

Scholars and Literati at the University of Vilnius (1578–1800)

David de la Croix

Anna-Maria Gkopi

IRES/LIDAM, UCLouvain

This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati who taught at the University of Vilnius from its inception in 1578 to 1800. For more detailed information about these individuals, please visit the comprehensive database available at <https://shiny-lidam.sipr.ucl.ac.be/scholars/>.

1 SOURCES

A primary source of information regarding the University of Vilnius is the “Encyclopaedia of Information on the Jesuits in the Territories of Poland and Lithuania, 1564-1995” edited by Grzebiń (2004): it provides meticulous data concerning the activities and the dates of the scholars and literati who taught there, as well as precise information about the locations of their births and deaths. The text of this encyclopedia can be searched online at <https://www.jezuici.krakow.pl/bibl/enc.htm>. Another useful source is Sommervogel (1890). In his work “Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus” (Library of the Society of Jesus), he offers a comprehensive, valuable compilation of Jesuit writings, encompassing works authored by members of the order, including those affiliated with the University of Vilnius, before 1800. Thanks to these two sources, we can claim an almost comprehensive coverage of the Jesuit period. Data collection is less easy for the post-Jesuit period, after they were expelled from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1773). For that period, we rely on Bumblauskas et al. (2004) and Massonius (2005), but these books only provide the names of the best-known professors.

2 THE UNIVERSITY

The foundation of the University of Vilnius was driven by both the Catholic Reformation and competition with Protestant efforts to establish their own college, led by influential nobles like Nicolaus Radivillus Niger. Jesuits arrived in the city in 1569, and by 1570, the Vilnius Jesuit College was established, with long-term plans to become a university. Despite challenges, including opposition from Protestant Chancellor Nicolaus Radivillus Rufus, King Stephanus Bathoreus and Pope Gregory XIII approved the transformation in 1579. The University was officially founded the same year as *Academia et Universitas Vilnensis Societatis Jesu*, marking a major educational and cultural milestone in the region (Bumblauskas et al. 2004).

The first rector of the University of Vilnius, Piotr Skarga, played a crucial role in its development by inviting scholars from across Europe and expanding the library with the help of benefactors like Sigmund II Augustus, Bishop Walerian Protasewicz, and Kazimierz Lew Sapieha.

The early structure of the university followed the medieval model with faculties of theology, law, medicine, and philosophy. The professors were mainly Jesuits, except in the faculties of law and medicine. The university was closely tied to the Catholic Church, which provided funding and influence in its governance (Bumblauskas et al. 2004).

After the Jesuits were expelled in 1773, the University of Vilnius came under the control of the secular authorities. This led to modernize the curriculum and reduce the religious influence that

had been dominant under the Jesuits. The new curriculum focused more on the natural sciences, mathematics, and philosophy. Many of the Jesuit professors were replaced by secular educators or clergy from other orders, particularly the Piarists.

The late 18th century brought additional difficulties, including the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which affected the university's status and resources. In 1795, with the final partition of the Commonwealth, the university's operations were increasingly disrupted. Despite this, the 17th and 18th centuries were characterized by the international recognition that the university received regarding its contributions to the natural sciences (Bumblauskas et al. 2004).

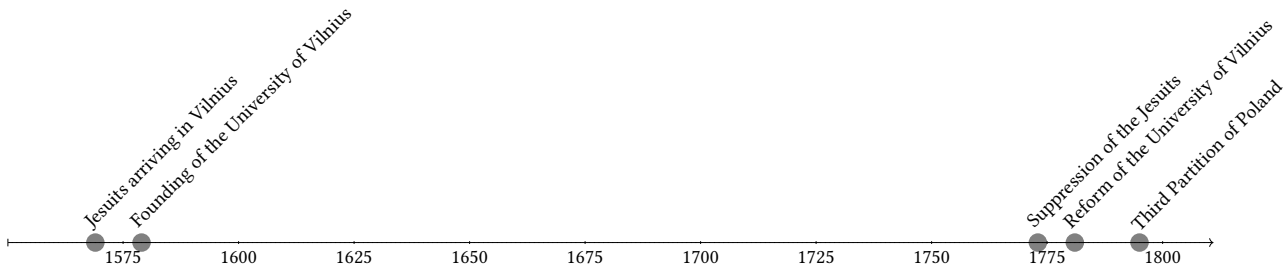


Figure 1: Timeline of the University of Vilnius

Period	nb. obs	birth date	known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1527–1617	65	96.9%	96.9%	33	57.4	572	32.3%	50.8%
1618–1685	113	99.1%	91.2%	38.8	60.5	333	23%	40.7%
1686–1733	143	97.9%	90.2%	37.4	55.2	237	15.4%	30.8%
1734–1800	183%	97%.3	94	36.7	59.7	221	18.6%	36.1%
1200–1800	504%	97.8%	92.7	36.9	58.3	278	20.6%	37.5%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

