https://doi.org/10.14428/rete.v16i0/Paris

Scholars and Literati at the University of Paris (1200–1793)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Paris from its earliest days to its dissolution in 1793.

1 Sources

The University of Paris had a loose, complex structure, comprising both faculties and colleges. Unlike other old universities of considerable size such as Cambridge (Venn 1922) or Bologna (Mazzetti 1847), no comprehensive catalogue of University of Paris professors has been compiled by French historians. We have therefore combined multiple sources to assemble such a catalogue, which will regardless remain incomplete. Nonetheless, we are confident that the main scholars and men of letters are included, while the gaps that remain largely concern more obscure figures.

Three systematic catalogues cover parts of the university: Genet (2019) for the medieval period; Antonetti (2013) for the Faculty of Law after 1679; and Noguès (2008) for the Faculty of Arts and the colleges after 1660.

Studium Parisiense (Genet 2019) is a database listing members of the University of Paris from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. Based on previous partial catalogues (Weijers 1994; Gorochov 2012) and developed within the "Signs and States" program, led by Jean-Philippe Genet and funded by the European Research Council, it provides valuable biographical and bibliographical information on professors and students. To distinguish professors from students, we relied on the "academic career" field, which details offices held. Note that this occasionally led us too far, as an academic career may have included chairs in convents that were not necessarily aggregated to a university.

Noguès (2008) is another online database covering the later period and the arts/humanities. At the time of writing, the site appears to be inaccessible. Antonetti (2013) is a printed volume with entries for each professor of the Faculty of Law, focusing on social background/wealth and scholarly contribution.

To supplement theology and medicine, we harvested the following sources: Hazon and Bertrand (1778) (medicine), Feret (1904) (theology), Élie (1950) (around 1500), Corlieu (1877) (medicine), and Gaullieur (1874) (Collège de Guyenne).

Throughout, we have been careful not to conflate the University of Paris with clearly distinct institutions. The Royal College has already been the subject of a note (De la Croix 2021). The Collège de Clermont (the Jesuit college, kept outside the university until the expulsion of the Jesuits) will be addressed separately. Confusion can arise quickly, even for very famous figures. The Catholic Encyclopedia (Herbermann 1913) states of Giordano Bruno: "While at Paris he lectured publicly on philosophy, under the auspices, as it seems, of the College of Cambrai, the forerunner of the College of France," whereas Bruno's Paris lectures (1581–1583 and again 1585–1586) were in fact given under royal auspices—at/through the Royal College, which was not part of the University of Paris—often at the Collège de Cambrai, a site that functionally hosted teaching before the Royal College had its own building.

Finally, although no one has produced a full prosopography of University of Paris professors, the literature on specific aspects of the university is virtually endless. Guénée (1981) lists 4,926 publications on the university, and that bibliography stops in 1981.

2 The University

In the early 1100s, the masters teaching near Notre-Dame and the students who trailed them coalesced into a *studium* so lively that people began to call it simply *universitas*—community. Out of the booming Parisian schools of the later twelfth century, amid a city that was thriving demographically, economically, and politically, the University of Paris started taking shape. The venerable Notre-Dame school gradually yielded its monopoly over theology, and a new corporate body emerged; traces of it appear as early as 1200, thus making Paris the second oldest university after Bologna (Rashdall 1895; Verger and Charle 2012; Guénée 1981).

From discreet beginnings, theologians soon steered the organization of learning and claimed precedence within it. Robert de Sorbon (1201–1274), the chaplain (a clergyman serving an individual) to King Louis IX, founded the Collège de Sorbonne in 1257 for theology students from poor backgrounds, and over time the name "Sorbonne" became shorthand for the university's theology faculty and the building itself.

Teaching settled into four faculties—Arts, Theology, Medicine, and Canon Law (civil law and French law were taught only after 1679)—while the Faculty of Arts, in which nearly three-quarters of the students were enrolled, was subdivided into four "nations," grouped according to the province and diocese. The university's daily life unfolded across schools and *studia* linked to religious communities, and across colleges—pious foundations that began as student housing and gradually became parallel sites of instruction. The rector, who was elected among the members of the Faculty of Arts (typically via successive three-month terms), came to embody the university's corporate voice.

In 1231, after two years of the masters going on strike, Pope Gregory IX issued *Parens scientiarum*, securing prized autonomy. Other strikes followed to defend tax exemptions or students' rights. By the fourteenth century, the university had become a moral and intellectual authority, speaking forcefully in controversies and crises—from the Great Western Schism to the Hundred Years' War—and leaving its imprint on events as emblematic as the trial of Joan of Arc.

Humanism arrived in the sixteenth century, along with speaking Greek and printing in movable type. Professors argued over Cicero and Scripture, while the Theology Faculty patrolled the porous border with heresy. Religious wars shook the city; classrooms emptied out and were filled up again. The Jesuits opened the Collège de Clermont and trained brilliant students; the university battled them for jurisdiction, lost ground, then won ground, but never fully made peace. Royal power became stronger with Richelieu and Louis XIV.

