

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Trier (1454–1798)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Trier (Universitas Trevirensis) from its earliest days to its closure in 1798.

## 1 SOURCES

The names of the scholars who taught at the University of Trier have been drawn primarily from four sources.

A primary source of information is the *Repertorium Academicum Germanicum* (2019). It provides meticulous data of those activities and the dates of the scholars and literati who taught there before 1550, as well as precise information about the locations of their births and deaths. Another useful source is Zenz (1949). In his work "Die Trierer Universität 1473 bis 1798. Ein Beitrag zur abendländischen Universitätsgeschichte" (The University of Trier 1473 to 1798. A Contribution to Western University History), Zenz offers a comprehensive, valuable compilation of the scholars and literati who taught at the University of Trier in the field of medicine. Köbler (2019), provides data for the activities of the scholars and literati in the field of law. The last source, Sommervogel (1890), offers a comprehensive and valuable compilation of Jesuit writing, encompassing works authored by members of the Jesuit order, including those affiliated with the University of Trier, before 1798. On the whole, we believe our coverage is broad, but not comprehensive after 1550.

## 2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Trier was founded by Archbishop Jakob von Sierck, with approval from Pope Nicholas V in 1454, and confirmation by Pope Sixtus IV in year 1473. It was one of the oldest universities in the Holy Roman Empire and was modeled on older medieval universities. In 1473, the city finally opened the university for teaching. The university had four traditional faculties: Theology, Law, Medicine, and Philosophy (Arts). Establishing a university in the city was a reflection of Trier's importance both as an archiepiscopal seat and one of the empire's oldest cities.

Throughout the Reformation, Trier remained firmly Catholic. In the 1560s, the Jesuits were invited by the Archbishop-Elector Johann von der Leyen to reform and strengthen the university against Protestant influence. By the early 17th century, the Jesuit order dominated the teaching, especially in theology and philosophy, making Trier a stronghold of Counter-Reformation Catholic scholarship.

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) brought severe disruptions: student numbers fell, and the city of Trier was repeatedly occupied and damaged. The Jesuits continued to run the university until the suppression of their order in 1773 by Pope Clement XIV. After 1773, the university tried to reorganize without Jesuit leadership but entered a period of decline. In 1798, under French administration, the University of Trier was officially closed.

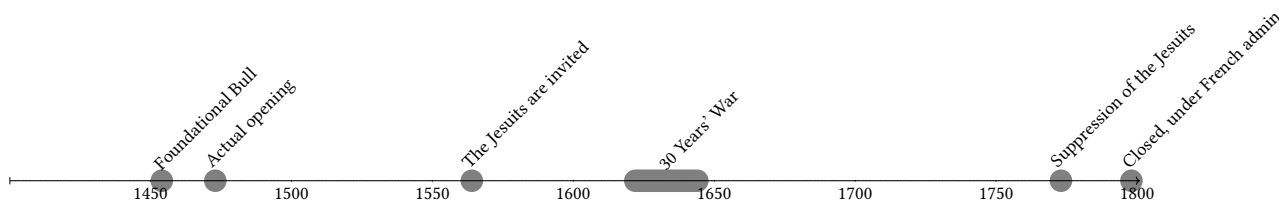


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Trier

### 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. Overall, 261 scholars are linked to the University of Trier. Biographical information remains incomplete. For more than half of the scholars and literati affiliated with the University of Trier, neither the year of birth nor the place of birth is known. The average age at first appointment was around 38.5 years, while longevity is relatively low. Scholars and literati in the last two periods lived about 10 years longer than those in the first period (in line with Stelter, De la Croix, and Myrskylä (2021), but not very significant here because of the low number of observations). More specifically, the professors from the first period had a mean age at death of 57 years, while those in the last two periods had a mean age at death of 70.5 and 68.5 years respectively. The median distance between the places of birth and activity is 134 km, with the longest distance to be found during the third period at 222 km. All in all, 13.8% of the scholars have Wikipedia entries, while the proportion with VIAF records slightly exceeds 30%, close enough to the average of 37% in the full database (all universities and academies).

Period	no. obs	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1450–1526	86	23.3%	36%	33.2	57	94	12.8%	17.4%
1527–1617	56	44.6%	57.1%	37.1	62.9	134	21.4%	39.3%
1618–1685	26	61.5%	53.8%	48	64.6	222	11.5%	57.7%
1686–1733	29	55.2%	48.3%	43	70.5	134	10.3%	48.3%
1734–1800	64	48.4%	51.6%	39.8	68.5	107	10.9%	21.9%
1200–1800	261	41.4%	47.5%	38.5	64.4	134	13.8%	30.7%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

### 4 FIELDS

Figure 2 shows the distribution of disciplines at the University of Trier, based on a sample of professors who published. Forty-five per cent of publishing activity at the University of Trier was focused on Theology. Fields associated with Humanities (faculty of Arts) account for 25% followed by Law at 11% and Medicine at 7%.

