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Scholars and Literati in European Academia before 1800 – an update

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1 Introduction

This note is a progress report on the establishment of a relational database of scholars and literati active in European Academia from the inception of the first universities to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. This database underpins our work to quantify the role of academia in the "Rise of the West", using the methods of economics and statistics.

The compilation of the database started in 2017 and now (in June 2026) contains data on more than 93,000 persons active in 370 universities and academies. The project was first funded by 'Special Research Funds' from UCLouvain, then by the European Research Council (ERC). The ERC grant falls under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement No. 883033 "Did elite human capital trigger the rise of the West? Insights from a new database of European scholars." The part on academies is also funded by the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique-FNRS under Grant n° A2.11903.007-F "Human capital and the rise of the West: the key role of scientific academies."

We harvest data manually from secondary sources on the history of universities and academies. We took the list of universities from Frijhoff (1996) and the list of academies from McClellan (1985), and added to this the language academies, the most important Italian Renaissance academies from The British Library (2021), and several other higher education institutions which conferred academic degrees, or were active on the same market as universities.

Since 2021, for each institution for which we have sufficiently comprehensive information, we have published an issue of the *Repertorium Eruditorum totius Europae* (RETE), providing a short description of the institution, the sources of information about the members of this institution, and some descriptive statistics.

2 Warning

As a massive, pan-European aggregate, RETE achieves its monumental scale by ingesting a highly heterogeneous mix of datasets, ranging from pristine, cutting-edge modern digital registries like the *Repertorium Academicum Germanicum* (RAG) to outdated, uncleaned 19th-century institutional histories for regions that lacks contemporary prosopographical coverage. This structural unevenness highlights a fundamental disciplinary clash between macro-economic modeling and micro-historical precision. RETE is perfectly suited for running quantitative analysis on 90,000 scholars – where a baseline 3% error rate from legacy data functions as negligible statistical "noise" that does not threaten broad macro-trends. This safety net evaporates when a researcher filters that same aggregate down to a hyper-specific micro-cohort, transforming minor macro-noise into mathematically toxic variable distortions. In that case, additional checks on filtered individuals are necessary (one by one, using idiosyncratic, historiographic evidence).

3 Some statistics

Table 1 shows some descriptive statistics, which can easily be compared with statistics on individual institutions provided in the other issues of RETE. The whole period is divided into ten distinct operational periods: it begins with the Cathedral Schools and Early Universities (1000–1149), transitions into the Aristotelian Influx and Scholastic Peak (1150–1249), and moves into Institutional Maturity and the Impact of the Black Death (1250–1347). Following the plague, the timeline progresses through the Humanist Renaissance (1348–1452) and the era of Printing and Early Scientific Inquiry (1453–1517), which gives way to the Reformation and Counter-Reformation Schools (1518–1597). The shift toward modern empirical thought unfolds during the period of Modern Science and New Academies (1598–1659), followed by the Enlightenment Foundations and Secular Academic Growth (1660–1715). Finally, the timeline comes to an end with the institutionalization of the High Enlightenment and Specialization (1715–1750) and the Late Enlightenment, Revolution, and Colonial Circuits (1751–1800).

From this Table we draw four lessons.

First, there is a strong selection effect for the first two periods: we do not know well the obscure scholars during these days, so the sample contains a high proportion of scholars present in Wikipedia and VIAF, with known place and year of birth, and long lives.

The percentage of persons for whom the birth year is known, even approximately, is particularly high during the first period, because of a the same selection effect: the people we know about from that period are relatively famous, and better documented. A more "normal" percentage is around 12-18% during the Middle-Ages. In the Early Modern Period, it increases steadily.

With regard to longevity, we observe the same selection effect for the first period. Our two measures (mean age at death, and expected age at death when aged 30) drop after 1450, which is hard to interpret without invoking this selection. In the early modern period, in accordance with the literature on the historical life expectancy of elites (Stelter, de la Croix, and Myrskylä 2021), longevity improves, with a gain of four to five years in the last two periods.

Finally, 21.9% of the scholars have a Wikipedia page (in some language), and 31.6% of them have left a footprint in the catalogues of the libraries of the world, VIAF, either by having published some work, or by having been the subject of published books and articles. For scholars active way before the invention of the printing press, more have a Wikipedia page than a VIAF reference, as several publications of that time did not survive or are not available in the libraries today. Conversely, following the invention of the printing press we clearly see more scholars with publications than with a Wikipedia page.

