

Scholars and Literati at the University of Utrecht (1636–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Utrecht from its inception in 1636 to 1800. For more detailed information about these individuals, please visit the comprehensive database available at <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>.

1 SOURCES

The University of Utrecht was one of the first to provide an online catalogue of its past professors (Dorsman 2011). It is based on a 19th-century book which lists the full professors at the university (Academia Rheno-Trajectina 1861). Beyond these full professors, there were some scholars who never reached that status, but still spent some time teaching there. We can find their names in Kernkamp (1939).

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Utrecht was founded in 1636. Its creation was part of a broader movement in the 17th century to bolster education and scholarly pursuits in the Dutch Republic, especially in Utrecht, a key intellectual and religious center. The early years of the university were marked by its strong connection to Calvinism, particularly with Voet (Voetius), who advocated for an orthodox Reformed theology. During the 18th century, the University of Utrecht began to embrace broader Enlightenment ideals, shifting away from strict theological dogmatism toward more scientific and empirical methods of inquiry.

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1618–1685	52	90.4%	94.2%	34.3	61.6	40	78.8%	88.5%
1686–1733	28	92.9%	89.3%	35.2	65.2	122	85.7%	92.9%
1734–1800	45	97.8%	100%	37.4	69.9	73	91.1%	100%
1200–1800	125	93.6%	95.2%	35.7	65.5	57	84.8%	93.6%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

3 SOME STATISTICS

Table 1 presents a summary of descriptive statistics for the scholars. The dataset includes information on 125 scholars. The quality of information is extremely high, as witnessed by the high percentage of scholars with known birth places and birth years.

The median distance between professors' places of birth and the university is 57 km, which is remarkably low. This also shows that what is now the Netherlands was a very densely populated country, with a large pool of scholars over a small area. The share of scholars with Wikipedia and

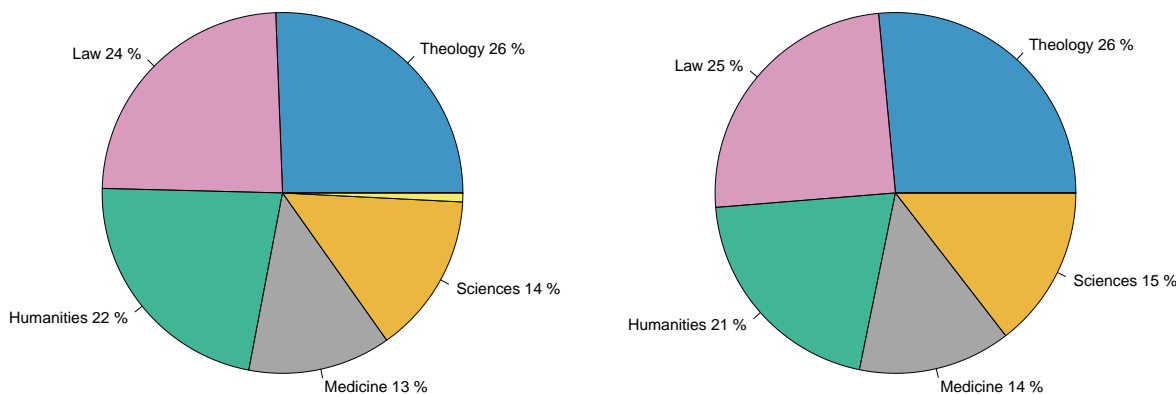


Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Utrecht (left: all scholars, right: published scholars only)

VIAF entries is extremely high, close to 100%. The work of almost all the professors at the University of Utrecht has left a footprint. This may also suggest that the database is missing lesser-known teachers who did not attain the rank of full professor.

4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of fields of specialization among scholars at the University of Utrecht. It was a well-balanced institution, where law and theology were prominent, but where science and medicine also featured substantially.

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the birthplaces of the scholars affiliated with the University of Utrecht by period. It highlights the geographical origins of the professors over time, providing insight into the documented median distance from their birthplaces to Utrecht. In all three periods, the majority of professors were from the Netherlands. Some originated from the East, in what is now modern-day Germany.

In the early phase, a significant number of professors originated from distant regions in the West. However, during the second and third periods, there was a noticeable shift in the geographical origin of the professors, with a large majority coming from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This trend was reversed in the last period, when foreign professors were hired again.

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. Based on the individual notability of the scholars and literati, we compute the notability of the university at each date t by averaging the human capital of the scholars who were active at the University of Utrecht within a 25-year period leading up to t , and who concluded their careers before t . The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023) and in De la Croix et al. (2024).