Meanwhile, medicine and law professionalized; art masters debated method, while scholars navigated the quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Yet the old constitution—faculties, nations, and privileges—was challenged by print, state, and science. By the late eighteenth century, critiques of corporate privilege and pleas for utility came from every side; the Enlightenment wrote with Parisian ink, but often against Parisian forms.

After the expulsion of the Jesuits, a reorganization in 1763 incorporated the Collège de Clermont (renamed Louis-le-Grand), and the university comprised some thirty colleges. Then came the Revolution. In 1793, the National Convention abolished the university and its faculties, sweeping away the medieval corporation in the name of the nation. Libraries were seized and scattered among depots, and most colleges were closed, sold, or reassigned—some stones survived, but the medieval institution itself was dismantled. In its place rose *écoles*, institutes, and, later, Napoleonic structures that centralized education under the state. The old University of Paris—born from a gathering of masters by a cathedral—closed its books.

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
1000–1199	94	52.1%	79.8v	36.8	70.5	346	66%	60.6%
1200–1347	1144	15.5%	68.9%	35.2	63.9	346	21%	26.7%
1348–1449	2519	5.8%	66.5%	30.8	64.8	201	3.3%	6.2%
1450–1526	998	10.2%	62.6%	32.2	63.6	205	7.6%	15.3%
1527–1617	168	64.3%	79.8%	37	66.2	247	56.5%	64.9%
1618–1685	120	59.2%	61.7%	39.7	69.6	130	32.5%	56.7%
1686–1733	177	50.3%	81.4%	34.1	70.1	81	23.2%	43.5%
1734–1800	173	83.2%	91.3%	32.6	68.2	138	35.8%	56.6%
1200–1800	5393	16.4%	68.1%	34.1	66.5	213	12.9%	19.0%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

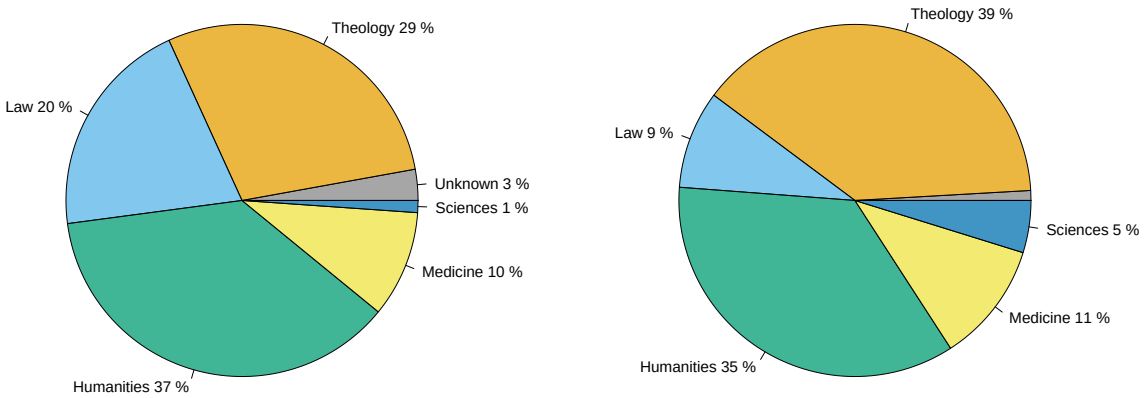

Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Paris (left:all scholars; right: published scholars)

