

Scholars and Literati at the University of Caen (1432–1793)

Blandine Clément and David de la Croix

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

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

1 SOURCES

We did not find a single comprehensive source for the professors at the University of Caen, but a patchwork of documents read together provide reasonable coverage: Pontville (1997) (members of the local academy), Chatel (1883) (rectors), Boisard (1848) (local biographical dictionary), Guerrin (1932) (history of the university), Carel (1888) (physicians and surgeons), and Roy (2006) (15th and 16th centuries).

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The University of Caen, then known as the University of Normandy, was founded in 1432, during the English occupation of Normandy, by John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford, acting for the English Crown. It was intended to train administrators and churchmen for the English-held territories in France, at a time when Paris was not considered a secure place for that purpose. The first topics taught at the new university were civil law and canon law. After the French recovery of Paris in 1436, the English authorities in Normandy expanded the University of Caen from its original legal faculties into arts, theology, and medicine, aiming to provide Norman students with a Paris-like education within English-controlled territory. The university's status was confirmed by papal bulls issued by Pope Eugenius IV in 1437 and 1439, and its privileges and statutes were regularized by a major ordinance of Henry VI of England, the Lancastrian ruler of Normandy, in 1439.

The university passed from English to French authority in 1450, when Charles VII recaptured Caen during the final French reconquest of Normandy. Rather than suppressing an institution founded under English rule, Charles VII chose to maintain it under French sovereignty, later confirming or refounding its status by royal letters in 1452.

In the centuries that followed, the university became one strong institution of higher education in France. The main campus was on the Rue des Cordeliers and there were several colleges scattered throughout the city. It grew but not quickly, mostly because of competition from the University of Paris and inconsistent royal support.

On the eve of the French Revolution, the University of Caen had one of the country's best-supplied libraries, the third-largest law faculty, and the fourth-largest medical faculty. The Revolution, however, brought a rapid crisis: enrollments collapsed, conflict grew between the authorities and professors who belonged to religious orders, and teaching was effectively suspended in 1791, except for medical education, before university instruction was halted nationally in 1793. By 1793, the medieval and early-modern University of Caen had already enjoyed more than three and a half centuries of intellectual importance, but the upheaval of the Revolution was bringing its first era to a close. The faculties were reestablished in 1806 under Napoleon I, but the University would only be reinstated one century later, in 1896.

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1348–1449	32	9.4%	18.8%	37	72	221	6.2%	3.1%
1450–1526	154	1.3%	10.4%	55	71.5	29	0%	1.3%
1527–1617	149	12.8%	20.8%	35.2	59.8	41	7.4%	10.1%
1618–1685	54	22.2%	20.4%	31.4	70.8	30	11.1%	14.8%
1686–1733	37	18.9%	18.9%	36.3	78.3	0	0%	16.2%
1734–1800	68	39.7%	26.5%	33.5	67.6	0	11.8%	19.1%
1200–1800	494	14.2%	18%	35.1	68.1	27	5.5%	9.1%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

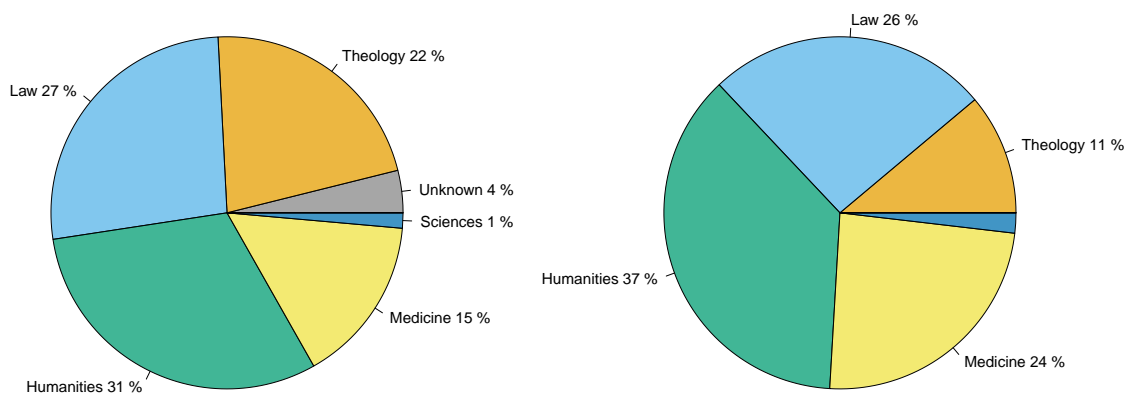


Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Caen (left: all scholars; right: published scholars)

