

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Wittenberg (1502–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Wittenberg from its inception in 1502 to the eve of the Industrial Revolution (1800).

## 1 THE UNIVERSITY

At the behest of Prince Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, the Roman Germanic king and future emperor Maximilian I granted the royal privilege to establish a university on July 6, 1502. Located in Wittenberg within the Electorate of Saxony, this university opened its doors on October 18, 1502. It was founded after the Treaty of Leipzig (1485) which divided the lands of Weittin into Saxony and Thuringia. It aimed to educate jurists, theologians, and physicians for the administration of the Saxon territory. The university was originally funded by the chapter of the collegiate church (similar to a cathedral but without a bishop) (Herbermann 1913).

The university's early leadership was esteemed, which attracted numerous professors and students. Its foundational principles drew inspiration from those of the University of Tübingen. In 1512, Martin Luther earned his doctorate at this university and later taught theology there. It was on the church door of Wittenberg that he posted his 95 theses against indulgences in 1517. Translated into vernacular languages and disseminated across Western Europe by merchants, peddlers, and travelers using the printing press, Luther's propositions sparked the Protestant Reformation, making Wittenberg its center. The first pastor was appointed in 1523.

While the Thirty Years' War directly impacted the surrounding suburbs, Wittenberg itself remained relatively unscathed. However, the influx of refugees seeking protection within the city led to disease outbreaks, high mortality rates, and a decline in societal norms, significantly disrupting the university's operations.

The University of Wittenberg was suspended in March 1813. Despite the city's attempts to retain its local university, it was eventually moved to Halle. On April 12, 1817, the unified Friedrichs University of Halle-Wittenberg was founded in its new location.

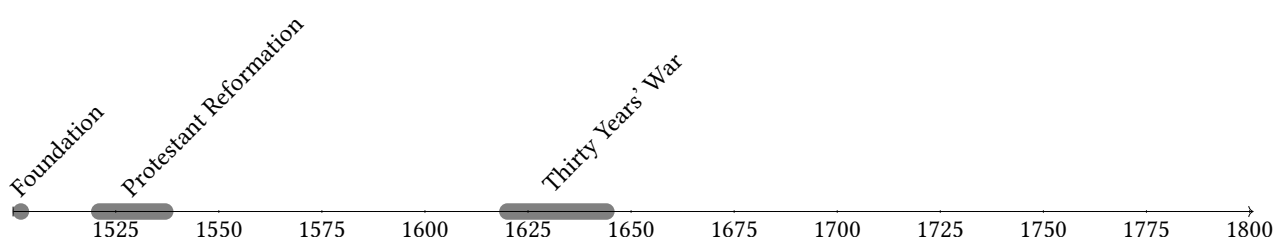


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Wittenberg

## 2 SOURCES

Two sources provide most of our data on the University of Wittenberg. Kohnle and Kusche (2016) covers the faculty of theology over the whole time span. The other faculties are covered by combining lists of professors found on Wikipedia with the textitllgemeine Deutsche Biographie. Finally, up to 1550, we add scholars - often lesser-known ones - from the *Repertorium Academicum Germanicum* (Schwinges and Hesse 2019) to achieve as comprehensive a data set as possible. On the whole, the coverage is comprehensive for theology, and broad for the other fields.

## 3 SOME STATISTICS

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics for the scholars we link to the University of Wittenberg. During the first period (the Catholic period), the information we have on the scholars is less complete concerning the birth dates and places. Indeed, the period includes many obscure scholars found in the *Repertorium Academicum Germanicum*. For the other periods, the information is excellent, and almost every scholar has both a Wikipedia page and a VIAF page. We retrieve some “stylized facts” already seen in other universities: at the time of the foundation, the university hired older scholars than in later periods (mean age at appointment of 34.8 compared to 31 on average). The mean distance between birth and university declines over time, i.e. the university became more and more local. After the Thirty Years’ war, longevity increases from 58 to 62 years.

