

Scholars and Literati at the University of Ferrara (1391–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Ferrara from its inception in 1391 to 1800.

1 SOURCES

The information on the professors at the University of Ferrara is primarily drawn from the works of Cugusi Persi (1873), Borsetti (1735), and Pardi (1903), which represent the earliest and most systematic attempts to document their academic careers and institutional profiles. While these sources have proven invaluable, the occasional unevenness, selectivity, or limitation to official appointments. To ensure more accurate identification of faculty members and greater chronological consistency, these sources were cross-checked systematically with the entries in the *Enciclopedia Biografica* of Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana (1961).

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Ferrara was officially founded on 4 March 1391 by Alberto V d'Este, Marquess of Ferrara (1347–1405). The University received papal recognition from Boniface IX, who granted the faculty the authority to confer academic degrees in all disciplines: Theology, Canon and Civil Law, Medicine, and Arts. Although financial difficulties caused a temporary closure a few years after its inception, the University's true rise occurred in 1402 under Niccolò III d'Este, Marquess of Ferrara (1383–1441), who re-established its economic and structural foundations so that it could compete with neighbouring centres such as Bologna and Padua.

The golden age of the University coincided with the flourishing of Ferrarese Humanism between the 15th and 16th centuries. Under the patronage of Leonello d'Este, Marquess of Ferrara (1407–1450), known for his scholarly interests and support of humanist culture, and Borso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara (1413–1471), who consolidated the political and economic foundations of the city, the University became an intellectual crossroads of European significance. German and Polish students were drawn to the University. Notable alumni include Nicolaus Copernicus, who obtained his doctorate in Canon Law there in 1503, and Paracelsus, who graduated in Medicine.

The so-called Devolution of 1598 marked the city's transition from the Este dynasty to the direct rule of the Papal States. The scientific tradition was later reinvigorated in the 18th century through the reforms of Pope Benedict XIV, who aimed to modernize teaching structures and curricula. In 1767, the institution found its definitive home in the majestic Palazzo Paradiso, where it combined activities with the preservation of its book heritage in the new Public Library.

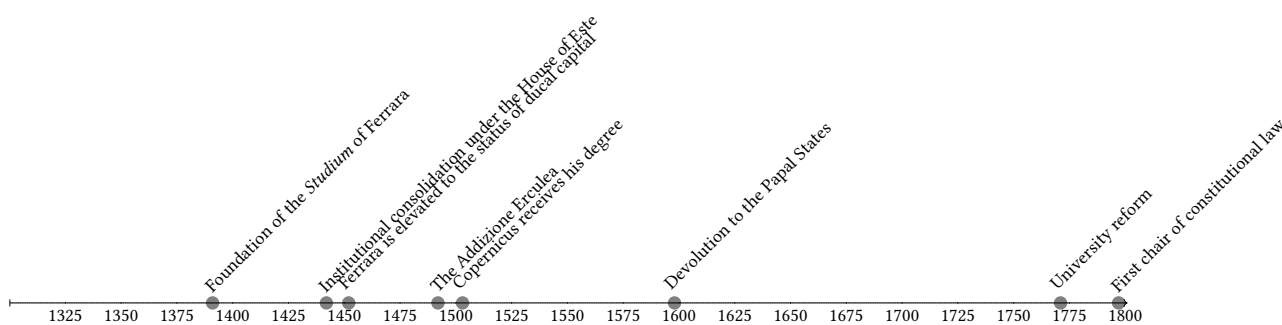


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Ferrara

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1200–1347	6	0	83.3	NaN	NaN	0	0	0
1348–1449	77	35.1	85.7	41.9	68.9	83	29.9	36.4
1450–1526	411	14.6	79.8	32.6	63.6	30	10.7	15.8
1527–1617	371	13.7	92.5	35.4	62.5	0	9.7	15.9
1618–1685	153	13.1	97.4	28.1	68.5	0	7.2	15.7
1686–1733	103	5.8	96.1	43.6	73.3	0	2.9	8.7
1734–1800	124	23.4	83.1	40.2	72.4	0	14.5	25.8
1200–1800	1245	15.5	87.8	35.8	66.2	0	10.8	17.4