### 5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces of the scholars active at the University of Trier by period. Overall, the university primarily attracted local scholars throughout all five periods. In the first period until 1526, most scholars were local, with a small number coming from the Low Countries and Poland. In the second period until 1617, the majority remained local, though a minority came from the United Kingdom and again from the Low Countries. In the third period, the geographical scope expanded slightly toward East-Central Europe. By contrast, the last two periods show a predominantly local recruitment pattern.

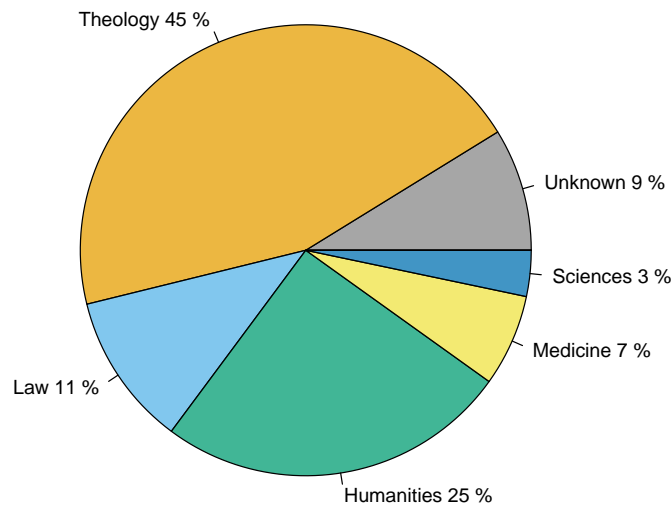


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Trier (published scholars only)

## 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 Trier 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.

On the whole, notability fluctuates at a relatively low level, with a peak just before 1600.

## 7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

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

**Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld** (Kaiserswerth 1591 – Trier 1635) was a German Jesuit priest, professor, poet, and the most influential Catholic critic of the witch prosecutions. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1610 (novitiate at Trier) and was ordained in 1622. He taught in Trier (1629–1635), Paderborn and Cologne (Herbermann 1913; Sommervogel 1890). Spee's *Cautio criminalis* (1631) denounced torture and the legal machinery of witch trials. Trier was his home for both the beginning and the end of his Jesuit career: he started his novitiate there and later returned during the Thirty Years' War, when he cared for the wounded amid plague and conflict.

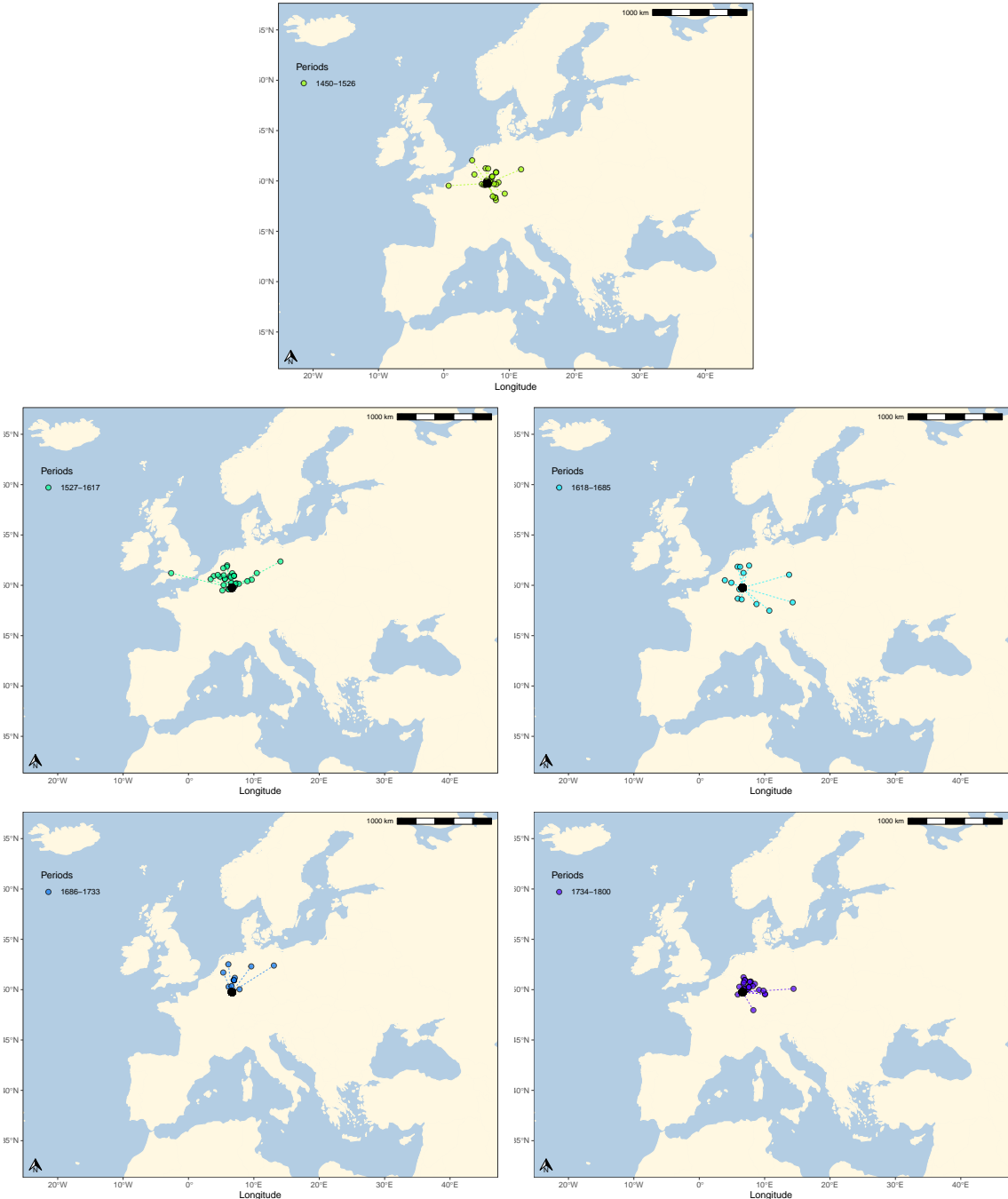
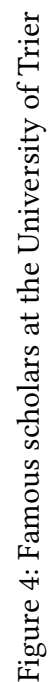


