

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Åbo (Turku) (1640–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Åbo from its earliest days to 1800.

## 1 SOURCES

A list of professors was already compiled by Jensen (2018) in his thesis. We completed the list with names found in sources pertained to other institutions (Dahlgren 1915; Inno 1972), and from Wikipedia.

## 2 THE UNIVERSITY

Founded on 26 March 1640 by Queen Christina of Sweden as the Royal Academy of Turku ( not an academy in the sense of a scholarly society, but a university; Turku is the Swedish name for Åbo. the University of Åbo grew out of the Turku Cathedral School and became the Swedish Empire’s third university. It opened with the four classic faculties—Theology, Law, Medicine, and Philosophy—teaching primarily in Latin; Philosophy served as the preparatory faculty for the others. In 1642 the University housed Finland’s first printing press, anchoring an early scholarly and book culture around Åbo. The institution remained small: around its founding there were roughly 250 students and 11 professors, and the scale stayed modest through the 18th century (from <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/about-us/university-helsinki/history>). The Great Northern War, in which a coalition led by Russia successfully contested the supremacy of Sweden in the region, disrupted operations severely: in 1713 the Academy effectively closed as professors fled to Sweden; teaching resumed only after the peace of 1721. After the Finnish War (1808–1809), Finland became a Grand Duchy of Russia; the University was renamed the Imperial Academy of Turku in 1809. The capital was shifted from Turku to Helsinki in 1812, aligning administration closer to St Petersburg.

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1527–1617	1	100%	100%	29	47	207	100%	100%
1618–1685	37	97.3%	91.9%	33.5	61.1	333	97.3%	81.1%
1686–1733	39	89.7%	82.1%	35.5	58.8	266	92.3%	84.6%
1734–1800	54	100%	96.3%	34.7	62.7	187	92.6%	94.4%
1200–1800	131	96.2%	90.8%	34.5	61	242	93.9%	87.8%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

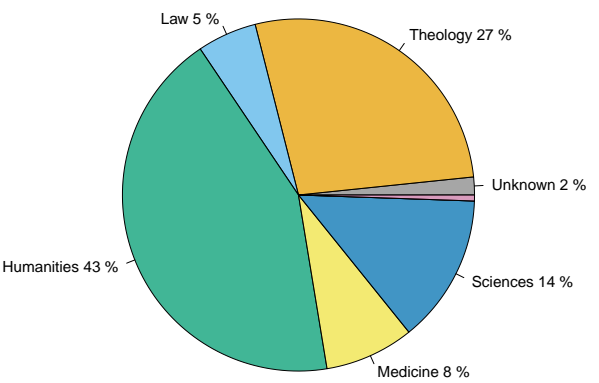


Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Åbo (all scholars)