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

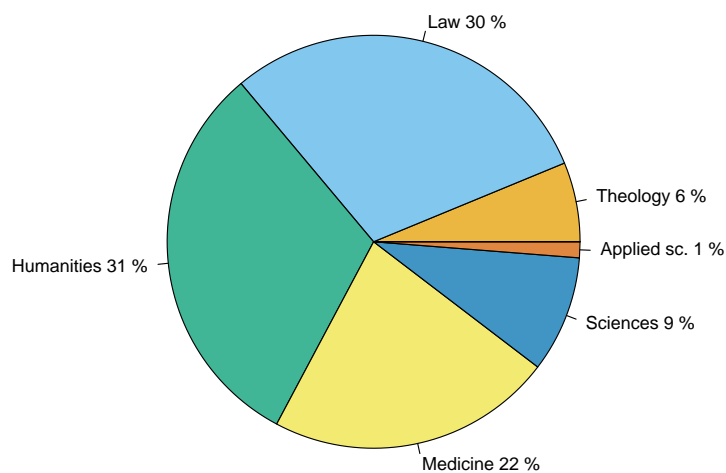


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Ferrara (published scholars only)

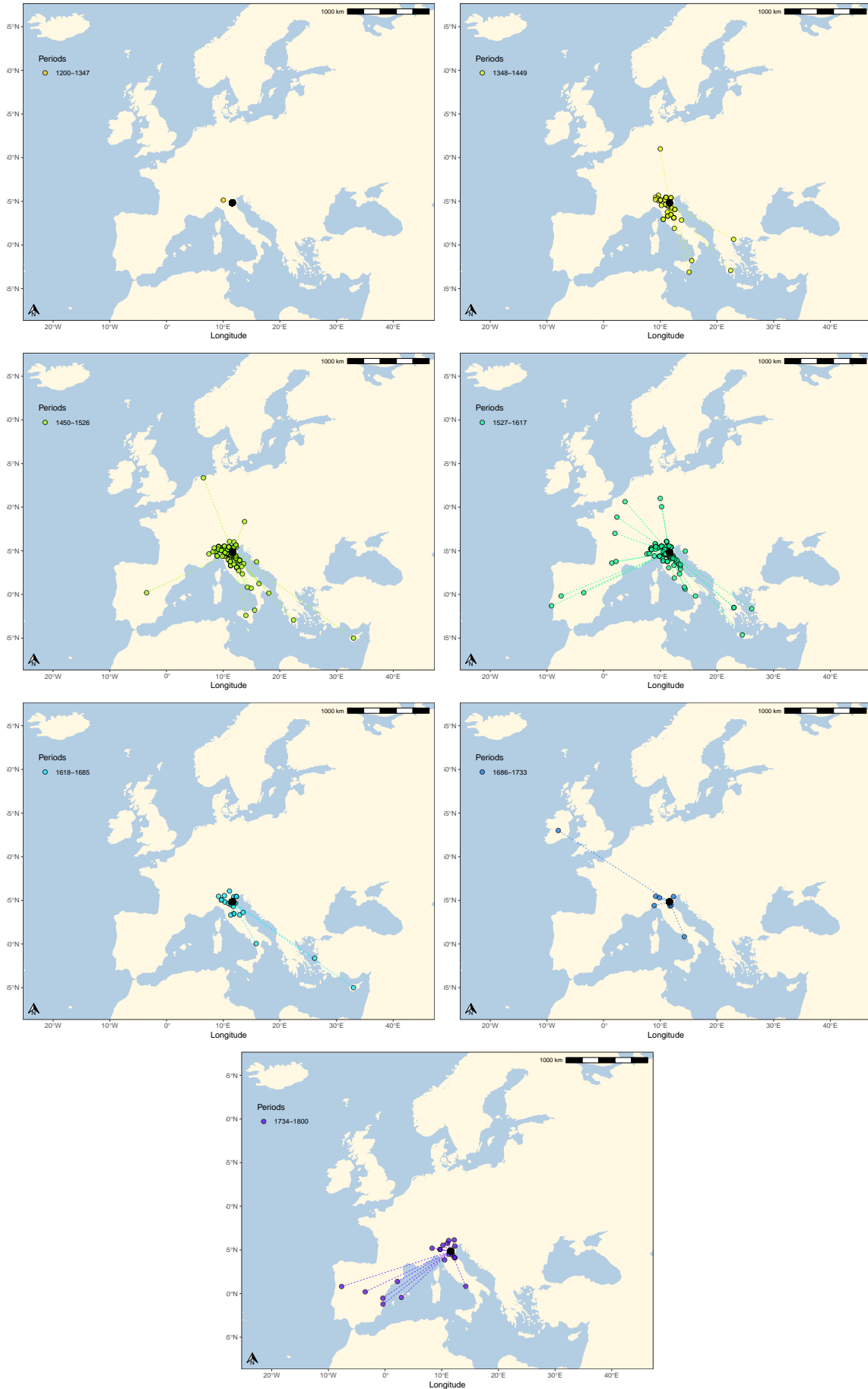


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Ferrara

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. We have information on 1,245 scholars active in Ferrara between 1200 and 1800. The date of birth is known for 15.5% of scholars, while the place of birth is available for 87.8% of cases. The university has a predominantly local character: this is shown by the median distance between the place of birth and the university, which is equal to zero in most sub-periods, indicating that a substantial share of scholars were born in Ferrara or in its immediate surroundings. Only in the late medieval and early Renaissance periods (1348–1449 and 1450–1526) does the median distance increase, suggesting a more geographically diversified recruitment. It should be noted, however, that for the University of Ferrara the sources very often record Ferrarese citizenship rather than the actual place of birth, since citizenship was frequently granted for administrative or privilege-related reasons. As a result, the apparently high share of locally born scholars in part be due to ambiguities in the biographical information. Unlike what is observed for other Italian universities, the period 1734–1800 does not exhibit a marked increase in geographical mobility, as the median distance remains equal to zero. Most academics do not have a Wikipedia page (in any language). The share of scholars with a VIAF identifier is relatively limited (17.4% over the whole period), but it increases noticeably in the final sub-period.

4 FIELDS

Figure 2 shows the distribution of scholars by field. Law and medicine clearly dominate, reflecting the traditional profile of the University of Ferrara, which was strongly oriented towards professional faculties.

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Ferrara by period. In general, a strong concentration of birthplaces in North-Central Italy can be observed, with a clear pole in the Po Valley area. Only in some periods do long-distance connections appear (especially from Central-Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean), indicating periods of greater openness and international attractiveness of the University of Ferrara.

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, Wikipedia, and Wikidata, using principal component analysis. We also compute the notability of the University at each date by averaging the human capital of the best five scholars active in Ferrara 25 years before that date (de la Croix et al. (2024) and Curtis et al. (2026)). 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. As we can observe from the orange line, the institution's notability reached its peak during the height of the Renaissance. The presence of high-profile scholars, such as Alciato and Agricola, positioned Ferrara not only as an important center for legal and humanistic studies, but also as a hub capable of maintaining high-quality teaching for over a century.

