

Scholars and Literati at the University of Coimbra (1290–1800)

David de la Croix

Tifenn Gualandris

Mara Vitale

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Coimbra from its inception in 1290 to the eve of the Industrial Revolution (1800).

1 SOURCES

We used several sources that allowed us to reconstruct an almost exhaustive list of the scholars who taught at Coimbra. The main ones are the two volumes by Rodrigues (2003, 1992), published by the archives of the University of Coimbra. They provide a detailed list of the professors who taught at the faculties of theology, canon law, civil law, and medicine. For the faculty of arts, we collected data from Gomes (1955), who focuses on Jesuit professors who taught philosophy at the University of Coimbra. To complete the information about scholars, we also consulted the first two volumes of Braga's work "Historia da Universidade de Coimbra" (1892; 1895). Finally, the works by Antunes (1997) and Ferreira (1729) were particularly helpful in finding and verifying the names of the early theologians who taught at Coimbra.

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Coimbra was founded in Lisbon in 1290. We know about this first university from the papal bull issued by Pope Nicholas IV recognizing its status as a *studium generale* where the arts, canon law, civil law, and medicine were taught. The teaching of theology was entrusted to the Dominicans and Franciscans. The first statute dates back to 1309. King John III (1502-1557) decided to move it to Coimbra in 1537 where it then stayed permanently.

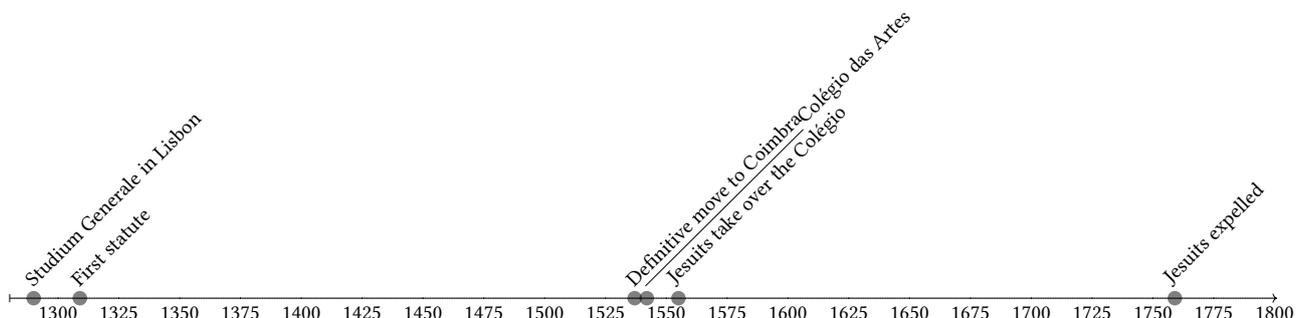


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Coimbra

In 1548, the king became dissatisfied with the quality of the teaching at the University of Coimbra and sought to establish a new institution dedicated to the humanities and philosophy, inspired by the Collège Sainte-Barbe in Paris. Although it attracted notable scholars, the resulting Colégio das Artes struggled to find stability.

In a bid to improve the situation, the king turned to the Jesuits, who had earned widespread respect in Coimbra in the years since their arrival. The founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola, accepted the king’s invitation and recruited some of the society’s most distinguished scholars, as noted by Grendler (2017). The Jesuits made a significant contribution to the University of Coimbra in the centuries that followed, until their expulsion in 1759.

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1200–1347	13	0%	38.5 %			176	0%	0%
1348–1449	67	0%	19.4 %			176	1.5%	0%
1450–1526	94	3.2%	13.8%	45	78	186	1.1%	2.1%
1527–1617	430	39.1%	85.8 %	33.3	63.3	176	12.1%	18.8%
1618–1685	270	45.2%	89.6%	35.5	63.6	138	3.3%	8.5%
1686–1733	243	43.6%	90.1%	36.1	66.1	134	1.2 %	5.3%
1734–1800	553	45%	78.1%	34	69.7	122	5.8%	8%
1523–1800	1670	38.8 %	77.4 %	34.4	65.9	148	5.9%	9.8%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