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Trier



**Thomas Murner** (Obernai 1475 – Obernai 1537) was an Alsatian satirist, poet and translator (Herbermann 1913). He joined the Franciscan order in 1490, and from 1495 onward traveled, studied, and later taught and preached in Freiburg im Breisgau, Paris, Kraków, and Strasbourg (Herbermann 1913). He taught law at the University of Trier in 1515 (Repertorium Academicum Germanicum 2019). Murner was well-known for his satires, which were directed against contemporary corruption, the Reformation, and especially Martin Luther. His most forceful work, regarded as the harshest German satire of the period, was *Von dem grossen Lutherischen Narren wie ihn Doctor Murner beschworen hat* ('On the Great Lutheran Fool,' 1522) (Thomas 1909).

**Barthélemy Latomus** (Arlon 1485 – Koblenz 1566) was a Rhenish scholar of Luxembourgish origin, appointed to the chair of eloquence at the Royal College. Latomus taught in many universities: Cologne, Paris, Louvain and Freiburg im Breisgau, and for four years (1522-1526) at the University of Trier (Repertorium Academicum Germanicum 2019). He was known for being a philologist and polemicist, actively participating in the theological debates of his time. A committed Catholic, he wrote extensively against Lutheran ideas, and his works reflect the intellectual and confessional tensions of the Reformation era (Paquot 1763).

**Thomas Basin** (Caudebec-en-Caux 1412 – Utrecht 1491) was a French bishop, historian, and jurist. Educated at the University of Paris, he pursued further studies in law at Louvain and Pavia. In 1447, he was appointed Bishop of Lisieux (Britannica 2024). Basin taught law at the University of Trier in 1473 (Repertorium Academicum Germanicum 2019). His principal work, *Historiae de rebus a Carolo VII et Ludovico XI Francorum regibus*, offers a detailed account of the reigns of Charles VII and Louis XI. Basin's writings provide valuable insights into the political and ecclesiastical landscape of 15th-century France (Britannica 2024).

**Paul Aler** (Saint-Vith 1656 – Duren 1727) was a Jesuit priest, philologist, and playwright of Luxembourgish origin. He studied at the Collège des Trois Couronnes in Cologne from 1673 to 1676 and entered the Society of Jesus in 1676 (O'Neill and Domínguez 2001). Aler taught philosophy and moral theology and held administrative positions at several Jesuit colleges, including Cologne, Münster, Aachen, and Düren (Académie royale 1866). He taught theology at the University of Trier from 1701 until 1717 (Zenz 1949; Sommervogel 1890). He is known for his contributions to Jesuit education and for his literary works, notably Latin tragedies and pedagogical manuals such as the *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1706) (O'Neill and Domínguez 2001).

## 8 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 Trier during each period in Figure 5. The period 1450-1526 sees links with some important universities of that time (Paris, Basel, Louvain, Cologne, Heidelberg). The subsequent periods show links with almost exclusively Jesuit universities. The network shrinks over time, as scholars become increasingly less mobile.

