

Scholars and Literati at the Académie Philomathique of Paris (1788–1800)

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This document offers a concise portrait of the scholars who belonged to the Académie Philomathique of Paris from its founding in 1788 to the turn of the nineteenth century, in 1800. It also traces the academy's initial history and outlines its main characteristics. For more detailed information about these individuals, please visit the comprehensive database available at <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars2/>.

1 SOURCES

To recover the list of academicians, we relied on *La Société philomathique de Paris de 1788 à 1835* (Mandelbaum 1983), a two-volume work that reconstructs the history of the academy from its foundation in 1788 to 1835 and provides biographical information on its members and correspondents during its first fifty years. The book is available in digital form on the academy's website at the following link: <https://philomathique.paris/index.php/histoire-de-la-societe-philomathique>.

2 THE ACADEMY

The Académie Philomathique de Paris was founded on 10 December 1788, on the eve of the French Revolution, by six young men with a shared interest in the sciences. Initially known as the "Société gymnastique", it began as a small circle devoted primarily to mutual instruction and the exchange of scientific knowledge. Its founders combined different backgrounds in medicine, natural history, mathematics, and the physical sciences, reflecting from the outset the Academy's distinctly multidisciplinary character. Rather than focusing exclusively on original research, members were expected to follow developments in their respective fields, present and discuss scientific information, and contribute to its collective circulation. This emphasis on the exchange of knowledge was quickly institutionalised through the creation in 1791 of the Academy's Bulletin, which summarised recent discoveries, scientific papers, and the activities of other scientific communities.

Throughout its development, the Academy retained its distinctive character as a close-knit and collegial community of scientists, combining scientific activity with a strong emphasis on friendship and mutual exchange. Its relatively informal and non-institutional character distinguished it from the more hierarchical academic institutions of the Ancien Régime, a distinction that would become particularly significant during the upheavals of the Revolution. By remaining a *société libre*, that is, a private association, the Société Philomathique survived the suppression of the royal academies in August 1793. The dissolution of the Académie Royale des Sciences (de la Croix and Zanardello 2022), in particular, led the philomathes to welcome around seventeen of its former members, providing an important degree of continuity between the old academic world and the scientific institutions that emerged after the Revolution.

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the dataset of 153 scholars. A known date of birth is available for 87.6% of individuals, while the place of birth is identified for 83.7%. The mean age at appointment is 37.3 years, and the mean age at death is 67.7 years. Overall, 64.1% of the scholars are represented on Wikipedia and 90.2% are identifiable in VIAF.

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

Period	no. obs	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1734–1800	153	87.6	83.7	37.3	67.7	64.1	90.2

4 FIELDS

The scientific interests of the philomathes are evident from Figure 1. The disciplinary profile is strongly concentrated in the natural sciences and medicine, followed by applied sciences. Together, these fields account for 97% of affiliates.

This characterization is also reflected in the name of the Academy itself, a neologism formed through the combination of two Greek words: *philos* (*φίλος*) and *mathētēs* (*μαθητής*), literally the “friends of science.”