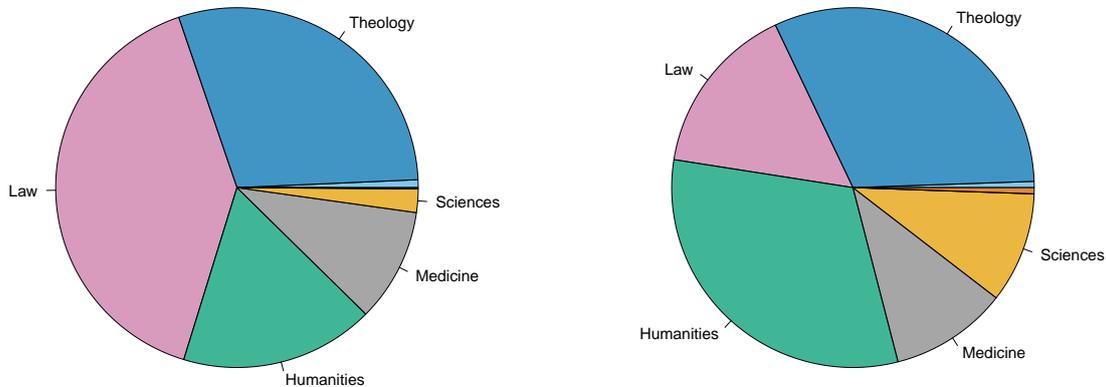


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Coimbra (left: all scholars, right: published scholars only)

3 SOME STATISTICS

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. We have information on 1,670 scholars. For the first two periods, we have virtually no exploitable data. We start having some reliable information from 1348 onwards, although the share of people for whom the year of birth is known remains rather low. On the whole, the birthplace is known for 77.4% of the scholars. The median distance between Coimbra and the location of birth is 148 km, confirming the national nature of this university. Most of the scholars do not have a Wikipedia page and do not appear in the Worldcat catalog. Only in the fourth (1527-1617) period is a temporary change observed, with more renowned scholars, coinciding with the creation of the Colégio das Artes and the subsequent arrival of the Jesuits in Coimbra. In fact, the members of this religious order are in general well documented.