## 9 ANECDOTES

Thomas Murner was known as an energetic and passionate character, but his sharp tongue and uncompromising style meant he made enemies wherever he went. His biting satires earned him as much hostility as admiration, and the targets of his quarrels ranged from clerics to civic authorities (Thomas 1909).

Erasmus mockingly called Barthélemy Latomus "Hephaestus," the crippled blacksmith god, poking fun at his limp and quarrelsome nature (Vocht 1951).

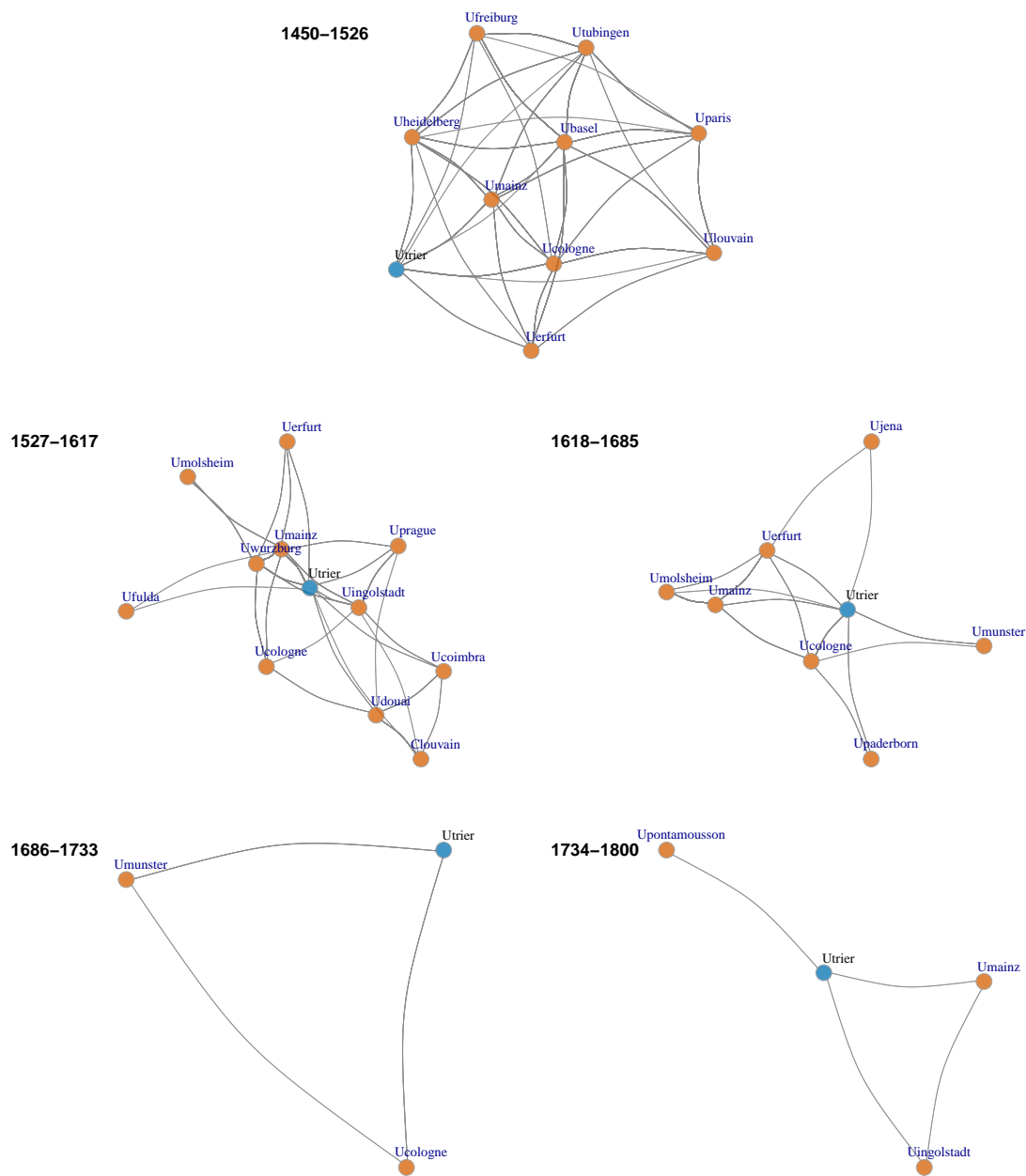


Figure 5: Links between Trier and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

## 10 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Trier began as a promising princely foundation, suffered a narrowing of its mission under Jesuit dominance, and was deeply shaken by the Thirty Years' War. By the late eighteenth century it had declined to become a provincial school of limited intellectual impact, before its final suppression.

## 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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