

Scholars and Literati at the University of Montpellier (1289–1793)

David de la Croix

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Montpellier from its earliest days (before its official foundation in 1289) to its dissolution in 1793.

1 SOURCES

To compile the prosopographical database of the University of Montpellier, we rely on a set of secondary sources. The collection of books by Dulieu provides a detailed account of the faculty of medicine: Dulieu (1975, 1979, 1983). Astruc (1767) complements this collection with detailed biographies. The faculty of law is well covered by combining Fournier (1892), Faucillon (1862), Anonymous (1877) and Germain (1874).

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The reputation of the city of Montpellier as a center of learning was established well before the official foundation of the university. By the 12th century, it was already known for its medical school, which attracted scholars from across Europe. The school of law also emerged around this time, with significant influence from the University of Bologna.

Theology was at first taught in the convents, in which St. Anthony of Padua, Raymond Llull, and the Dominican Bernard de Trilia were lecturers (Herbermann 1913).

In 1220, Pope Honorius III issued a papal bull officially recognizing the medical school of Montpellier. Later, in 1289, Pope Nicholas IV issued a papal bull that officially established the University of Montpellier as a generalist university (*Studium generale*), incorporating faculties of medicine, law, and arts. The university flourished during the medieval and Renaissance periods, becoming a leading center of intellectual thought. Famous physicians such as Arnaud de Villeneuve and Guy de Chauliac (14th century) contributed to its reputation. The Jardin des Plantes (botanic garden), founded in 1593, further enhanced Montpellier's reputation as a center for botanical studies.

From 1560 to 1622 Montpellier became a stronghold of Protestantism (Huguenots). The university, along with the city's political institutions, saw a strong Protestant influence. Many professors and students were drawn to the Reformed faith, until the restoration of control of the city by Louis XIII.

The university experienced periods of disruption, particularly during the religious conflicts of the 16th century. Afterwards, it remained a prestigious institution, particularly in medicine, with figures like François Boissier de Sauvages de Lacroix and Paul Joseph Barthez. Like all French universities, the University of Montpellier was abolished during the French Revolution in 1793, but the teaching of medicine survived. It was reconstituted as a university in 1896.

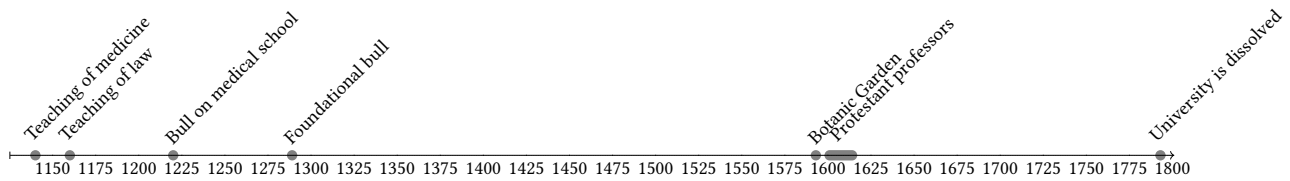


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Montpellier

Period	no. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1000–1199	13	38.5%	76.9%	33	75	162	53.8%	61.5%
1200–1347	162	21%	48.8%	38.6	66.1	162	22.8%	27.2%
1348–1449	36	38.9%	58.3%	39.6	68.9	227	19.4%	36.1%
1450–1526	100	5%	32%	26.4	62.8	110	3%	10%
1527–1617	102	31.4%	88.2%	32.9	66.4	111	12.7%	35.3%
1618–1685	54	77.8%	83.3%	37.4	66.5	0	9.3%	22.2%
1686–1733	34	91.2%	88.2%	36.5	68.4	0	38.2%	55.9%
1734–1800	55	89.1%	92.7%	36.2	66.4	21	32.7%	65.5%
1200–1800	556	38.1%	64.4%	36.2	66.9	84	18.5%	32%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