Period	no. obs	no. instit.	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1000–1149	177	18	44.6%	74%	35	66.8	62.7%	58.2%
1150–1249	650	27	24.9%	73.8%	34.8	68.1	35.8%	37.1%
1250–1347	2637	39	10.1%	54.6%	34	64.7	12.6%	15.4%
1348–1452	8504	71	9.3%	64.2%	31.9	65.7	7.4%	8.6%
1453–1517	8757	105	15.4%	59.1%	30.3	62.3	10.6%	15.1%
1518–1597	14916	192	31.5%	60.1%	29.5	61.4	18.9%	26.2%
1598–1659	13752	217	47%	65.7%	30.8	61.4	20.1%	32%
1660–1715	13375	249	57.5%	68.4%	32.8	62.4	22.8%	35.5%
1715–1751	11344	285	62.4%	68.2%	33.3	63.9	26.6%	39.7%
1751–1800	19161	290	66.8%	66.3%	34.9	66.1	34%	47.5%
1000–1800	93273	370	44.4%	64.6%	32.8	63.7	21.9%	31.6%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

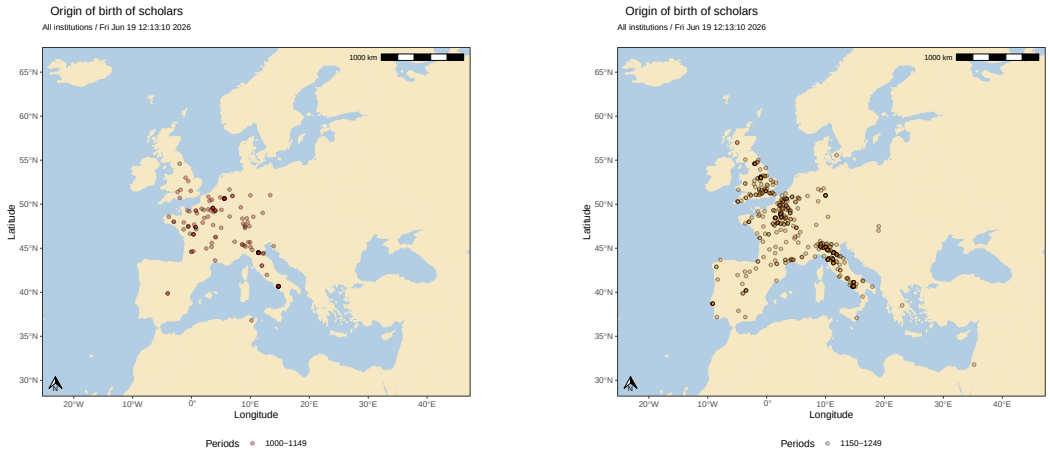

Figure 1: Places of birth of the scholars and literati (1/2)

4 Place of birth

Figures 1 and 2 plot the birthplaces of all scholars in RETE by period, and thus provide a first visual assessment of the geographical coverage of the database. Blank areas may still reflect gaps in data collection, although this interpretation becomes less plausible as coverage improves. The broad pattern, however, is historically meaningful: the maps capture the gradual eastward expansion of the institutional space of Latin Europe. We already stressed in de la Croix and Vitale (2022) that while the earliest universities were strictly clustered in Western Europe (Italy, France, England), the mid-14th century marked a critical turning point. Specifically, the foundation of the University of Prague in 1348 serves as the geopolitical catalyst that officially initiated the structural expansion of universities into Central and Eastern Europe. Over the full period, RETE covers a wide European arc, from Coimbra in the west to Saint Petersburg in the east. By contrast, the Balkans remain largely outside the scope of the database, reflecting their different institutional trajectory under Byzantine and, later, Ottoman rule.

5 Universities vs. Academies

RETE includes both universities and scientific academies. To understand the different roles of universities and academies in the development of knowledge, the state of the art is well captured in the books by Gaukroger (2006), and by Dear (2019). According to Dear and Gaukroger, there was an early modern shift toward academies. It was driven by a fundamental change in what society demanded from knowledge. In Revolutionizing the Sciences, Dear emphasizes that while universities remained tethered to the traditional, text-based transmission of established truths, academies emerged as flexible, patronage-driven spaces designed for the active production of new, operationally useful knowledge. This transition extended beyond the natural sciences into philology, literature, and the arts. Gaukroger argues in The Emergence of a Scientific Culture that this institutional migration was less about a sudden rejection of old topics and more about a profound realignment of cognitive values. The corporate, often ecclesiastically bounded university framework could not easily accommodate the humanist and empirical emphasis on collaborative, open-ended inquiry. Consequently, the academy became the premier vehicle for a new intellectual culture that valued novelty, state utility, and peer validation over scholastic commentary.

