

# Scholars and Literati at the University of Salerno (1231–1800)

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This note is a summary of our research into the group of scholars and literati who were at the University of Salerno until 1800, or were connected with it.

## 1 SOURCES

The names of the scholars who taught at the University of Salerno have been drawn primarily from five sources.

The starting point is the seminal work of De Renzi and Henschel (1852), *Collectio Salernitana*, a comprehensive collection of manuscripts, treatises, medical recipes, statutes, and other documents related to the Salerno Medical School, from the Middle Ages to the modern era. A significant contribution also comes from the article by Paul Oskar Kristeller (1945), which, in addition to providing a historical overview of the school, enabled the identification of numerous scholars. Additional data were obtained from Capparoni's (1924) work, *Magistri Salernitani*, and from Sinno's (1921) repertory, which lists the graduates and their academic sponsors. Finally, Grendler (2002) brings some more information for the Renaissance period. To complete the information on individual scholars, entries from the Treccani Encyclopedia (1961) were also consulted.

## 2 THE UNIVERSITY

Even before acquiring university status, Salerno was renowned for its Medical School. The origins of the Salerno Medical School date back to the early Middle Ages, but little is known about that period, particularly regarding its organization. The school reached its peak in the 12th century, when medicine transitioned from an empirical practice to a theoretical body of knowledge. However, there is no evidence that the school was officially recognized as a public institution at that time. The first regulation came with Frederick II's Constitutions of Melfi in 1231: the king (Holy Roman Emperor from 1220) reserved for himself the right to confer diplomas, while the masters assessed the candidates and certified their competence. From 1241, a structured curriculum was introduced: three years of logic, five years of medicine (including surgery), and one year of apprenticeship. In 1252, Conrad (Corrado) IV, the son of Frederick II, attempted to transfer the University of Naples, founded by Frederick II, to Salerno, thereby creating a broader *studium*. Although the project failed, it marked the beginning of the formal recognition of the School. The king of Sicily Manfredi confirmed Salerno's exceptional status among the authorized institutions in the Kingdom.

In 1280, by means of statute issued by Charles I of Anjou (who became King of Sicily), the school was officially recognized as a *Studium Generale* in medicine. The path to obtaining a degree was rigorous and involved lengthy studies, public examinations, and recommendations to the king. In the 14th century, the school gradually became a municipal institution, with professors paid by the king. In the 15th century, its scientific centrality declined and it was supplemented – and partially replaced – by the *Collegium medicum* of Naples, which took on a central role in medical training. Formally established at the end of the 15th century, the *Collegium* was an autonomous body with

the exclusive right to confer degrees. Many of its members were also university professors. From this period onward, the distinction between *Studium* and *Collegium* became increasingly clear, and teaching extended to other disciplines such as law and theology. An academic revival began in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, further supported by the intervention of the new rulers, the Sanseverino family, who brought in some well-known scholars (Grendler 2002). Despite this initiative, the *studium* did not enjoy the same success as others, and by the end of the 16th century, no prominent names can be found among the faculty. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the School slowly declined, partly due to the growing centralization of education in the Kingdom of Naples, especially with the rise of the University of Naples. However, the Salerno university survived for many centuries, until it was officially closed by Joachim Murat on 29 November 1811, during the reorganization of public education in the Kingdom of Naples.

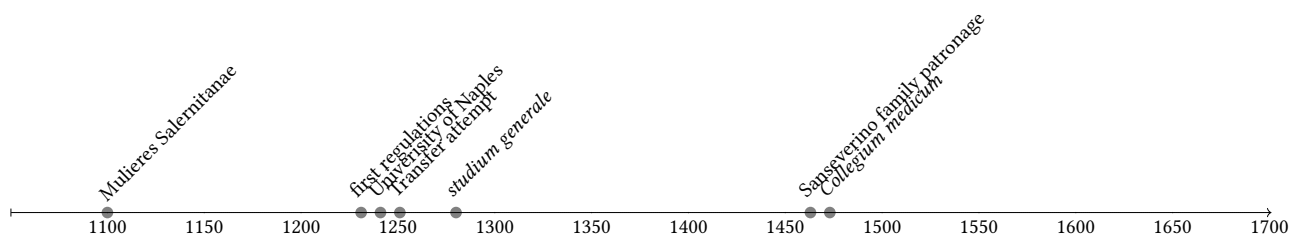


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Salerno

### 3 DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. Overall, we link 200 scholars to the University of Salerno. The quality of information is quite low. For example we observe the places of birth for only 67% of them. There are two periods with relatively more well-documented people: the first period, with 39% of the scholars having a Wikipedia page and the periods 1450–1617 in which scholars left more often their footprints in the libraries of today more often (37% with VIAF entry).