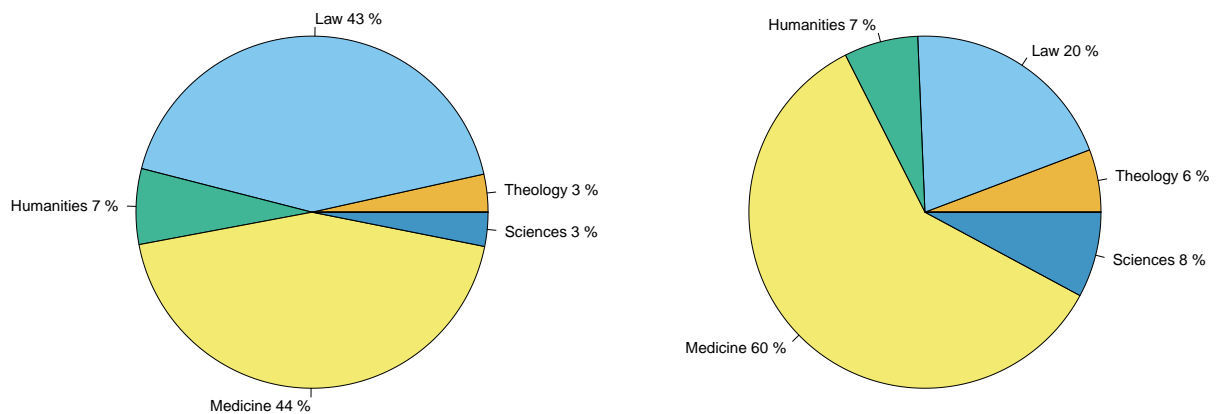


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Montpellier (left:all scholars; right: published scholars)