Figure 3 illustrates the relative distribution of academic fields within the RETE database, contrasting the institutional profiles of universities (left) and academies (right) (for an in-depth discussion on field categorization and measurement, see Curtis et al. (2026)). The data reveals that premodern universities were predominantly anchored in the humanities (38%), law (16%), and theology (23%), leaving a relatively small institutional share for medicine and the natural sciences. By

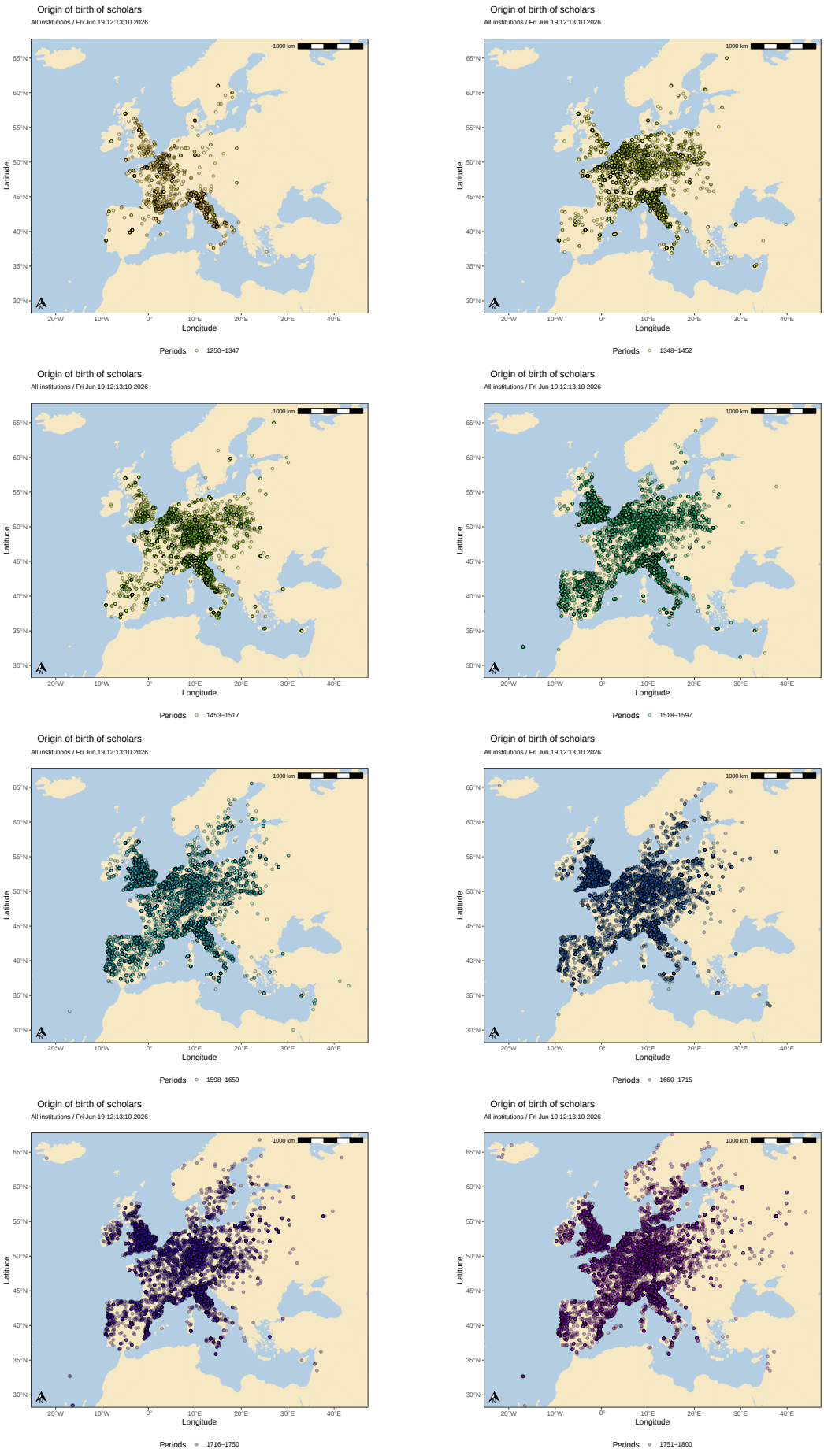

Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati (2/2)

contrast, while the humanities remained a significant pillar within the academies, the institutional weight of law and theology waned sharply, giving way to a substantial expansion in medicine (17%) and science (25%). These distributions demonstrate that universities were never entirely divorced from scientific inquiry; rather, the distinction between the two types of institutions is a matter of relative weight and structural priority. Furthermore, these pie charts underscore the enduring prominence of fields outside the natural sciences—a reality frequently overlooked by a historiography of scientific progress that routinely neglects the parallel evolutions of legal, theological, and humanistic scholarship (with a few exceptions, such as Almelhem et al. (2026)).

