

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Rome (1303–1800)

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This note is a summary of our research into the group of scholars and literati who were at the University of Rome known as "La Sapienza" until 1800, or were connected with it.

## 1 SOURCES

To reconstruct the academic activity at the University of Rome and the biographical profiles of the scholars associated with it, several sources have been consulted. Among the main references is Renazzi's detailed *Storia dell'Università degli studi di Roma* Renazzi (1803), which proved valuable despite some gaps. Also useful was the repertory by Spanò (1935), offering a census of professors from the Middle Ages to the modern era. The works of Carafa (1751), Conte (1991), and Dorati da Empoli (1980) helped to supplement and complete numerous biographical and chronological details. Finally, valuable information was drawn from entries in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana 1929).

## 2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Rome was founded on April 20, 1303, by Pope Boniface VIII through the bull *In Supremae praeminentia Dignitatis* (The Preeminence of Supreme Dignity). Established as the *Studium Urbis*, it was created to provide Rome with a center of higher learning directly controlled by the Holy See, at a time when other major European universities, such as Bologna and Paris, enjoyed considerable autonomy.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the university expanded with support from the papacy, which included privileges and financial endowments. During the Avignon Papacy (1309–1377), its administration was temporarily entrusted to the city of Rome, which, however, was unable to provide what was needed to maintain the *Studium*. Only with the new statutes of the city and the return of the Curia to Rome (January 7, 1377), during the early years of the pontificate of Gregory XI de Beaufort (1370–1378), did the University of Rome begin to regain a certain importance. Its seat was moved to Trastevere, but this must have been a rather short-lived phase: in the following years, due to the grave condition of the Church, torn apart as it was by the Western Schism, the *Studium* declined and almost disappeared.

In 1431, Pope Eugene IV reformed and reorganized the *Studium*, establishing the "Collegio della Sapienza" and assigning it a permanent seat near San Lorenzo in Damaso. From then on, the university was commonly referred to as "La Sapienza."

A significant revival occurred in the early 16th century under Pope Leo X, who brought renowned scholars from across Europe to Rome, enhancing the university's prestige.

During the Renaissance, "La Sapienza" distinguished itself in the fields of law, the humanities, and medicine, attracting prominent intellectuals and becoming one of the main cultural hubs of the Papal States. In 1660, the *Studium* moved to a new and imposing building on Corso del Rinascimento,

known as "La Sapienza" after the inscription above its main entrance: *Initium Sapientiae timor Domini* ("The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," (Proverbs 9:10)). It was there, in 1670, that Pope Alexander VII founded the Biblioteca Alessandrina, enriched with manuscripts, alphabets, and grammars collected by papal emissaries from the Near East.

In the mid-18th century, Pope Benedict XIV gave new momentum to the university: he regulated academic appointments, expanded the number of degree programs from three to five (sacred studies, law, medicine and surgery, arts and philosophy, and languages), introduced new disciplines such as experimental physics, chemistry, and higher mathematics, and allocated funds for scientific equipment and laboratories—showing a clear awareness that reforms had to be accompanied by adequate resources.