7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

Torquato Tasso (Sorrento 1544–Roma 1595), poet and a central figure of the late Renaissance. His education began under the guidance of the Jesuits in Naples and continued at the universities of Padua and Bologna—where he was also investigated for satirical verses in 1564—reflecting an erudition that ranged from philology and philosophy to the scientific disciplines. An aspect often overlooked by traditional historiography is his deep connection with the Urbino School of Mathematics, where he studied under Federico Commandino, the sixteenth-century *restau-*

rator mathematicarum (Restorer of mathematics), acquiring solid expertise in geometry and astronomy. Between 1573 and 1579, Tasso officially held the university chair of mathematics. Archival sources confirm that he was entrusted with the “lectures on the Sphere and Euclid,” a post that involved explaining the Ptolemaic cosmological system and the foundations of geometry. This teaching commitment, which preceded that of distinguished successors such as Cesare Cremonini, demonstrates that scientific culture was an integral and vital part of his intellectual output, shaping his very mindset. His teaching activity in Ferrara coincided with his period of greatest creativity, marked by the success of the *Aminta* (1573) and the completion of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581). However, this success was overshadowed by increasing psychological instability and crises of religious scrupulosity. Fearing accusations of heresy, Tasso submitted his works to the examination of the Inquisition and, following a violent outburst at court, was confined to the Hospital of Sant’Anna (1579–1586). During and after his confinement, his fame grew throughout Europe, making him the symbol of the tormented intellectual suspended between Renaissance classicism and Baroque sensibility. In his final years, in keeping with the dictates of the Counter-Reformation, he rewrote his poem (*Gerusalemme conquistata*, 1593). He died in Rome at the convent of Sant’Onofrio al Gianicolo in 1595, shortly before he was due to receive a formal poetic coronation on the Capitoline Hill—an honor granted by the Pope that he did not live to see.

Francesco Patrizi (Frane Petrić) (Cres 1529 – Roma 1597) was a Renaissance philosopher and humanist, and one of the most resolute critics of university Aristotelianism. Educated in Padua, where he encountered the dominant Aristotelian thinking, he soon distanced himself to embrace Platonism and the traditions of ancient wisdom, which he regarded as closer to divine truth. In the *Discussiones Peripateticae* he challenged the foundations of Aristotelian thought, paving the way for the *Nova de universis philosophia* (1591), in which he envisioned a cosmos grounded in light as the mediator between the Creator and matter. Appointed professor of Platonic philosophy at the University of Ferrara in 1578, and later invited by Clement VIII to teach at the Sapienza in Rome, he saw his principal work placed on the Index of Forbidden Books because of the boldness of his cosmological theories. He died in Rome in 1597.

Andrea Alciato (Milano 1492 – Pavia 1550) was an Italian jurist and humanist, regarded as the founder of legal humanism (*mos gallicus*). Educated in Pavia and Bologna, he promoted the study of Roman law through historical and philological methods, aiming to reconstruct the original context of the laws rather than merely relying on traditional commentary. He taught at several major European universities, including Avignon, Bourges, Pavia, and Ferrara, attracting students from across the continent. In 1531 he published the *Emblemata* in Augsburg, a collection of illustrated allegories accompanied by short Latin moral poems, which achieved great editorial success and was translated into numerous languages. By drawing extensively on classical mythology, he renewed the content of the emblematic genre, exerting an influence that extended beyond legal culture to Renaissance art and literature. He died in Pavia in 1550.

Battista Guarini (Ferrara 1538 – Venezia 1612) was an Italian poet, playwright, and diplomat, closely associated with the cultural life of Ferrara. Born into a distinguished humanist family—his father was the renowned Guarino Veronese, himself a professor of rhetoric and classical letters in Ferrara—he taught rhetoric at the University of Ferrara and took an active part in the life of the Este court, combining his academic work with political duties. He succeeded Torquato Tasso as court poet and was a prominent member of the Accademia della Crusca, contributing to the linguistic and literary debates of his time.

