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Scholars and Literati at the Accademia Etrusca of Cortona (1727 – 1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who were active at the Accademia Etrusca of Cortona from its foundation until 1800.

1 Sources

To compile the list of scholars admitted to the Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, we drew primarily from manuscripts held at the Biblioteca del Comune e dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona. The main source for reconstructing the list of academicians was the register of members (Biblioteca Comunale di Cortona, 1758/1786) and the official website of the Accademia Etrusca di Cortona was a complementary source (Accademia Etrusca di Cortona). Finally, complete in missing biographical information we consulted entries from the Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani, published online by the Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana Treccani (Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana (1961)).

2 The Academy

In December 1726, Marcello Venuti proposed to his younger brothers Ridolfino and Filippo, together with a few friends from Cortona, that they found a small society, the Accademia degli Occulti. The stated purpose was to share jointly the cost of purchasing books of scholarship and science otherwise unavailable in the city.

The following year, the society became a full-fledged academy, the *Accademia di Scienze et Erudizioni* (Academy of Science and Erudition), thanks to a donation from the abbot Onofrio Baldelli, the Venuti brothers' maternal uncle, who left the institution his collection of books, minerals, natural specimens, and Etruscan and Roman antiquities.

In 1728 the Academy took the name that made it famous, the *Accademia Etrusca delle Antichità ed Iscrizioni*, marking its definitive orientation toward the study of material evidence of the past, with particular attention to the Etruscan world.

A parallel initiative, the *Accademia Botanica e di Storia Naturale* (Botanical and Natural History Academy), founded in Cortona in 1754, was later absorbed into the Academy, whose natural-historical interests had already found expression in the "Notti Coritane" gatherings of 1744.

The Academy was led by a "Lucumone" (a title drawn from the ancient Etruscan magistracy, reserved for the rulers or princes of the Etruscan city-states), while the motto *Obscura de re lucida pango* (on an obscure subject I compose clear verses), taken from Lucretius, still appears on the institution's coat of arms today.

3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the dataset of 420 scholars. A known date of birth is available for 57.9% of individuals, while the place of birth is identified for 90%. The mean age at appointment is 44.7 years, and the mean age at death is 69 years. Overall, 41% of the scholars are represented on Wikipedia and 54.8% are identifiable in VIAF, a high share relative to the full sample.

Period	no. obs	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1686–1733	16	87.5%	93.8%	44.3	66.6	81.2%	81.2%
1734–1800	404	56.7%	89.9%	44.7	69.2	39.4%	53.7%
1686–1800	420	57.9%	90%	44.7	69	41%	54.8%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

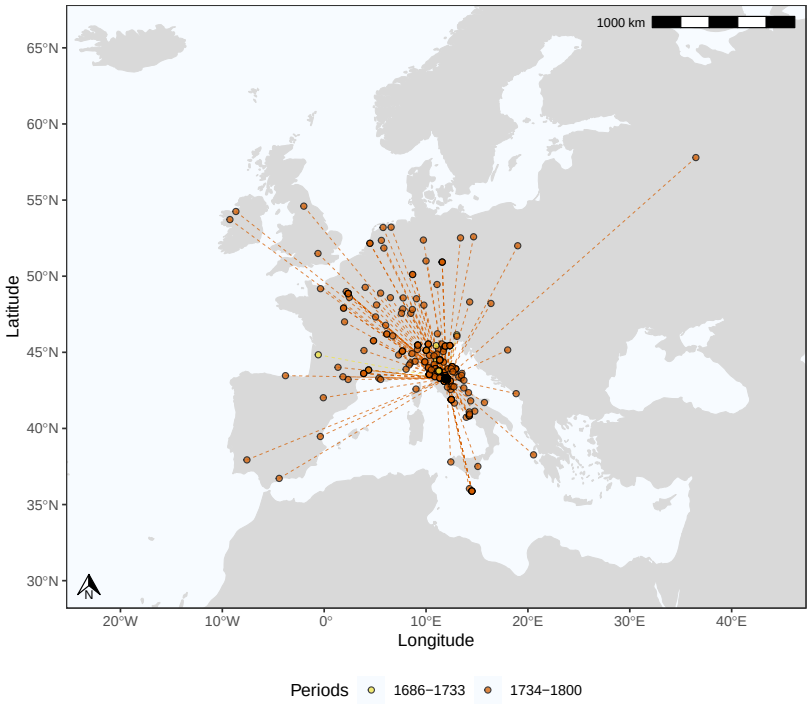

Figure 1: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the Accademia Etrusca

4 Fields

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines, on the left for all scholars, and on the right for published scholars. Humanities dominate in both panels, but even more markedly among published members (61% against 44% for the full membership). The share of honorary members drops sharply between the two panels (from 20% to 5%): this is consistent with honorary appointments being awarded mainly for prestige or diplomatic reasons rather than for a documented scholarly output, so that this group is naturally under-represented among published authors Sciences too, have proportionally more published scholars than members (16% vs. 13%), suggesting that scientifically active members were, on average, more likely to leave a documented body of work.

