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Scholars and Literati at the University of Vienna (1365–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Vienna from its foundation in 1365 to 1800.

1 Sources

The information on the professors of the University of Vienna is drawn from a combination of the historiography of the university and primary sources. For the medieval and early modern period (1365–1565), the main reference is the three-volume history of the university by Joseph von Aschbach (Aschbach 1865, 1877, 1888). The period 1565–1724 is covered by the third volume of the *Conspectus historiae Universitatis Viennensis* (Mitterdorffer 1725), while the medical faculty between 1577 and 1619 is documented in the history of the Viennese medical school by Rosas (1844).

From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, a large share of the teaching in theology and philosophy was entrusted to the Society of Jesus. Jesuit professors were therefore identified through the *Catalogi personarum et officiorum Provinciae Austriae S.I.* edited by Lukács (1978, 1982), and, for the theological faculty in 1750–1775, through the *Speculum academicum Viennense* of Locher (1773). Biographical information on Jesuit professors was completed using the *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus* of Sommervogel (1890). For the eighteenth century, the yearly court and state almanacs (*Staats- und Stands-Calender* and, from 1776, the *Hof- und Staats-Schematismus*) were used to reconstruct the teaching staff year by year (*Kayserlicher und königlicher wie auch ertz-hertzoglicher und dero residentz-stadt Wien staats- und stands-calender* 1800; *Hof- und staats-schematismus der römisch-kaiserlichen auch kaiserlich-königlichen und erzherzoglichen haupt- und residenzstadt wien* 1776).

2 The University

The University of Vienna, the *Alma Mater Rudolphina*, was founded on 12 March 1365 by Duke Rudolf IV of Austria (1339–1365) and his brothers. Pope Urban V confirmed the foundation but withheld the faculty of theology, which the Pope wished to keep under the control of Paris and Prague. The institution took off after its re-foundation in 1384 by Duke Albert III (1349/50–1395), when Pope Urban VI granted the right to teach theology. The Great Western Schism (1378–1417, when two, and later three, rival popes claimed authority over the Latin Church) played into Vienna's hands: masters leaving Paris, such as Heinrich von Langenstein and Heinrich von Oyta, gave the young university its intellectual profile.

The fifteenth century was a period of remarkable brilliance. The so-called first Viennese school of mathematics and astronomy, from Johannes von Gmunden to Georg von Peurbach and Regiomontanus, made Vienna one of the leading centres of the mathematical sciences in Europe. Around 1500, Emperor Maximilian I supported the humanists, and in 1501 Conrad Celtis founded the *Collegium poetarum et mathematicorum*, which was entitled to crown poets.

The Reformation, the plague, and the first Ottoman siege of 1529 caused a sharp decline in student numbers. Ferdinand I called the Jesuits to Vienna in 1551, and in 1623 the *Sanctio Pragmatica* of Ferdinand II merged the Jesuit college with the university, handing the faculties of theology and philosophy to the Society for one and a half centuries. From the middle of the eighteenth century, the reforms of Maria Theresa, inspired by her physician Gerard van Swieten, transformed the university into a state institution serving the needs of the Habsburg monarchy. The suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773 and the reforms of Joseph II completed this process.

3 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. We have information on 1,248 scholars active in Vienna between 1365 and 1800. The date of birth is known for 41.8% of them, and the place of birth for 59.1%. Coverage improves strongly in the eighteenth century, when the date of birth is known for more than two thirds of the professors. Conversely, the place of birth is poorly documented between 1618 and 1685 (30.9%), a period in which a large share of the teaching staff consists of Jesuits recorded in the sources mainly through their position in the province rather than through their biographical data.

Vienna recruited its professors from far away. The median distance between the place of birth and the university reaches 456 km in the first period and 477 km in 1527–1617, reflecting the supra-regional character of the university in the age of the Schism, of humanism, and of the early Jesuit presence. It falls to 155 km in the eighteenth century, when recruitment was increasingly confined to the Habsburg lands. The mean age at appointment is particularly low between 1450 and 1526 (30.4 years), which is consistent with the medieval system of young regent masters teaching in the faculty of arts. About one fifth of the scholars have a Wikipedia page, and one third a VIAF identifier, with a clear peak in 1527-1617 and 1734-1800.