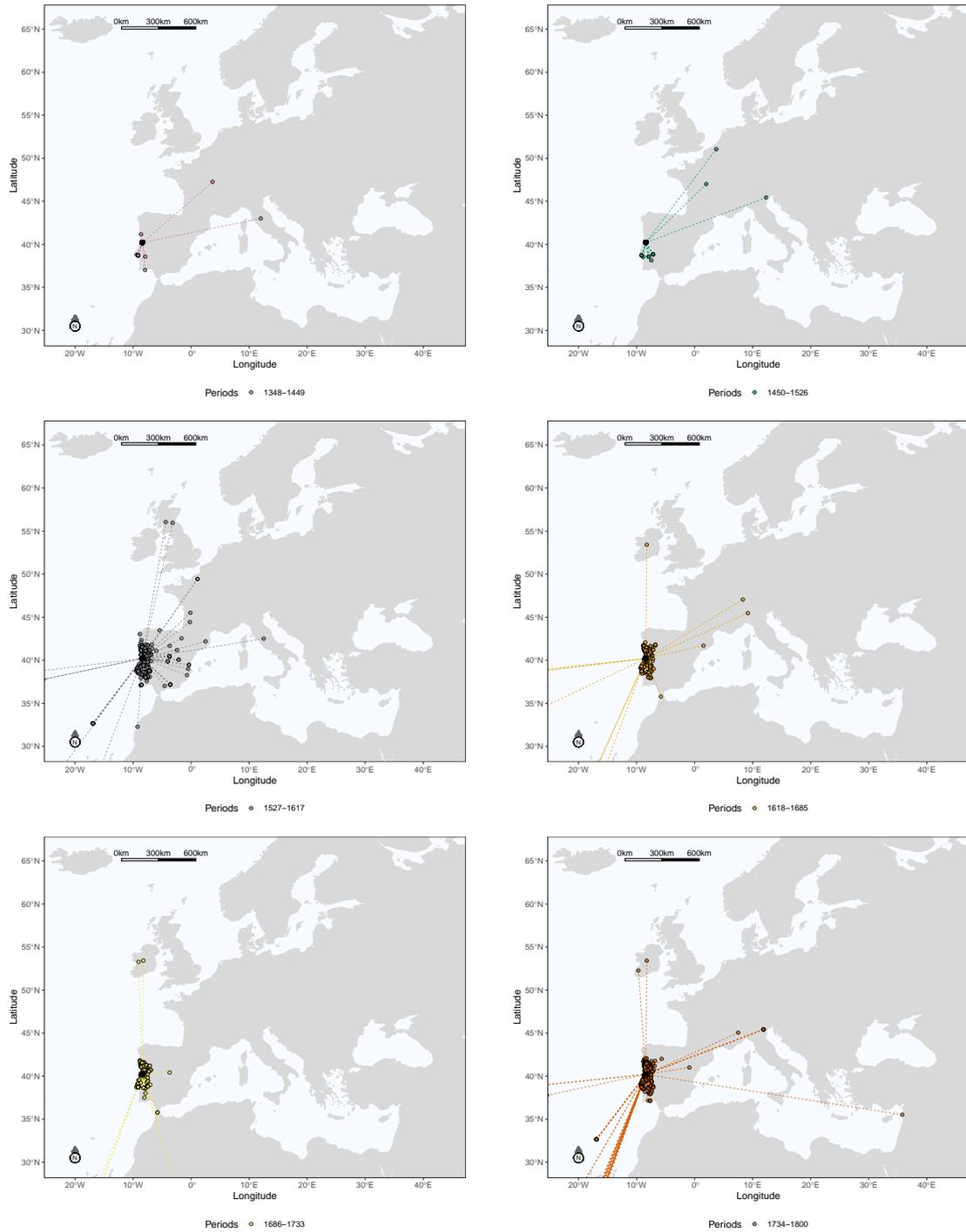


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Coimbra

4 FIELDS

Figure 2 shows the fields of specialization of Coimbra's scholars. The main fields are law, theology, and the humanities. When examining the publications of Coimbra's professors, it becomes clear that the fields of theology and the humanities continued to dominate, while law lost ground to the sciences and medicine.

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 shows the different birthplaces of the scholars affiliated with the University of Coimbra, by period. Over the centuries considered, we observe that the professors at the University of Coimbra were mainly from Portuguese territories. We observe a variation during the third period considered (1527-1617), coinciding with the arrival of the Jesuits, and in the last period (1734-1800), with the presence of professors from colonies.

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 the notability of the university at each date by averaging the human capital of the scholars active in Coimbra 25 years before that date. The 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 displays the notability of the university, based on how well published its top scholars were.

7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

We now provide a brief overview of the five professors with the highest human capital index.

Francisco Suárez (Granada 1548 – Lisbon 1617) was a Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian who belonged to the School of Salamanca movement. He had a great impact on scholastic philosophy and was mainly interested in metaphysics and the philosophy of law. After having taught at Salamanca for seven years (Vitale 2022), he took up the principal chair of theology at the University of Coimbra in 1597.

José Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva (Santos 1763 – Niteroi 1838) was a politician, naturalist, mineralogist, and poet. He taught mineralogy and geognosy at several European universities such as the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, the Royal Academy of Sciences of Lisbon, and the University of Coimbra. He is well known for the discovery of four new minerals and eight previously unknown species. Moreover, the mineral 'andradite' is named after him. After his long trip across Europe, he went back to Brazil where he was appointed Minister for Kingdom and Overseas Affairs. He fought for abolition and education, but those principles were not aligned with those of Emperor Pedro I. After the dissolution of the assembly, he was exiled to France until 1829. Then, he went back to Brazil and tried to reestablish the Empire without success.

George Buchanan (Killearn 1506 – Edinburgh 1582) was a historian and humanist scholar who had a thorough knowledge of Latin. He was arrested twice for his Protestant beliefs. The first time happened in Scotland but he managed to escape to Bordeaux, France where he later taught. He was a professor at the University of Coimbra the second time he was arrested and was imprisoned for seven months. He published an important late treatise 'De Jure Regni apud Scotos' in 1579. In this work, he wrote that the source of all political power is the people. The king is bound by the conditions under which the supreme power has been placed in his hands and it is lawful to resist and even punish tyrants. Among his pupils, we can mention Michel de Montaigne and Mary, Queen of Scots.