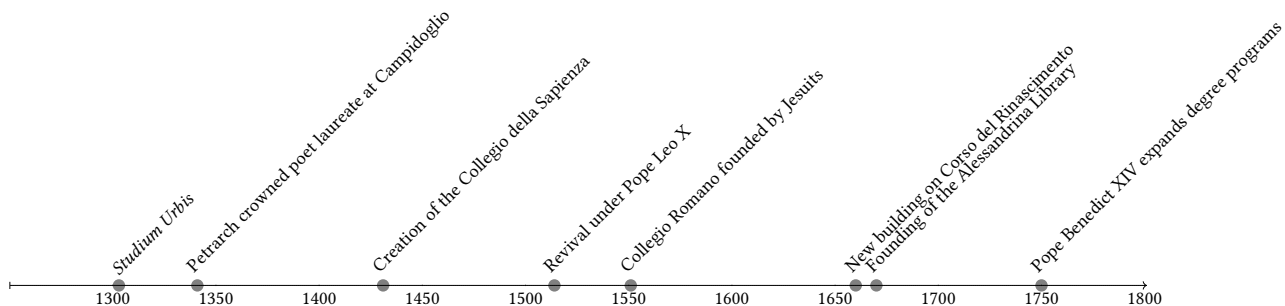


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Rome

### 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics. In total, we link 1,626 scholars to the University of Rome. The place of birth is known for 63.3% of them. There is relatively more biographical information for two periods: 1200–1347 and 1348–1449. Respectively, 64.3% and 51.1% of these scholars have a Wikipedia entry. This higher visibility can largely be explained by the fact that only the most prominent figures of these two periods are known (14 and 45 scholars). The traces left in contemporary libraries are also more substantial for them, with 78.6% and 60% of scholars, respectively, having a VIAF entry. The pie chart also shows a high proportion of honorary members, mainly due to the significant role played by the Church and its representatives in the organization and support of the institution in Rome.

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1000–1199	1	0	100	NaN	NaN	181	100	100
1200–1347	14	50	78.6	42.2	67.9	181	64.3	78.6
1348–1449	45	57.8	86.7	41.4	66	181	51.1	60
1450–1526	430	23	55.1	41.2	63.6	214	19.1	24.7
1527–1617	549	17.9	57.4	39.9	64.8	190	13.1	20
1618–1685	281	20.6	73.3	40.3	69.4	229	13.2	23.5
1686–1733	146	29.5	73.3	39.5	68.6	232	17.1	28.1
1734–1800	160	25.6	70.6	36	71.6	184	18.1	26.2
1200–1800	1626	22.9	63.3	39.7	66.5	209	17.1	24.8

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

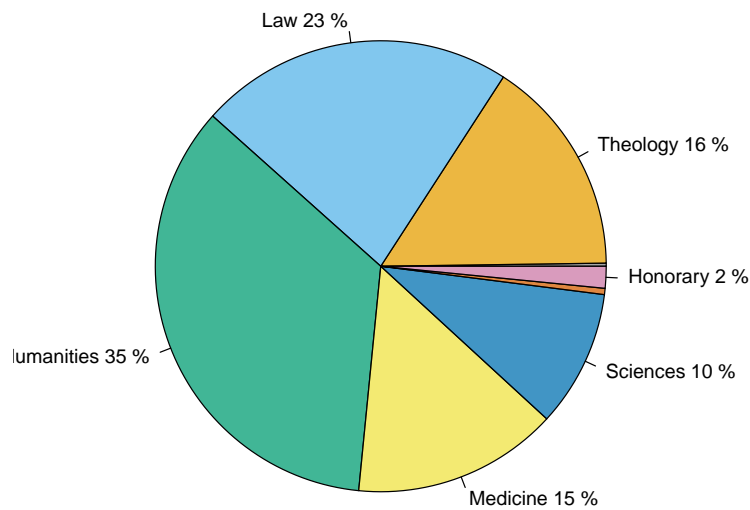


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Rome (published scholars only)

## 4 FIELDS

Figure 2 shows the distribution of disciplines at the University of Rome, for those professors who published. The humanities were the most prominent, and they gradually took on an increasingly central role. In the 14th century, university teaching focused on canon and civil law, medicine, grammar, theology, and—thanks to the initiative of Pope Clement V in Avignon—also on Eastern languages. During the 15th century, the curriculum expanded to include philosophy, astronomy, rhetoric, Greek, and eloquence, eventually opening up, from the 16th century onward, to the sciences and mathematics.

## 5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces of the scholars active at the University of Rome by period. The analysis of the sequence shows that the University of Rome maintained a predominantly local nature over time, with most professors originating from the Italian peninsula. From the 15th century onward, however, foreign scholars from various parts of Europe also began to appear. A significant number of Byzantine professors were also invited to teach Greek.