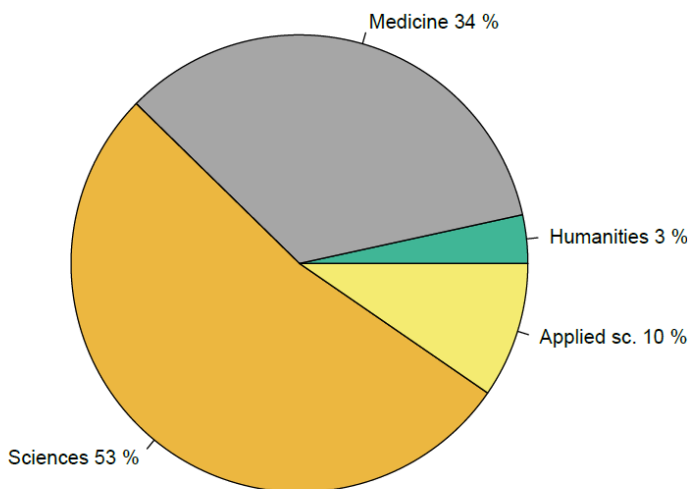


Figure 1: Macro fields at the Académie Philomathique de Paris

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the Académie Philomathique for the period 1788–1800. For both members and correspondants, Paris emerges as a geographical centre of gravity, with the majority of associates being of French origin. Nonetheless, particularly among the correspondents, scholars born in other European countries are also represented, including Switzerland, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and Spain. Their known addresses further reveal the geographical reach of the Academy: correspondents were relatively evenly divided between those based in France and those residing abroad. This suggests that, despite its relatively small size, the Académie Philomathique maintained a geographically extended network across Europe and beyond (Mandelbaum 1983).

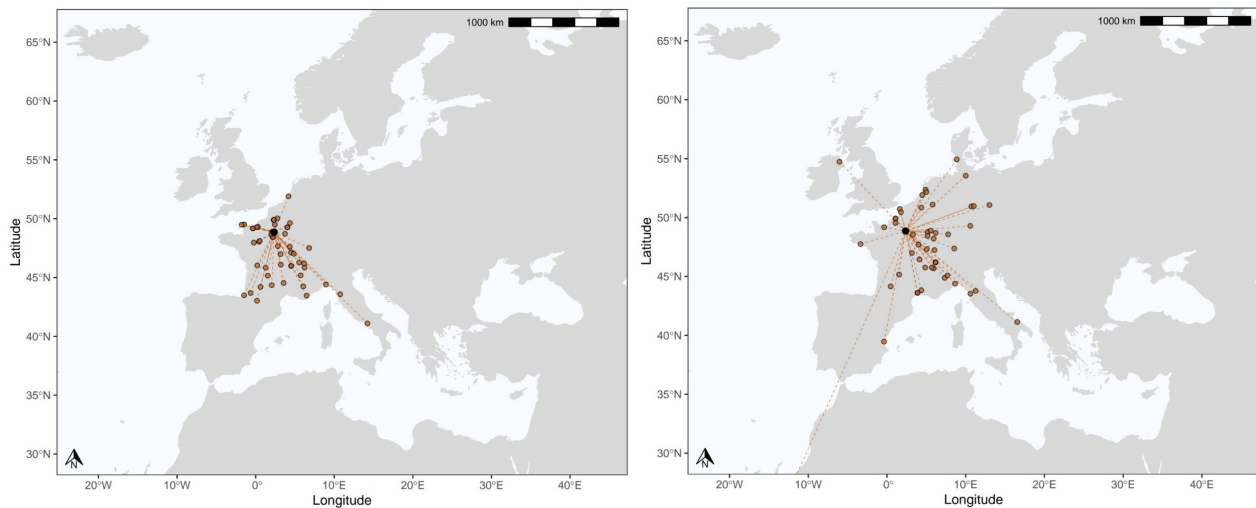


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars at the Académie Philomathique de Paris. Members on the right; correspondants on the left. Period: 1788–1800

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. Over the relatively short observation period, affiliates display a heterogeneous distribution of human capital, spanning both high and low levels.

7 TOP 5 SCHOLARS

What follows is a brief overview of the five philomathes with the highest human capital index.

Georges Cuvier (Montbéliard 1769 – Paris 1832), founder of comparative anatomy and vertebrate paleontology, was unanimously elected member in 1795, upon his arrival in Paris that same year. There, he read his early anatomical papers and reported on the sessions of the Institut, of which he became member in 1796. In December 1798 he read to the members a letter sent from Egypt by his friend Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844), who was asking for the addresses of the philomathes in Bonaparte's expedition. Cuvier later broke with Geoffroy in the 1830 "quarrel of the analogues", and his firm opposition to transformism also marked his bitter eulogy of Lamarck.

Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck (Bazentin-le-Petit 1744 – Paris 1829), botanist, pioneer of invertebrate zoology, and one of the first to use the word "biology", was elected in September 1793 after the dissolution of the Académie Royale des Sciences. At first, he attended more regularly than other former academicians, and read papers on botany, conchology and meteorology. In 1797, after his attack on Lavoisier's chemistry had found little support at the Institut, he presented to the Academy his *Mémoires sur une nouvelle théorie physique et chimique*, again without much success, and offered his resignation that same year, too poor to bear the cost of his absences. He later became an emeritus member of the Academy, and Laplace took his seat in 1802.