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics. We identified 494 scholars who taught at the University of Caen. The quality of the available information is rather low and uneven. Some periods are better documented than others: Roy (2006)’s coverage of 1450–1526 and 1527–1617 is particularly good. We know the place or year of birth for less than one fifth of the scholars. Except in the first period, most scholars appear to have come from nearby places, as indicated by the median distance between birthplace and university. The share of scholars covered by Wikipedia or VIAF is also very low.

4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines, for all scholars, on the left, and for published scholars, on the right. The chart on the left shows high shares of law, humanities and theology. When we weight scholars by the publications, the share of theology shrinks, and the share of medicine increases, suggesting that, on average, Caen’s theologians were relatively obscure, while Caen’s physicians were publishing well.

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Caen by period. There is little of interest in this figure because of a lack of data on places of birth.

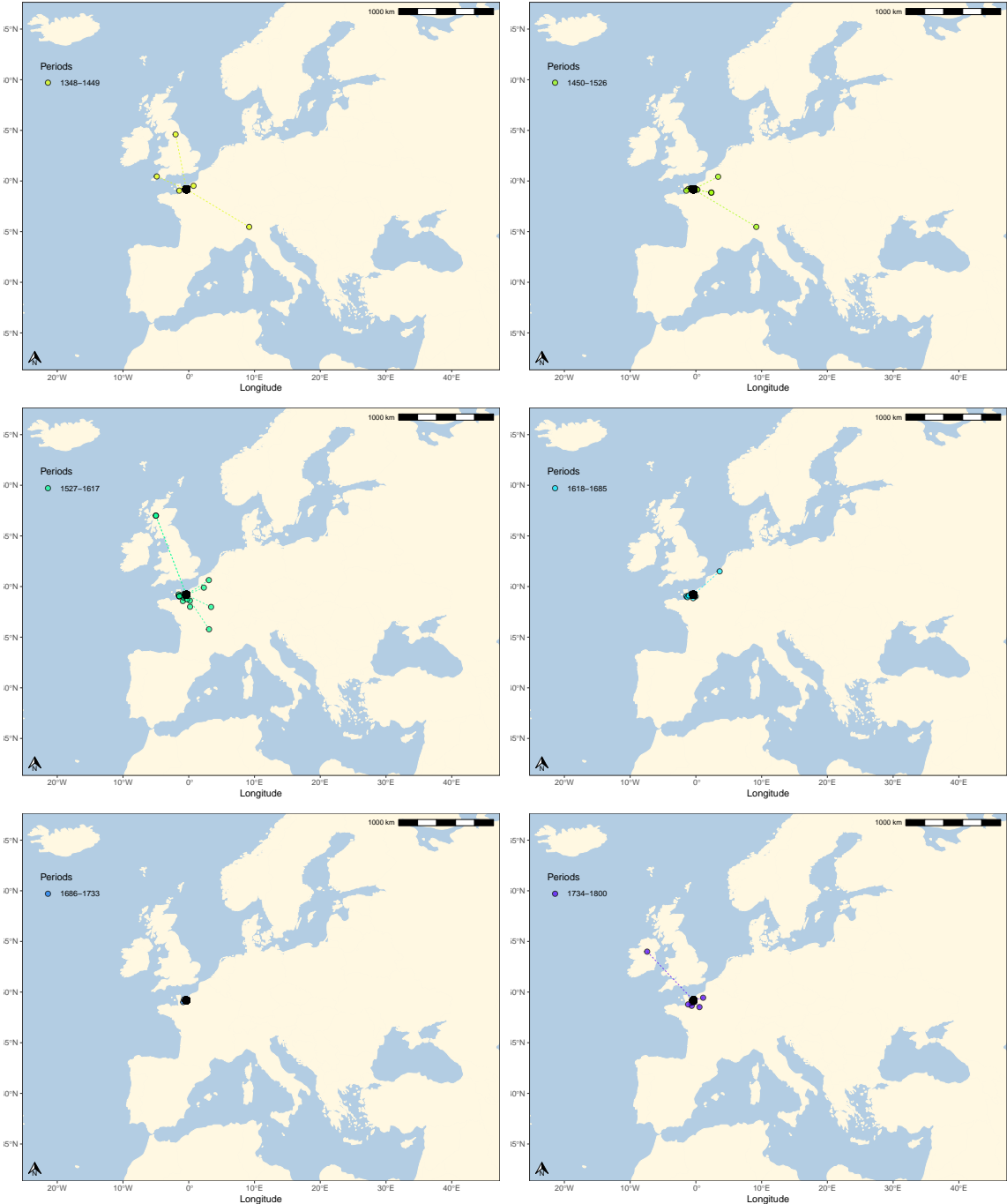


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Caen

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 Caen 25 years before that date. The details are given in de la Croix et al. (2024) (for notability of institution) and Curtis et al. (2026) (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 Caen did not have enough scholars with a high human capital index to sustain its notability over the centuries. Notability fluctuated at a low level, without a clear peak.

7 TOP 4 PROFESSORS

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

Thomas Basin (Caudebec-en-Caux 1412 – Utrecht 1491) was a French jurist, bishop, and Latin chronicler. He earned his Master of Arts at the University of Paris and pursued further studies in civil and canon law at Louvain and Pavia. Appointed canon in Rouen by Pope Eugene IV, he taught canon law at the University of Caen from 1441 to 1447, likely through the intervention of an ambassador of King Henry VI. Basin became rector of the university in 1442 and vice-chancellor the following year. In 1447, he was elected bishop of Lisieux; he later entered into the service of Charles VII and became one of his advisors. Due to royal pressure, he eventually resigned his position as bishop in 1474. Basin is particularly known for his historical writings, including the *Historiæ de rebus a Carolo VII et Ludovico XI Francorum regibus gestis* (Histories of the deeds performed by Charles VII and Louis XI, kings of the Franks).