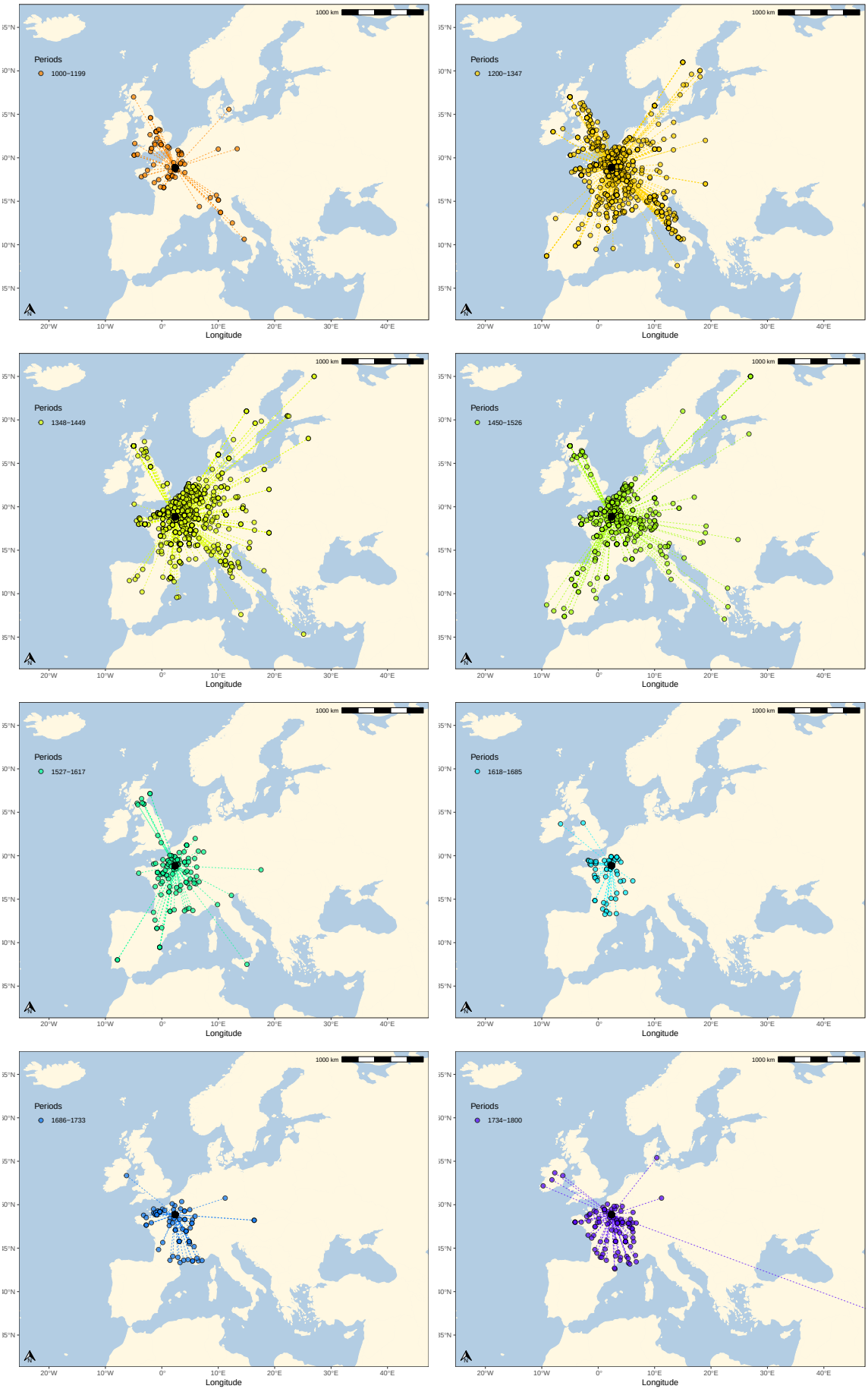

Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Paris

3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. The dataset includes 5,393 scholars. The distribution of scholars over time is far from uniform. The coverage for the Middle Ages is much better, thanks to the Genet (2019) database. It induces a selection effect on the other statistics. When the coverage is high, the information on birth year is less often available, and scholars are more rarely observed in VIAF.

The median distance from birthplace to university is higher in the first periods than afterwards. The Middle Ages was a period during which mobility was very high. The overall coverage of scholars in Wikipedia and VIAF is low, as it is brought down by the large number of observations in the medieval era. Looking at the last two periods, which are expected to be periods of decline, we do not observe drops in these two indicators compared to the period from 1618 to 1685.

4 Fields

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines, for all scholars on the left, and for published scholars on the right. The low share of medicine and sciences is confirmed, slightly less so when considering published scholars.

5 Places of Birth

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Paris by period. Until 1526, the university hired all over Western Europe. After 1526, the hiring became more local, with very few scholars coming from outside France.

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 Paris 25 years before that date. The details are given in De la Croix et al. (2024) (for notability of institution) and Curtis et al. (2025) (for our individual measures of human capital). 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.

The University of Paris is characterized by alternating periods of grandeur and periods of relative decline, with apexes around 1150-1350 and 1550-1600. Outside these periods, the university still had a large number of published professors, preventing its notability from dropping to a low level. In terms of academic fields, the first apex was driven by theology, while the second was related to the field of humanities.

7 Top 9 Professors

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

Thomas Aquinas (Roccasecca 1225 -– Rome 1274) was an Italian Dominican friar and one of the foremost masters of scholastic philosophy and Catholic theology. At the age of 20, he went to Paris to study theology, where he composed a detailed commentary on Peter Lombard's *Book of Sentences*. From 1252, he taught at the University of Paris, mainly through theological disputations (*disputationes*), Biblical commentary, and public preaching. His thought sought to reconcile reason and faith, considering philosophy as the servant of theology in the pursuit of truth. Canonized by Pope John XXII in 1323, he was later proclaimed patron saint of universities by Leo XIII in 1880.

Ramon Llull (Palma 1232 -– Palma 1315) was a philosopher, poet, novelist, theologian, missionary, and Christian apologist. In 1286, he received the title of *magister* at the University of Paris, where he resided for three years. He returned there around 1310 to give university lectures that drew considerable interest (without holding an official chair). His most ambitious and controversial project was to convert Muslims and Jews to Christianity through systematic arguments combining theological and philosophical principles. Llull is also regarded as one of the founders of literary Catalan, and his extensive body of work has secured his place among the greatest writers of Catalonia.