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
1000–1199	41	29.3%	65.9%	37	62.7	0	39%	39%
1200–1347	62	11.3%	66.1%		74	0	19.4%	16.1%
1348–1449	12	8.3%	100%			0	8.3%	0%
1450–1526	11	36.4%	90.9%	46	67.3	0	36.4%	36.4%
1527–1617	40	30%	77.5%	32.1	61.8	0	15%	37.5%
1618–1685	15	0%	60%			0	0%	0%
1686–1733	8	0%	12.5%			15	0%	0%
1734–1800	11	0%	27.3%			0	0%	9.1%
1200–1800	200	18%	67%	35.9	65.2	0	19.5%	23%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

### 4 FIELDS

Figure 2 shows the distribution of disciplines at the University of Salerno, considering professors who published. The educational activity of the School of Salerno was primarily focused on medicine. Although a few jurists and theologians can be identified—especially in the sixteenth century—there is no evidence that full-fledged faculties of law or theology were ever established. As early as 1224



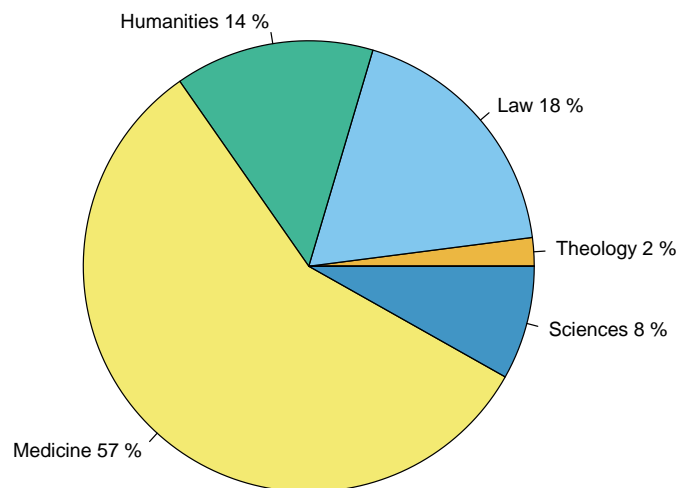


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Salerno (published scholars only)

the king had decreed that the University of Naples would be the only institution in the kingdom authorized to teach and award degrees in legal studies. It is therefore believed that law courses may have been offered in Salerno, but that students had to go to Naples to complete their studies (De Renzi; Kristeller 1955).

## 5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the documented birthplaces of the scholars active at the University of Salerno by period. In general, the scholars who taught at the School of Salerno were native to the region or to neighboring parts of southern Italy. We only find scholars originating from other Italian regions and from various parts of Europe in the earlier part of our sample period, reflecting the widespread reputation the medical school enjoyed at that time.

## 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 Salerno 25 years before that date. The details are given in De la Croix et al. (2024) and 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 two periods of glory are clearly identifiable on the chart. The first one is related to the medical school (dots are yellow). The second one, weaker, relates more to the school of law (dots in blue).

## 7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

**Constantinus Africanus** (Carthage 1020 – Monte Cassino 1098) a physician and translator, arrived in Salerno around 1075 after a long journey and became a teacher at the Salerno Medical School. There, he translated numerous medical texts from Arabic into Latin, playing a crucial role in shaping the medieval European medical curriculum. His work marked the beginning of a more systematic and scholarly approach to medicine in Europe. He later joined the Bene-