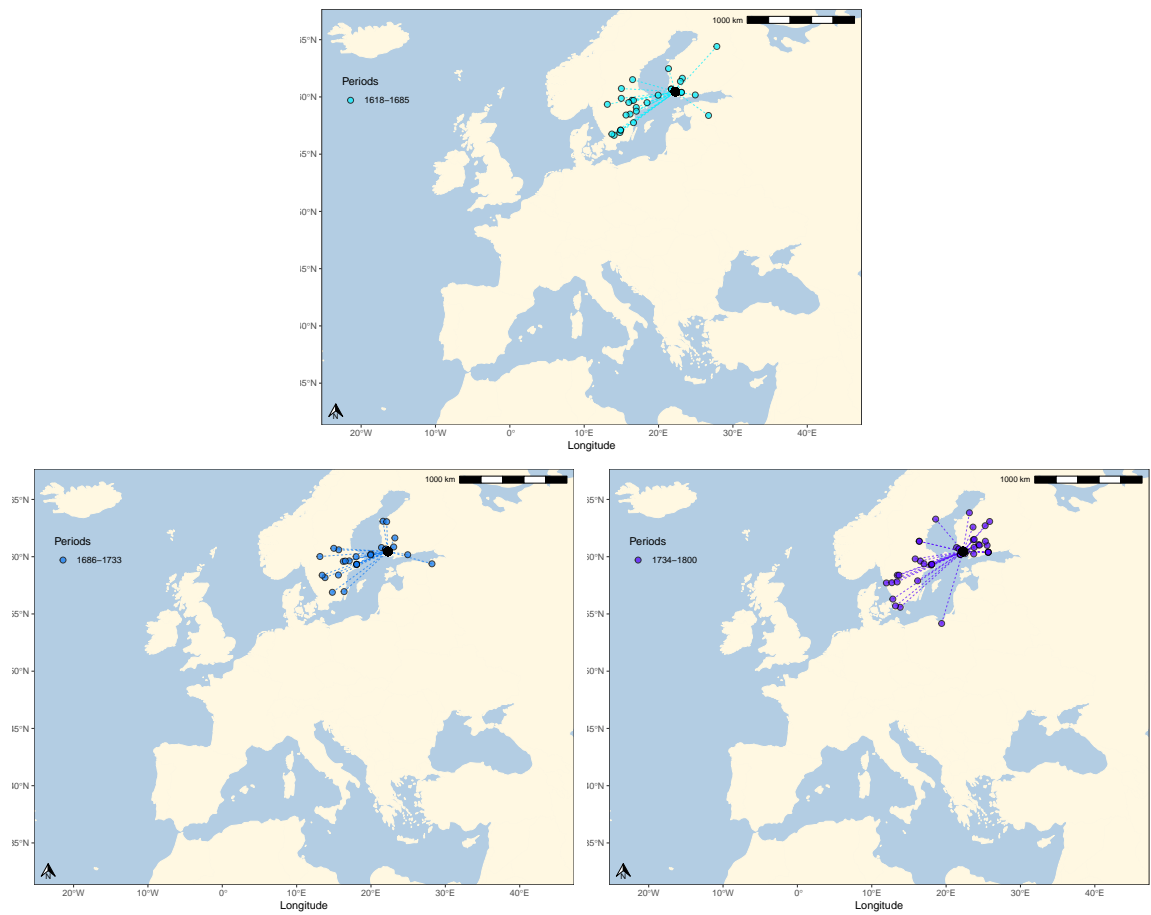


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Åbo

### 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. The dataset includes information on 131 scholars, including 1 scholar before 1618, teaching at the Cathedral school. The university is small but the information available (birth place, birth year) is of high quality. The number of observations is too small to infer some conclusions from the mean age at appointment or death. The median distance between professors' places of birth and the university is decreasing over time (abstracting from the first period), which is pattern we find in many other places. Finally, the percentage of the scholars who have a Wikipedia page (in some language), or who have left a footprint in the world's library catalogs, is extremely high.

### 4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines. This is a relatively balanced pattern, with a domination of the humanities, and a particularly small share of law.

### 5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Åbo by period. The pattern is quite stable, with a majority of scholars coming from Sweden (as defined today), and some from Finland.

### 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 five best scholars active in Åbo 25 years before that date. The details are given in De la Croix et al. (2024) and Curtis et al. (2025). 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 foundation, the University of Åbo quickly attained a high level of notability, which remained largely stable throughout its existence, with two notable exceptions. The Great Northern War left almost no trace, as its brevity prevented it from influencing a measure of notability based on achievements over the preceding 25 years. By contrast, in the second half of the eighteenth century, the university's notability rose to unprecedented levels, reflecting the remarkable quality of this Nordic institution. A comparable trajectory was observed for the University of Uppsala by De la Croix (2024).

The rise in notability of the University of Åbo during the second half of the eighteenth century can also be placed in the wider context of the Scandinavian Enlightenment. Much like the Scottish Enlightenment, this movement combined a strong emphasis on education and literacy with the pursuit of useful knowledge in the natural sciences, economics, and statecraft (Stråth 2016).