Giovanni da Fidanza (Bagnoregio 1219 — Lyon 1274), better known as Bonaventure, was an Italian Franciscan theologian. He studied arts and then theology at the University of Paris, where he began teaching in 1248. In 1256, he was compelled to cease teaching due to increasing hostility towards the mendicant orders, to which he belonged. Deeply influenced by Augustine of Hippo, his writings sought to elaborate theologically and philosophically on the teachings of Francis of Assisi. His thought inspired the Bonaventurist movement, which opposed Thomism with a more modest conception of human access to truth. Canonized in 1482 and proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 1586 by Pope Sixtus V, he is regarded as a central figure of medieval Christian theology.

Eckhart von Hochheim (Hochheim 1260 — Avignon 1328), known as 'Meister Eckhart,' was a German theologian and philosopher. After joining the Dominican Order, he pursued theological studies and later taught at the University of Paris between 1293 and 1313. Accused of heterodoxy and unorthodox practice, some of his propositions were condemned in 1329 by a theological commission chaired by inquisitor Jacques Fournier in Avignon. Eckhart is regarded as one of the leading figures of Rhenish mysticism, and his thought exerted a lasting influence on Christian spirituality.

Pierre Abélard (Le Pallet 1079 — Chalon-sur-Saône 1142) was a French philosopher, theologian, dialectician, poet, and composer. He was among the first to promote Aristotelian studies within cathedral schools, and in 1110, he established one of the first colleges that was independent from episcopal authority, foreshadowing the later University of Paris. A prolific and sometimes controversial author, he became renowned throughout 12th-century Europe. He is regarded as a founding figure of scholasticism and the originator of conceptualism. He is also renowned for his love affair with his student Héloïse.

John Duns Scotus (Duns 1266 — Cologne 1308), known as *Doctor Subtilis* (the Subtle Doctor), was a Scottish Franciscan theologian and philosopher. After studying at Oxford, he began teaching at the University of Paris around 1302. In 1303, after refusing to support the condemnation of Pope Boniface VIII by King Philip IV, he was forced to leave Paris but returned once the ban was lifted. He developed the school of thought later known as Scotism, a subtle doctrine defending the univocity of being. His thought deeply influenced William of Ockham and left a lasting mark on medieval philosophy.

Albertus Magnus (Lauingen 1193 — Cologne 1280) was a German Dominican friar, philosopher, theologian, and natural scientist. He studied the liberal arts and medicine in northern Italy, and then theology at Cologne. He subsequently taught at several universities, notably at the Collège des Jacobins in Paris from 1241, where he was the teacher of Thomas Aquinas. In Paris, Albertus became acquainted with the writings of Aristotle, which profoundly shaped his thought. Later, he wrote several encyclopedic works on natural sciences, a field in which he particularly excelled.

