

Scholars and Literati at the Royal Naval Academy of France in Brest (1752–1793)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati at the Royal Naval Academy of France in Brest between its creation in 1752 and 1800. For more detailed information about these individuals, please visit the comprehensive database available at <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>.

1 THE ACADEMY

The Royal Naval Academy of Brest dates to around 1750, when Captain Sébastien-François Bigot de Morogues (Brest 1706 – Jouy-le-Potier 1781), along with fellow officers, commenced drafting a marine dictionary. The Secretary of State for the Navy, Antoine Louis Rouillé, formalized the institution in 1752, with the request that it be nationalized. The Academy's mission was to improve knowledge of the marine sciences during a period of significant progress in nautical astronomy and hydrodynamics. It convened ship's officers, engineers, and scientists for regular meetings and writing memoirs. Subjects such as naval architecture, navigation and hydrography were discussed, incorporating broader fields such as mathematics. Despite a temporary pause between 1765 and 1769 due to the Seven Years' War, the Academy rebounded and earned the title of "Royal". As with all French universities and academies, it came to an end in 1793, following a decree by the French National Convention during the Revolution.

2 SOURCES

To find the members of the Royal Naval Academy of Brest, we primarily used the academy's website, which provides names and detailed biographies for all members between 1752 and 1793 (Académie de Marine 2023). From this website, we collected all the micro-level information we needed: place of birth and death with dates, and possible additional affiliations. In addition, we also utilized the archive of the Committee for Historical and Scientific Works (Marion 2019). We completed the missing information thanks to their list of historical members with additional information about their lives and their roles within the academy.

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. We found 194 people who members from the foundation of the Royal Naval Academy of Brest until 1800. Among these 194, 32 are either corresponding members or foreign members. Information on the place and year of birth was found for more than 80% of members, which is slightly above the average of other academies. The scholars involved became members when they were around 39-40 years old (the average is about 37 years old, see Zanardello (2024)). They also remained members for the rest of their lives (mean age at death is 65.7 years, see Zanardello (2024)). The percentage of scholars who left a footprint in the VIAF catalogue and/or in Wikipedia is 49%, which is relatively low compared to similar academies of the time (Zanardello 2024). This may be because it is a naval academy, where scholars were not only

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1734–1800	194	90.2%	83%	39.5	65.6	49%	49%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

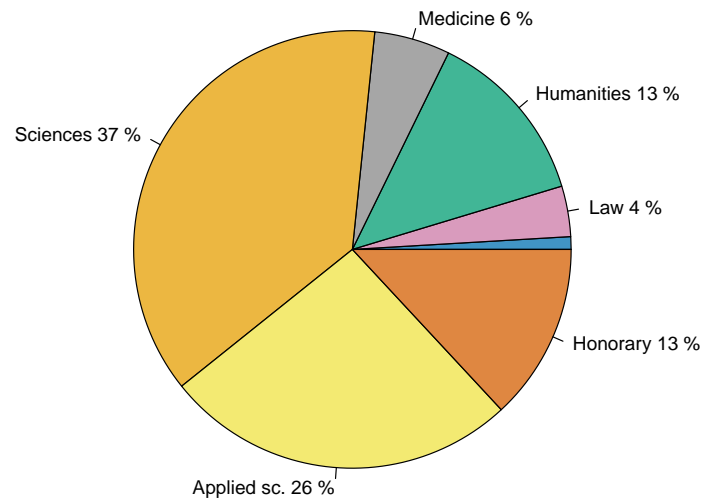


Figure 1: Broad fields at the Royal Naval Academy in Brest (published scholars only)

