

Scholars and Literati at the School of Sorø (1586–1800)

David de la Croix

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the School of Sorø (sometimes called Sorø Academy or the Equestrian Academy) from its inception in 1586 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

A detailed list of members has been obtained from Olrik (1927) for the period 1586–1737 and from Glahn (1975) for the period 1747–1800.

2 THE SCHOOL

The school of Sorø, located in Sorø, Denmark, has a storied history dating back to its medieval origins. Sorø Abbey was founded in 1142 as a Cistercian monastery, and became a notable center for learning and religious life. In 1586, after the Protestant Reformation and the dissolution of monastic institutions, King Frederick II of Denmark repurposed the Abbey as a royal school.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the School of Sorø evolved under the influence of Danish Enlightenment ideals, combining classical education with newer approaches. However, the school's fortunes fluctuated with political changes and financial challenges, which precipitated temporary closures.

In 1623 Christian IV turned the boarding school into an Equestrian Academy. Under this new banner it became one of Denmark's key institutions for educating young men, particularly those from noble families, and for fostering Lutheran teachings. Later attempts were made to turn it into a university proper but it only existed as such for about 20 years, before closing in 1665.

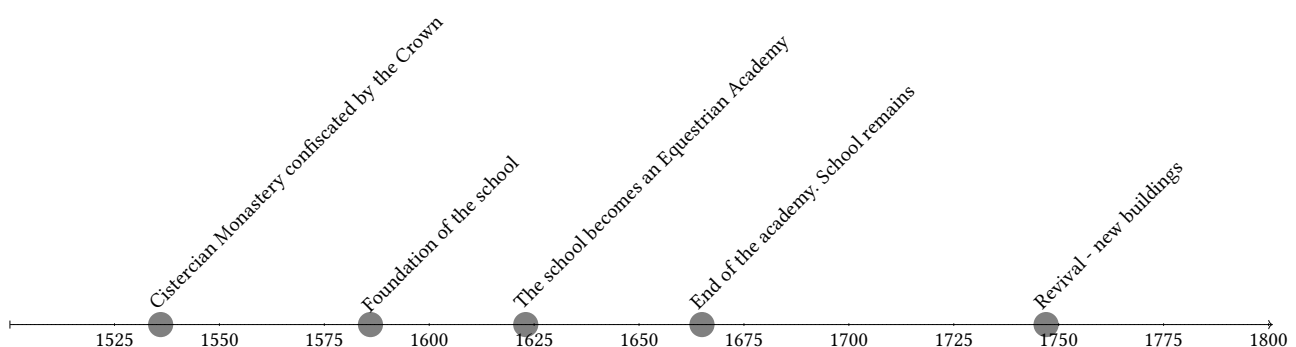


Figure 1: Timeline of the School of Sorø

After the closure of the Academy, the premises continued as a school until 1737. There were efforts to reestablish the academy and around 1740, under the reign of Christian VI, the old buildings

were rebuilt. The writer Ludvig Holberg, who had no heirs, was persuaded to bequeath his considerable fortune to the institution, which helped to revitalize the school and strengthen its reputation as a leading academic institution.

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1527–1617	36	36.1%	30.6%	24.8	55.5	178	8.3%	8.3%
1618–1685	58	55.2%	53.4%	29.4	57.9	125	19%	32.8%
1686–1733	22	86.4%	81.8%	26.3	55.5	69	4.5%	13.6%
1734–1800	44	88.6%	70.5%	35.4	62.3	118	34.1%	50%
1200–1800	160	64.4%	56.9%	30.5	58.8	107	18.8%	29.4%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