Period	nb. obs	birth date known	birth place known	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1457–1526	128	66.4%	67.2%	34.8	58.1	255	57.8%	57.8%
1527–1617	281	84.3%	85.4%	30.4	55.3	204	72.2%	83.3%
1618–1685	95	98.9%	98.9%	29.6	58.7	107	100%	100%
1686–1733	85	97.6%	100%	30.1	62.4	135	100%	100%
1734–1800	102	100%	100%	30.8	62.4	98	98%	99%
1457–1800	691	87%	87.8%	31	58.5	149	80.6%	85.2%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

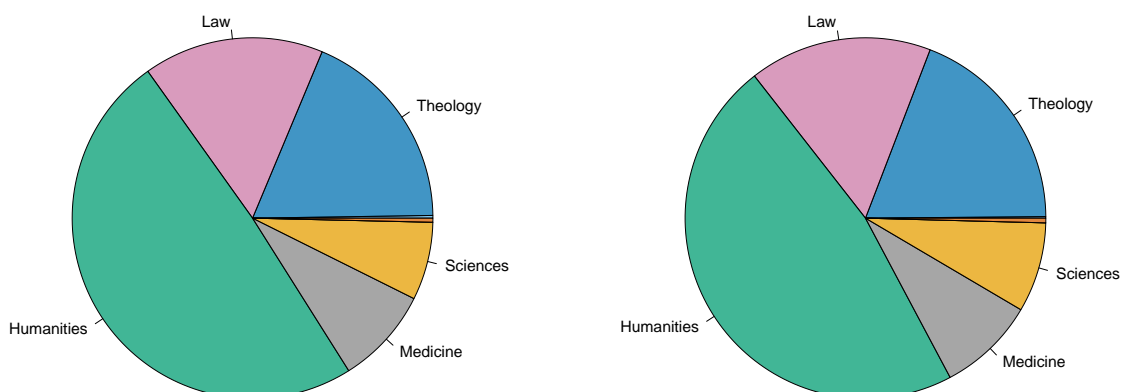


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Wittenberg (left: all scholars, right: published scholars only)

## 4 FIELDS

Figure 2 illustrates the broad academic fields at the University of Wittenberg for all scholars (LHS) and those who published (RHS). It shows that Wittenberg did not specialize in theology, even if this field represented a fair share. Law, sciences, medicine, and humanities are all well represented at the university, both in terms of the number of professors (left) and in terms of the published professors.

## 5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces of the scholars and literati active at the University of Wittenberg by period. During the first period, the University of Wittenberg, then Catholic, hired people who were born South West of the city. In later periods, the pattern is different, with more scholars coming from the North-East. The maps also show that the recruitment pool of the University of Wittenberg shrinks over time, in line with the drop in the median distance between birthplaces and Wittenberg seen in Table 1.