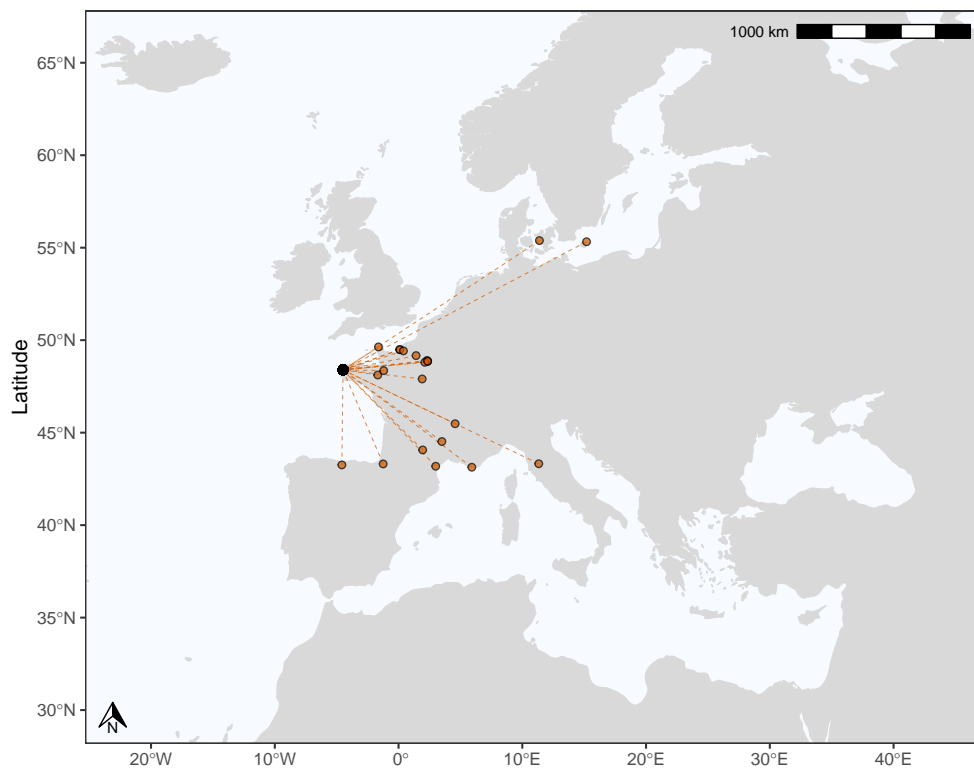


Figure 2: Places of birth of the corresponding members of the Royal Naval Academy in Brest