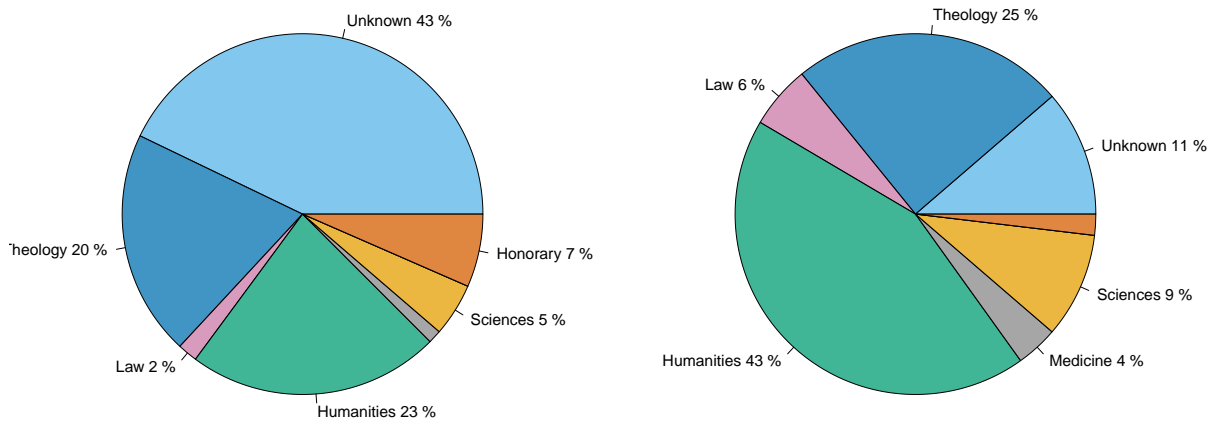


Figure 2: Broad fields at the School of Sorø (left: all scholars, right: published scholars only)

3 SOME STATISTICS

The dataset includes information on 160 scholars and in Table 1 we present a summary of descriptive statistics for these scholars. The completeness of information increases over time, as the percentage of scholars with known birth year and/or birth place rises from period to period. On average, the scholars were appointed young (at 30.5 on average), but died young as well (at 58.8 on average). The median distance from scholars' birthplaces to the university is relatively low, which suggests that professor recruitment was predominantly local. Observing the percentage of scholars with Wikipedia pages and/or VIAF records, we see two periods with relatively high numbers, the second and fourth periods, and two periods where most scholars are obscure.

4 FIELDS

Figure 2 illustrates the fields of specialization among scholars at the School of Sorø. Humanities is the predominant field, and there is a strong dose of theology. Sciences and Medicine appear relatively strong as well, while law has a minimal presence. On the left chart, for many scholars the field is "unknown", as the sources do not indicate what they were teaching. Among the subset of published scholars, there are fewer for whom the field is "unknown".