Figure 3 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. After its creation, the University of Utrecht quickly reached a high level of notability, which persisted over the period considered. This was achieved thanks to the presence of many scholars with a higher human capital index (in the range 4-8). It is surprising to find few scholars with lower levels of human capital (≈ 2). This ties back to the aforementioned absence of lesser-known teachers in the

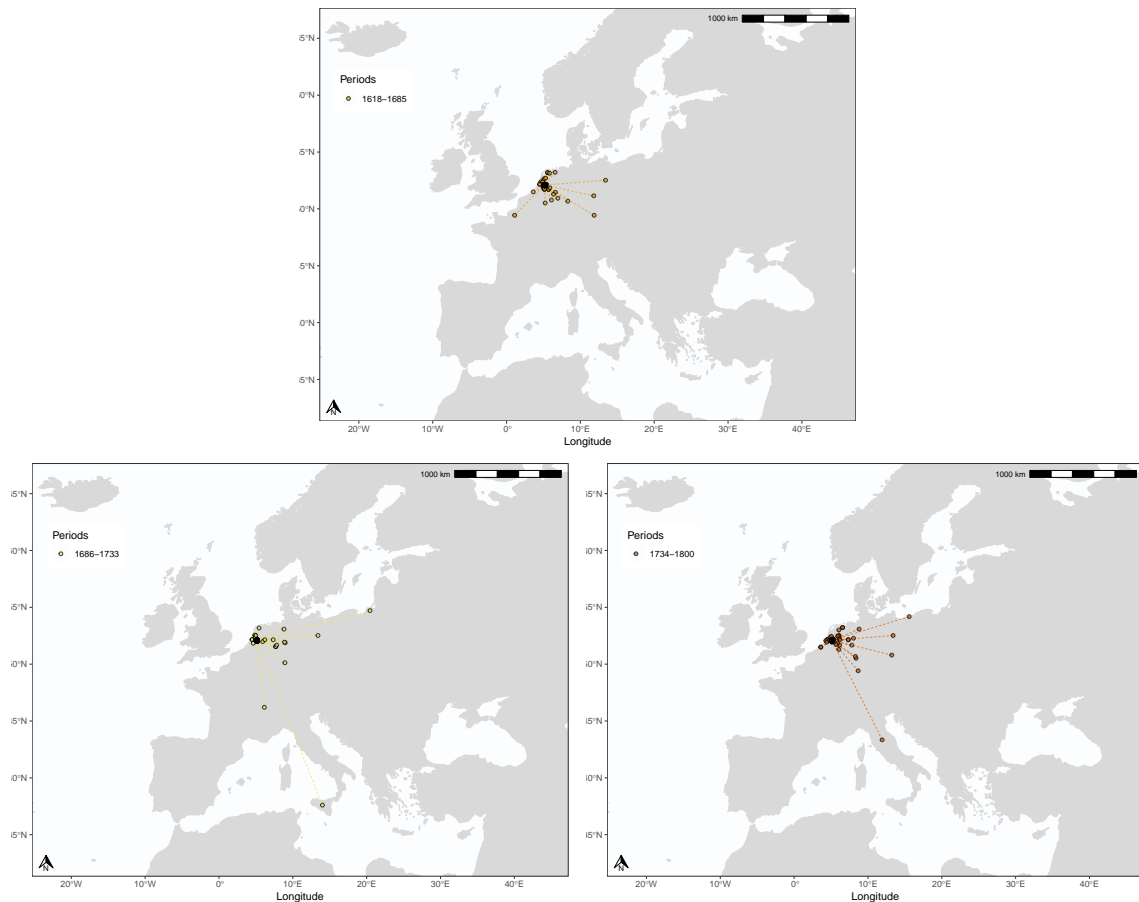


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Utrecht

faculty.

7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

A brief overview of the five professors with the highest human capital index follows.

Petrus van Musschenbroek (Leiden 1692 -- Leiden 1761) was a Dutch scientist and inventor, best known for his contributions to experimental physics and the invention of the Leyden jar, an early form of the capacitor. He studied medicine and philosophy at the University of Utrecht, where he later became a professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, before moving to the University of Leiden (De la Croix and Stelter 2021). His work at Utrecht was influential in the development of experimental physics, and he was among the first to introduce Newtonian mechanics to the Netherlands. He was a member of at least seven major academies (Prussian, St Petersburg, Royal Society, Stockholm, Paris, Bologna, and Haarlem).

Johannes Georgius Graevius (Naumburg 1632 – Utrecht 1703) was a renowned German classical scholar and critic who made significant contributions to the study of Antiquity. He became a professor at the University of Duisburg, then at the University of Utrecht in 1667, where he taught rhetoric and history. Graevius was particularly known for his work on classical Latin authors and for editing major ancient texts. His extensive editorial work, especially on Roman history and literature, had a lasting impact on the study of the classics.