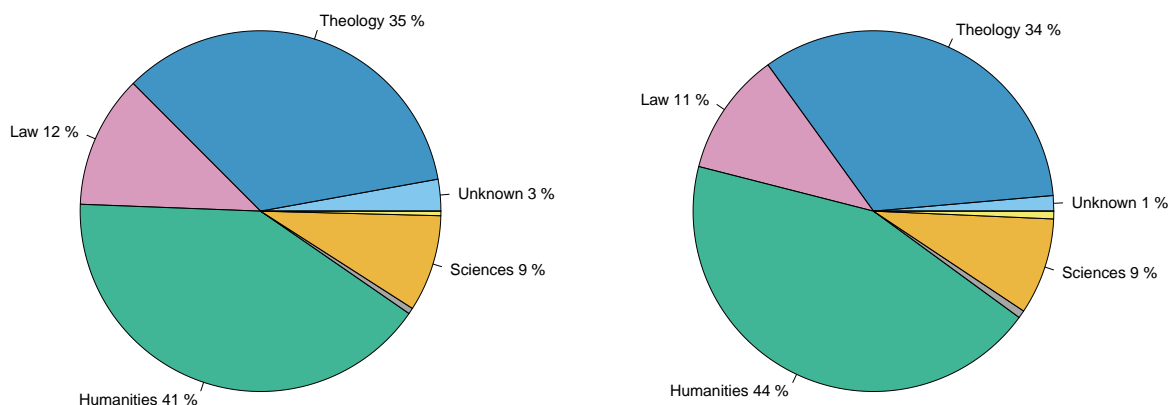


Figure 2: Broad fields at the University of Vilnius (left: all scholars, right: published scholars only)

3 SOME STATISTICS

Table 1 presents a summary of descriptive statistics for the scholars. The dataset includes information on 499 scholars. The quality of information is high, as witnessed by the high percentage

of scholars with known birth places and birth years. The longevity of the professors is quite low compared to other universities (see (Stelter, De la Croix, and Myrskylä 2021) and the other issues of RETE). This seems to be a recurrent finding for Jesuit universities. During the first period, the median distance between professors' places of birth and their places of activity is 572 km, indicating that professors were hired from distant locations. By contrast, during the last three periods, the median distance is lower, suggesting that the majority of professors increasingly came from within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The proportion of scholars for whom both the years and places of birth are known is extensively documented. The average age at first appointment is approximately 36.9 years, although longevity remains low and there is no discernible trend over time. Overall, around 20% of the scholars have Wikipedia entries, while the proportion of those with VIAF records slightly exceeds 35%, the share in the full database (all universities and academies).

4 FIELDS

Figure 2 illustrates the fields of specialization among the scholars at the University of Vilnius. Humanities is the predominant field, with a strong dose of theology. Law and Sciences appear relatively strong as well. There is not much difference between the two pies (all on the left, published only on the right), which implies that the published scholars are representative of all the professors in terms of fields.