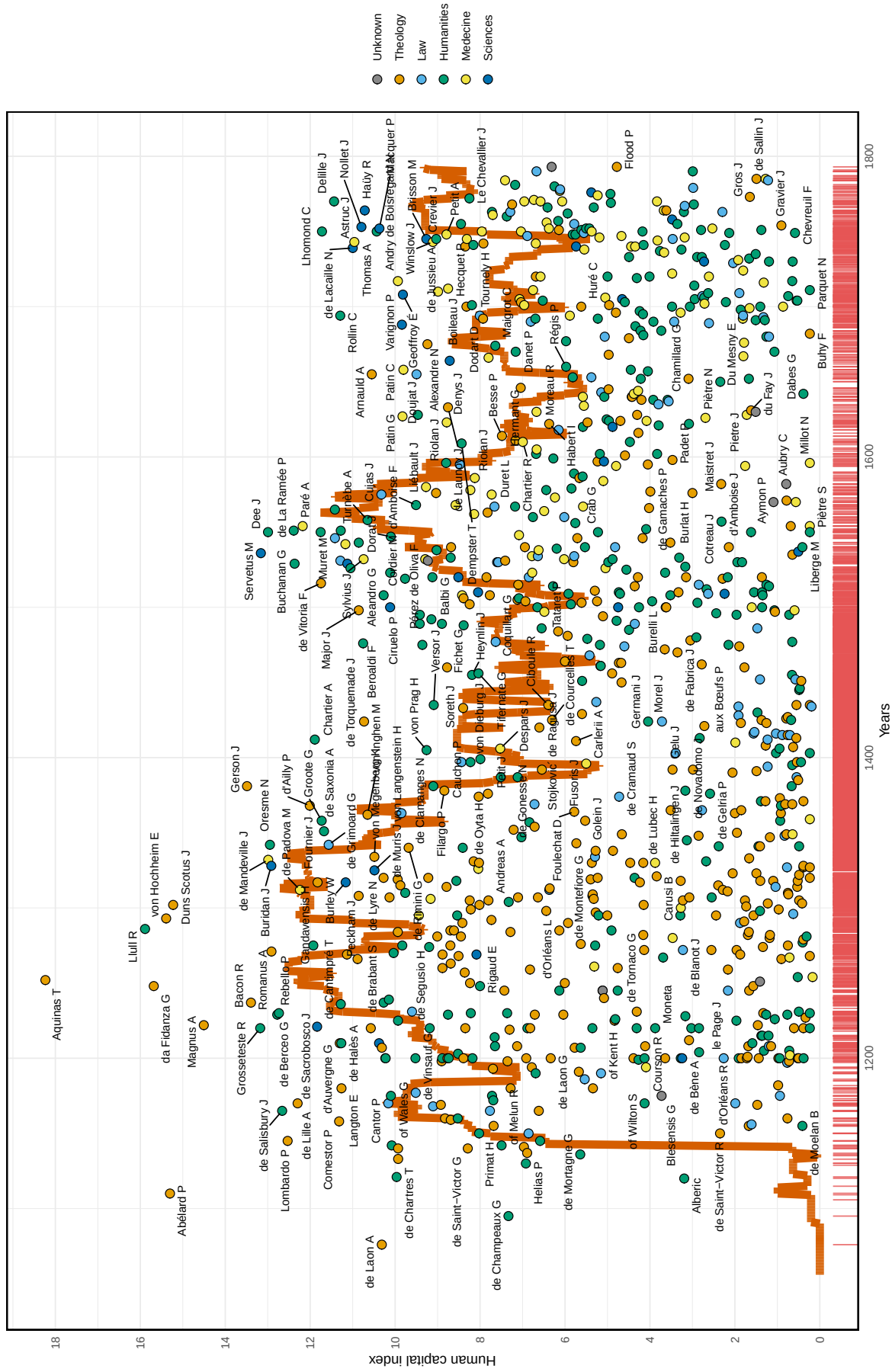

Figure 3: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

Jean de Gerson (Gerson 1363 -– Lyon 1429) was a French academic, theologian, preacher, and political figure. At the age of 13, he began his studies in the arts before pursuing theology at the Collège de Navarre in Paris. As Chancellor of the University of Paris, he played a major role in both the political conflict between the Armagnacs and Burgundians and the crisis of the Great Western Schism. His theological writings are marked by an emphasis on the primacy of faith and the dissemination of dogma to a wider audience.

Roger Bacon (Ilchester 1220 -– Oxford 1292) was an English philosopher, scholar, and alchemist. After studying at Oxford, he came to Paris in 1237 to teach Aristotle at the Faculty of Arts. During this period, he wrote numerous works, including commentaries on Aristotle and treatises on logic. He returned to Oxford in 1247 and later went back to Paris, although he was prevented from teaching there by an injunction from his religious superiors. Known as *Doctor Mirabilis* (the Admirable Doctor) for his extraordinary intellect, his emphasis on experimentation has led many to regard him as a forerunner of the modern scientific method.

8 Related Scholars

Beyond those who taught at the University of Paris, several significant individuals were related to the university. They are counted in the data for all figures but Figure 3.

François de Montcorbier , known as François Villon (Paris 1431 -– c.1463), was a French poet. Born into a poor family, he studied at the University of Paris thanks to the support of the chaplain of Saint-Benoît-le-Bétourné and obtained his Master of Arts degree at around the age of 21. He never pursued an academic career, likely because of political unrest at the university and his involvement in several crimes, notably the murder of a priest and a robbery at the Collège de Navarre. His poems were very successful in the decades after his death and were republished frequently. His work paints a vivid portrait of Paris at the time through puns, irony, and double meaning.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (Mirandola 1463 -– Florence 1494) was an Italian philosopher and theologian who participated in the humanist revolution. Born into an old noble family of counts, he began studying canon law in Bologna at the age of 10, but abandoned it two years later to turn to philosophy, first in Ferrara and then in Padua. In 1485, he went to the University of Paris, where he likely began drafting his 900 theses on philosophy, Kabbalah, and theology. Regarded as the founder of Christian Kabbalah, his work pursued the tradition of *Prisca Theologia*, which views all religions as cultural variations on a common theme, and sought to synthesize the major philosophical and religious doctrines of his time.

William of Ockham (Ockham 1287 -– Munich 1347) was an English philosopher, logician, and Franciscan theologian. He studied and later taught for several years at the University of Oxford, before, perhaps, continuing his academic career in Paris. The Paris career is however subject to doubts, as older sources place him as a master in Paris c.1320–23 (Herbermann 1913), but there is no documentary evidence for a Paris regency and most recent scholarship treats this as unlikely. It was there that he supposedly acquired the nickname *Doctor Invincibilis* (the Invincible Doctor). Some of his views on theology and papal authority led to accusations of heresy. He is regarded as the foremost representative of scholastic nominalism, a major rival to both Scotism and Thomism. Through its emphasis on empirical facts and logical reasoning, his philosophy anticipated key aspects of modern thought.