## 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 Rome 25 years before that date. The details are given in De la Croix et al. (2024) and Curtis et al. (2025). 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. During the Avignon Papacy, there was a marked decline both in the number of professors and in the human capital index. The presence of the papal court in Rome was in fact crucial to the life of the university, ensuring resources, attracting high-profile scholars, and maintaining its central role in the intellectual networks of the time.

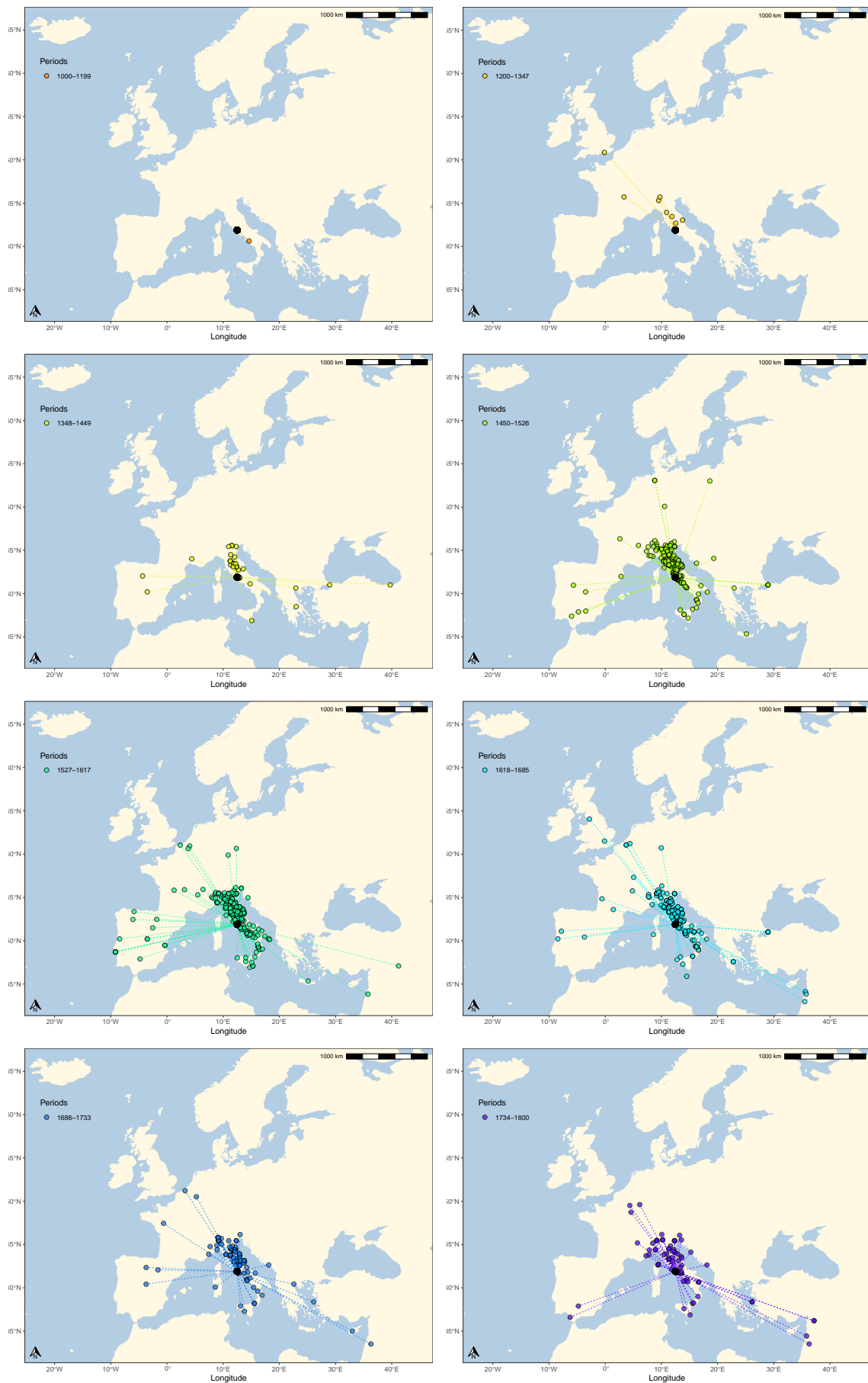


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Rome

## 7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

**Lorenzo Valla** (Rome 1407 – Rome 1457) was one of the most influential humanists and philologists in 15th-century Italy. He taught rhetoric and Latin eloquence at the universities of Pavia and Rome. In his teaching, Valla promoted a return to classical Latin, in open contrast to the scholastic Latin of the Middle Ages, and contributed to the spread of the philological and critical method that would become central to Humanism.

**Poggio Bracciolini** (Terranova 1380 – Florence 1459) was an Italian humanist and historian, known for rediscovering forgotten masterpieces of Latin literature, including Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. He arrived in Rome in 1403 with a letter of recommendation from Coluccio Salutati and rose through the papal chancery to become *secretarius domesticus* to Antipope John XXIII. He spent the final years of his life in Rome, where he taught rhetoric. Author of *De varietate fortunae*, Poggio championed a humanistic ideal based on continuity between classical culture and Christian tradition. A central figure in a famous polemic with Lorenzo Valla, he defended a rhetorical and harmonious vision of antiquity against Valla's philological rigor.

**Felice Peretti** (Grottammare 1521 – Rome 1590), who became Pope Sixtus V, was a Franciscan friar, theologian, and teacher. He studied and taught in Rome, where he was active in several Franciscan *studia* and at the convent of Aracoeli. He also served as a lector in philosophy and theology at the *Studium Urbis*. His academic career supported his rise within the Church hierarchy: he was appointed inquisitor, then