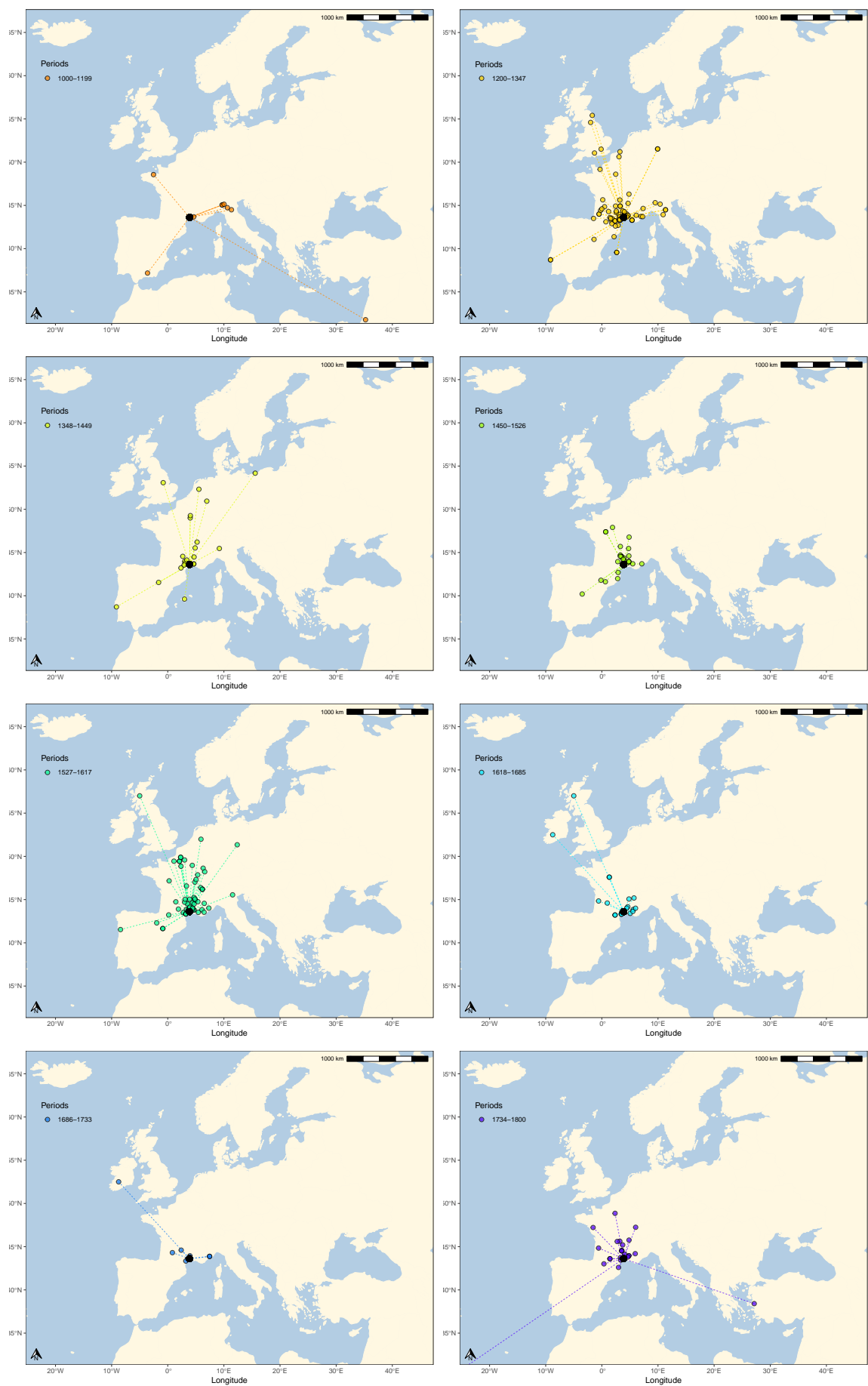


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Montpellier

3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. The dataset includes information on 556 scholars, including 13 scholars before 1200. The information available (birth place, birth year) is of variable quality, depending on the period. The worst period is 1450–1526, with many obscure scholars. The average age at which they began teaching is 36.2 years.

The median distance between professors' places of birth and the university is 84 km. It was higher during the first periods, dropping to 0, 0, and 21 km during the last three periods. As is often the case, the Middle Ages was a period of higher mobility than the Early Modern period. Finally, 18.5% of the scholars have a Wikipedia page (in some language), while 32.3% of them have left a footprint in the world's library catalogs, as recorded in VIAF. Those are slightly below-average numbers.

4 FIELDS

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of teaching disciplines, for all scholars on the left, and for published scholars on the right. The domination of medicine is confirmed, even more so when we consider the published scholars.

5 PLACES OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces for the scholars who were active at the University of Montpellier by period. Before its official foundation, the University of Montpellier recruited mainly from Italy. At that time, it did not belong to the French crown, but to the kingdom of Aragon. Over 1200-1347, there was a significant contribution of the British Isles and the Iberic Peninsula to the faculty. In the following periods, until 1793, the majority of the scholars came from France, but scholars keep coming from Spain as well.

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. We also compute the notability of the university at each date by averaging the human capital of the five best scholars active in Montpellier 25 years before that date. 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. The orange line displays the notability of the university, based on how well-published its top scholars were.

The University of Montpellier shows a series of periods of grandeur separated from each other by periods of decline. The apogees are around 1300, 1600, and 1793. The lows are 1400-1500 and 1600-1700. From the colors of the points we see that both medicine and law contributed to the peak in 1300, while medicine was the main driver after 1600, with some contribution from science during the last century.

7 TOP 8 PROFESSORS

We now provide a brief overview of the eight professors with the highest human capital index.

François Rabelais (Chinon 1490 – Paris 1553) was a French Renaissance writer, physician, and humanist, best known for his satirical works *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. He studied medicine at the University of Montpellier, where he earned his medical degree in 1530. Rabelais taught and practiced medicine there, contributing to the university's reputation as a leading medical institution. His writings combined humor, erudition, and social critique, reflecting the humanist spirit of his time. His legacy endures as a master of satire and linguistic creativity.



Arnaud de Villeneuve (Villanueva-de-Jiloca c. 1240 – Genova 1311), also called Arnaldus de Villa Nova, was a medieval physician, alchemist, and theologian, known for his medical writings and translations of classical and Arabic works. He studied and later taught at the University of Montpellier (Astruc 1767). Later, he also taught at the University of Lleida (Lladonosa 1969) and the University of Naples (Vitale 2024). His contributions to medicine included works on dietetics, fevers, and the distillation of alcohol for medicinal use. He also engaged in theological debates, sometimes attracting controversy.

Guillaume de Grimoard (Pont-de-Montvert 1310 – Avignon 1370), later known as Pope Urban V, was a French Benedictine monk, scholar, and pope. He studied law and theology at the University of Montpellier, where he later became a professor of law (1342-1348) (Herbermann 1913). Renowned for his piety and scholarship, he was elected pope in 1362 and sought to reform the clergy and promote education. He attempted to return the papacy from Avignon to Rome but faced political challenges. Despite his short papacy, he was beatified for his devotion to church reform and learning.

Alain de Lille (Lille c. 1116 – Saint-Nicolas-lès-Cîteaux 1202) was a French theologian, philosopher, and poet, known for his works on logic, ethics, and Christian doctrine. He is believed to have studied and taught at the University of Montpellier (Delaruelle 1977), contributing to its reputation as a center of learning. His writings, such as *De Planctu Naturae* and *Anticlaudianus*, blended scholasticism with allegory and poetic imagery. A defender of Catholic orthodoxy, he engaged in debates against heresies of his time.