François Henri Turpin (Caen 1709 – Paris 1799) was a French man of letters and an historian. He began his career teaching at the University of Caen. Encouraged by Claude-Adrien Helvétius, he moved to Paris, where he gained recognition in various philosophical circles. Throughout his lifetime, he wrote and adapted numerous historical works into French. His most notable work is *La France illustre ou le Plutarque français*, a five-volume collection of biographies of prominent French generals, ministers, and lawyers. He also authored more than 300 historical articles, notably on French history, for the *Supplément à l'Encyclopédie*. Throughout his life, he struggled with financial difficulties and was often regarded as a “mediocre compiler.”

Robert Constantin (Caen 1530 – Montauban 1605) was a French physician, Hellenist, lexicographer, and professor. He earned a Master of Arts and studied medicine at the University of Caen, where he also taught Greek, specifically at the Collège du Bois. He was forced to leave Caen in 1564 after being condemned by the theologians of the faculty for his commentary on the Epistles of Saint Paul. Subsequently, he served as physician to the Queen of Navarre and continued to teach in Montauban and Orthez. He is the author of several works on philology and lexicography. Constantin is primarily remembered for editing one of the first bibliographies published in France, the *Nomenclator insignium scriptorum*.

Julien Le Paulmier de Grentemesnil (Agneaux 1520 – Caen 1588) was a French physician and medical writer. He studied medicine in Caen before pursuing philosophy in Paris, which he was forced to leave during the French Wars of Religion. He temporarily withdrew from public life and wrote a treatise on contagious diseases, which sparked a major dispute with his eminent colleague Ambroise Paré. His reputation led to his appointment at court, where he treated King Charles IX. He also served as physician to Duke François d'Anjou. Le Paulmier is known to have been a professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Caen, although the exact dates of his tenure remain uncertain. He is also credited with writing the first treatise on cider.