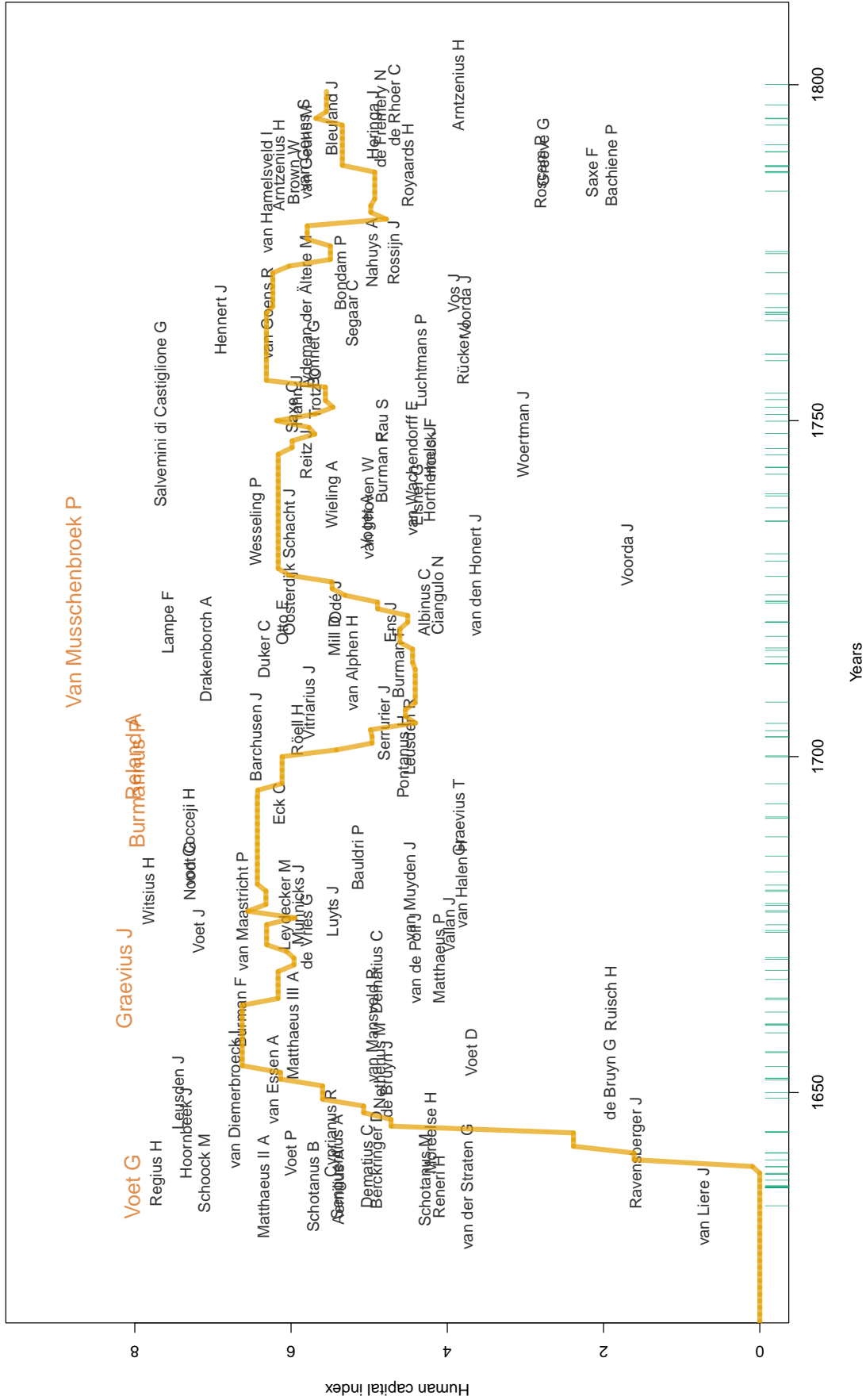


Figure 3: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

Gijsbertus Voet (Heusden 1589 -- Utrecht 1676) was a prominent Dutch Reformed theologian and a key figure in the development of Reformed orthodoxy. He was appointed professor of theology at the University of Utrecht in 1634, where he also served as a pastor. Voetius was known for his staunch Calvinism (Symonds 1911) and his opposition to Cartesian philosophy. He played a central role in shaping the theological direction of the university, making it a stronghold of orthodox Reformed thought.

Adriaan Reland (De Rijp 1676 -- Utrecht 1718) was a Dutch Orientalist, linguist, and scholar of comparative religion, renowned for his expertise in Asian languages and cultures. He started his academic career at the University of Harderwijk (van Epen 1904). He became a professor of Oriental languages at the University of Utrecht in 1701. Reland's work at Utrecht focused on Islamic studies, Hebrew, and other Middle Eastern languages, and he is particularly known for his pioneering research into the geography and culture of the Middle East.