Jean-Antoine Chaptal (Nojaret 1756 – Paris 1832) was a French chemist and politician, known for his significant contributions to the field of chemistry and the development of the chemical industry in France. He studied medicine and natural sciences at the University of Montpellier, where he taught in 1780 (Dulieu 1983). Chaptal is best known for his work on the properties of various chemical substances and for developing processes to produce chemicals, including sugar from beetroot. He was member of several academies (Montpellier, Turin, Nîmes, Toulouse). He also served as a minister of the interior under Napoleon Bonaparte and played a crucial role in promoting education and industry in France.

Isaac Casaubon (Geneva 1559 – London 1614) was a French classical scholar, philologist, and Protestant theologian, known for his critical editions of ancient texts. He studied at the University of Montpellier, where he developed a strong foundation in Greek and Latin literature. Isaac Casaubon taught at the University of Montpellier for a time (Attinger, Godet, and Türler 1928). He was appointed as a professor of Greek and later became involved in the study of theology and philosophy. Casaubon was highly regarded for his expertise in textual criticism and his ability to analyze and interpret classical works. After Montpellier, he moved to the Royal College in Paris (De la Croix 2021).

Guglielmo Durante (Puimisson 1260 – Rome 1330), also known as William of Durandus, was a French canonist (lawyer specializing in canon law, the law of the Church) and liturgical writer. He studied in Bologna and, according to Fournier (1892), taught at the University of Montpellier (c. 1250–1260). Later, he was also a professor in Modena (De la Croix and Zanardello 2023). His principal work is the *Speculum iudiciale*, which was compiled in 1271. It is a general explanation of civil, criminal, and canonical procedure. Another influential text is *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, which provided a systematic explanation of the liturgy. It was one of the first books to be printed, in Mainz (1459).

Guy de Chauliac (Chaulhac c. 1298 – Avignon 1368) was a prominent French surgeon and physician, renowned for his contributions to medical practice and surgery during the medieval period. He studied medicine at the universities of Bologna and Montpellier, where he taught sporadically, while living most of the time in Avignon, close to the court of the Pope (Dulieu 1975). Chauliac is best known for his influential work *Chirurgia*, which compiled surgical

knowledge and techniques of the time and became a standard textbook in Europe for several centuries. His writings emphasized the importance of observation and experience in medicine, and he is often regarded as the father of modern surgery due to his systematic approach to surgical procedures and anatomy.

8 RELATED SCHOLARS

Beyond those who taught at the University of Montpellier, several important individuals were related to the university. From their writings, we can deduce that they also probably taught at the university. They are counted in the data for all figures but Figure 3.

Ramon Llull (Palma de Mallorca c. 1232 – Palma de Mallorca (?) 1316) was a Majorcan philosopher, theologian, and polymath, known for his contributions to logic, literature, and mysticism. He studied and later likely taught at the University of Montpellier (Dulieu 1975). He influenced medieval thought with his *Ars Magna*, a system of logical combination aimed at proving Christian doctrine. Llull was a pioneer of Catalan literature and wrote extensively in Latin, Arabic, and Catalan. His work in combinatorial logic is considered a precursor to modern computational theory. He traveled widely, promoting interfaith dialogue and missionary work.

Fernando Martins de Bulhões (Lisbon c. 1195 – Padua 1231), better known as Saint Anthony of Padua, was a Portuguese Franciscan friar and renowned preacher. According to Herbermann (1913) he taught at the universities of Bologna (De la Croix and Vitale 2021) and Montpellier (in 1224), and later at Toulouse (De la Croix and Fabre 2022). Originally an Augustinian, he later joined the Franciscans and became famous for his eloquence and theological insight. His sermons, marked by wisdom and compassion, earned him the title Doctor of the Church. Saint Anthony remains one of the most venerated saints in Christianity, especially as the patron of lost things.

Pedro Julião (c. 1215–1277), (or Petrus Hispanus), was a Portuguese scholar, physician, and theologian. His life is shrouded in mystery. He likely studied medicine, philosophy, and theology at the University of Montpellier (Dulieu 1975) and other European institutions. Renowned for his medical treatise *Thesaurus Pauperum*, he contributed to medieval medical and logical thought. In 1276, he became pope under the name John XXI but served for less than a year before dying in a tragic accident (the identity between Petrus Hispanus and Pope John XXI is however still subject to debate).