His fame is chiefly linked to *Il Pastor Fido* (completed in 1585 and published in 1590), a pastoral tragicomedy with which he helped define the genre. The work blends tragic elements—such as fate and sacrifice—with features typical of comedy, including a happy ending and amorous misunderstandings, all set in an idealized Arcadia. Guarini was also at the center of a heated literary controversy: some critics accused him of violating Aristotelian rules by mixing tragedy and comedy. He responded with the *Compendio della poesia tragicomica*, arguing that poetry should not only imitate reality but also delight contemporary audiences. He died in Venice in 1612.

Rudolf Agricola (Baflo 1443 – Heidelberg 1485) Regarded as the "father of Northern European humanism," the Dutch scholar spent a formative period in Ferrara between 1475 and 1479. During his stay, he was not merely a student but an orator who gave lectures and held oratory disputes, becoming a point of reference for the academic community of the time (Nauert 2006). At the University, he perfected his Greek under Battista Guarini and gained fame for his oratory and musical talents at the Este court. This experience was instrumental in the creation of his masterpiece, *De inventione dialectica*, through which he exported the methods of Italian humanism to Northern European universities.

8 RELATED SCHOLAR

Beyond those who taught at the University of Ferrara, at least one important individual is related to the university.

Sadolet Jacopo (Modena 1477 – Roma 1546) a humanist, cardinal and theologian, Sadoletto is remembered as one of the most brilliant minds of the Catholic Renaissance. His connection to the University of Ferrara dates back to his formative years, where he studied under the guidance of Niccolò Leonicensi, deepening his knowledge of philosophy and classical literature. His career quickly led him to Rome, where he became secretary to Pope Leo X.

9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Our assumption is that a professors' involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a linkage between those institutions. We present those universities that were connected to the University of Ferrara during each period in Figure 5. Overall, the network displays a strong variability in both density and structure over the long term. After an initial phase characterised by a limited number of ties, between the mid-fourteenth century and the early sixteenth century Ferrara gradually became embedded in a more articulated system of exchanges, with a clear increase in both the number of connected institutions and the intensity of interactions. From the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, the network retracted, with connections narrowing to just two other Italian universities. The final period shows a reconfiguration of relationships, characterised by a smaller yet still clearly identifiable set of exchanges, suggesting a transformation—rather than a dissolution—of Ferrara's role within the circuits of academic human capital.

10 CENSORSHIP AND HUMAN CAPITAL

At the University of Ferrara as many as 17 scholars were censured by the Catholic Church. Their works are listed in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* by De Bujanda and Richter (2002), a catalog of publications banned by the religious institution and established in 1559 by Pope Paul IV. Consistent with the findings of Blasutto and De la Croix (2023), the scholars included in this index were, on average, of high quality. This is particularly true of professors in the 15th century. Over time, however, this correlation between high academic standing and censure weakens. Among the most significant cases of censorship at Ferrara, three scholars stand out: Jean de Coras (Realmont 1513 –

Toulouse 1572), a renowned jurist whose legal commentaries were placed on the Index not only for their interpretative rigor—which occasionally challenged ecclesiastical practice—but primarily due to his later formal adherence to Protestantism, which led to his persecution as a heretic. Johannes Sinapius (Schweinfurt 1505 – Würzburg 1560), a German humanist and physician active in Ferrara, whose close ties to reformist circles (such as that of Renée of France) and scientific works drew the scrutiny of the Inquisition, reflecting the Church’s suspicion toward transalpine critical thought. Fabrizio Pellizzari (Piacenza 1596– Modena 1651), a professor of law whose writings were censured due to his positions on sensitive economic and contractual issues, such as usury and the limits of temporal power, which directly conflicted with the social and political doctrine of the Roman Curia at the time.