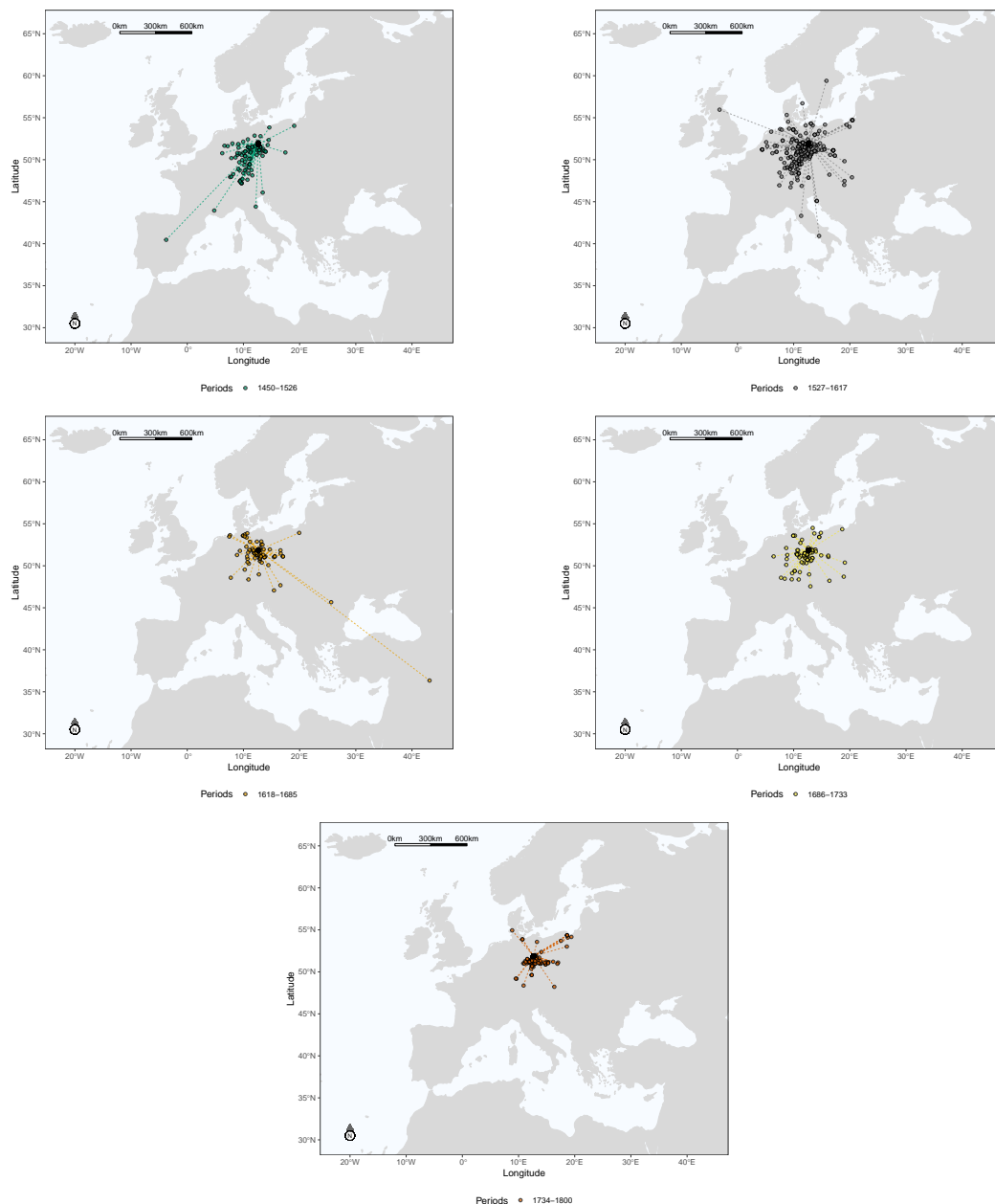


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Wittenberg

## 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 VIAF 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 at Wittenberg 25 years before that date. The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023). 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.

The path followed by the orange line shows that the University of Wittenberg reached its apogee during the life of Luther and Melanchthon, but kept a high level of notability in the following centuries.

## 7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

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

**Martin Luther** (1483 Eisleben – 1546 Eisleben) was a German monk, theologian, and reformer. He initially studied law at the University of Erfurt, but he soon decided to become a monk and entered an Augustinian monastery in 1505. In 1508, he started teaching moral philosophy and Biblical interpretation at the University of Wittenberg. Deeply disturbed by the corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church, he embarked on a quest for religious reform. In 1517, Luther published his famous 95 Theses, calling into question the sale of indulgences and other abuses in the Church. This marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. His teachings quickly gained popularity, challenging papal authority and sparking intense theological debate. Excommunicated in 1521 by Pope Leo X, Luther was protected by Prince Frederick III of Saxony and continued to spread his teachings. He also translated the Bible into German, making God's word accessible to the people. Luther's Bible, theology, and church policies brought about significant changes in European society and culture during the early modern period.

**Philipp Melanchthon** (1497 Bretten – 1560 Wittenberg) was a German Lutheran reformer, theologian of the Protestant Reformation, and collaborator of Martin Luther. He studied at the University of Heidelberg and the University of Tübingen. In 1518, he accepted a call to the University of Wittenberg, where he became an appreciated professor of Greek and theology. He played an important role in the development of the university as a center of the Protestant Reformation. Melanchthon was involved in negotiations with the Roman Catholic Church and in drafting the *Confessio Augustanae* (Augsburg Confession). He introduced numerous reforms to school and university education in Saxony, which became a model for other countries. He essentially promoted humanism against medieval scholasticism.

