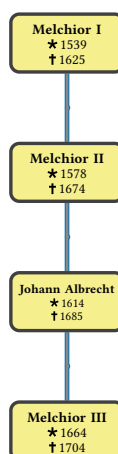


Figure 5: The Sebisch family

## 10 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Here, we assume that when a professor occupied a position in more than one university over their life, this established a link between those universities. The universities with which the University of Strasbourg was linked in each period are displayed in Figure 6.

There is a clear contrast between the first figure and the next: during Reformation, University of Strasbourg professors came from and went to many universities all over Europe. After the Reformation, movement only occurred with the North East, that is the Protestant world. This is a nice illustration of the findings in De la Croix and Morault (2022): the Reformation, followed by the Counter-Reformation, cut Europe in two, and prevented mobility across the religious border.

In the last two periods, i.e. when the university was taken over by the French, mobility towards the East stopped, but was not replaced by anything else. The University of Strasbourg became a Protestant university isolated in a Catholic country.

## 11 A NETWORK OF INDIVIDUALS

Another way to look at the intersection between two institutions is to consider the network of scholars. The network of scholars will represent individuals as nodes. Edges (links between individuals)

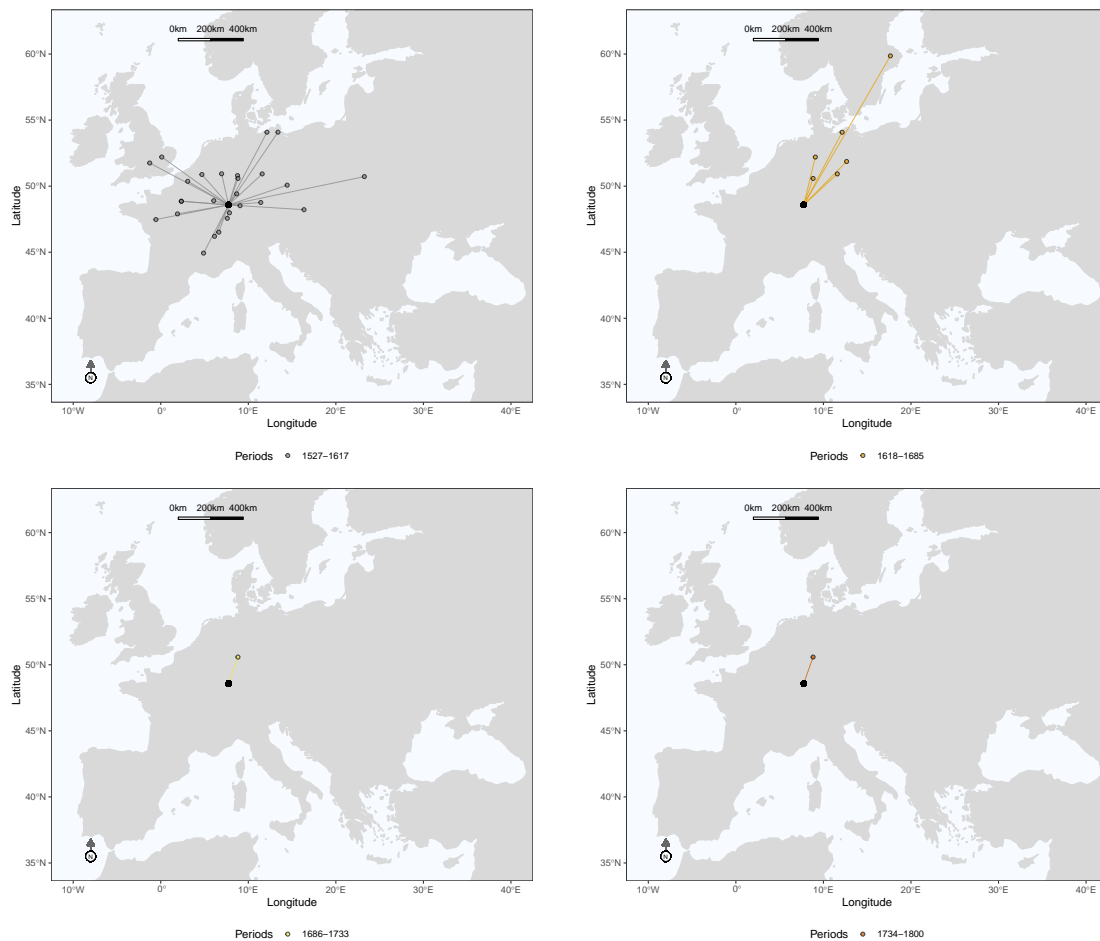


Figure 6: Links between Strasbourg and other universities through scholars' mobility, by period

will be assumed when two scholars share the same institution during the same period. Figure 7 shows the network of scholars of the University of Strasbourg together with those from the University of Geneva, in the Calvinist Switzerland. Time flows from top to bottom. At the beginning, several professors created links between the two universities, because they occupied positions in both. Afterwards, the two universities followed their own paths, no more connections were made. This reinforces the view that the University of Strasbourg became more and more isolated as time passed.