François Xavier (Javier 1506 -– Shangchuan 1552) was a Jesuit missionary from Navarre. Drawn to religious life, he studied theology in Paris at the Collège Sainte-Barbe, where he met Ignatius of Loyola, with whom he helped found the Society of Jesus. Appointed papal nuncio, he was sent to evangelize the East. He was nicknamed 'the Apostle of the Indies' in reference to his eleven years of missionary work in the East Indies, and canonized in 1622.

Arnaud de Villeneuve (Villanueva-de-Jiloca 1240 -– Genoa 1311) was a Valencian physician and theologian. Around 1260, he went to Montpellier to study medicine and theology in Dominican circles, soon gaining renown as a physician and author. In 1300, he was sent to Paris as the ambassador for King James II of Aragon, where he presented his treatise *De adventu antichristi*, announcing the coming of the Antichrist, to the theology faculty at the University of Paris. The faculty rejected his views and denounced him as a 'false prophet.' He promoted the reappropriation of Greco-Roman medicine and strongly influenced the early development of academic medical education.

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 Paris during each period in Figure 4. Here, the periods of grandeur appear clearly, with a larger number of connections in the Middle Ages.

10 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 Paris have been honored by having a crater on the surface of the Moon named after them. This underlines the fact that the sciences were not absent from the University of Paris.

Pierre d'Ailly (Compiègne 1351 – Avignon 1420) was a French cardinal, author, and academic. While studying at the Collège de Navarre in Paris, he gained recognition with his *Epistola de Leviathan*, in which he called for a council to end the Great Schism. He later served as Grand Master of the Collège de Navarre and Chancellor of the University. A prolific author, he produced more than 170 works, exerting a strong influence on contemporary philosophy, theology, and science.

Roger Bacon See above in Top Scholars.

Jean François Fernel (Montdidier 1497 – Paris 1558) was a French physician, scientist, and mathematician. He first taught mathematics and philosophy, particularly at the Collège des Lombards in Paris, before turning to medicine. He also published several works on mathematics and astronomy. His reputation as a practitioner led Henry II to appoint him chief physician to the king.

Nicolas Louis de Lacaille (Rumigny 1713 – Paris 1762) was a French astronomer. He studied theology at the Collège de Navarre in Paris, where he obtained a Master of Arts degree. In 1737, he turned to astronomy, conducting his first celestial surveys, and later taught mathematics at the Collège Mazarin. He introduced 14 of the 88 constellations recognized today and became a member of numerous European academies.

Nicole Oresme (Fleury-sur-Orne, 1325 – Lisieux 1382) was a French polymath, renowned for his contributions to philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, economics, music, and theology. He studied arts and then theology at the Collège de Navarre in Paris, where he became Grand Master in 1356. While his reputation earned him the position of tutor to the Dauphin, the future King Charles V, and later canon of the Rouen Cathedral, he continued to be closely involved with the University of Paris.

Johannes de Sacrobosco (Dumfriesshire 1195 – Paris 1256) was an English scholar, mathematician, astrologer, and astronomer. He studied at Oxford before moving to Paris in 1220, where he became a professor of the *quadrivium*. He is best known for his widely circulated scientific treatises, notably *De arte numerandi* and *De sphaera mundi*, which became standard texts