**Giordano Bruno** (1548 San Giovanni del Cesco – 1600 Roma) was a brilliant scholar who wandered for sixteen years, settling in cities with libraries and intellectual circles, while trying to find teaching positions to earn a living. He stayed only two or three years in each place, each time being driven into exile. In Wittenberg, he gave lectures on Aristotle's *Organon*, which he gave together with other lectures on philosophy for two years (Lepri 2012). He was finally arrested in Venice, judged by the Inquisition, and burned in Rome in 1600, without recanting his ideas.

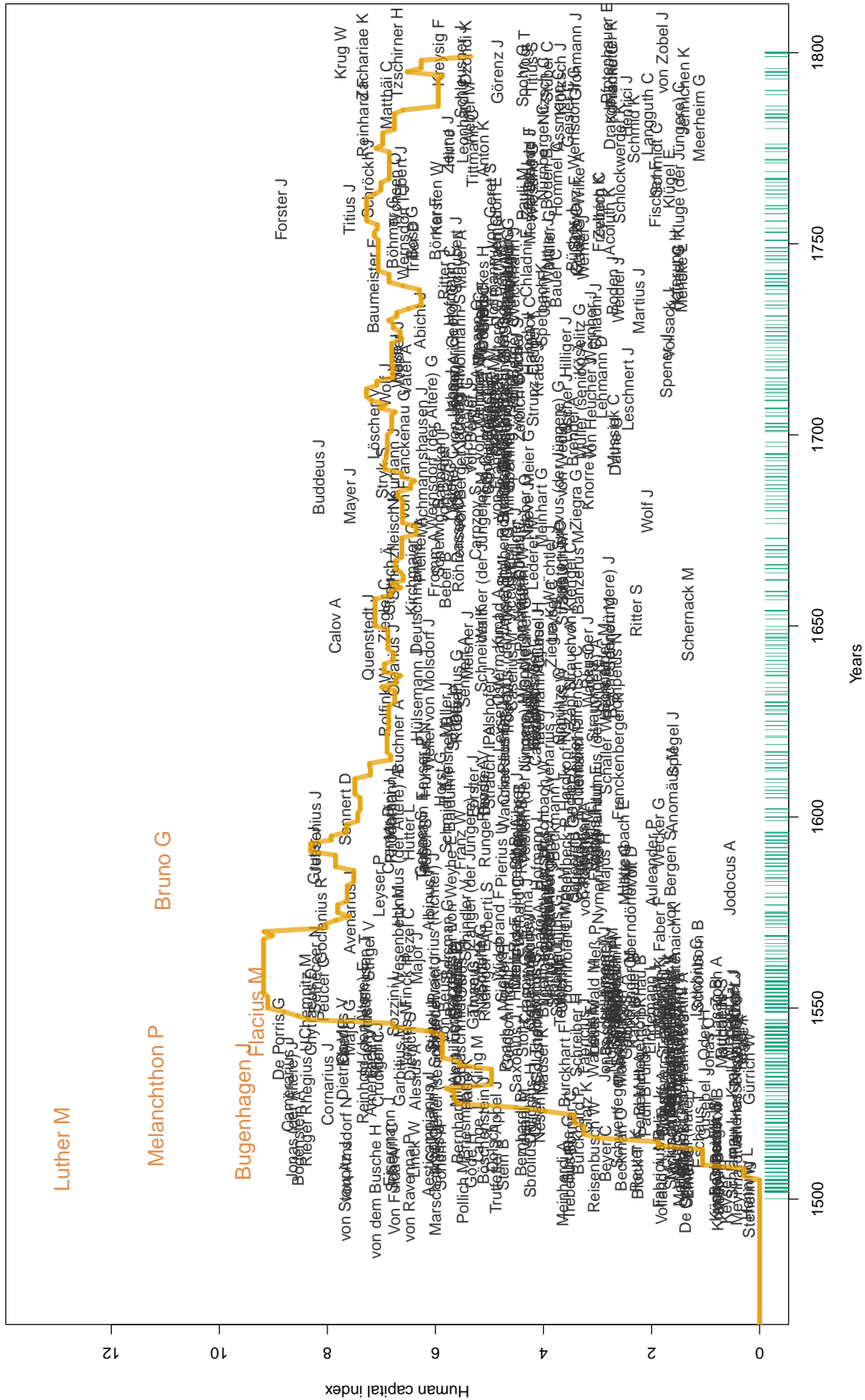


Figure 4: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

**Johannes Bugenhagen** (1485 Wellin, Poland -- 1558 Wittenberg) was a German theologian, reformer, and collaborator of Martin Luther. He studied at the University of Greifswald but left without graduating. In 1521, he traveled to Wittenberg, where he met Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon. Bugenhagen became one of the first professors of theology at the University of Wittenberg in 1523. He taught there intermittently until 1558. In addition to his teaching, Bugenhagen was also a pastor at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, where he put his reform ideas into practice. His apostolate played an important role in the reform of the clergy and ensured the conversion of all the Hanseatic countries to Protestantism.

**Matthias Flacius** (1520 Labin, Croatia – 1575 Frankfurt) was a German Lutheran theologian and reformer. After a thorough humanist education in Venice, he went on to study in Basel, Tübingen, and finally Wittenberg. There, he began teaching Hebrew. He also taught at the University of Jena. His work on the Magdeburg Centuries had a decisive influence on the historiography of the Protestant Church. His views on original sin were often criticized by strict Lutherans, and he was often forced to flee until his death.

## 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. The following professors received this honor, in recognition of their contribution to the advancement of the sciences.