Adamantios Korais (Izmir 1748 – Paris 1833) was a Greek scholar, humanist, and key figure of the Greek Enlightenment. He studied medicine at the University of Montpellier before shifting his focus to philology and classical studies. In Montpellier, he taught for four months before moving to Paris. Korais played a crucial role in the revival of the Greek language and the intellectual preparation for Greece's independence from the Ottoman Empire. His critical editions of ancient Greek texts helped shape modern Greek identity and education. He is regarded as a founding father of modern Greek literature and nationalism.

Pierre de Jean Olivi (Serignan c. 1248 – Narbonne 1298) was a French Franciscan theologian and philosopher known for his influential writings on theology and spirituality. According to Herbermann (1913), he taught in Montpellier, probably in the Franciscan convent. Olivi is recognized for his critiques of contemporary theological thought, particularly regarding poverty, grace, and the nature of God.

Samuel ben Judah ibn Tibbon (Lunel c. 1150 – Marseille 1230) was a Jewish philosopher, physician, and translator, best known for translating Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed from Arabic into Hebrew. He studied medicine and philosophy, possibly at the University of Montpellier, when it was a center for Jewish and Arabic learning in medieval Europe. His trans-

lations helped transmit Aristotelian and Neoplatonic thought to Jewish scholars. Ibn Tibbon also wrote commentaries on biblical and philosophical texts, advocating for the integration of reason and faith.

9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Following De la Croix and Morault (2025), our assumption is that a professor's involvement in multiple universities throughout their career establishes a link between those institutions. We present the universities that were connected to the University of Montpellier during each period in Figure 5. Here, the periods of grandeur appear clearly, with a larger number of connections in 1200–1347 and 1527–1617. We also notice the link between Montpellier and Salerno (the first medical school in Europe) during the first period, which quickly vanishes as Salerno lost importance.

10 IF YOU VISIT MONTPELLIER

The city of Montpellier has many jewels going back to the old faculty of Medicine. I warmly recommend a visit of the medicine faculty, reservation needed (<https://book.montpellier-tourisme.fr/fr/voir-faire/248499/la-facult%C3%A9-de-m%C3%A9decine-un-b%C3%A2timent-historique/>). Figure 6 displays the gallery of portraits of past professors, highlighting the university's strong connection to its history. This is particularly notable in France, where the legacy of Ancien Régime universities was largely disrupted by the Revolution and the complex transformations of the 19th century.

The botanic garden is also worth a visit.

11 ANECDOTE

In De la Croix et al. (2024), we used the following anecdote to discuss the reliability of bibliographical data for earlier periods. It pertains to the oculist *Benevenutus Hierosolymitanus*, also known as Benevenutus of Jerusalem. His life is totally unknown to historians, but his book, *Ars probatissima oculorum*, was immensely popular and influential – having already been translated into four languages in medieval times. From other writings citing his work, historians infer he lived between 1100 and 1290. Assigning Jerusalem as his place of birth is disputed, but seems the likeliest option, given the knowledge of Middle Eastern cultures displayed in his writings (remember that Jerusalem was for some time a Latin kingdom (1099–1187)). He was also obviously acquainted with the medical school of Salerno, and he likely taught there (being the physician from Salerno in one manuscript, namely the *Besançon Manuscript*). The most intriguing part concerns his relation with Montpellier, another famous medical school. In 1921, the Faculty of Medicine in Montpellier placed a marble slab in its entrance hall listing him among its early faculty members. There are some arguments to link Benevenutus of Jerusalem to Montpellier, but there remains a “considerable disparity between the fragility of the documentary basis for the Montpellier inscription and the robustness of the stone on which it was engraved” (Kedar 1995).

12 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Montpellier was a hub of intellectual exchange in Medieval Europe. It maintained a high status, particularly in medicine, until the French Revolution.

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

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

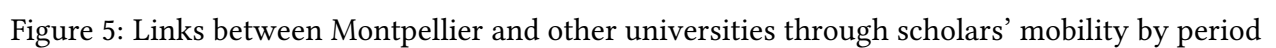




Figure 6: Collection of portraits – museum of the University. Photo by D. De la Croix

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