cardinal, and eventually pope in 1585. As pope, Sixtus V undertook a major reform of the *Studium Urbis*, expanding its structure and establishing new chairs as part of his broader efforts to reorganize the Curia and centralize papal authority (Vitale and Croix 2025). He also promoted large-scale urban works and strengthened the educational role of Rome's university.

**Leonardo Bruni** (Arezzo 1370 – Florence 1444) was the first to use the term “humanism” (in Latin *humanismus*) to describe the new cultural movement of the Renaissance, in a famous 1424 letter addressed to Palla Strozzi entitled “De studiis et litteris.” He was a historian, translator, and politician who taught eloquence and philosophy at the University of Rome, contributing to the spread of the philological method and the interest in classical texts. His academic activity was intertwined with his political career: he served as secretary of the Republic of Florence and promoted a civic humanism that emphasized citizens' responsibility. Among his most famous works are the vernacular translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and the *History of Italy*, one of the first modern histories.

**Paolo Giovio** (Como 1483 – Florence 1552) was an Italian humanist, historian, and physician. In 1527, he obtained the chair of history at the University of Rome, where he stood out for his critical approach and passion for collecting firsthand historical testimonies. He is famous for his *Elogia virorum bellica virtute illustrium* and the *Historiae*, which reflect his interest in contemporary history and biography. Giovio was also a key figure in promoting portraiture as a historical tool, amassing a vast archive of portraits of illustrious figures of his time.

## 8 RELATED SCHOLARS

**Nicolaus Copernicus** (Torun 1473 – Frombork 1543) was a Polish astronomer and canon lawyer who is renowned for developing the heliocentric model of the solar system, presented in his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. After studying in Kraków, he completed his education in Italy, attending universities in Bologna, Padua, and Ferrara. Later humanist sources, including Paolo Giovio, mention a possible academic stay in Rome, perhaps on the occasion of the Jubilee of 1500. Michaud (1811) also lists him among the mathematics professors.