Acadphilomatique–1788 – Publishing Scholars and Distribution of all Scholars (rug plot)

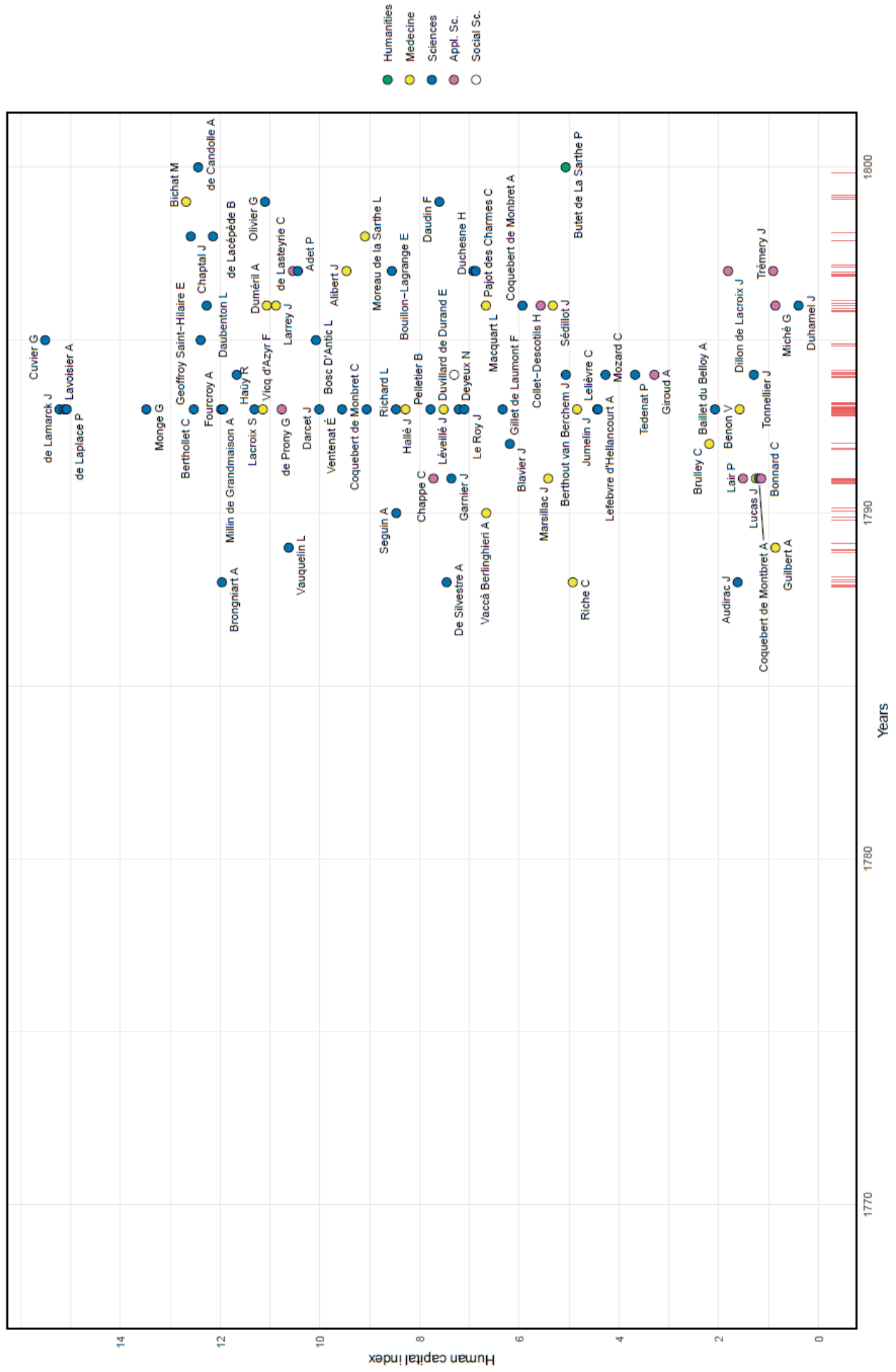


Figure 3: Macro fields at the Académie Philomathique de Paris

Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (Paris 1743 – Paris 1794), the chemist behind the chemical revolution, was a philomathe for less than three months. Proposed by Augustin-François de Silvestre (1762–1851), founder of the Académie Philomathique and friend from the *Société d'agriculture*, he was elected in September 1793 but only attended one meeting before his arrest in November as a former member of the *Ferme générale*, the institution that collected the king's indirect taxes. He was guillotined in May 1794, and Silvestre later paid him a brief tribute in the Academy's reports.

Pierre-Simon Laplace (Beaumont-en-Auge 1749 – Paris 1827) was an astronomer and mathematician, and Lavoisier's collaborator on heat and respiration in the early 1780s. He was elected in November 1793, but soon withdrew to the safer countryside during the Terror. His name returns in 1799, when the Society read an extract of the first part of the *Mécanique céleste*, later published in the *Bulletin*. Readmitted unanimously in 1802 in Lamarck's place, he never attended himself: his memoirs on the tides and on falling bodies were read and published on the *Bulletin* by other philomathes. He became an emeritus member in 1810.

Gaspard Monge (Beaune 1746 – Paris 1818), mathematician, inventor of descriptive geometry and one of the founders of the *École Polytechnique* (Paris), had just served as Minister of the Marine (1792–1793) when he was elected in September 1793. He seems never to have taken much part in the Academy's work. In 1798 he sailed with Bonaparte to Egypt, where he presided over the *Institut d'Égypte*, and the Academy's list of January 1799 records him as "currently in Egypt", alongside fellow philomathes like Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire.

8 ACADEMIC NETWORK

The Académie Philomathique was closely connected to the wider scientific world through its very purpose: collecting and circulating new scientific knowledge. From its early regulations, members and correspondents were expected not only to report their own work, but also to communicate new discoveries, publications, experiments, and information gathered through their connections with other scientific communities, including unpublished research and ideas. The *Bulletin* institutionalised this function, becoming a channel through which gathered information could be