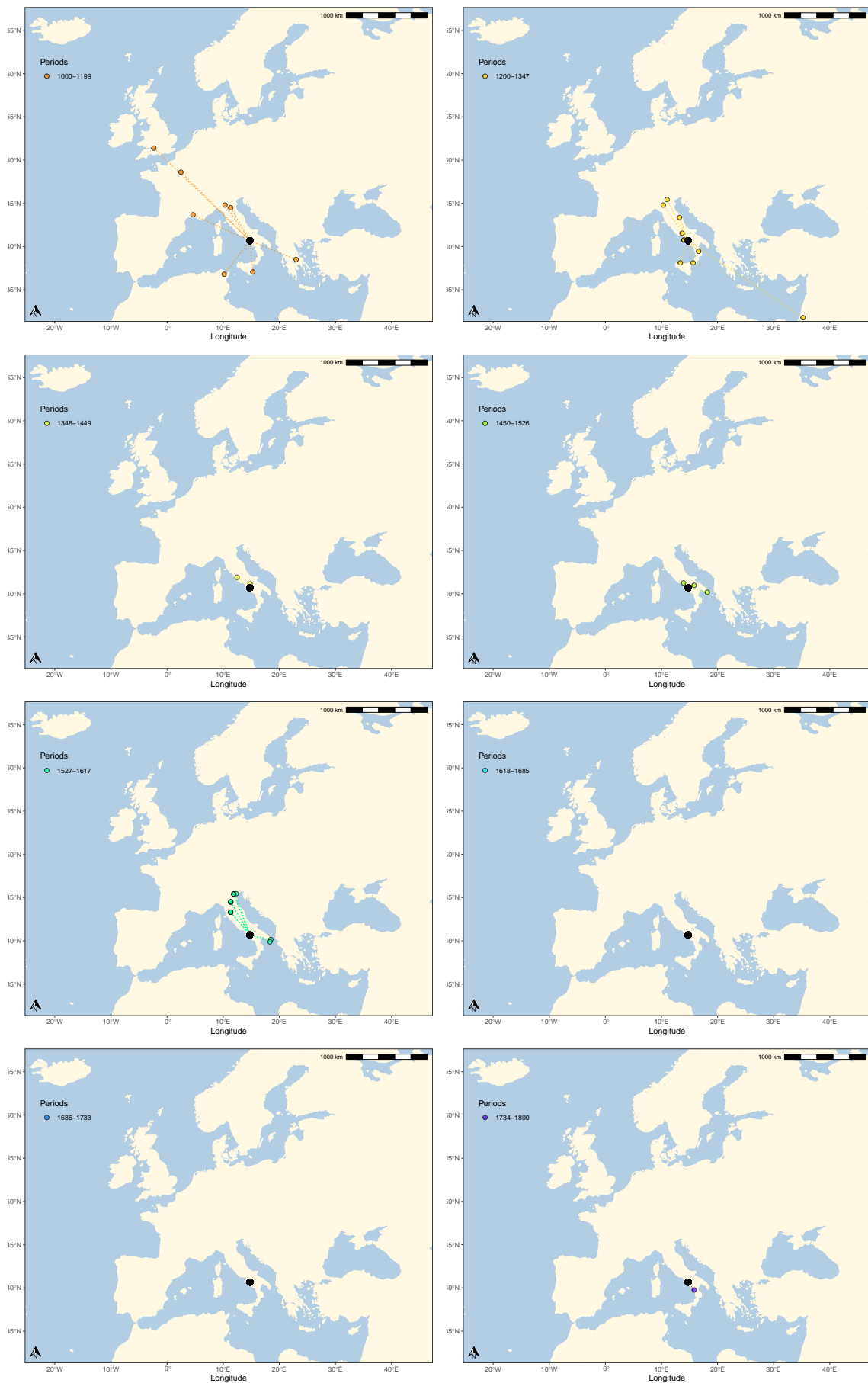


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Salerno

dictine order and retired to the Abbey of Montecassino, where he continued his translation work.

**Trotula de Ruggiero** (Salerno c. 1050– ) is an emblematic figure of the Salerno Medical School, considered one of the first female physicians in Western history. Specializing in gynecology and obstetrics, several treatises are attributed to her, including the famous "De passionibus mulierum". Her work aimed to improve women's health by combining medical knowledge with empirical practices. Her historical existence is debated, but her name became a symbol of female medical authority in the medieval world (De la Croix and Vitale 2023).

**Agostino Nifo** (Sessa-Aurunca c.1473 – Salerno c. 1545) was a philosopher and Aristotelian commentator. He began his academic career teaching philosophy in Salerno, before moving to other universities across the Italian peninsula, including Padua, Naples, and Rome. Initially aligned with Averroism, he later shifted toward a Thomistic interpretation. Pope Leo X appointed him count palatine and censor of books. His extensive body of work deeply influenced Renaissance philosophical thought, particularly on the soul and the intellect.

**Matteo Plateario** (Salerno – 1161) was a Salerno physician and one of the most renowned representatives of the Salerno Medical School. Belonging to a family of physicians, he authored the *Liber de simplicibus medicina* (also known as *Circa instans*), a highly successful work describing the properties of numerous simple remedies. He taught medicine in Salerno, contributing to the dissemination of Arabic and Greek medical knowledge throughout Europe. His text, translated into various languages, was used for centuries as a reference manual.