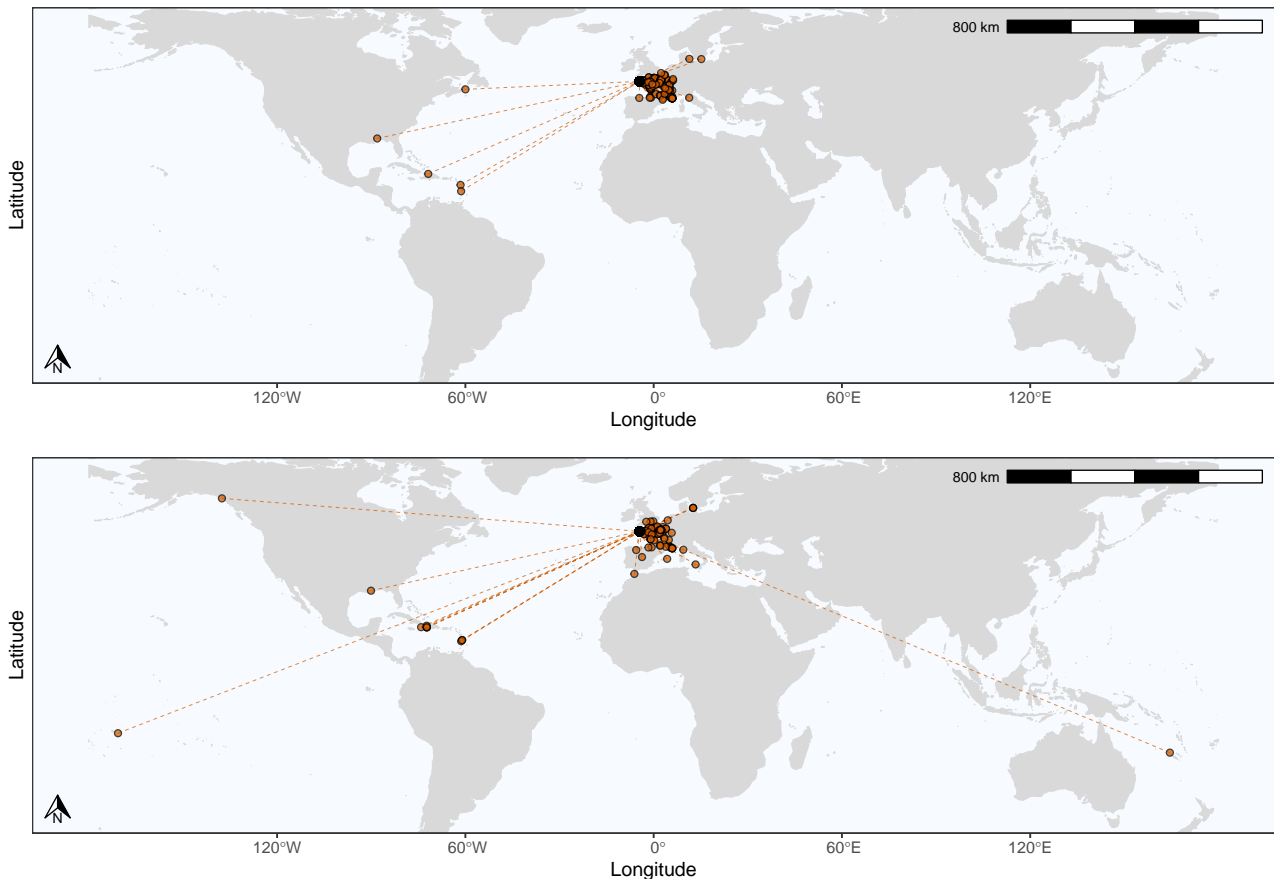


Figure 3: Places of birth (above) and places of death (below) of the members of the Royal Naval Academy in Brest worldwide

members of the academy but also of the Navy. Hence, they were actively involved in naval defence activities, and not full time scholars (i.e., planning and building ships, fortifications, streets, water plants, etc.).

4 FIELDS

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of academic disciplines within the Royal Naval Academy in Brest. More than half of the members were engaged in the sciences and applied sciences, in particular engineering, architecture, and agronomy. They planned, managed, and built new boats, better infrastructure, and more efficient streets and canals. They operated in the field, where their missions took them. Humanities and law had a marginal role in the activities of the academy and account for 17% of the total. Honorary members make up 13% of the total; these scholars are usually officers who demonstrated both a strong inclination toward the sciences and fierce courage on the battlefield.

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces of the ordinary members active at the Royal Naval Academy in Brest. Members came mostly from France, but there are some scholars from the French colonies of the time, such as Étienne Eustache Bruix (Saint-Domingue 1759 - Paris 1805) and Jean Étienne Bernard Clugny de Nuits (Sainte-Rose in Guadeloupe 1729 - Paris 1776).

To fully grasp the outreach of the Royal Naval Academy in Brest, it is interesting to present the spread of the places of death as well. Because the academy focused on naval matters and was populated by navy officers, many of its members died while on missions. This data is presented in the lower panel of Figure 3: many members died in France but half a dozen of them died in Southern

Europe, and another handful died much further away — as far as New Caledonia, Samoa, Martinique, and the Dominican Republic. We know the place of death for about 80% of the scholars affiliated to Royal Naval Academy in Brest, compared to an average of around 60% for the whole database.

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. The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023). Figure 4 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index at the Royal Naval Academy in Brest.

7 TOP 5 SCHOLARS

We provide a brief overview of five members with a high human capital index, skipping the second and the fourth (Lalande, member of at least 25 academies, and Bouguer, member of at least 4 academies) who have already been described in other issues of RETE.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville (Paris 1729 — Paris 1811) was a French naval officer, explorer, and writer. He studied law before embarking on a military career. Sent to Canada as aide-de-camp to the Marquis de Montcalm, he played an important role in the defense of Nouvelle-France. From 1766 to 1769, he led the first French-commissioned circumnavigation of the globe. The publication of his logbook, *Voyage autour du monde*, was a great success. He took part in the American War of Independence and was appointed Senator and Count by Napoleon Bonaparte after the French Revolution.