Garcia d’Orta (Castelo de Vide 1501 – Goa 1568) was a physician and herbalist. He was the first European to describe the symptoms of tropical diseases. He came from a Spanish family of Jewish faith that was forcibly converted to Christianity – although they continued to secretly practice Jewish traditions. He sailed to Portuguese India in 1534 as chief physician on board. He settled in Goa where Burhan Nizam Shah I, the ruler of the Ahmednagar Sultanate, and several Portuguese governors featured among his patients. He learned from Indian practitioners of traditional medicine and published "Colóquios dos simples e drogas he cousas medicinais da Índia" ("Conversations on the simples, drugs and medicinal substances of India") in 1563. His book was translated into Latin and became a standard reference text on medicinal plants.

Martín d’Azpilcueta (Barásoain 1491 – Roma 1586) was a canonist and theologian who belonged to the School of Salamanca. His work focused on the economic consequences of the influx of precious metals from the Americas, which caused inflation across Europe. He developed the theory of scarcity value, which explains that when demand outstrips supply, the price of goods increases. In addition to his economic insights, he is known for his significant contributions to modern casuistry, particularly through his influential 1553 publication, "Manual de confesores y penitentes" (Manual for confessors and penitents). One of his key contributions was the definition of the doctrine of *mentalís restrictio* (mental reservation, the practice of making a statement that is literally true, but intentionally misleading because the speaker is withholding relevant information).

8 WHO’S WHO ON THE MOON

There are various indicators of an individual’s notable achievements, such as the recognition they receive through the naming of streets, schools, research institutes, prizes, and even lunar craters. Unfortunately, when it comes to scholars from the University of Coimbra, there is only one lunar crater that bears the name of one of its scholars, indicating a relatively low level of recognition in this regard.

Pedro Nunes (Alcácer do Sal 1502 – Coimbra 1578) was a mathematician and cosmographer. He is best known for his "Tratado em defensam da carta de marear" (Treatise in Defense of the Marine Chart), published in 1537, in which he discusses the loxodrome for the first time, which he named the rhumb line. The loxodrome is an arc crossing all meridians at the same angle. In navigation, it is the curve that a ship follows if it always follows the same compass setting. He also invented the nonius, a useful tool in navigation and astronomy, which takes more precise measures on circular instruments such as the astrolabe. Moreover, Pedro Nunes educated King John III of Portugal’s brothers, and taught navigation skills, thus contributing to the first colonizing expedition to Brazil. His student Christopher Clavius, a future great astronomer, considered Pedro Nunes as a “supreme mathematical genius.”

9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

We operate under the assumption that when a professor held positions at multiple universities during their career, it established a connection between those institutions. Figure 5 displays the universities that were linked to Coimbra during each period. Notably, the period from 1527 to 1617 stands out for the high level of international mobility among professors.

10 ANECDOTES

The *Conimbricenses*, also known as the *Commentarii Collegii Conimbricensis Societatis Iesu*, is a significant work that had a great impact on Aristotelian philosophical studies. It was written between 1592 and 1606 by a group of Jesuits in Coimbra and is the first complete philosophical text published by a Jesuit college.