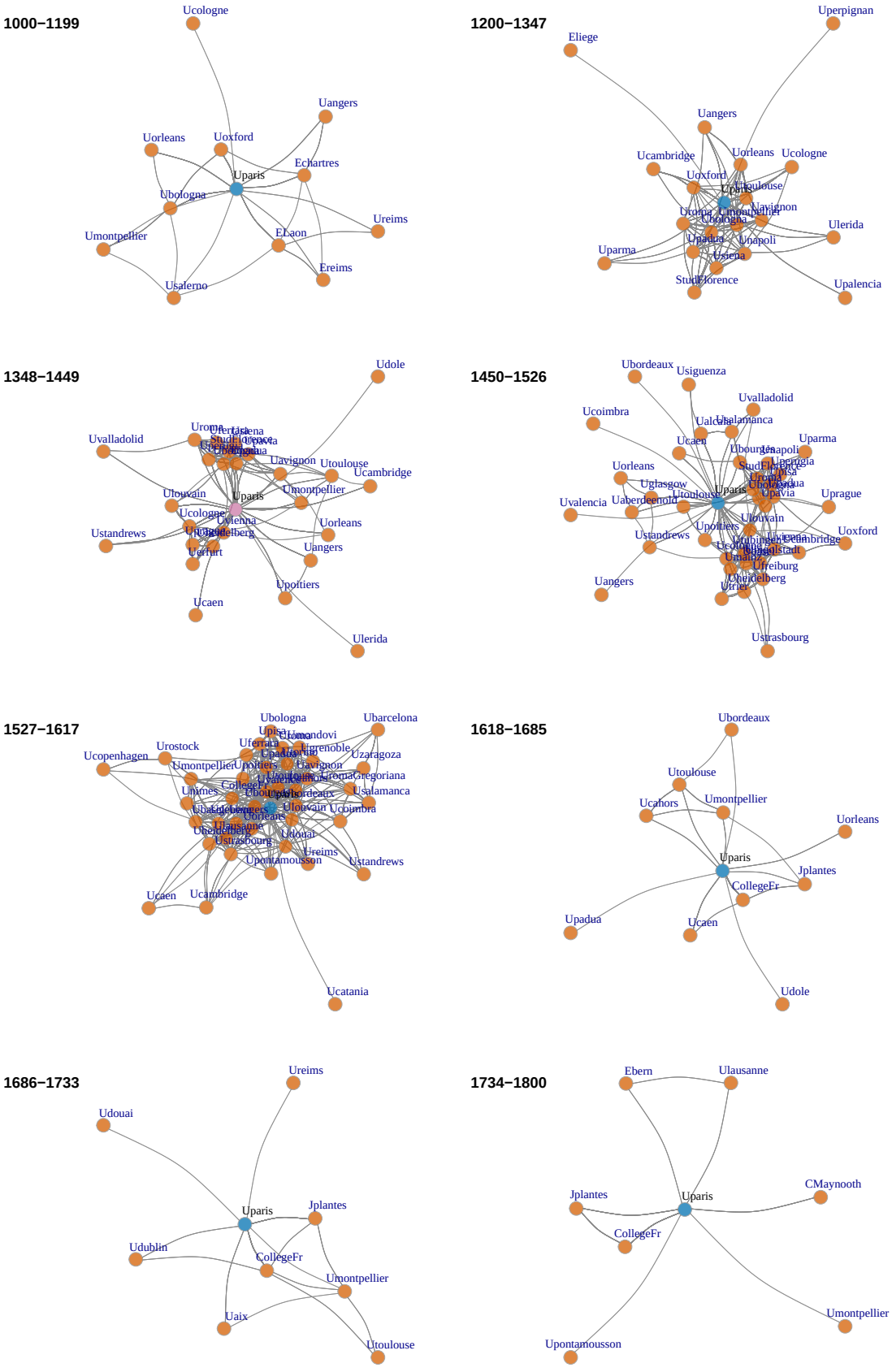

Figure 4: Links between Paris and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

at medieval universities. He was also regarded as a specialist in the calculation of the epact, which was used to determine the date of Easter.

11 Interaction with Other Parisian Institutions

Figure 5 shows the extent of the interactions between the University of Paris and the main academies in the French capital (Royal Academy of Sciences (De la Croix and Zanardello 2022), French Academy (De la Croix 2022), and Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres) and other important institutions in Paris up to 1800. The interactions are based on scholars who were members of both institutions. The intersection contains 41 scholars, about 10% of the professors we managed to identify at the university. We believe it is significant, and shows that the world of the university was not completely disconnected from the trends of its time, represented by the academies.

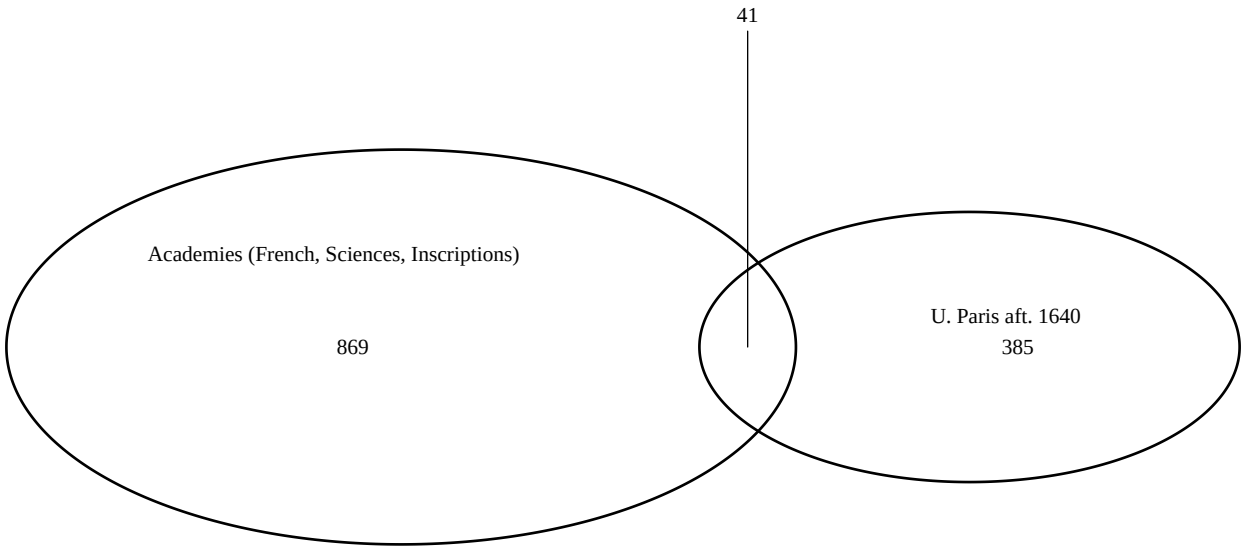

Figure 5: Interaction between the University of Paris from 1635, and the main academies, until 1800.