**Rogiero Frugardi** (Parma 1140 – 1195) was a physician and surgeon from the Parma area, considered one of the founding figures of medieval surgery in Europe. He was active in Salerno, where he studied at the Salerno Medical School and later became a master. His main work, *Practica Chirurgiae* (also known as *Chirurgia Rogerii*), was the first systematic treatise on surgery written in Europe post-antiquity. Translated and commented on for centuries, the work had wide circulation in the Western medical world.

## 8 RELATED SCHOLARS

**Tommaso d'Aquino** (Roccasecca 1225 – Fossanova 1274) theologian and philosopher taught in major centers such as Paris and Naples, where he wrote parts of his *Summa Theologiae*. It is not certain that he actually taught in Salerno, but a commemorative plaque at the university recalls his presence at the *studium* (see the third photo in Figure 6).

**Adélard of Bath** (c. 1080 – c. 1152) was one of the first European intellectuals to translate and disseminate Arabic texts on mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and natural sciences. His most famous work is the Latin translation of Euclid's *Elements* from Arabic, which became a standard text for centuries. He studied and traveled in the Arab world, particularly in Toledo, Antioch, and in the south of the Italian peninsula, where Greco-Arabic knowledge was actively transmitted. For this reason, although there is no direct evidence, some historians have suggested that he may have passed through the Salerno medical school (Rashdall 1936).

**Hillel Ben samuel** (Verona c. 1220 -- Forlì 1295) was a Jewish physician, philosopher, and translator. He practiced medicine in various Italian cities, including Rome, Capua, and Ferrara, and authored philosophical works and medical commentaries, including *Tagmule ha-Nefesh*. According to Salvatore De Renzi, he also studied at the Salerno Medical School. He played a significant role in the debate on Jewish orthodoxy and in the transmission of medical and philosophical thought within the Latin context. He was one of the main mediators of Jewish medical and philosophical knowledge in medieval Italy.