Period	no. obs	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1348–1449	150	23.3	77.3	36.1	65.1	456	14	20.7
1450–1526	176	23.3	77.8	30.4	58.9	329	16.5	25.6
1527–1617	167	31.7	48.5	35.8	59	477	25.1	40.7
1618–1685	220	25.9	30.9	36.7	62.5	302	12.3	24.1
1686–1733	251	56.6	55.8	34.6	61.5	155	11.6	38.2
1734–1800	284	68.3	68.7	35.4	64.6	155	32.7	45.8
1200–1800	1248	41.8	59.1	35	62.5	269	19.3	33.9

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

4 Fields

Figure 1 shows the distribution of scholars by field. Vienna was primarily a university of arts and theology: humanities account for 37% and theology for 31% of the published scholars, while medicine (10%) and law (9%) play a smaller role. The sciences represent 13% of published scholars, against only 7% of all scholars.

5 Places of birth

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces of the scholars active at the University of Vienna by period. Until 1526, scholars come mainly from Southern Germany, Austria, Bohemia and Hungary. Recruitment widens in 1527–1617, with many arrivals from the Low Countries, the Rhineland,

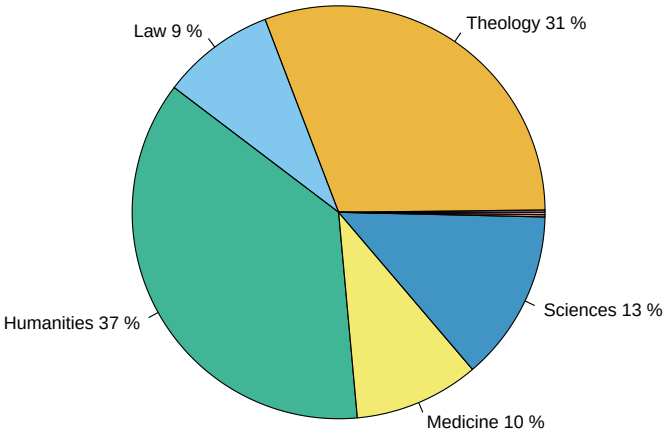


Figure 1: Broad fields at the University of Vienna (published scholars only)

France and Italy, and reaches its widest extent in 1618–1685, from Ireland and Spain to the Eastern Mediterranean. In the eighteenth century, origins concentrate on the Habsburg monarchy.

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 Vienna 25 years before that date (de la Croix et al. (2024) and Curtis et al. (2026)). 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. Three peaks of notability emerge. The first corresponds to the fifteenth-century school of astronomy (Peurbach, Regiomontanus) and to the early humanism of Celtis and Vadianus. The second coincides with the first generation of Jesuits and the scholars called by Ferdinand I around the middle of the sixteenth century (Canisius, Postel). The third is the age of the Theresian reforms, with Gerard van Swieten, Nikolaus Joseph von Jacquin, Joseph von Sonnenfels, Maximilian Hell, and Joseph Jakob Plenck.

7 Top 5 professors

Petrus Canisius (Nijmegen 1521 – Fribourg 1597) was a Dutch Jesuit, the first of his nation to join the Society of Jesus, and one of the leading figures of the Catholic Reformation in the German-speaking lands. After teaching at Ingolstadt, he was called to Vienna in 1552 at the request of Ferdinand I, where he taught theology at the university and preached at court. He administered the diocese of Vienna in 1554–1555, while refusing the episcopal title. In Vienna, at the request of the King, he wrote his *Summa doctrinae christianae* (1555), a catechism that went through hundreds of editions and shaped Catholic religious education for centuries. He spent his final years in Fribourg, where he founded the College of Saint-Michel. He was canonized and proclaimed Doctor of the Church in 1925.