Henri Louis Duhamel du Monceau (Paris 1700 — Paris 1782) was a French agronomist, naval engineer, and botanist. After studying law, he turned his attention to farming and forestry, researching the estate he inherited from his father. A versatile scientist, he was appointed Inspector General of the Navy in 1739 and founded a marine school two years later. Duhamel is considered to be one of the founding members of the Royal Naval Academy in Brest. He left behind numerous publications on a wide range of subjects, including ship maneuvers, agriculture, and fishing.

Jacques-Nicolas Bellin (Paris 1703 — Versailles 1772) was a French cartographer, hydrographer, and encyclopedist. He produced maps for many significant works of his time. His remarkable cartography of North America, although he never actually went there, was intended to secure navigation and help claim certain lands for France. Bellin became a free member of the Royal Naval Academy in Brest in 1752. He wrote 1,023 articles for Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, mainly on naval matters.

Yves Joseph de Kerguelen de Trémarec (Landudal 1734 — Paris 1797) was a French naval officer and navigator. Born into Breton nobility, he joined the Gardes de la Marine at 16, a program that trained young nobles for naval officer roles. He then entered the Royal Navy and played an active role in the Seven Years’ War. His hydrographic surveys earned him admission to the Académie de Marine of Brest. After a campaign in the North Atlantic, he undertook two expeditions in search of the southern continent. During these explorations, de Kerguelen discovered an archipelago which was later named after him. Upon his return, he was accused of several offenses, including illicit trading, and was imprisoned. He rejoined the navy after his release.