### 7 TOP 6 PROFESSORS

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

**Pehr Kalm** (Sjålevad 1716 – Åbo 1779) was a Swedish-Finnish naturalist, explorer, and one of Carl Linnaeus's most prominent students. He studied at the University of Åbo, where he later became professor of natural history and economics (from 1747). Commissioned by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, he undertook a scientific expedition to North America (1747–1751), collecting plants and reporting on agriculture, industry, and society. His widely read *Travels into North America* (1753–1761) spread Enlightenment ideas and practical knowledge

across Europe and the Atlantic world. At Åbo, Kalm established the Linnaean tradition in Finland, training a generation of students.

**Henrik Gabriel Porthan** (Viitasaari 1739 – Åbo 1804) was a Finnish humanist, historian, and philologist, often regarded as the "father of Finnish historical research." He studied at the University of Åbo, where he later became professor of eloquence (from 1777). Porthan was a leading figure of the Finnish Enlightenment, promoting critical scholarship, classical learning, and the study of Finnish history, language, and folklore. He played a central role in the *Åbo Tidningar*, the first newspaper in Finland, fostering public debate and literary culture. Through his teaching and writings, Porthan shaped an entire generation of Finnish scholars and consolidated the reputation of the University of Åbo as a center of Enlightenment learning in the Nordic world.

**Daniel Juslenius** (Storkyro 1676 – Skara 1752) was a Finnish scholar, writer, and bishop, known as an early advocate of Finnish cultural identity. He studied theology at the University of Åbo, where he later became professor of poetry and later of theology. Juslenius published several influential works, including *Aboa vetus et nova* (1700), a Latin description of Åbo that combined history, topography, and civic pride, and *Vindiciae Fennorum* (1703), which defended the antiquity and worth of the Finnish people. His writings mark an early stage of Finnish nationalism.

**Johannes Gezelius the Elder** (Åbo 1615 – Åbo 1690) was a Finnish-Swedish Lutheran bishop, theologian, and educator. He studied at several European universities before becoming professor of theology at the University of Åbo. In 1664 he was appointed bishop of Åbo, a position he held until his death. Gezelius was a leading figure in the promotion of Lutheran orthodoxy and popular education in Finland, publishing a widely used catechism and sermon book, as well as initiating the large-scale production of schoolbooks and religious texts. Under his leadership, the University of Åbo expanded its role as both a theological and educational center in the Swedish realm.

**Karl Fredrik Mennander** (Stockholm 1712 – Uppsala 1786) was a Swedish Lutheran bishop and academic administrator. He studied at the University of Åbo, where he became professor of physics and later of theology. In 1757 he was appointed bishop of Åbo, and from 1775 he served as archbishop of Uppsala, the highest office in the Church of Sweden. Mennander was a reform-minded church leader who promoted education, literacy, and Enlightenment learning.

**Jacob Tengström** (Nykarleby 1755 – Åbo 1832) was a Finnish clergyman, theologian, and the first Archbishop of Finland. He studied at the University of Åbo, where he later became professor of philosophy. Tengström was a central figure in the ecclesiastical and cultural life of Finland during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After Finland became part of the Russian Empire in 1809, he played a key role in organizing the autonomous Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, securing its position within the new political framework.

## 8 RELATED SCHOLARS

One important individual was related to the Cathedral school, the predecessor of the university. He is counted in the data for all figures but Figure 3.



**Mikael Agricola** (Pernaja 1510 – Viipuri 1557) was a Finnish clergyman, scholar, and reformer, celebrated as the "father of the Finnish written language." Educated at the University of Wittenberg under Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon, he introduced the ideas of the Reformation to Finland. As rector of the Cathedral School of Åbo, he laid the foundations for advanced learning in the city. Agricola translated the New Testament into Finnish (1548) and produced the first Finnish-language books, including a primer, a prayer book, and a psalter, thereby establishing the basis of Finnish literacy. Though he lived before the foundation of the University of Åbo, his work created the intellectual and institutional conditions that made a university possible.

## 9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Following De la Croix and Morault (2025), our assumption is that a professor's involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a link between those institutions. We present the universities that were connected to the University of Åbo during each period in Figure 4.