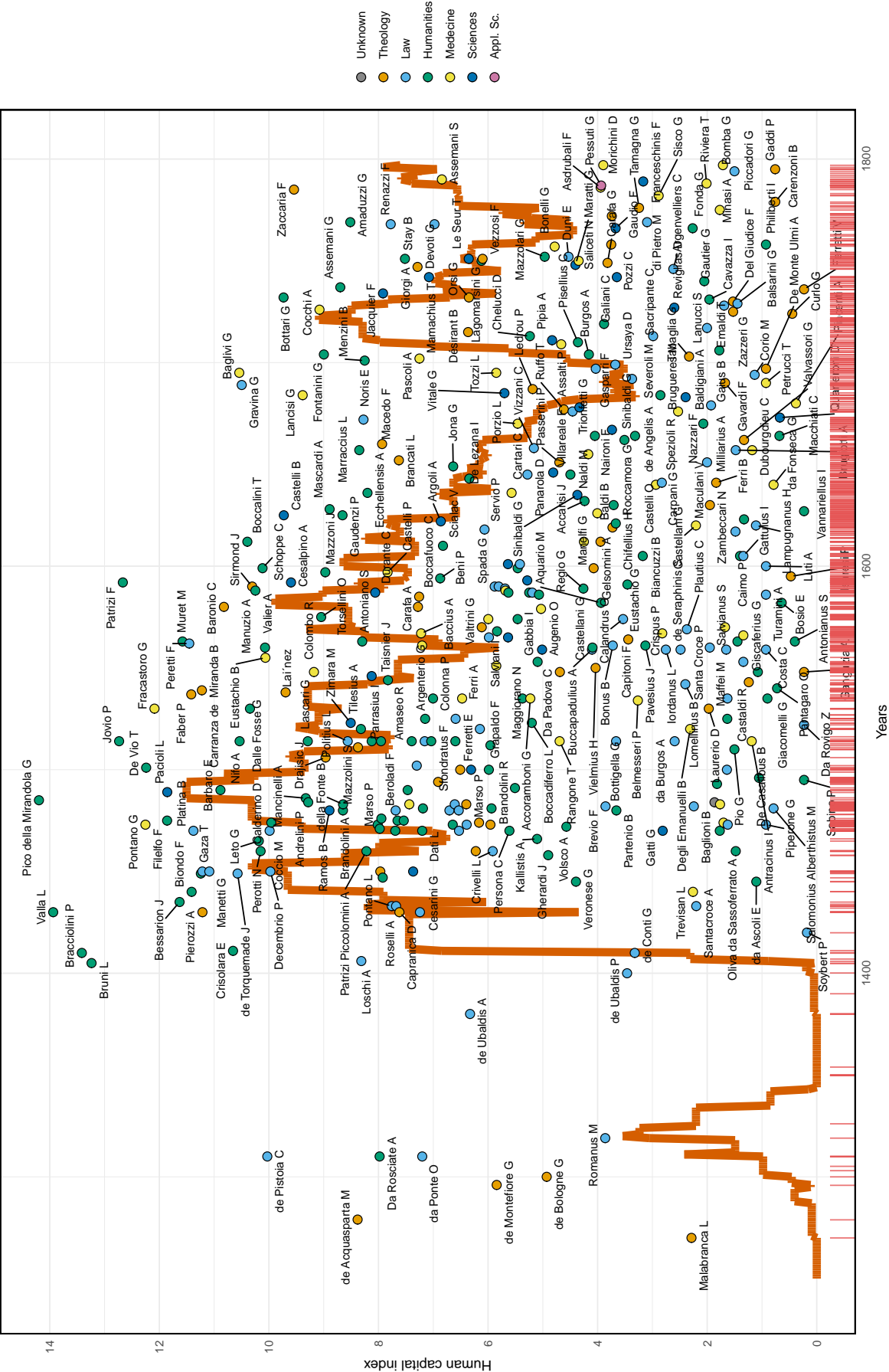


Figure 4: Famous scholars at the University of Rome

**Torquato Tasso** (Sorrento 1544 –Rome 1595) was one of the most celebrated poets of the Italian Renaissance. He is best known for his epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata*, which recounts the First Crusade with a blend of classical inspiration and Christian spirituality. He spent time in several cultural centers, including Ferrara and Naples, and visited Rome on multiple occasions, where he was received by leading patrons and intellectuals. Later humanist sources suggest a connection with the academic circles of the city, though there is no conclusive evidence that he taught at the *Studium Urbis*.