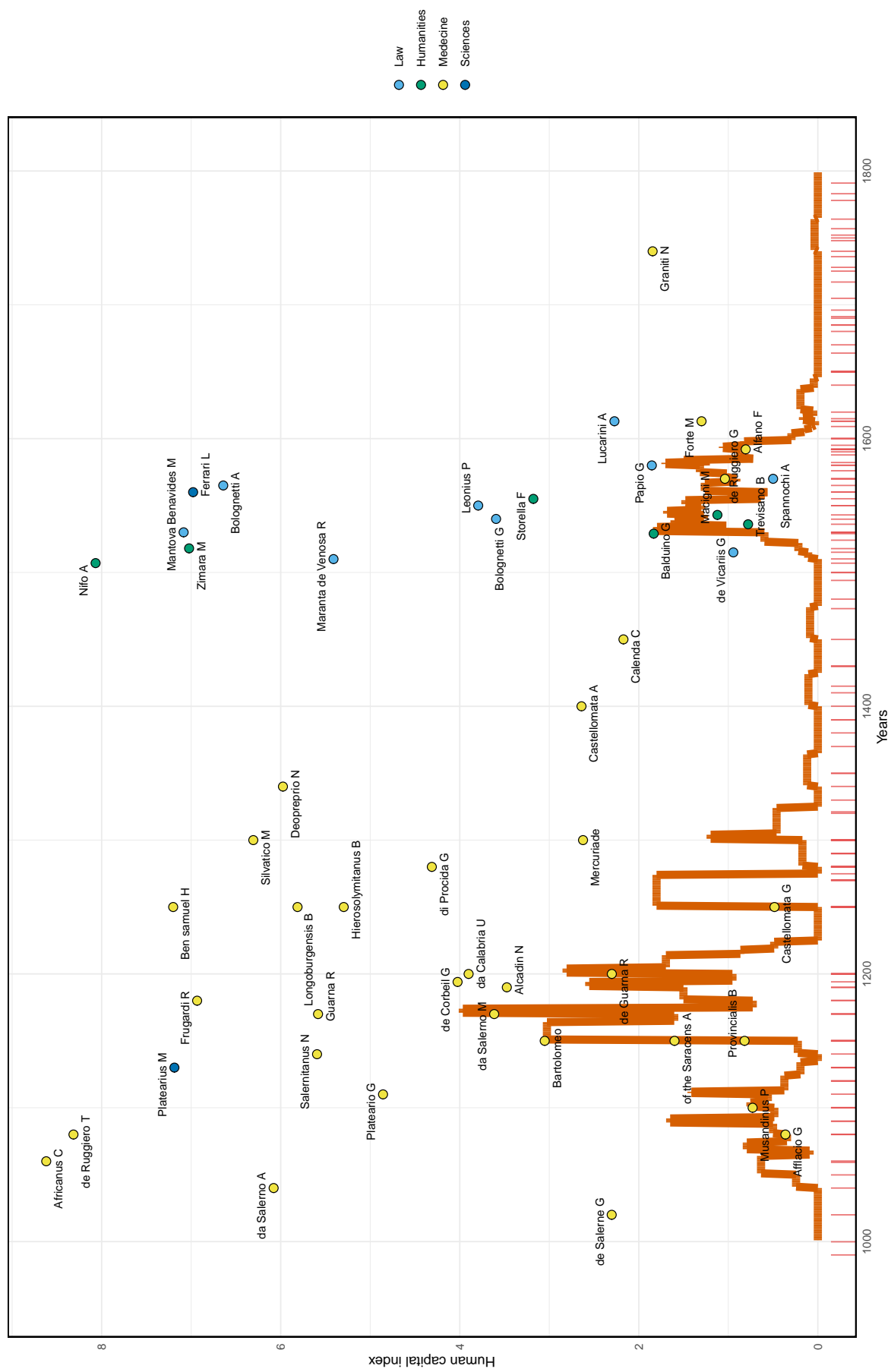


Figure 4: Famous scholars at the University of Salerno

### Mulieres Salernitanae

The term *Mulieres Salernitanae* refers to a group (not formally constituted) of female physicians active between the 11th and 13th and associated with the Salerno Medical School. Although formal teaching roles were reserved for men, documentary sources and medical treatises attest to the participation of women in scientific production and therapeutic practice, particularly in the fields of gynecology, obstetrics, female hygiene, and cosmetics. While these figures are partly shrouded in legend, the most significant among them are documented by surviving sources. The most renowned is undoubtedly Trotula de Ruggiero (11th century), who is considered the most representative figure of the *Mulieres Salernitanae*. According to tradition, she belonged to a noble Salernitan family and was active both as a physician and as a teacher within the school. Three widely circulated treatises have traditionally been attributed to her: *De Passionibus Mulierum ante, in, et post partum* (also known as *Trotula Major*) a work on gynecology and obstetrics, *De Ornatu Mulierum* (*Trotula Minor*), a treatise on cosmetic medicine and *Practica secundum Trotam*, a broader compendium of therapeutic remedies and medical recipes. Recent scholarship (Green 1999) has shown that the figure of Trotula was in part constructed through the medieval manuscript tradition, and that some of the texts attributed to her may be the result of composite authorship or written by male authors. Nevertheless, the existence of a historical female physician named Trota, documented in a medical manuscript preserved in Vienna, confirms the real presence of an active and authoritative woman practitioner at the Salerno Medical School.

## 9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

We assume that a professor's affiliation with multiple universities throughout their career creates a connection between those institutions. Under this assumption, Figure 5 illustrates the universities associated with the University of Salerno during each period. We observe the same bifurcated pattern found in the human capital index and the international character of scholars (Figure 2). From the networks we have drawn using the collected information, we can observe that, despite the small number of professors, this institution managed over time to establish connections with important university centers, thanks to its faculty. No exchanges are observed with the University of Montpellier (De la Croix 2025), the other major center for medical studies, except during a very early period, when the status of the Salerno school had not yet been officially recognized. A strong increase can then be seen between 1527 and 1617, followed by a sharp decline in the subsequent period.

## 10 IF YOU VISIT SALERNO

The City of Salerno seems aware that there is some history related to the medical school and its famous members. Although there was not much in place when we visited in January 2024, there are a few street names and memorial stones see Figure 6.

## 11 ANECDOTES

As we have seen, the origins of the Salerno Medical School remain shrouded in mystery, and numerous legends have grown up around them. A curious anecdote, reported by the monk and historian Richer of Reims, recounts an episode that allegedly took place at the French court towards the end of the 10th century, involving two rival physicians. Deroldus, the future bishop of Amiens and a royal favorite, engaged in a heated debate on medical matters with a Salernitan doctor who enjoyed the favor of the queen. The dispute ended unfavorably for the Italian physician, who, seeking revenge, unsuccessfully attempted to poison Deroldus. The latter, did succeed in poisoning his rival but, in an act of generosity, treated him and saved his life.