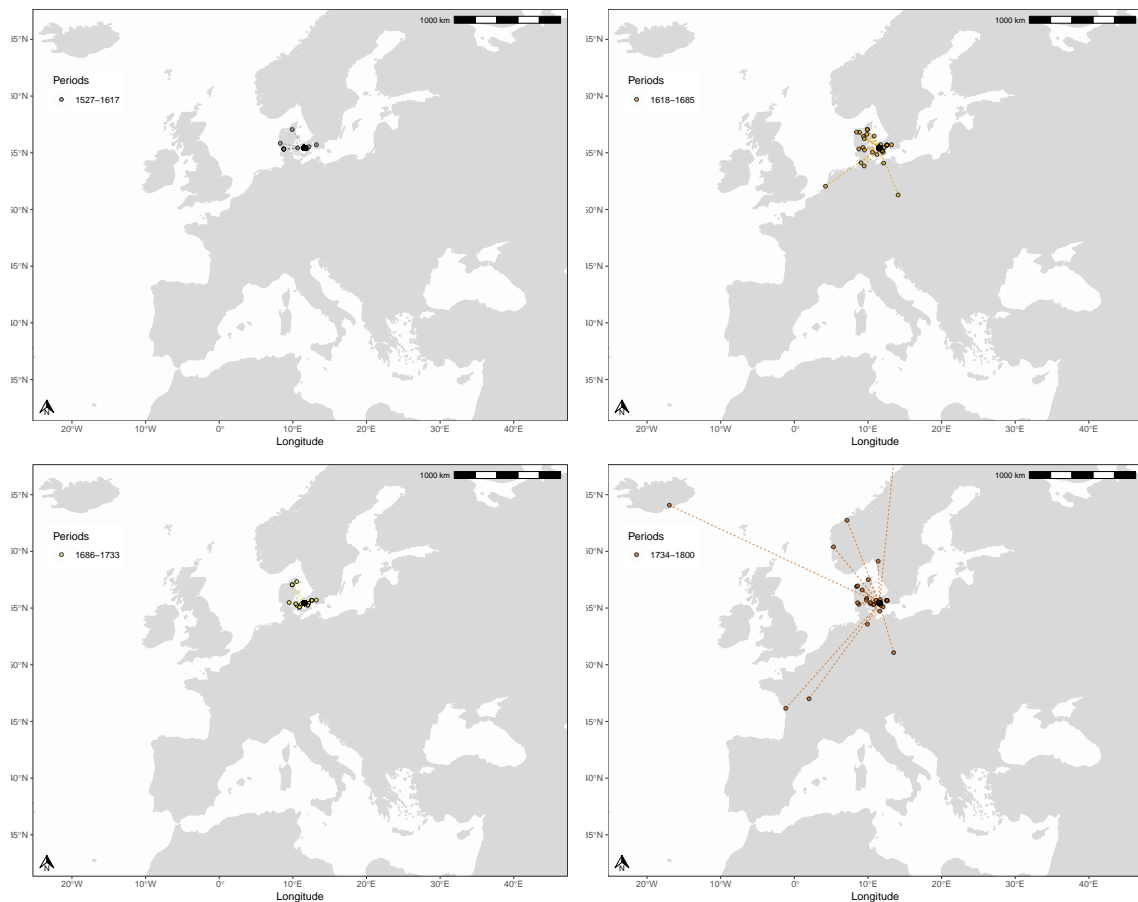


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the School of Sorø

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 depicts the birthplaces of scholars affiliated with the School of Sorø across different periods. This visualization highlights the geographical origins of the professors over time, illustrating the documented low median distance from birthplaces to Sorø. During all periods but one, the professors originate from Scandinavia, with very few exceptions. Only in the period 1734–1800 did several scholars come from France and the Holy Roman Empire to teach in Sorø.

6 HUMAN CAPITAL OF SCHOLARS AND LITERATI

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index by combining information from VIAF and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. Based on the individual notability of scholars and literati, we compute the notability of the institution at each date t by averaging the human capital of the scholars who were active at the School of Sorø within a 25-year time frame 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 4 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index. The orange line displays the notability of the institution, based on how well-published its top scholars were. The evolution of notability follows the narrative in Section 2. The two periods of prominence are clearly visible, separated by a period where Sorø was just a school with obscure professors.