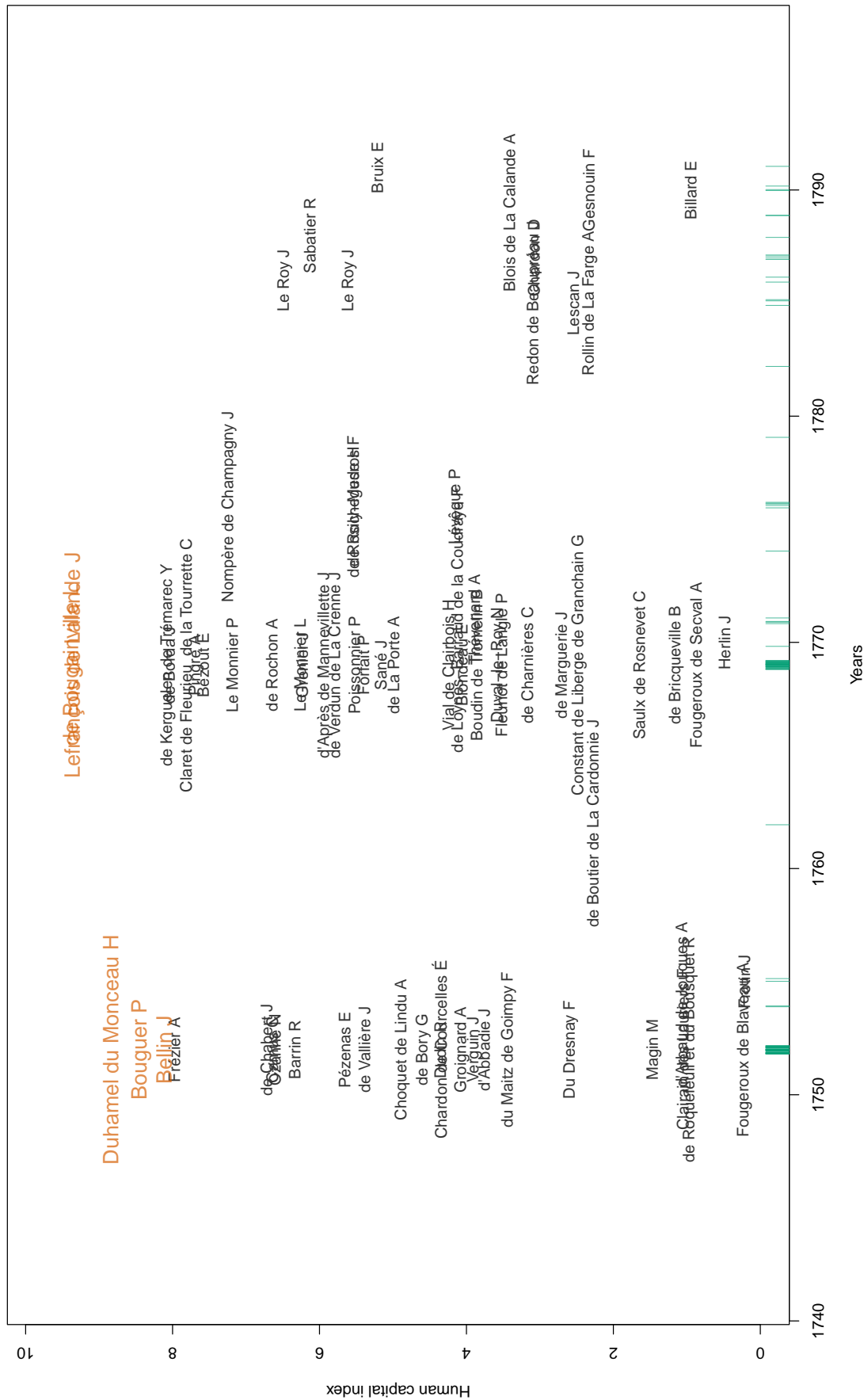


Figure 4: Famous scholars at the Royal Naval Academy in Brest

Jean-Charles de Borda (Dax 1733 – Paris 1799) was a French mathematician, physicist, and navigator. Born into a military family, he was admitted to the Ecole Royale du Génie de Mézières and appointed aide-de-camp to General de Maillebois during the Seven Years' War. As a maritime engineer, Borda participated in several expeditions, including to the Canary Islands and the West Indies. Among his contributions were the invention of a measuring instrument and the development of a voting system. He also played a role in defining measurement systems such as the metre and authored several remarkable memoirs on geometry, hydraulics, and fluid resistance. In addition to the Royal Naval Academy in Brest, he was also an eminent member of the Académie des Sciences in Paris.

8 VICTIMS OF THE REVOLUTION

The French Revolution was probably the most deadly event for academics over the period 1000-1800. Not only was every French academy and university shut down in 1793, but many scholars were arrested, jailed, and sentenced to death. We list the three victims from the Royal Naval Academy in Brest with a brief story and their human capital index q .

Pierre-Claude Haudeneau de Breugnon (Brest 1717 – Paris 1792) was a royal ambassador under Louis XV at the court of the Moroccan Sultan in 1767. He fought during the United States' War of Independence and received the nomination to vice-admiral in January 1792, although he was already retired from his naval duties. He was assassinated during the "Massacres de Septembre" on September 6, 1792 [Age 75, honorary member (i.e., no q), naval officer and statesman].

Arnaud de La Porte (Versailles 1737 – Paris 1792) was a financial magistrate, like his father and grandfather. He became Minister of the Marine in 1789, just a few days before the fall of the Bastille. He emigrated to Spain but returned to serve Louis XVI as Intendant of the Civil List. This task proved fatal for him: being the manager of most of the King's private funds and one of his closest advisors, he was arrested on August 10, 1792. Thirteen days later, he was guillotined as a traitor to the Revolution, and his head was shown to the imprisoned King [Age 54, q 4.99, statesman].

Bache Elzéar Alexandre d'Arbaud (Aix-en-Provence 1720 – Aix-en-Provence 1793) was a captain of a vessel and took part in many missions and battles such as Cape Sicié in 1744 and the Battle of Lagos in 1759. He was appointed special governor of Guadeloupe, Marie-Galante, Désirade, Saint-Barthélemy, and the French part of Saint-Martin in 1775. He planned and completed many improvements to the fortifications of Guadeloupe. At the start of the Terror in Aix-en-Provence (August 1793 – September 1794), 1,280 people were arrested in the city, including Alexandre d'Arbaud. He died in prison [Age 70, q 1.05, Captain of the Navy].

9 FINAL THOUGHTS

The Royal Naval Academy in Brest was established as the project of a Captain of the Navy. His plan was to expand naval officers' knowledge and enhance naval equipment. The academy remained relatively local, but reached its initial goal with most members drawn from the navy and involved in global military missions.

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

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/UTHCerc>

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

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