Petrus Burmannus (Utrecht 1668 -- Leiden 1741), also known as Pieter Burman the Elder, was a distinguished Dutch classical scholar. In 1715, he became a professor of Latin and history at the University of Utrecht, where he was highly regarded for his expertise in Latin literature and ancient history. Burmannus was especially known for his critical editions of classical texts, including works by poets like Ovid and Virgil. His scholarly rigor and influential editions made significant contributions to classical philology. After his position at Utrecht, he moved to the University of Leiden. Junius Institute (2013) also mentions him as librarian at the University of Aberdeen.

8 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

We assume that when a professor held positions at multiple universities during their career, it established a connection between those institutions. Figure 4 displays the universities that were linked to Utrecht during the various periods. It reflects the fact that its scholars moved quite often, but stayed within the Calvinist world (including the Presbyterian world in Scotland). This is just an example of a broader trend highlighted by De la Croix and Morault (2020), according to whom very few scholars moved between the Catholic and Protestant worlds.

9 IF YOU VISIT UTRECHT

The city of Utrecht has preserved several landmarks from the Medieval and Early Modern periods. The first lectures at the university were held in the chapter house adjacent to the cathedral. Originally, the chapter consisted of 40 canons (clergy members) responsible for administering the cathedral.

However, most of the university's main buildings date from a later period. It is a neo-Renaissance structure, gifted to the university by the city in 1896. Inside, there is a collection of portraits of professors, thus displaying the content of our database on the walls (Figure 5).

10 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Utrecht was a small but important Calvinist university in Europe. With a strong focus on theology initially, it developed firm foundations in emerging scientific disciplines.

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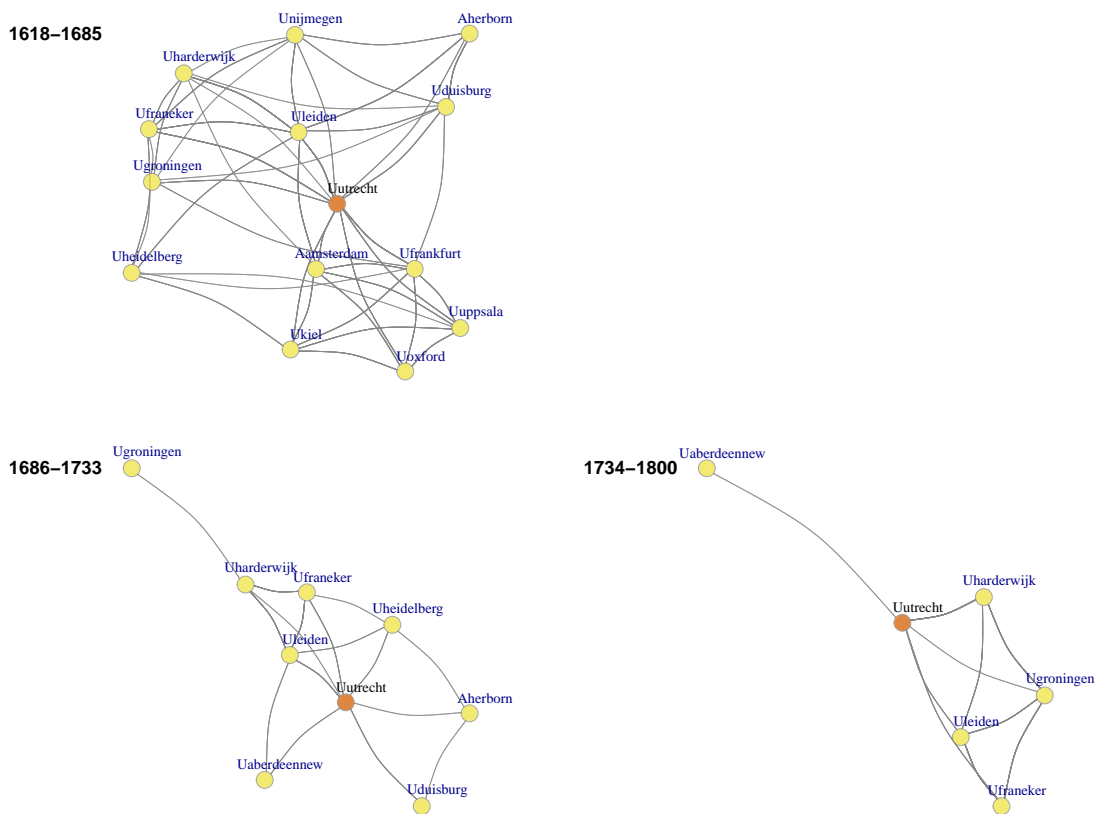


Figure 4: Links between Utrecht and other universities through scholars' mobility



Figure 5: The database on the walls

Homepage: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/UTHCerc>

Database: <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>

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