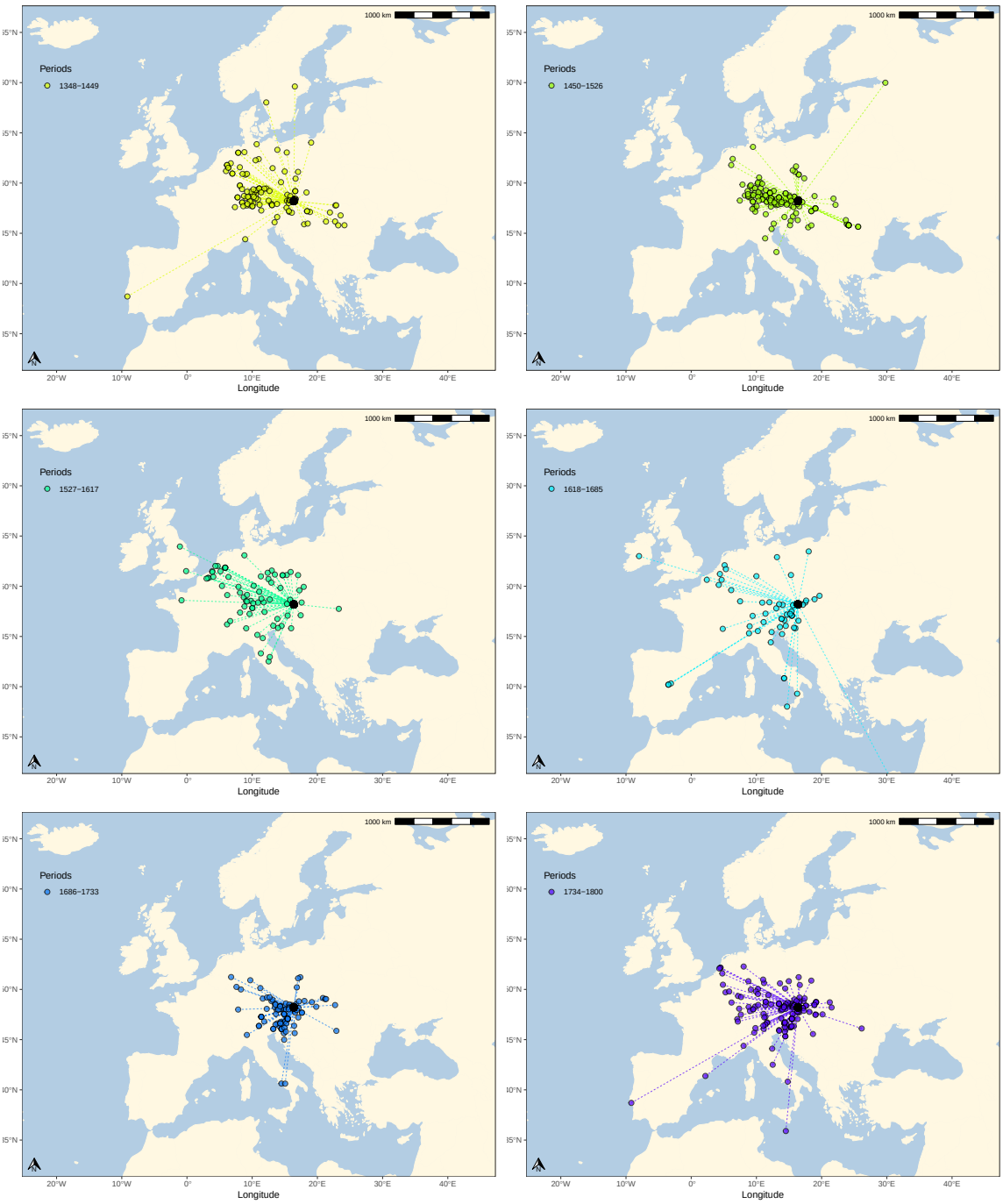


Figure 2: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Vienna

Johannes Müller (Regiomontanus) (Königsberg in Bavaria 1436 – Rome 1476) was the greatest astronomer of the fifteenth century. After studying in Leipzig, he enrolled in Vienna in 1450, where he became the pupil and collaborator of Georg von Peurbach. He taught in the faculty of arts, lecturing on Euclid, perspective, and the classics. After Peurbach's death in 1461, he completed the *Epitome* of Ptolemy's *Almagest* commissioned by Cardinal Bessarion, whom he followed to Italy. He later worked at the court of Matthias Corvinus in Hungary and settled in Nuremberg, where he founded one of the first scientific printing presses. His *Ephemerides* (1474) were used by navigators of the age of discoveries. He died in Rome, where Pope Sixtus IV had called him to work on the reform of the calendar.