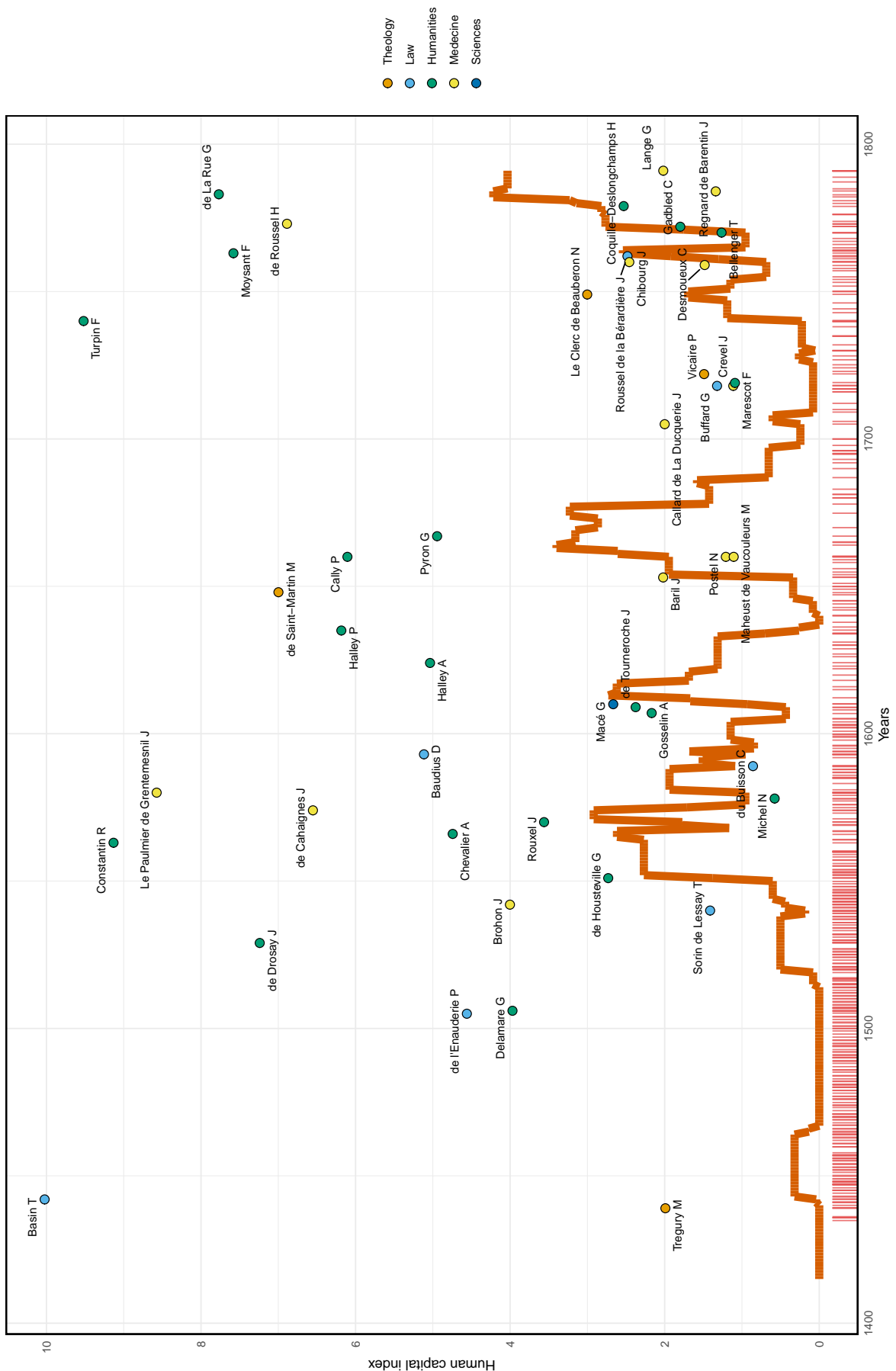


Figure 3: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

8 RELATED SCHOLARS

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

Jean Vauquelin de La Fresnaye (La Fresnaye-au-Sauvage 1536 – Caen 1607) was a French magistrate and poet. He was educated in Paris, Poitiers, and Bourges, where he studied law. After fighting in the French Wars of Religion, he began a career as a magistrate in Caen. In this role, he became a key supporter of the University of Caen, particularly during its reform in the 1580s and in efforts to establish a system of salaries for its professors. Influenced by Pierre de Ronsard, he also devoted himself to poetry. He wrote pastoral poems, as well as satires and religious and political sonnets.

Isaac Beeckman (Middelburg 1588 – Dordrecht 1637) was a Dutch mathematician, physicist, physician, and philosopher. He studied philosophy and languages in Leiden before continuing his studies in Franeker and Saumur. In 1618, he traveled to Caen to defend his medical thesis and receive his degree. He then returned to Holland, where he formed a friendship with René Descartes. He taught logic in Rotterdam and later became co-rector of the Erasmian School. He is particularly known for his early work on the relationship between the length and frequency of vibrating strings.