11 WHO’S WHO ON THE MOON

Another way to measure the notability of individuals is to look for signs of recognition such as street names, ... and lunar crater names. Three professors from the University of Ferrara received this honor: Georg von Peurbach (1423–1461), an Austrian mathematician and astronomer, who was considered the father of observational and mathematical astronomy of the Renaissance. The crater Purbach bears his name, in tribute to his monumental work in modernizing European astronomy and introducing the use of sines in trigonometry, which paved the way for Copernicus. Luca Gaurico (1475–1558), a highly renowned Italian bishop and astrologer, was a central figure in 16th-century European courts. Known for his precise ephemerides and his predictions (often requested by popes and sovereigns), his influence on the science of the time is commemorated by the crater Gauricus. Giovanni Bianchini (1410–1469), a professor in Ferrara and a collaborator of Peurbach. Bianchini was a pioneer in the use of decimal fractions in the West. The crater Bianchini celebrates his fundamental contribution to perfecting astronomical tables, which were essential tools for 15th-century navigators and scholars.

12 FAMILIES OF SCHOLARS

We identified several (17) father-son pairs and multi-generational lineages among the professors of the University of Ferrara. As noted by de la Croix and Goñi (2024) in their study of academic dynasties, the hereditary transmission of chairs was a widespread phenomenon reflecting the crucial role of social and family capital in accessing higher education positions. The Brassavola family represents one of the most distinguished examples of academic succession, establishing a true dynasty in medical and botanical sciences: Antonio Brassavola (1500) served as the patriarch for his successors Roberto, Girolamo, and Gian Francesco. Another significant example is found in the Guarini family, which saw a direct passing of the torch in humanistic studies from Battista (1435) to Alessandro (1486). Further examples of this continuity, often rooted in law or medicine, are evidenced by families such as the Bentivoglio (Ippolito and Luigi), the Nigrisoli (Girolamo and Francesco Maria), and the Baruffaldi (Alessio and Girolamo), whose members consistently held chairs at the University between the 15th and 18th centuries.

The Jesuits in Ferrara: The College and the University

The Society of Jesus played a central role in Ferrara's educational and scientific life from the 16th century. The Jesuit College was founded on 5 June 1551, with the arrival of five students from the Collegio Romano, supported by Duke Ercole II d'Este and Bishop Alfonso Rossetti. The College maintained a close and mutually respectful relationship with the University of Ferrara: on 20 April 1555, thirty-two university professors publicly endorsed the Jesuits, declaring them indispensable for the city (Pepe 1998). Ferrara became a center of excellence in astronomy and mathematics, with several internationally renowned Jesuit scholars serving as faculty at the University of Ferrara, including: Giambattista Riccioli, celebrated astronomer; Nicolò Cabeo, author of "Philosophia Magnetica", a key work on magnetism; Paolo Casati, scientist and author of "Vacuum proscriptum"; Daniello Bartoli, writer and scientist, Ippolito Sivieri, mathematician who designed the main altar of the Church of the Gesù in the 18th century and Francesco Lana Terzi, mathematician and natural philosopher, notable for his work on aeronautics. The College quickly became a major intellectual hub, attracting nearly 200 students in its early years, thanks to courses organized *more parisiensis*, following the model of the University of Paris.

13 ANECDOTE

Among the scholars of the University of Ferrara, Luca Guarico (1476–1558) was a very unusual Renaissance figure. He was the Bishop of Civitate and a famous astrologer, best known for predicting the death of King Henry II to his wife, Catherine de' Medici. Despite his important roles in the Church and his studies of the stars, Guarico lived a very energetic personal life fathered 29 children outside of his marriage. His is a unique example of how, at that time, a high-ranking career in the Church could go hand in hand with a very unconventional private life.

14 FINAL THOUGHTS

Two elements seem to distinguish the University of Ferrara from other contemporary institutions and, in particular, from the nearby Universities of Bologna and Padua: on is, the central role played by the teaching of Greek, linked to the context and cultural demands generated by the Council of Florence-Ferrara (1438–1439); the other is, a professional orientation among the faculty that appears less firmly anchored to the pursuit of an academic career in the strict sense and more directed, instead, toward the possibility of integrating into the service and patronage networks of the Este court (Benzoni 1998).

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."

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First version March 31, 2026

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