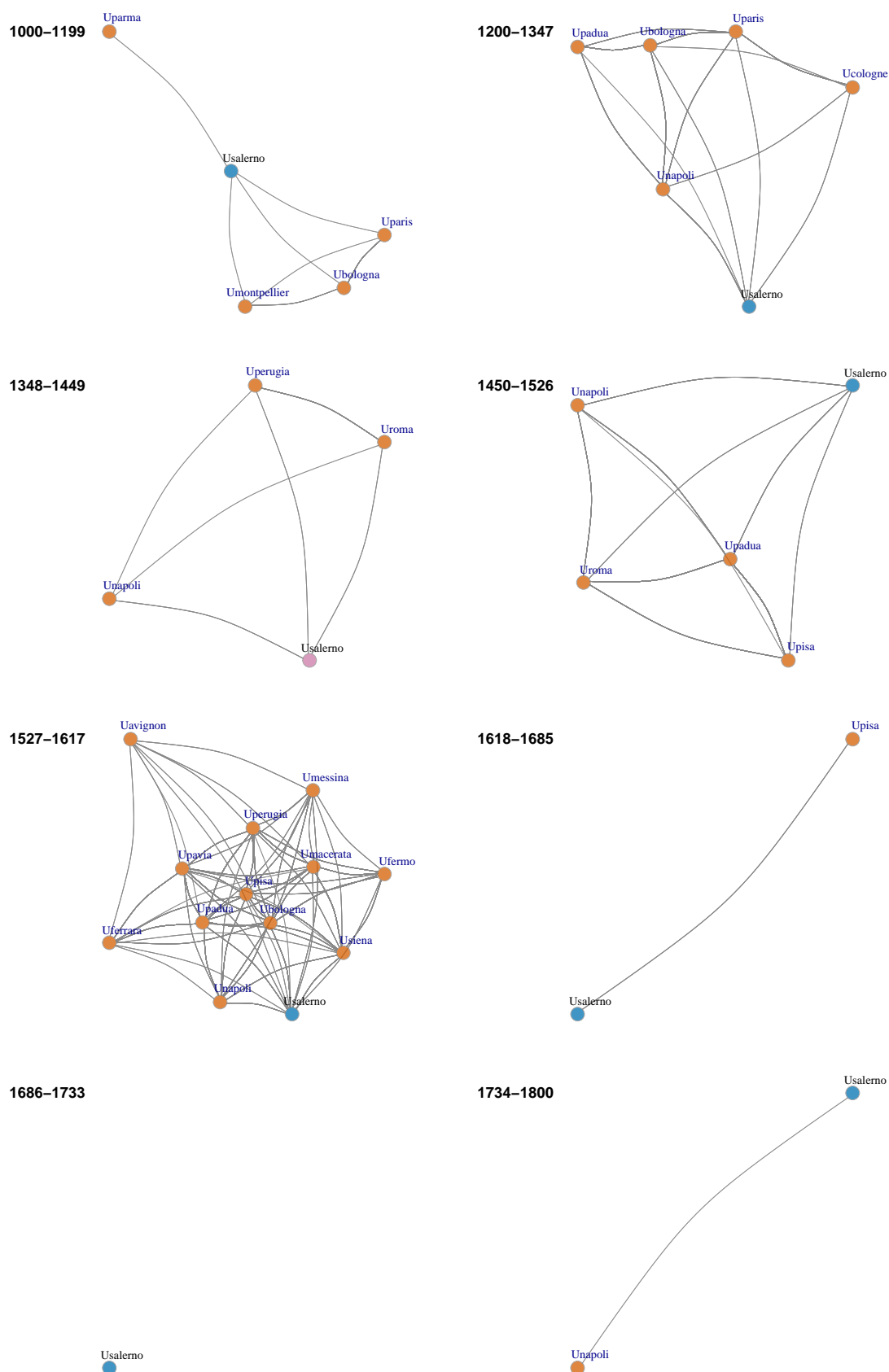


Figure 5: Links between Salerno and other universities through scholars' mobility by period



Figure 6: Street names (Giovanni da Procida, Trotula de Ruggiero) and memorial stone (Aquinas)

## 12 FINAL THOUGHTS

At a time when medicine was evolving from an empirical practice into a theoretical discipline, the Salerno Medical School played a central role in transmitting Greek and Arab knowledge to Latin Europe.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

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

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