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 Caen during each period in Figure 4.

If the presence of links is taken as an indicator of the university's vitality, then the period 1527–1617 clearly appears as the most dynamic. By contrast, during the Enlightenment, professor mobility was virtually nonexistent, and the University of Caen appears as an isolated node within the broader network of European universities.

10 INTERACTION WITH THE ACADEMIES OF CAEN

Figure 5 illustrates the extent of the interactions between the University of Caen and the academies in the city. There were two academies in Caen: the Academy of Physics of Caen (1662–1672) and the Academy of Sciences, Arts and Belles-Lettres of Caen (1705–1793). Both are discussed in Pontville (1997). These interactions are identified via scholars who were members of the university and either of the academies. There are 32 scholars who intersect in this way. This is a relatively large overlap by French standards, and suggests that scholars at the University of Caen were more engaged with contemporary scholarship outside the university than were their counterparts at other universities in France.

11 FINAL THOUGHTS

In the pre-modern period, the University of Caen was a solid regional centre of teaching, but its scholars left a relatively modest intellectual footprint, and the institution never ranked among the most prominent universities in Europe.

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."

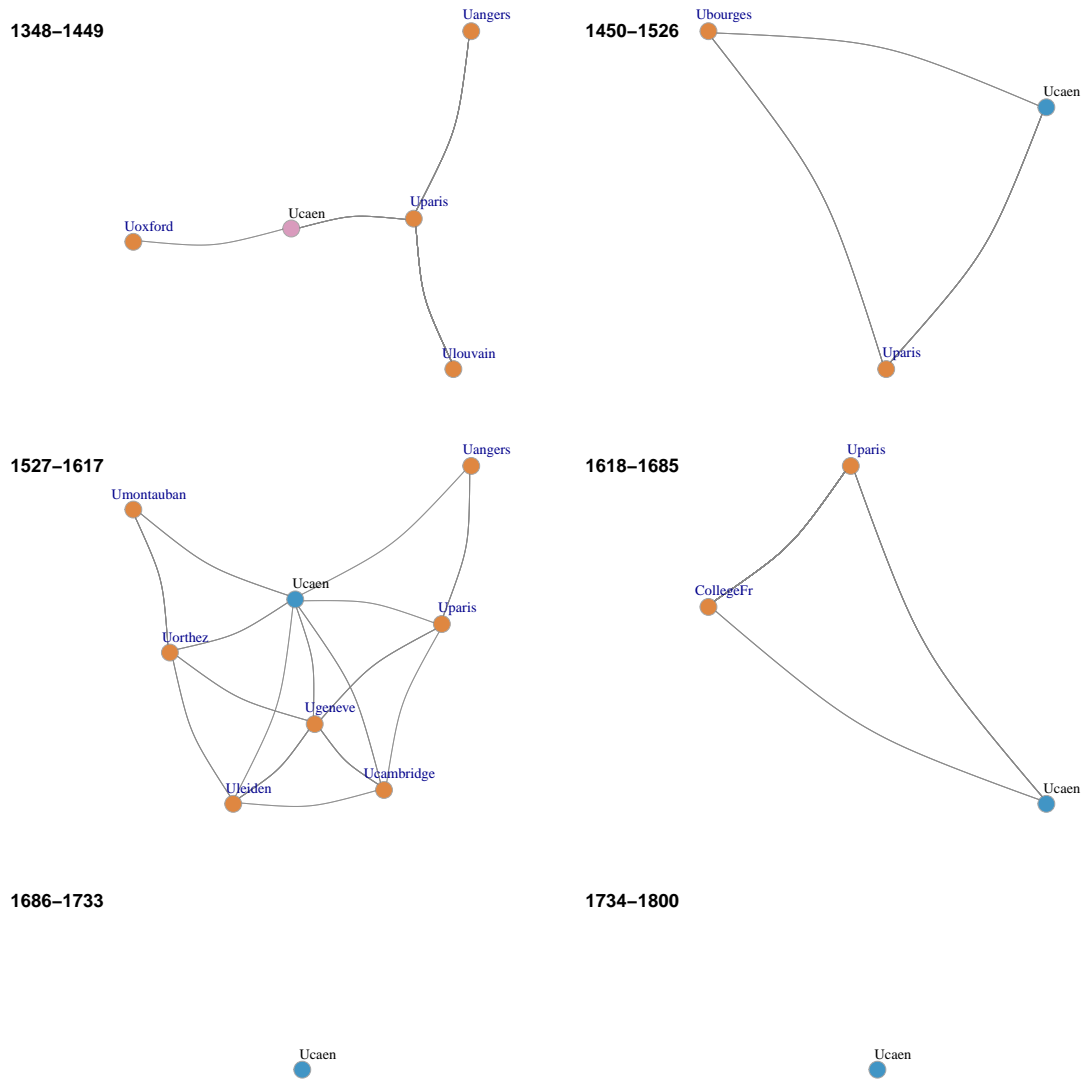


Figure 4: Links between Caen and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

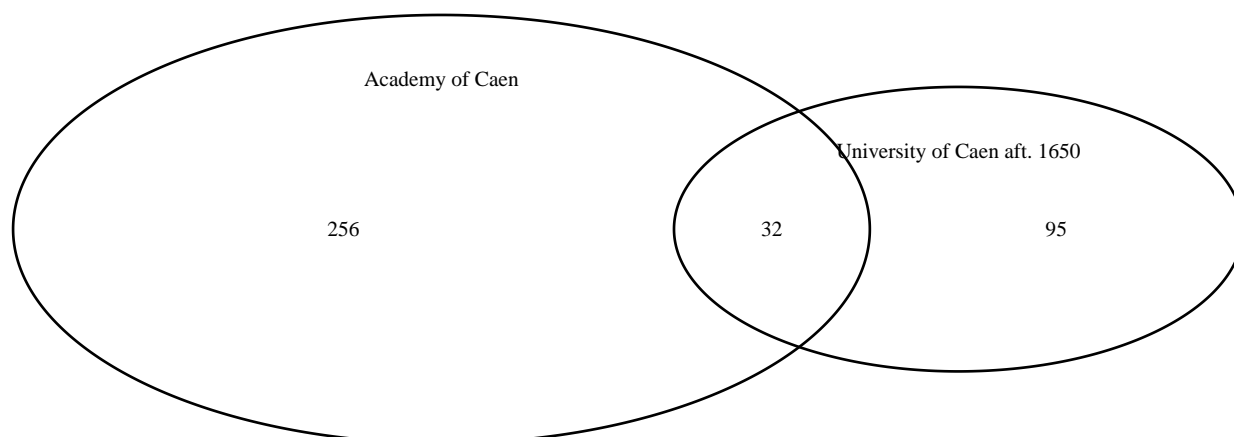


Figure 5: Interaction between the University of Caen from 1635, and the two academies in Caen, until 1800.