5 Places of Birth

Figure 1 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the Accademia Etrusca for the period 1727–1800. The distribution is strongly centred on Tuscany and central Italy, reflecting the Academy's local roots in Cortona, but it also reveals a dense web of connections extending across Western Europe. Many members were antiquarians and scholars of ancient art, and the Academy's museum and collections of Etruscan and Roman artefacts made it a European point of reference in this field.

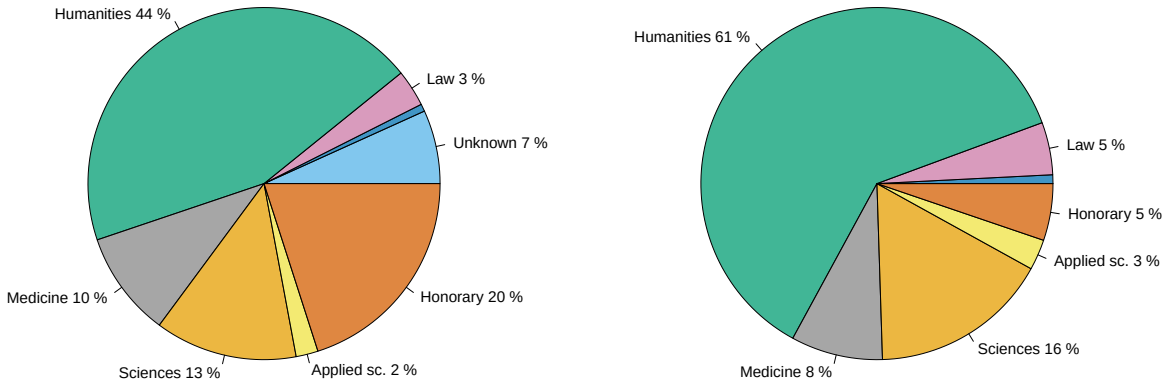

Figure 2: Broad fields at the Accademia Etrusca (left:all scholars; right: published scholars)

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. The details are given in Curtis et al. (2026) for these individual measures of human capital. Figure 3 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index.

7 Top 5 Scholars

Here we provide a brief overview of the five members with the highest human capital index. It should be noted that the sources the Accademy do not explicitly distinguish between corresponding members and full or resident members; the following overview therefore treats all identified members uniformly, without differentiating by membership status.

François-Marie Arouet de Voltaire (Paris 1694 – Paris 1778),philosopher, historian, and writer, one of the leading figures of the French Enlightenment, was a member of numerous continental academies — from the Académie Française (1746)(de la Croix 2022) to the Royal Society of London (1743)(de la Croix and Mytilinaios 2022), as well as the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences and several Italian academies. In the summer of 1746 Voltaire was elected a member of the Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, as attested by his correspondence (D 3433, 3 July 1746; D 3447, 17 August 1746, the latter possibly addressed to Filippo Venuti, one of the Academy's founders) (Macé 2008). Writing to the marquis d'Argenson on 3 July 1746, Voltaire noted that he had received "les lettres les plus polies et les plus remplies de bonté de ceux qui président à l'Académie de la Crusca, à celle de Cortone, à celle de Rome, et à plusieurs autres" ("the most courteous letters, filled with the greatest kindness, from those who preside over the Accademia della Crusca, that of Cortona, that of Rome, and several others") (Voltaire 1968–1977).

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (Château de la Brède 1689 – Paris 1755), philosopher and man of letters, author of *De l'esprit des lois.* During his stay in Florence in December 1728, as part of his grand tour of Italy, Montesquieu was personally introduced to Marcello Venuti,a co-founder of the Accademy who invited him to become an associate member. Montesquieu had not forgotten this welcome more than a decade later, as he recalled it in a letter to the abbé de Guasco dated 17 March 1739 (Montesquieu 1955).