7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

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

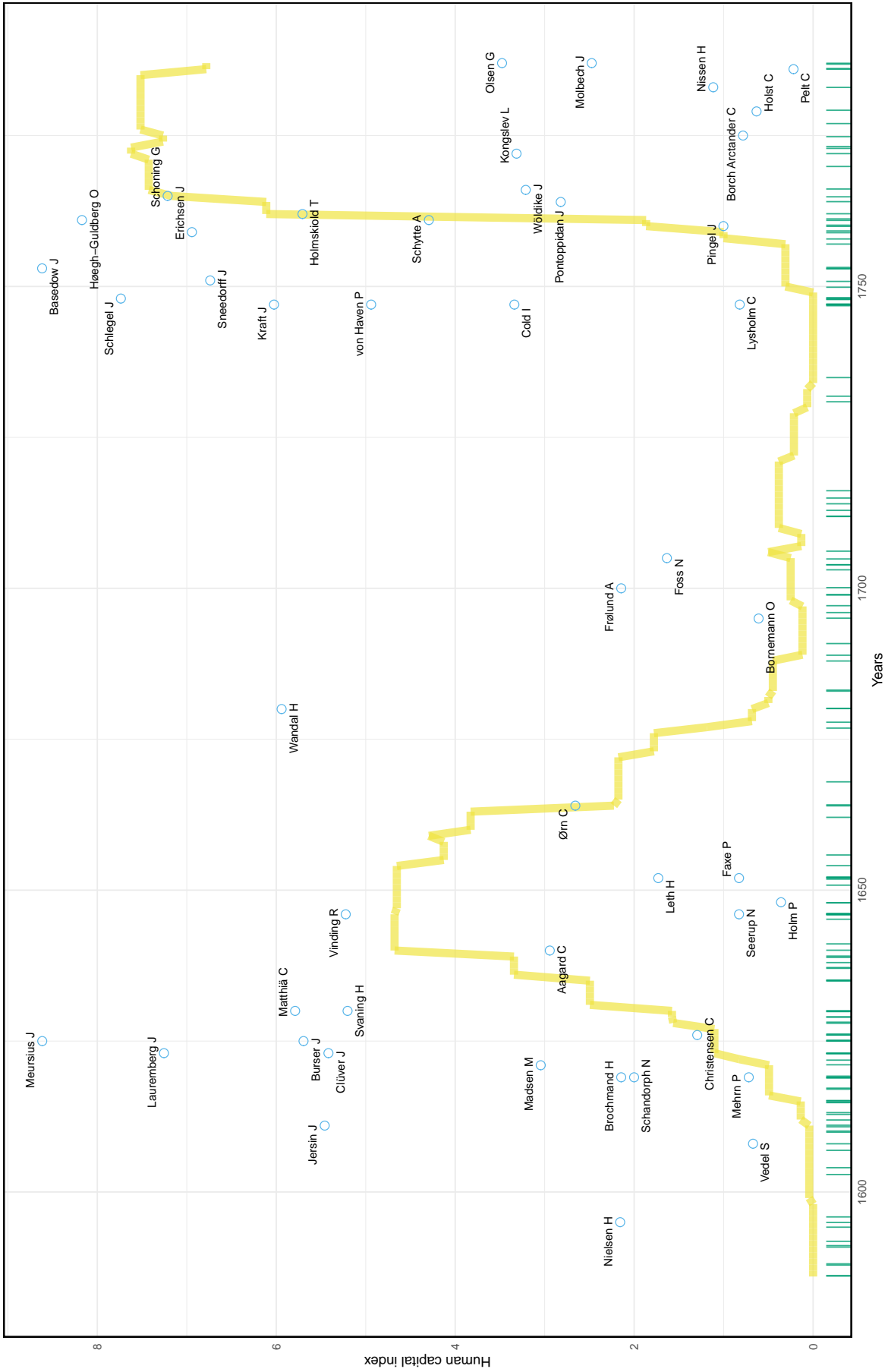


Figure 4: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

Johann Bernhard Basedow (Hamburg 1724 – Magdeburg 1790) was a German educator, philosopher, and a pivotal figure in the evolution of modern education. His educational philosophy championed practical knowledge, physical education, and moral instruction, offering a stark contrast to the traditional, rigid, classical curriculum of his time. In 1753, Basedow was appointed professor of moral philosophy and belles-lettres at the School of Sorø, where he gained a reputation as a highly popular and engaging teacher. He was even called upon to deliver lectures on theology. However, his outspoken, anti-establishment views, along with the publication of his 1758 work *Praktische Philosophie* ("Practical Philosophy"), in which he articulated his unconventional religious beliefs, led to his dismissal from the school in 1761.

Johannes Meursius (Loosduinen 1579 – Sorø 1639) was a Dutch classical scholar, historian, and theologian, known for his contributions to the study of ancient history and his work as a professor at the University of Leiden. Meursius was an advocate of the humanist educational ideals, emphasizing the study of classical languages, history, and philosophy, which were central to the curriculum at the best European institutions of higher learning in his time. Although we did not find him in the two sources about the School of Sorø, the *Britannica* of 1911 reports that he welcomed the offer (1625) of Christian IV. of Denmark to become professor of history and politics at the School of Sorø, combined with the office of royal historiographer. This information is confirmed in De Bujanda and Richter (2002).

Ove Høegh-Guldberg (Horsens 1731 – Viborg 1808) was a Danish statesman, historian, and influential political figure. He was educated as a theologian; he earned a theology degree in 1753. Later he became a historian and in 1761 a professor at the School of Sorø. He left the school in 1764 to become the house teacher of the son of Queen Juliana Maria. From this role he rose to prominence as a key advisor and de facto prime minister, effectively controlling the Danish government from 1772 to 1784. In addition, we have found him in the lists of members of the academies in Copenhagen, Göttingen and Trondheim.

Johann Elias Schlegel (Meissen 1719 – Sorø 1749) was a German poet, playwright, and literary critic associated with the early German Enlightenment. He was invited to Denmark to work as a literary advisor. In 1748 he was made professor at the School of Sorø, where he died one year later.

Johannes Lauremberg (Rostock 1590 – Sorø 1658) was a German poet, satirist, and scholar known for his contributions to Latin and vernacular literature. He started his academic career at the University of Rostock. In 1623, he was appointed professor of poetry at the School of Sorø, where he influenced Danish intellectual and literary circles. Lauremberg was renowned for his satirical works, often using humor and wit to critique society and politics. His Latin and German poems gained popularity for their clever, ironic style and served as early examples of social satire in Northern Europe. His time at Sorø left an enduring impact on Danish academic and literary traditions.

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 5 displays the universities that were linked to Sorø during the various periods. It is not surprising to see relatively few universities connected. It reflects the fact that Sorø's scholars did not often move, and the School did not hire much from abroad.