**Giordano Bruno** (1548 San Giovanni del Cesco – 1600 Roma) Bruno's persecution (see above) left its mark. In 1961, the International Astronomical Union named a crater on the moon "Giordano Bruno" in honor of the Italian theologian and philosopher.

**Johann Matthias Hase** (1684 Augsburg – 1742 Wittenberg) was a German mathematician, astronomer, cartographer, and geographer. He studied mathematics at the University of Helmstedt. He began teaching this discipline at Wittenberg in 1720, with a particular emphasis on practical applications. He also contributed to the improvement and creation of numerous maps of various regions.

**Jacob Milich** (1501 Freiburg im Breisgau – 1559 Wittenberg) was a German mathematician and physician. He studied at the University of Freiburg and later in Vienna, where he focused on studying medicine. In Vienna and later in Wittenberg, he taught various disciplines, including Latin grammar, cosmology, mathematics, and medicine. He also contributed to the access to Greek medicine.

**Michael Neander** (1529 Joachimsthal – 1581 Jena) was a German teacher, mathematician, and astronomer. He studied at the University of Wittenberg and taught briefly there, before teaching mathematics, Greek, and medicine at the University of Jena. Some of his writings, particularly on astrology, are of historical importance today.

**Erasmus Reinhold** (1511 Saalfeld – 1553 Saalfeld) was a German astrologer, astronomer, and mathematician. He studied at the University of Wittenberg, where he held the chair of mathematics. His work led to the identification and description of a large number of stars. He was also one of the first proponents of the Copernican view of the world and helped to develop it.

**Johann Daniel Titius** (1729 Chojnice, Poland – 1796 Wittenberg) was a German scholar. He studied at the University of Leipzig and then began teaching a number of disciplines in Wittenberg, including mathematics, physics, philosophy, theology, and law. He is best known for creating a mathematical formula to describe a regularity in the average distances between the planets and the sun.