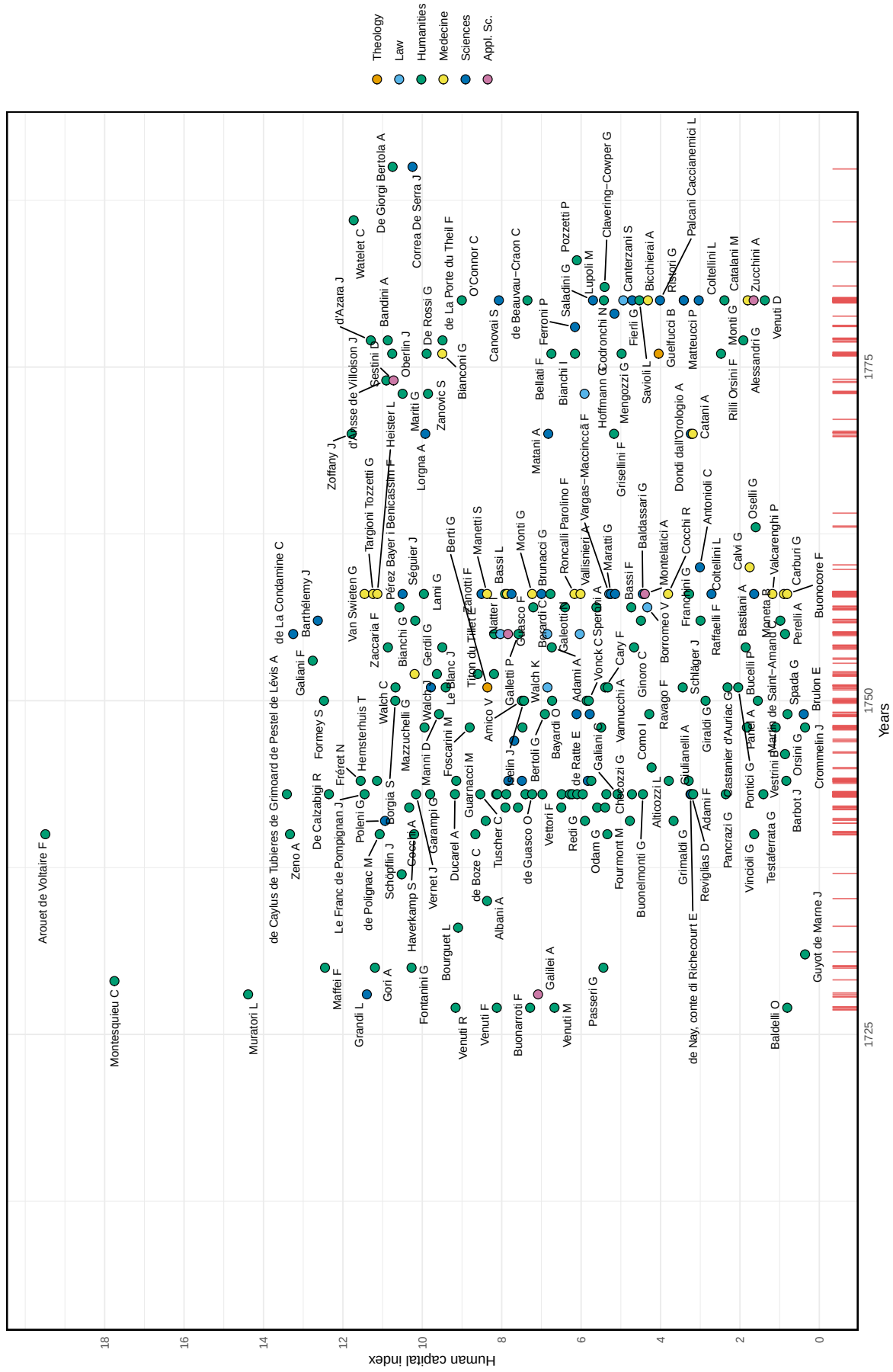

Figure 3: Famous scholars at the Accademia Etrusca

Lodovico Antonio Muratori (Vignola 1672 – Modena 1750), historian, librarian, and one of the foremost figures of Italian Enlightenment historiography, best known as editor of the *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*. Muratori was a member of the Academy and maintained scholarly ties with its co-founder Ridolfino Venuti: on 4 April 1736 he addressed to him a dissertation on a sepulchral axe (*ascia sepolcrale*), later printed among his collected works (Muratori 1767).