**Roberto Bellarmino** (Montepulciano 1542 — Rome 1621) was a Jesuit and cardinal who taught theology at the Collegio Romano from 1576, where he inaugurated the course in controversial theology that gave rise to the *Disputationes de controversiis* (De la Croix and Karioun 2021). He did not teach directly at the Sapienza, but his writings and his role as cardinal and consultant of the Holy Office also influenced theological teaching at the *Studium Urbis* (Renazzi 1803).

**Johannes Müller** (Königsberg 1436 – Rome 1476), known by his Latin name Regiomontanus, was a German mathematician, astronomer, and astrologer, and one of the most important scientists of the 15th century. Born in Königsberg in Bavaria, he studied at the University of Vienna under the guidance of Georg von Peurbach, with whom he collaborated on revising the Alfonsine Tables. After his mentor's death, Regiomontanus continued the work and gained distinction for his *Ephemerides*, which provided remarkably precise astronomical calculations for the time. He was also active in disseminating scientific knowledge, founding a printing press in Nuremberg. In 1475 he traveled to Rome, summoned by Pope Sixtus IV to assist in reforming the calendar, but died the following year under unclear circumstances (see De la Croix and Vitale (2021)).

## 9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

We assume that a professor's affiliation with multiple universities throughout their career creates a connection between those institutions. Under this assumption, Figure 5 illustrates the universities associated with the University of Rome during each period. We observe the same bifurcated pattern found in the human capital index and the international nature of scholars (Figure 2).

## 10 IF YOU VISIT ROME

In the heart of Rome, between Piazza Navona and the Pantheon, stood the ancient University of Rome. Its very first seat, however, was located in the Trastevere district, before it was transferred to the area near the Pantheon. Supported financially by the city from 1363 onward, the university grew steadily until Pope Eugene IV reorganized its structure in 1431 and promoted its relocation to the Sant'Eustachio district. It was there, two centuries later, that the historical Palazzo della Sapienza was built—today home to the State Archives(Figure 6).

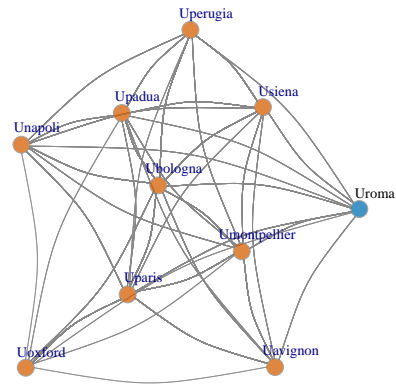
## 11 WHO'S WHO ON THE MOON

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. Five scholars associated with the University of Rome have been honored by having a crater on the surface of the Moon named after them: Cardinal Bessarion, a promoter of dialogue between Greek and Latin culture; Girolamo Fracastoro, physician and humanist, a forerunner of germ theory; Athanasius Kircher, Jesuit and encyclopedic polymath; Giulio Cesare Lagalla, natural philosopher and scholar of optics; and Giovanni Pontano, Renaissance poet and statesman.