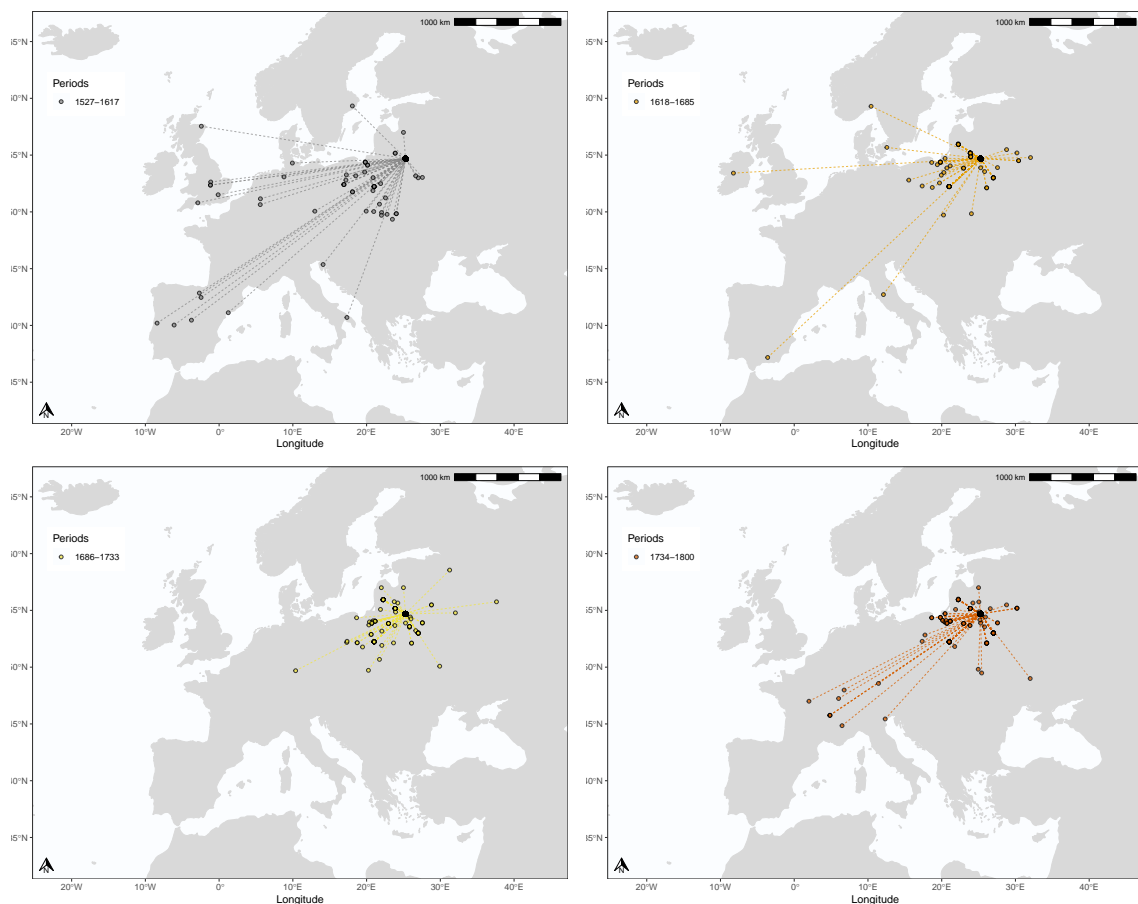


Figure 3: Places of birth of the scholars and literati at the University of Vilnius

5 PLACE OF BIRTH

Figure 3 displays the birthplaces of the scholars affiliated with the University of Vilnius by period. It highlights the geographical origins of the professors over time, providing insight into the docu-

mented median distance from their birthplaces to Vilnius. In the early phase, a significant number of professors originated from distant regions in the West. However, during the second and third periods, there is a noticeable shift in the geographical origin of the professors, with a large majority coming from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This trend is reversed in the last period, when foreign professors were hired again.

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 Worldcat and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. Based on the individual notability of the scholars and literati, we compute the notability of the university at each date t by averaging the human capital of the scholars who were active at the University of Vilnius within a 25-year period leading up to t , and who concluded their careers before t . The details are given in Curtis and De la Croix (2023) and in De la Croix et al. (2024).

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 evolution follows the narrative in Section 2. The trajectory followed by the orange line points at a relatively stable presence of distinguished scholars until approximately 1700. The absolute level of notability is however low, because most professors were members of more than one university over their lifetimes, and this discounts their publication allocation to Vilnius in the computation of notability. After 1700, a decline becomes apparent. Finally, the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1773 coincides with a revival of the university, with the trajectory reaching a new peak toward the late 1700s.