Guillaume Postel (Barenton 1510 – Paris 1581) was a French orientalist and linguist. The first holder of a chair of oriental languages at the Collège des lecteurs royaux in Paris (1538), he travelled twice to the Ottoman Empire and collected Arabic, Hebrew, and Syriac manuscripts. In 1554 he was called to Vienna by Ferdinand I, where he briefly taught oriental languages and contributed to the first printed edition of the Syriac New Testament with Johann Albrecht Widmanstetter (1555). His prophetic and universalist ideas, centred on the concord of all religions under a single monarchy, led to the placing of his works on the Index and to his confinement as insane by the Venetian Inquisition. He spent his last years confined in the monastery of Saint-Martin-des-Champs in Paris.

Karl Leonhard Reinhold (Vienna 1757 – Kiel 1823) was an Austrian philosopher. Educated by the Jesuits, he entered the order of the Barnabites after the suppression of the Society in 1773 and taught philosophy in Vienna. In 1783 he fled to Leipzig and then to Weimar, where he converted to Protestantism, worked for Wieland's *Teutscher Merkur*, and married Wieland's daughter. His *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* (1786–1787) made Kant known to a wide public and earned him a chair at Jena (1787), where his *Elementarphilosophie* prepared the ground for German idealism. From 1794 he taught at Kiel.

Albert of Saxony (Albertus de Saxonia) (Rickensdorf c. 1320 – Halberstadt 1390) was a German philosopher and logician. A master of arts at Paris, where he was rector in 1353, he belonged to the circle of Jean Buridan and Nicole Oresme and developed influential theories on impetus and the motion of falling bodies. His *Perutilis logica* was widely used in European universities. In 1365 he became the first rector of the newly founded University of Vienna and took part in drafting its statutes. The following year he was appointed bishop of Halberstadt, where he died in 1390.

8 Related scholar

Beyond those who taught at the University of Vienna, at least two important individuals are related to the university.

Johannes Sambucus (János Zsámboky) (Trnava 1531 – Vienna 1584) was a Hungarian humanist, physician, philologist, and historian. After studying in many European universities, he settled in Vienna, where he became court physician and imperial historiographer under Maximilian II. His *Emblemata* (1564) is one of the major emblem books of the Renaissance. His rich collection of Greek manuscripts entered the imperial library, today the Austrian National Library.