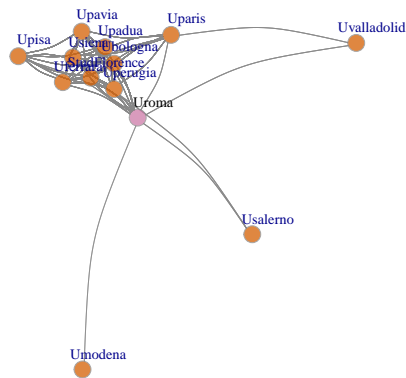
**1000–1199**

Uparis

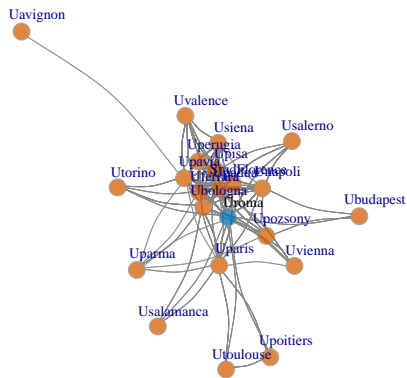
1200-1347



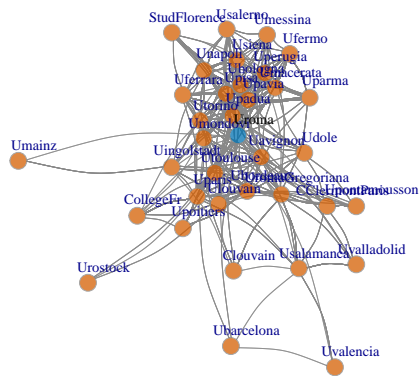
1348–1449



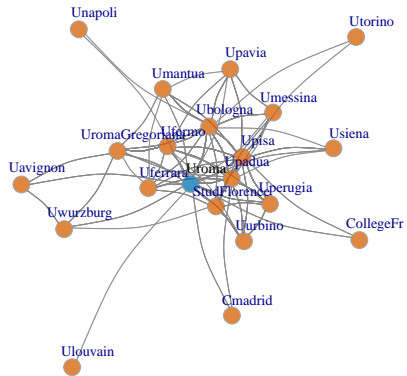
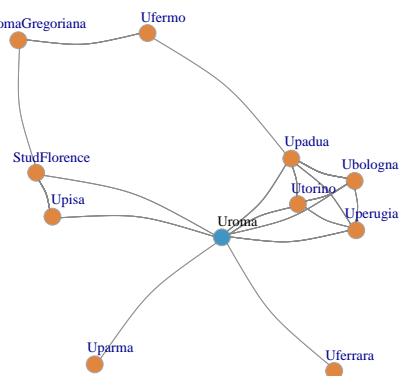
1450–1526



1527-1617



**1618–1685**

1686–1733<sup>U</sup>

1734–1800

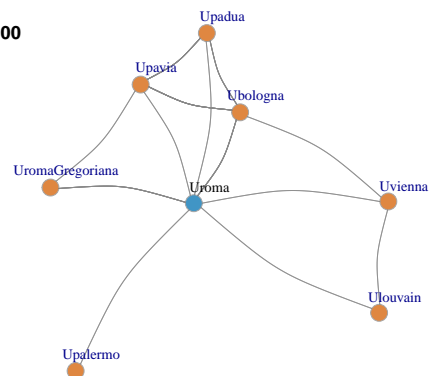


Figure 5: Links between Rome and other universities through scholars' mobility by period





Figure 6: The courtyard of the Palazzo della Sapienza, with the church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza (designed by Francesco Borromini, 1642–1660). Photo by Mara Vitale

## 12 ANECDOTES

As Spano recounts (1935), in the early days, the study and practice of medicine could prove extremely dangerous. Gabriele Zerbi, who was accused of failing to properly treat the Ottoman Sultan's prime minister, Skander, was sawn in half along with his son. As for Pietro Leoni, who was unable to cure Lorenzo de' Medici, he was thrown into a well.

## 13 FINAL THOUGHTS

When Boniface VIII founded the University of Rome, he wished it to be "ad universalem profectum non solum urbis ipsius et circumpositae regionis sed et aliorum qui de diversis mundi partibus confluiscent" — for the universal advancement not only of the city itself and the surrounding region, but also of all those who had gathered there from different parts of the world (Spanò 1935). This aspiration of the pontiff is confirmed by the history of the university, where the initial predominance of local scholars gradually gave way to the inclusion of foreign masters, thus reflecting a dual vocation: deeply rooted in the civic, cultural, and religious life of Rome, yet increasingly connected to the broader European and Mediterranean intellectual networks.

## 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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