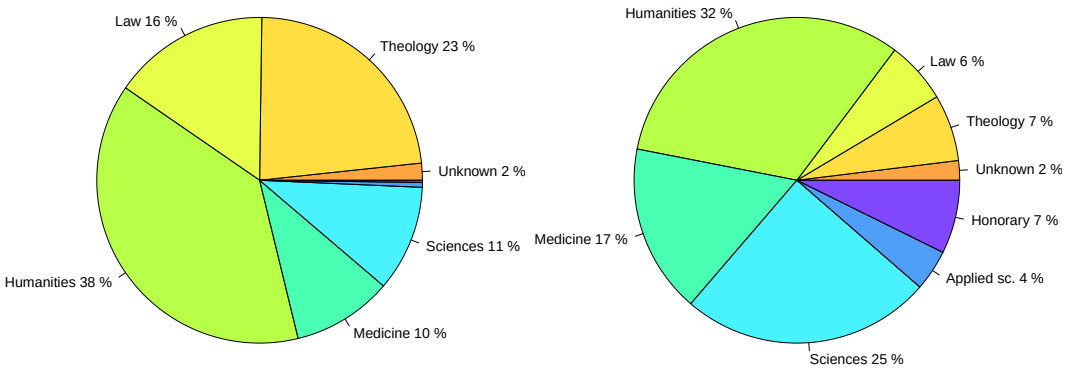

Figure 3: Weight of academic fields, measured in terms of published persons (left: universities, right: academies)

When examining the alleged "decline" of the premodern university, the perspectives of Dear and Gaukroger help dismantle the older historical myth of total institutional collapse. Dear notes that if a decline occurred, it was primarily a loss of intellectual monopoly; universities were no longer the sole arbiters of cutting-edge thought, as vital intellectual conversations migrated to academies and salon cultures. However, both authors imply that characterizing this era as a complete decay misses the structural reality. As Gaukroger's wider work illustrates, universities actually experienced a massive institutional expansion during this period because early modern states desperately needed standardized training grounds for lawyers, theologians, and bureaucrats. The "decline" was therefore not one of size or societal relevance, but rather a temporary intellectual stagnation where universities rigidly guarded orthodoxy, and lagged behind the rapid methodological innovations happening in the decentralized networks of the Republic of Letters (Mokyr 2016).

Despite their distinct institutional identities, the boundary between premodern universities and academies was highly porous, characterized by a large overlap in personnel, intellectual networks, and methodology. In RETE, we show that this overlap did not happen everywhere, but it was certainly present in many places. As Dear emphasizes, the shift toward academies did not create a clean break; rather, many of the leading figures of the Scientific Revolution simultaneously held university chairs while driving the research agendas of the new academies. Many scholars used their university positions for financial stability and pedagogical authority while using their membership of academies to publish and debate cutting-edge discoveries. Furthermore, Gaukroger's analysis underscores that the two spaces were bound together by a shared participation in the Republic of Letters. Over time, this interaction created a hybrid intellectual ecosystem where universities gradually absorbed the empirical and humanistic methods championed by the academies, laying the groundwork for the modern research university that ultimately fused teaching and original research into a single institution.

Here are some takeaways from the RETE project that directly inform the debate on premodern

universities vs. academies and the myth of university decline:

Proof of the "Porous Border" (The Double-Hatting Scholar) Older historiography looked at the charters of institutions and concluded that universities and academies were at war. RETE looks at the people. The data reveals a significant percentage of "double-hatting" – scholars who simultaneously or sequentially held a university chair and an academy membership, bridging the two worlds (de la Croix, Scebba, and Zanardello 2025). Our data empirically proves that academies did not operate in a vacuum; they were partly staffed by the elite human capital generated, trained, and paid by the university system. Figure 4 shows the sets of scholars at Universities after 1500, and at Academies. The intersection contains those present in the two types of institutions. It is far from empty, backing up the claim above. This also justifies our decision to focus on both types of both institutions.