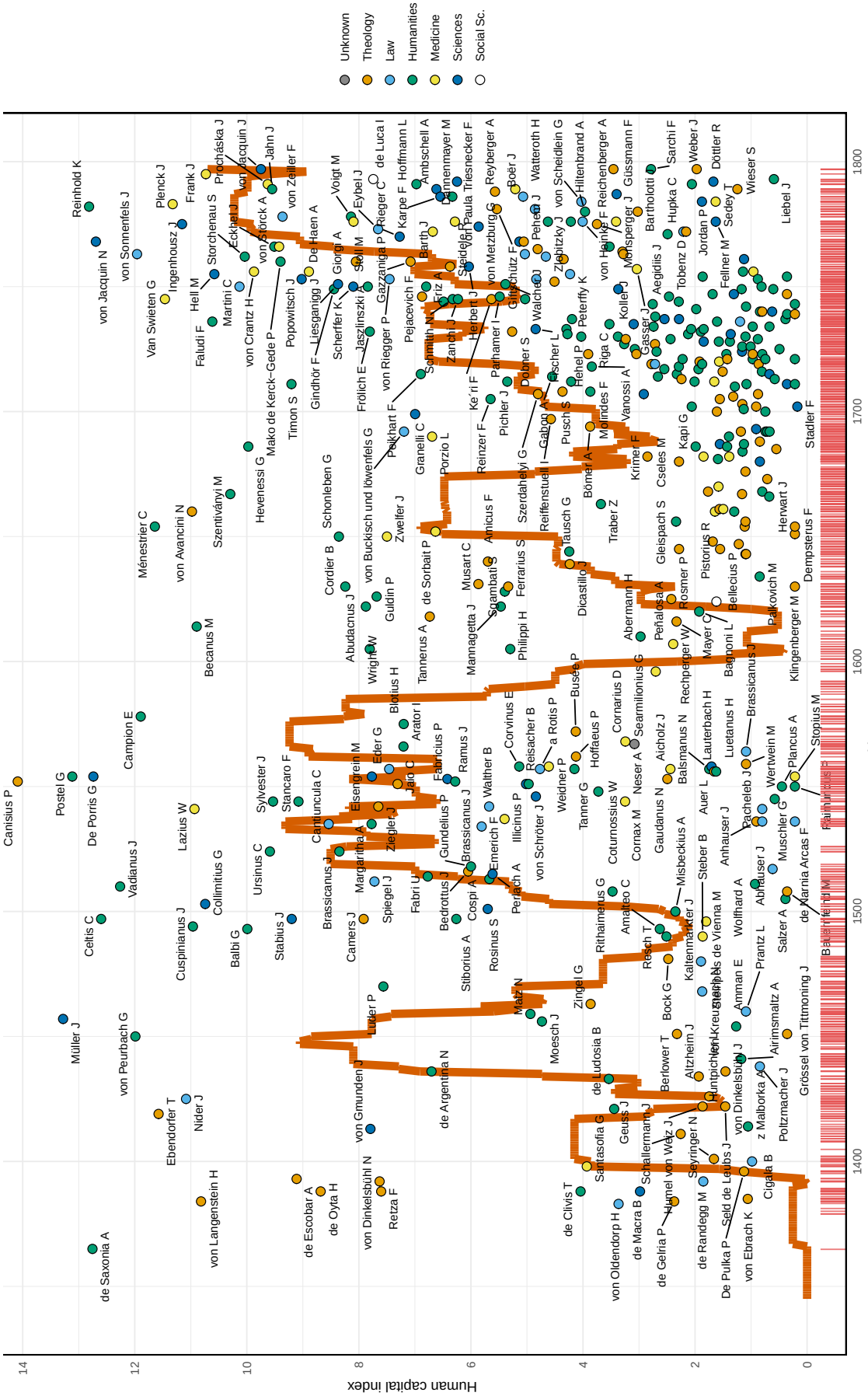


Figure 3: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq (Comines 1522 – Saint-Germain-sous-Cailly 1592) was a Flemish diplomat and humanist, ambassador of Ferdinand I to the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. His *Turkish Letters* are an important source on the Ottoman Empire. He brought back to Vienna about 240 Greek manuscripts for the imperial library, copied the *Monumentum Ancyranum*, and is credited with introducing the tulip and the lilac to Western Europe.