## 12 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Strasbourg is an interesting case. Born as a school in a free city in the early days of the Reformation, it grew into a full German university. Once conquered by the French, it kept its privileges but was cut from its past region of recruitment. Unlike most French universities, it had a strong scientific component.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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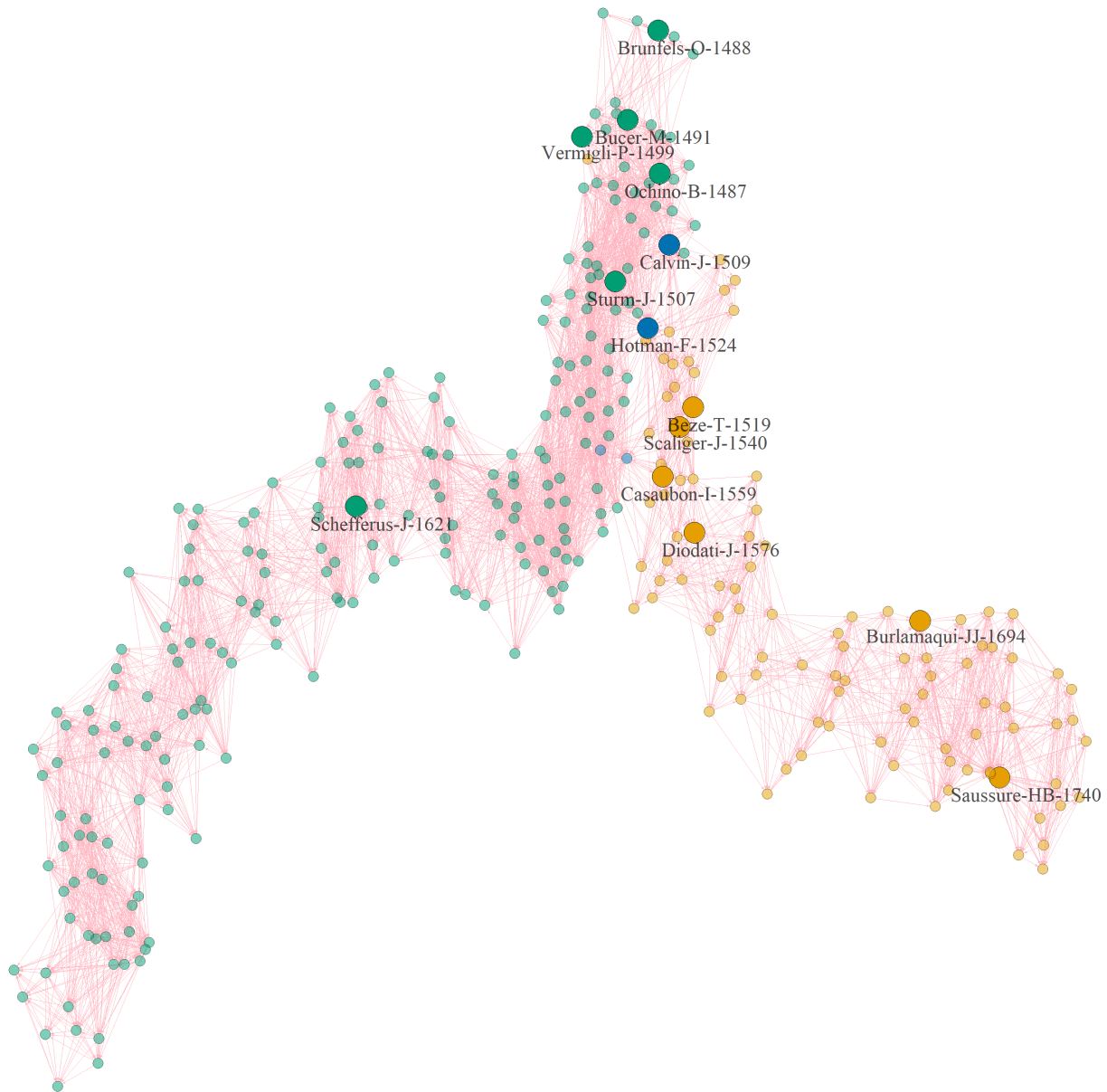


Figure 7: Network of scholars: University of Strasbourg (green) and of Geneva (orange)

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