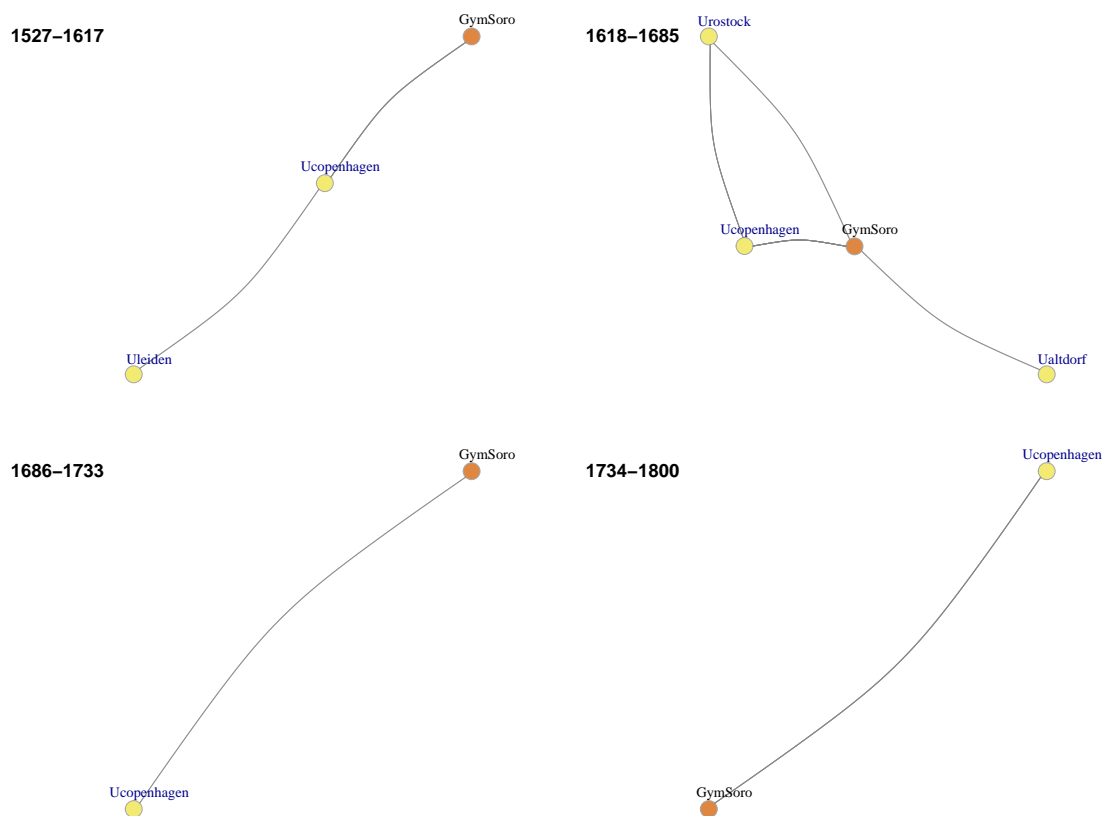


Figure 5: Links between Uppsala and other universities through scholars' mobility

9 FINAL THOUGHTS

The School of Sorø was a higher education institution whose leaders aspired in vain to make it a university. It had two periods of glory, when the King gave it a special role, and two dark ages, when it was simply a secondary school.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 883033 "Did elite human capital trigger the rise of the West? Insights from a new database of European scholars."

I am thankful to Paul Sharp (from university of Southern Denmark) for finding the two key sources used in this note.

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

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

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

First version 15 November, 2024.

REFERENCES

- Curtis, Matthew, and David De la Croix. 2023. Measuring Human Capital: from WorldCat Identities to VIAF. *Repertorium Eruditorum Totius Europae* 10:17–22. <https://doi.org/10.14428/rete.v10i0/hc>.
- De Bujanda, Jesús Martínez, and Marcella Richter. 2002. *Index des livres interdits: index librorum prohibitorum* [in French]. Montréal: Médiaspaul.

- De la Croix, David, Frédéric Docquier, Alice Fabre, and Robert Stelter. 2024. The Academic Market and the Rise of Universities in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (1000-1800). *Journal of the European Economic Association* 22 (4): 1541–1589. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvad061>.
- Glahn, Torben. 1975. *Soraner-biografier 1747-1800* [in Danish]. Sorø: Soransk Samfund.
- Meursius. 1911. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 18. Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.
- Olrik, HG. 1927. *Oversigt over forstandere og lærere ved den kgl. skole i Sorø 1586–1737* [in Danish]. Sorø: Folkebladets Bogtrykkeri.