Anne-Claude de Tubières, Comte de Caylus (Paris 1692 – Paris 1765), antiquarian, archaeologist, and man of letters, author of the *Recueil d'antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques, romaines et gauloises*. Caylus maintained close ties with the Roman antiquarian circle associated with the Academy, corresponding in particular with its co-founder Ridolfino Venuti, papal antiquarian and a central node in the network of scholars – French and Italian – with whom Caylus exchanged information on newly discovered antiquities.

Apostolo Zeno (Venezia 1668 – Venezia 1750), poet, librettist, journalist, and numismatist. A co-founder of the *Accademia degli Animosi* (1691) and, in 1710, of the *Giornale de' letterati d'Italia* together with Scipione Maffei and Antonio Vallisneri, Zeno was celebrated for his reform of *opera seria* (the dominant genre of Italian opera in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marked by mythological or historical subjects and a formal alternation of recitative and arias), and served as Imperial poet and historian at the Viennese court of Charles VI from 1718 to 1729. In his later years he turned increasingly to numismatics and antiquarian scholarship, corresponding extensively with Muratori and other Italian erudites.

8 Academy Network

Figure 4 shows the network of academies, where node color indicates the geographic affiliation of the institutions: orange marks Cortona, placed at the center of the network as the reference node, yellow marks Italian academies, and purple marks academies in the rest of Europe. Edge color, in turn, signals the nature of the connection: yellow for links between Italian institutions, purple for links between non-Italian European institutions, and green for links that cross the border between Italy and Europe.

The graph shows how the Accademia Etrusca occupies a hinge position between two distinct clusters, a core of Italian academies (Bologna, Crusca, Ricovrati, Florence, among others) and a more dispersed set of European institutions (the Royal Society, the Leopoldina, French and German academies). The dense presence of green edges, directly connecting the two groups, suggests that Cortona did not function merely as an isolated bridge, but was embedded in a network of exchanges that was already partly cross-border in nature, where Italian–European ties were as frequent as those within each area.