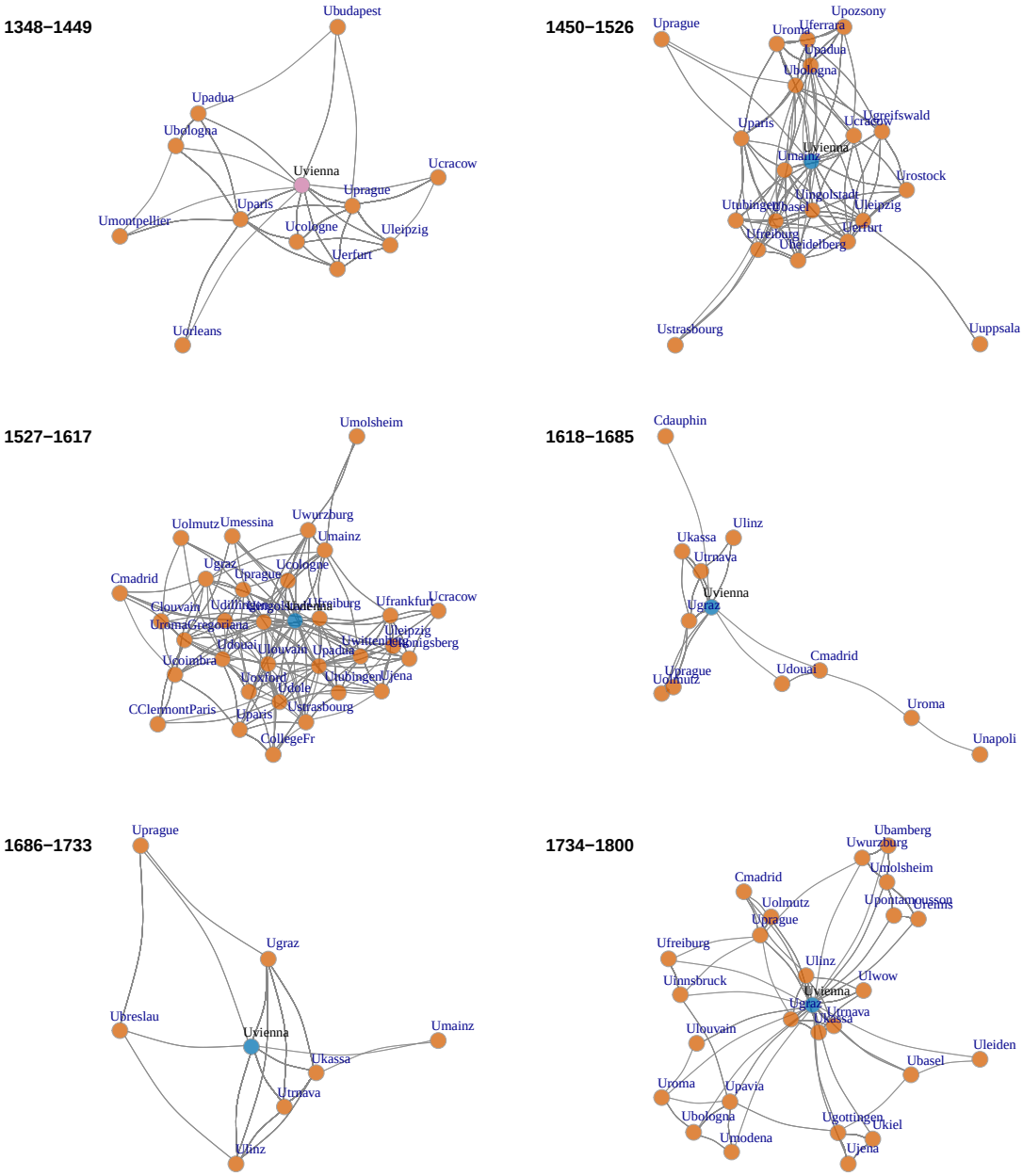


Figure 4: Links between Vienna and other universities through scholars' mobility by period

9 University network

Our assumption is that a professors' involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a linkage between those institutions(de la Croix and Morault 2025). We present those universities that were connected to the University of Vienna during each period in Figure 4. The evolution of the network follows the political and confessional history of the city closely. In the first

period, Vienna is tied to the great medieval universities (Paris, Prague, Bologna, Padua, Montpellier, Orléans) and to the new foundations of Central Europe (Cracow, Leipzig, Erfurt, Cologne). Between 1450 and 1526 the network expands to about twenty institutions, from Uppsala to Rome, including the new German universities (Basel, Freiburg, Ingolstadt, Tübingen, Rostock, Greifswald).

The Jesuits at the University of Vienna

The Society of Jesus arrived in Vienna in 1551, called by Ferdinand I to fight the spread of Protestantism and to revive a university that had lost most of its students and many of its professors. The first group, led by Claude Jay, settled in the former Carmelite convent Am Hof; Petrus Canisius joined them in 1552. Ferdinand's immediate aim was to fill the empty chairs of the faculty of theology, and Jay and Canisius were soon teaching at the university. Alongside it, the Jesuits opened a college and a grammar school, which quickly attracted the sons of the nobility and of the urban elites.