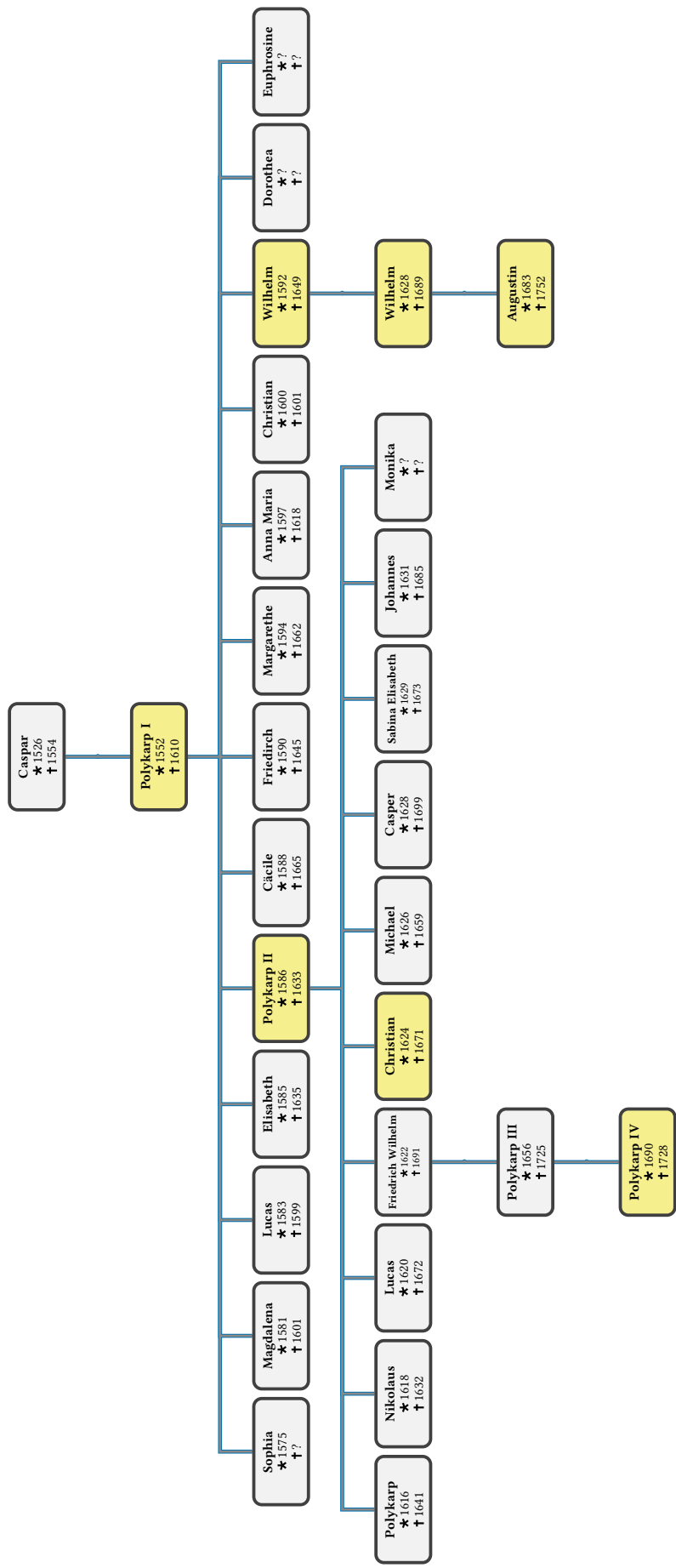


Figure 5: The Leyser family. Professors at Wittenberg in yellow squares

## 9 FAMILIES OF SCHOLARS

We counted 46 father-son pairs among the professors at the University of Wittenberg. Figure 5 gives the example of a family, the Leyser family. We represent only a few sibships, due to space limitations. The family tree is drawn from [www.geni.com](http://www.geni.com). We have highlighted those who taught at Wittenberg. The Polykarp lineage taught theology, while the Wilhelm lineage was specialized in law.

## 10 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

When a professor occupied a position at more than one university over his/her life, we can assume that this established a link between the universities where they taught. The universities with which the University of Wittenberg was linked during each period are displayed in Figure 6. The mobility of professors peaked between the Reformation and the Thirty Years' War (1527-1617). Afterwards, it was limited to the Holy Roman Empire (+ Moscow).