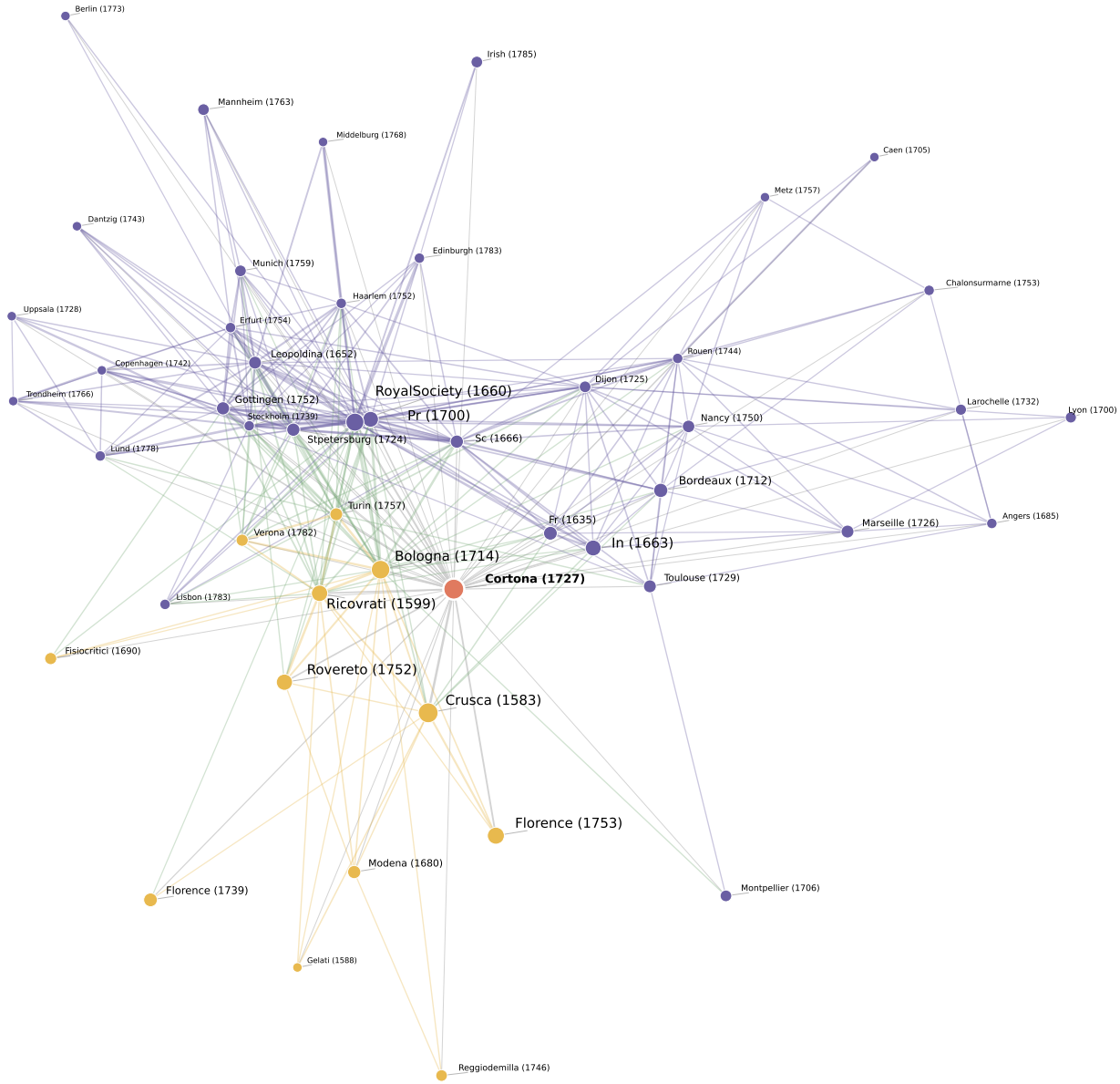

Figure 4: Co-membership network of the Accademia Etrusca of Cortona: Italy vs. the rest of Europe.

Etruscan antiquarianism and the birth of "Etruscheria"
The eighteenth century is the period in which the Etruscans become the object of systematic erudite inquiry, combining philology, epigraphy, and the collection of material remains in what historiography has termed *Etruscheria* (Cristofani 1978). The symbolic starting point is the publication, only in 1723–1724, of Thomas Dempster's *De Etruria regali* — a work written a century earlier (1616–1619) and left in manuscript — and subsequently promoted in print by Filippo Buonarroti and Thomas Coke. Its appearance fosters a genuine antiquarian and identitarian fashion, in which the myth of Etruscan origins is claimed as an "Italic," pre-Roman alternative to classical Romanness, with implications that extend into the political context of Grand Ducal Tuscany (De Angelis 2009).
Around this nucleus a dense network of scholars and institutions develops over the course of the century: Scipione Maffei (*Ragionamenti sopra gl'Itali primitivi*, 1727), Anton Francesco Gori (*Museum Etruscum*, 1743), Giovanni Battista Passeri (*Picturae Etruscorum in vasculis*, 1775), and Mario Guarnacci (*Origini italiche*, 1772) mark its principal stages, while outside Italy the work of Anne-Claude-Philippe de Caylus (*Recueil d'antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, romaines et gauloises*, 1752–1767) attests to its European resonance. The Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, founded in 1726/1727, becomes the main institutional hub of this activity, publishing the rate of its *Dissertazioni* from 1735 to 1795.
The phenomenon culminates, at the close of the century, in Luigi Lanzi's *Saggio di lingua etrusca e di altre d'Italia* (1789), which offers a first organic synthesis of accumulated knowledge — though it remains, like much of eighteenth-century Etruscheria, marked by often arbitrary interpretive conjecture. Its historiographical importance, however, lies not in the accuracy of its conclusions but in the systematicity of its collection and cataloguing of archaeological and epigraphic material, which laid the methodological groundwork for nineteenth-century scientific Etruscology (Cristofani 1983).

9 Anecdote

Membership in an academy like Cortona's was never an isolated appointement: members carried with them networks of relationships that extended well beyond Cortona, and sometimes came to intersect with the wider history of European culture. The case of Carlo Gottardo von Firmian is a telling example.

Admitted to the Accademia Etrusca in 1744, Firmian went on to become Habsburg plenipotentiary in Lombardy and director of Milan's Teatro Regio Ducale. It was he who, in March 1770, subjected the fourteen-year-old Mozart to a kind of public audition — three arias on texts by Metastasio, before 150 nobles — before entrusting him, the following day, with composing Mitridate, re di Ponto, which premiered on 26 December 1770.

10 Final Thoughts

The Academy's membership included historians, philologists, antiquarians, and collectors — categories with porous boundaries in eighteenth-century erudite culture, where scholarly correspondence, dissertations, and the exchange of material remains were complementary facets of a single intellectual practice.

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