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

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

First version April 17, 2026.

REFERENCES

- Boisard, François. 1848. *Notices, biographiques, littéraires et critiques sur les hommes du Calvados qui se sont fait remarquer par leurs actions ou par leurs ouvrages* [in French]. Caen: Pagny.
- Carel, Pierre. 1888. *Les medecins et les chirurgiens de caen avant la révolution* [in French]. Caen: Massif.
- Chatel, Eugène. 1883. Liste des recteurs de l'Université de Caen : dressée d'après leurs signatures sur les registres des rectories et autres documents conservés aux archives du Calvados [in French]. *Bulletin de la Société des antiquaires de Normandie* 11:75–128.
- Curtis, Matthew, David de la Croix, Filippo Manfredini, and Mara Vitale. 2026. Academic human capital in European countries and regions, 1200-1793. *Explorations in Economic History* 101:101456.
- de la Croix, David, Frédéric Docquier, Alice Fabre, and Robert Stelter. 2024. The Academic Market and the Rise of Universities in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (1000-1800). *Journal of the European Economic Association* 22 (4): 1541–1589. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvad061>.
- de la Croix, David, and Pauline Morault. 2025. Winners and losers from the Protestant reformation: an analysis of the network of European universities. *Journal of Economic History*.
- Guerrin, M. 1932. *Université de Caen, son passé, son présent, 1432-1932* [in French]. Caen: Malherbe.
- Pontville, Michel de. 1997. *Histoire de l'académie de Caen* [in French]. Manuscript.
- Roy, Lyse. 2006. *L'université de Caen aux XVe et XVIe siècles: identité et représentation*. Vol. 24. Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Leiden and Boston: Brill.