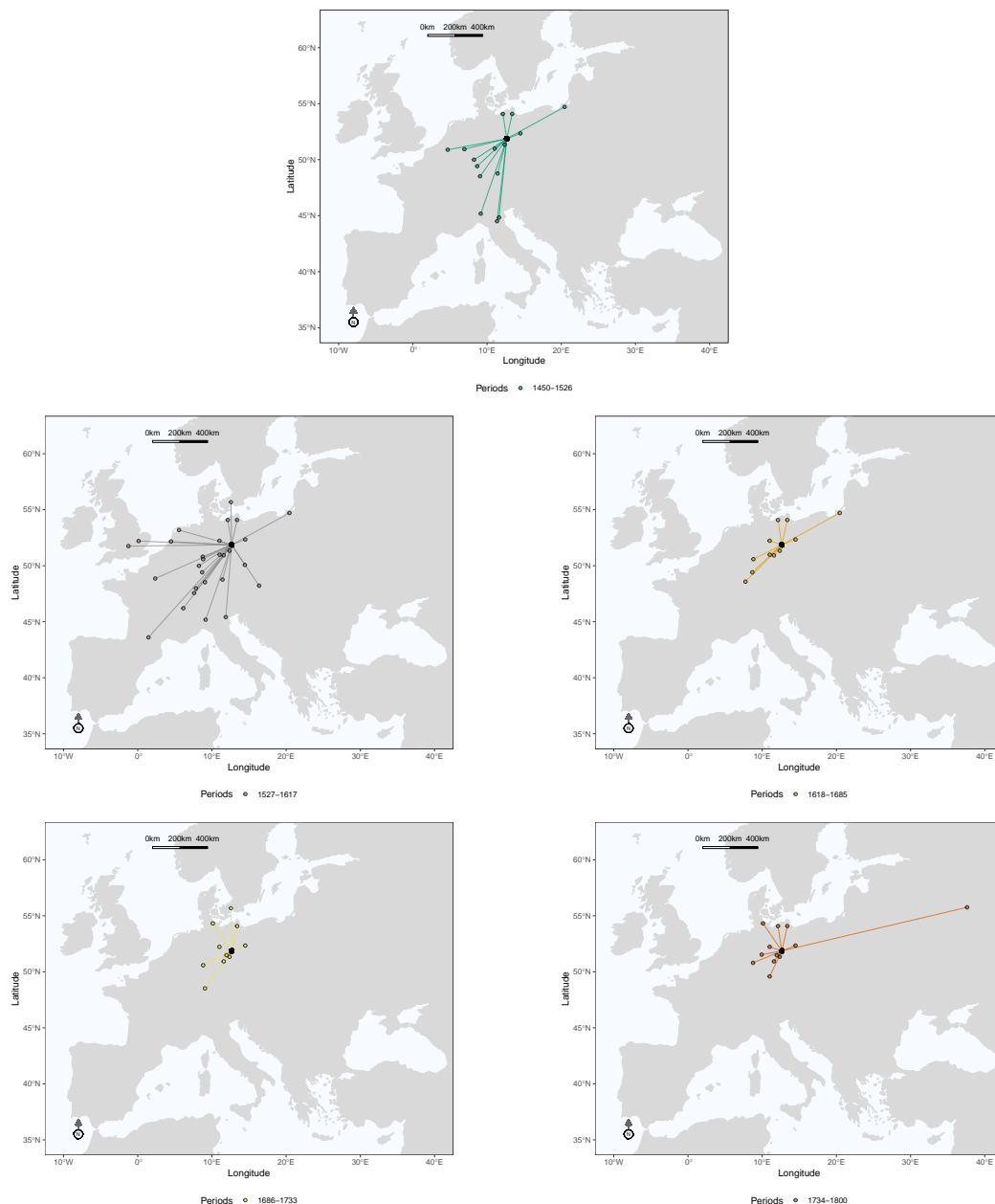


Figure 6: Links between Wittenberg and other universities through scholars' mobility, by period



## 11 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Wittenberg not only stood as the nucleus of Lutheranism but also served as a fertile ground for diverse academic pursuits. Notably, its influence extended beyond theology, encompassing a rich array of fields. The significant recognition of six of its professors, commemorated by craters on the moon bearing their names, attests to the institution's dynamic contributions to the realm of sciences.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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