brought into the philomathes' multidisciplinary circle. This network was strengthened by the multiple affiliations of its members (Figure 4). Yet, this activity depended on discretion. The intimate and restricted character of the Society allowed it to make use of information obtained through these connections without presenting itself as a competitor to other scientific societies or journals.

9 ANECDOTE

While the Academy prided itself on being founded on friendship, one subject fuelled a decade-long quarrel (1793–1803) among some philomathes: the *conferves*. Treatises were printed, reports rebutted, and pointed footnotes exchanged, all over whether these creatures were plants or animals. Even a mathematician like Lacroix, presumably with loftier mathematical matters at hand, was drawn into the fray alongside his friend Girod-Chantrans, only to end up on the losing side. Wondering what *conferves* are? Freshwater algae, which Candolle and Vaucher finally showed to be plants. All this passion, all this ink, all these years of polemics, for a few green filaments that no one could even see without a microscope. Nature, it seems, has a sense of humor: the smaller the object, the bigger the quarrel.

10 FINAL THOUGHTS

Founded on the eve of the Revolution by six young men, the Académie Philomathique de Paris remained in its early years a small, multidisciplinary circle, united by friendship and by the shared aim of following, discussing and circulating scientific knowledge. Unlike the royal academies and



Figure 4: Network of academies sharing members with the Académie Philomathique of Paris (center, orange). Yellow nodes are French academies; purple nodes are academies in the rest of Europe. Node size is proportional to the number of members shared with the Philomathique. Edges indicate shared members: dark orange for links to the Philomathique, yellow between French academies, purple between European academies, and green between French and European academies.

other more formal institutions, its discretion and private status as a *société libre* allowed it to survive their suppression in August 1793, and even to welcome many former members of the Académie royale des sciences. By bridging the academies of the Ancien Régime and the scientific institutions of the nineteenth century, it offers a rare window onto the informal sociability at the heart of the Parisian scientific world.

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

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

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