The coexistence of two teaching institutions soon led to a long conflict. The university defended its corporate privileges, and in particular the monopoly on conferring degrees, against a college that taught the same subjects with its own professors and its own methods, following the *Ratio studiorum*. The dispute was settled in 1623, when Ferdinand II, with the *Sanctio Pragmatica*, merged the Jesuit college with the university and entrusted the Society with the chairs of theology and philosophy. The Jesuits moved to a new college next to the university, together with the University Church (*Jesuitenkirche*), built between 1623 and 1631 and later remodelled by the Jesuit painter and architect Andrea Pozzo, whose illusionistic painted dome is still one of the landmarks of Viennese Baroque.

For one and a half centuries, Vienna was the centre of the Austrian province of the Society, which until 1773 also included the Kingdom of Hungary. Its professors circulated continuously among the colleges and universities of Graz, Linz, Prague, Olmütz, Trnava, and Kassa, which explains both the Habsburg shape of the university network in the seventeenth century and the large number of Hungarian and Croatian Jesuits among the Viennese professors. Philosophy was usually taught in a three-year cycle by young professors, who changed chair, and often city, every few years. The Jesuits were also active in the theatre: the school dramas of Nikolaus von Avancini, such as *Pietas victrix* (1659), were staged before the imperial court. The Society also made Vienna an important centre of astronomy. Maximilian Hell became director of the new university observatory, built on the roof of the new Aula, in 1755, and from 1757 published the *Ephemerides astronomicae ad meridianum Vindobonensem*. From the 1750s, however, the reforms of Maria Theresa progressively removed the Jesuits from the direction of studies, and the suppression of the Society in 1773 ended their monopoly. Their chairs were filled by secular priests and laymen, while some former Jesuits, like Hell himself, kept their posts.

The network reaches its maximum extent in 1527–1617, when it combines Protestant universities (Wittenberg, Jena, Königsberg, Frankfurt) with the emerging Jesuit circuit (Collegio Romano, Dillingen, Graz, Olmütz, Würzburg, Douai, Coimbra, Molsheim, Clermont). In the seventeenth century, it shrinks to a Habsburg and Jesuit system (Graz, Linz, Prague, Olmütz, Kassa, Trnava), and between 1686 and 1733 only seven institutions remain connected to Vienna. The last period shows a clear reopening, with links to Protestant universities such as Göttingen, Jena, and Kiel, and to Leiden, Louvain, and Pavia, reflecting the new recruitment policies of the Theresian and Josephinist state.

10 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. Five professors from the University of Vienna received this honor: Georg von Peurbach (1423–1461), who renewed planetary theory with his *Theoricae novae planetarum*. Johannes Müller (Regiomontanus) (1436–1476), his pupil and collaborator. Andreas Stiborius (c. 1470–1515), astronomer and mathematician of Celtis' circle and member of the *Collegium poetarum et mathematicorum*. Adam Tanner (1572–1632), Jesuit theologian and opponent of witch trials, who taught theology in Vienna in 1618–1619. Maximilian Hell (1720–1792), Jesuit, professor of astronomy and director of the Vienna university observatory.

11 Anecdote

In 1769, the Jesuit Maximilian Hell, director of the Vienna observatory, travelled at the invitation of King Christian VII of Denmark to Vardø, on the Arctic coast of Norway, to observe the transit of Venus across the sun. His results, published only some months later, were suspected of having been adjusted to fit the observations made elsewhere, and Hell was accused of fraud for more than a century. Only in 1883 did the American astronomer Simon Newcomb, after studying Hell's original notebooks, vindicate him (Aspaas and Kontler 2020).

12 Final Thoughts

What distinguishes the University of Vienna is how closely its trajectory followed Habsburg policy. The university was founded, re-founded, handed over to the Jesuits and finally turned into a state institution by successive rulers, and its network expanded and contracted accordingly.

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