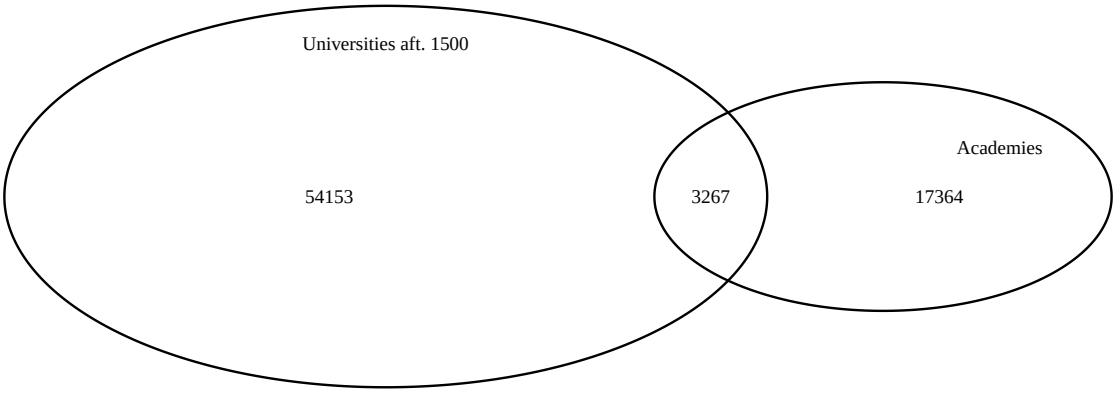

Figure 4: Intersections of the lists of scholars between Universities and Academies

The Quantified Rise of the Academies RETE allows researchers to map the shifting gravity of intellectual networks. By tracking where the "elite scholars" were located decade by decade, the project tracks a clear geographical and institutional migration. In the 13th and 14th centuries, elite capital is tightly clustered in a few university hubs (Paris, Bologna, Oxford). By the 17th and 18th centuries, the data shows a massive dispersion as royal and princely academies across Europe successfully siphoned off the research output of the top-tier minds (Zanardello 2024).

Debunking the Absolute "Decline" of Universities The data from the RETE project shows that while universities may have experienced an intellectual stagnation in certain fields (like scholastic philosophy), they were expanding rapidly in terms of sheer numbers, student enrollment, and faculty hiring before 1800. This reinforces the argument that universities did not "decline" in social or economic importance. Early modern states were injecting money into universities to produce the lawyers, administrators, and doctors needed for state-building. There were even some universities with a rising quality at the end of the eighteenth century (de la Croix and Stelter 2020; de la Croix 2025).

Market Sorting: Teaching vs. Prestige RETE's database illustrates a structural sorting mechanism that occurred before 1800. Universities acted as the primary labor market, the place where a scholar earned a living by teaching (de la Croix et al. 2024). Academies acted as a secondary market for prestige, publishing, and state networking. The project demonstrates that the two institutions functioned as a unified, complementary knowledge ecosystem in many places, rather than two isolated, warring factions.

After the end of our period of interest in 1800, there is another phenomenon occured. As the Humboldtian model of a university (nineteenth century) integrated the academy's research mission directly into the university structure, academies lost their monopoly on the production of new

knowledge. Stripped of their role as the primary engines of scientific discovery and lacking the sustainable funding and fresh labor pool provided by students, these institutions underwent a profound metamorphosis. They evolved from active, collaborative workshops of the Scientific Revolution into elite, honorary societies. Today, many national academies function primarily as arbiters of prestige and "senior entertainment," where election serves as a lifetime achievement award for retired or late-career faculty. Although some still give prizes, funding, and publish books, their day-to-day operations often resemble exclusive dining clubs and lecturing societies, marking a clear decline from their origins as the cutting-edge disruptors of Western intellectual life. The history of higher education is thus a game of institutional leapfrog. Simplifying:

1. Medieval Universities were amazing creations of Latin Europe.
2. Medieval Universities became rigid, so the Academies were born to do the real research.
3. Academies lacked teaching structures and permanent funding, so the 19th-Century Research Universities swallowed the academies' mission.
4. Modern Academies were left without a job, turning into the prestigious, senior-heavy honorary societies we see today.

Some of the connecting functions once performed by academies have endured, though often within new institutional forms. In economics, the NBER and CEPR are not academies in the historical sense, but they play a partly analogous role: they bring scholars together, validate new work through working-paper series, circulate ideas across national and institutional boundaries, and sometimes link research to policy debates. In this sense, the story is perhaps not that academies disappeared, but that their functions were redistributed and recombined across a wider institutional landscape.

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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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