12 Victims of the Revolution

The French Revolution was probably the deadliest event for academics over the period 1000-1800. Not only was every French academy and university shut down in 1793, but many scholars were arrested, jailed, and sentenced to death. We list the three victims from the University of Paris with a brief story.

Joseph-Marie Gros (1742–1792) was the priest of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. A doctor of theology and professor at the Collège de Navarre from 1785, he was killed in the September Massacres at the Carmes prison (the September Massacres were a series of killings and summary executions of prisoners in Paris that occurred in 1792).

Armand-Anne-Auguste-Antoine Chapt de Rastignac (1727–1792) was a deputy of the clergy (Orléans) in 1789. He refused the constitutional oath and was killed in the September Massacres at the Prison de l'Abbaye.

Barthélemy-Gabriel Rolland d'Erceville (1730–1794) was a magistrate who was linked to the university administration of the colleges after the Jesuit expulsion. He was guillotined during the Terror.

Beyond those three professors, there were many Sorbonne-trained clergy (doctors in théology) who were victims of the September Massacres, but standard lists (and the beatified "Martyrs of September") do not identify them as university professors.

13 If You Visit Paris

Unlike many great European universities, the old university has kept only a handful of its medieval and early-modern buildings. What can be seen around the Sorbonne today is mostly 19th-century architecture. Nevertheless, a number of colleges once attached to the university have preserved elements of their original buildings. Here is a list, with what they were then vs. what they are now:

- Sorbonne Chapel (1630s–1640s): the only substantial 17th-century remnant of the old Sorbonne complex; commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu and still standing behind the main courtyard. The surrounding teaching buildings largely date back to the 1884–1901 rebuild by Henri-Paul Nénot. The chapel is undergoing restoration and has occasionally been open to visitors on heritage days.
- Collège des Bernardins (13th century): a Cistercian college of the university (founded 1248). The vast Gothic refectory and halls survive; after a major restoration (completed in 2008), it is now a cultural and research center with public programs. Address: 20, rue de Poissy.
- Collège des Quatre-Nations (1660s–1680s): founded by Cardinal Mazarin as one of the university's colleges. The building with a dome that can be seen on the Seine is the old college; it has housed the Institut de France since 1805.
- Irish College / Collège des Irlandais (1770s): one of the "nations"/seminary colleges tied into the university's world. Its 18th-century complex on rue des Irlandais survives and now serves as the Centre culturel irlandais.
- Réfectoire des Cordeliers (13th–15th centuries): the last standing part of the Franciscan (Cordeliers) convent shares a long history with the university's Faculty of Theology/Medicine and was later taken over by the medical faculty. The great refectory at 15, rue de l'École-de-Médecine (6th arondissement) still exists and is used for events and exhibitions on the modern-day medical campus.
- École de chirurgie / (later) École de Médecine (1769—1774): the Enlightenment-era home of surgery/medicine for the old university can still be found at 10–12 rue de l'École-de-Médecine (6th arondissement) and is now Paris-Cité University's headquarters (with the Musée d'Histoire de la Médecine upstairs).
- Ancienne Faculté de Droit (Centre Panthéon) (built 1771–1773, by Soufflot): purpose-built for the university's law faculty before the Revolution; today it houses Paris-Panthéon-Assas and Paris-1 University teaching/administration at 12, place du Panthéon.
- Chapelle du Collège de Dormans-Beauvais (Saint-Jean l'Évangéliste, 14th c.), today the Romanian Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy Archangels, at 9bis rue Jean-de-Beauvais (5e). Built 1375–1379 by Raymond du Temple; it's the surviving medieval chapel of the Dormans-Beauvais college and has been the Romanian Orthodox church since 1882. It's one of the very few medieval college chapels still standing in the Latin Quarter.

14 Final Thoughts

The University of Paris was Europe's leading higher education institution until the mid-fourteenth-century crises. It recovered amid the humanist controversies and remained dominant throughout the seventeenth century. By the Enlightenment, its primacy was contested, though its scale and college network still anchored French intellectual life. It was dissolved in 1793, and its physical presence was largely erased.

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." We are very grateful to Jacques Verger for his comments on an earlier version of this note.

Homepage: https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html
Database: https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/

First version October 14, 2025. Revised November 25, 2025.

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