The network is relatively local, with connections to other Swedish universities (Lund, Uppsala, Dorpat). In the final period, a link also appears with the university in St Petersburg (see De la Croix and Doraghi (2021) on this institution, which was closely intertwined with the famous academy).

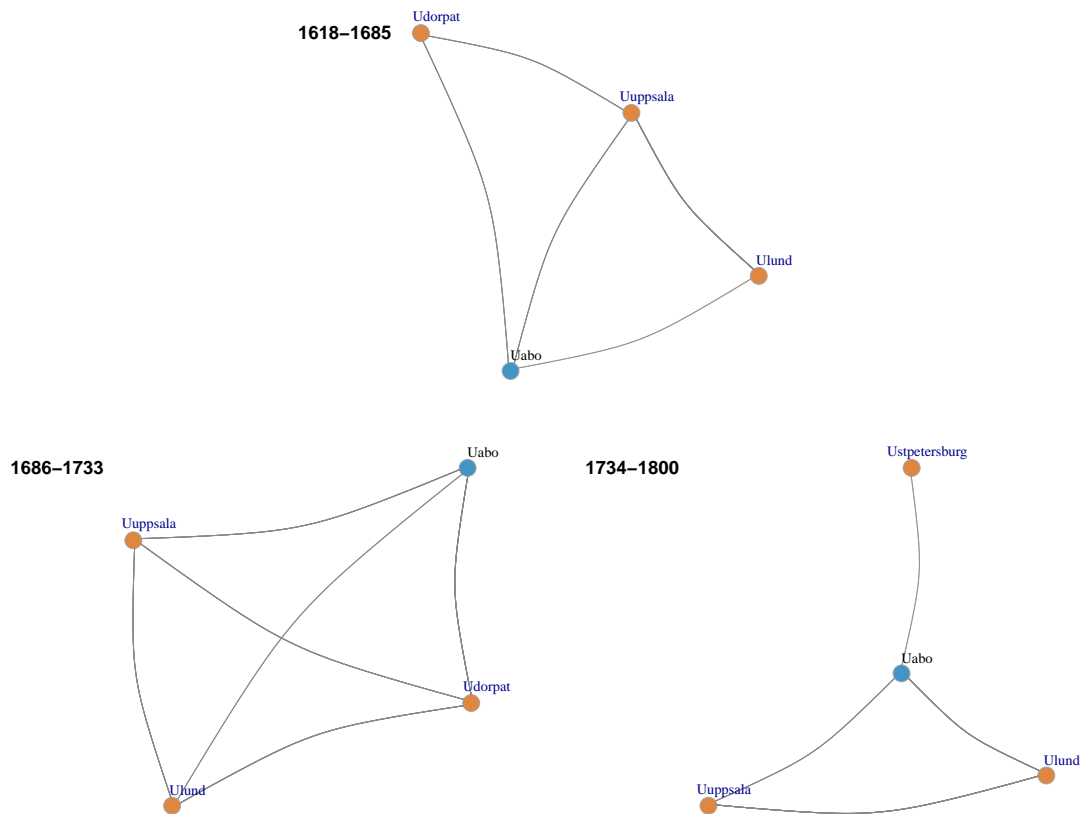


Figure 4: Links between Åbo and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

## 10 ANECDOTE

An anecdote from ChatGPT: When Kalm came back from his expedition, he brought with him a number of exotic plants and seeds — including the first attempts to cultivate American apple and ornamental species in Finland. According to contemporary reports, he even tried to establish tobacco and mulberry trees for silk production around Åbo. While most of these experiments failed

in the northern climate, they attracted much attention in the town, and his gardens at the university became something of a local curiosity, with citizens coming to see “American plant” grown on Finnish soil.

## 11 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Åbo was a small miracle on the Baltic Sea. Emerging from a remote cathedral school, it grew into a vibrant center of learning that, by the second half of the eighteenth century, cultivated a remarkably high level of human capital. In doing so, it not only advanced scholarship in Finland but also contributed to the broader currents of the Scandinavian Enlightenment.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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