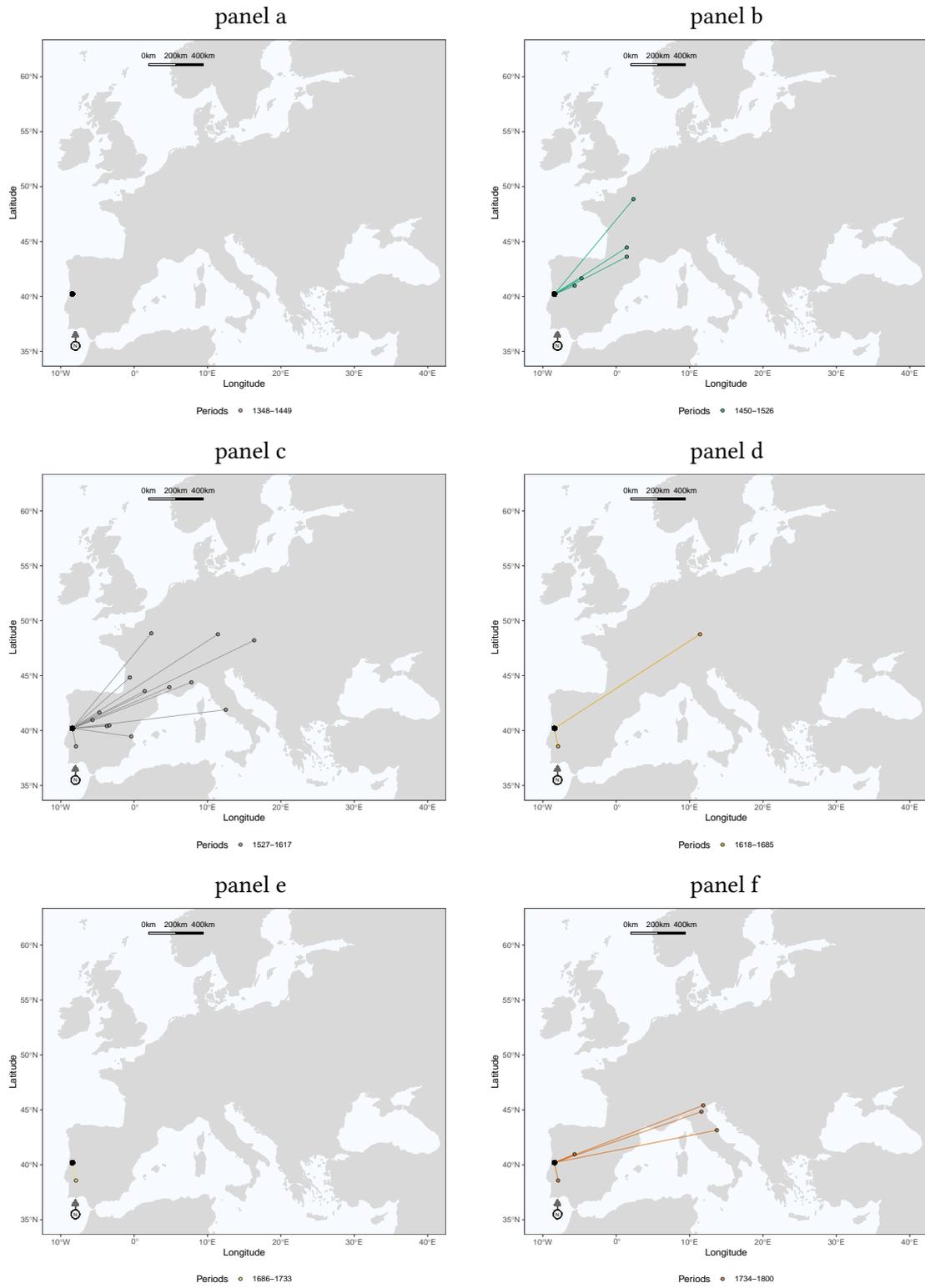


Figure 5: Links between Coimbra and other universities through scholars' mobility, by period

The primary objective of the *Conimbricenses* was to provide a foundational text for the Course in Philosophy, freeing both professors and students from the task of taking notes during lectures. This ensured that commentaries on Aristotelian texts and related matters, as mandated by the University of Coimbra's statutes, would be adequately covered.

Pedro da Fonseca led the commission responsible for overseeing the work, which included Marcos Jorge, Cipriano Suárez, and Pedro Gómez. The resulting collection of texts was so successful that it was reprinted multiple times, both in the Catholic and Protestant worlds. The enduring impact of the *Conimbricenses* is evident in the *Cursus Conimbricensis*, which developed primarily through educational institutions linked to the Jesuits in Europe, the Americas, and Asia.

According to linguist Anatoly Liberman, the English word "conundrum" may have originated in Coimbra. The scholars who worked on writing the *Conimbricenses* in the 16th century often used the expression 'multiplex significatio' (multiple meaning) to describe the complexity of a word. Referring to this characteristic of the ancient text, the expression "Conimbrienum argumentum" was born, which over time may have evolved into "conundrum" (Liberman. Anatoly 2008).

At Oxford, the famous Coimbra collection of texts was used, and it is thought that the common use of this word is due to the students of the English university, who began to use it in their slang to indicate something strange or whimsical.

11 FINAL THOUGHT

The University of Coimbra is one of Europe's oldest and most esteemed institutions of higher learning, with a rich history that dates back centuries. However, prior to 1530, it was a relatively small and unknown local university. Despite its early obscurity, the university quickly rose to prominence, enjoying a brief but brilliant heyday. Unfortunately, after 1600, the university experienced a sharp decline in both the quality and quantity of its publications, as well as its international nature.

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