7 TOP 5 PROFESSORS

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

Johann George Adam Forster (Gdansk 1754 – Paris 1794) was a German naturalist, ethnologist, and revolutionary, renowned for his scientific contributions and his influence on Enlightenment thought. He gained early fame as a participant in Captain James Cook’s second voyage around the world, documenting new species and cultures. Forster’s account of the journey, “A Voyage Round the World”, had a major impact on the study of Polynesian cultures and is still regarded as an important contribution to ethnology (Ackerknecht 1955). Forster’s connection to Vilnius began in 1784 when he accepted a position as a professor there (then part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth), which he kept until 1787. At the university, he taught natural history and became a key figure in modernizing the institution’s scientific curriculum. His work helped introduce Enlightenment ideas to the region, focusing on the integration of empirical research and promoting a rationalist approach to knowledge. His tenure there was brief, but his influence contributed to the intellectual growth of Vilnius and its academic culture.

Piotr Skarga (Grojec 1536 – Krakow 1612) was a notable Polish Jesuit preacher, author, and theologian, recognized for his fervent sermons and active involvement in the Counter-Reformation. He played a crucial role in reinforcing Catholicism within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and was a leading advocate for religious unity in the region (Britannica 2024). In Rome, he entered the Society of Jesus and later relocated to Vilnius, where he achieved notable success in persuading Protestants to embrace Roman Catholicism (De la Croix and Gkopi 2024). Furthermore, Skarga played a key role in the founding of the University of Vilnius in 1579, and as its first rector, he was pivotal in guiding its early development. He worked to ensure that the university’s mission was closely aligned with the Jesuit goals of advancing education and promoting Catholic revival (De la Croix and Gkopi 2024). Finally, the same year (1579),

Skarga also made significant contributions in the field of theology at the university Sommervogel (1890), further enhancing its academic and religious influence.

Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski (Sarbiewo 1595 – Warsaw 1640) rose to prominence as the leading poet in Latin in 17th-century Europe and became widely recognized for his influential contributions to poetic theory. His academic journey began with the Jesuits in Vilnius, where he underwent a demanding education that included philosophy, grammar, humanities, theology, and rhetoric (Flood 2006). Sarbiewski remained at the University of Vilnius for nearly a decade (1626-1635), during which he also held academic positions in both theology and the humanities (Grzebień 2004). In 1622, he traveled to Rome to advance his theological studies and was ordained priest the following year, in 1623. It is believed that his poetic achievements may have garnered praise from Pope Urban VIII (Flood 2006).

Jakub Wujek (Wagrowiec 1540 – Krakow 1597) was a Roman Catholic priest, theologian, and polemicist who played a significant role in the Counter-Reformation. In 1565, he joined the Jesuit Order and pursued theological studies in Rome, deepening his knowledge of Catholic doctrine. Upon returning to Poland, he was ordained in 1568 in Pułtusk, where he became active both as a preacher and a professor of rhetoric Region Wielkopolska (2024). At the University of Vilnius, he served as rector from 1578 to 1580. During his tenure, he was instrumental in establishing the academic and theological foundations of the institution Sommervogel (1890).

Adam Tadeusz Stanisław Naruszewicz (Pinsk 1733 – Janow-Podlaski 1803) was a Polish poet and historian, recognized as the first Polish historian to adopt modern scholarly methods. In his youth, he joined the Jesuit Order and taught at the Jesuit College in Warsaw. Following the dissolution of the order in 1773, he became a lay priest and was appointed bishop of Smolensk in 1788. In Vilnius, starting in 1754, Naruszewicz held a professorship at the university, where he played a crucial role in shaping its curriculum, especially in history and literature Sommervogel (1890). His efforts helped elevate the academic standards of the institution and fostered a nationalist spirit among students.

8 WHO'S WHO ON THE MOON

There are various indicators of an individual's notable achievements, such as the recognition they receive through the naming of streets, schools, research institutes, prizes, and even lunar craters. When it comes to scholars from the University of Vilnius, one has had a lunar crater named after him, indicating a high level of recognition in this regard.

Martin Odlanicky Poczobut (Grodno 1728 – Daugavpils 1810) was a notable Polish-Lithuanian astronomer, mathematician, and Jesuit priest. Poczobut is best known for his work in astronomy and his contributions to the University of Vilnius Observatory, where he served as its director. Poczobut was instrumental in modernizing the observatory and advancing astronomical research in the region. He made significant observations of celestial bodies and contributed to the cataloging of stars. His efforts earned him recognition among European scientific circles, including being inducted as a member of the prestigious Royal Society.

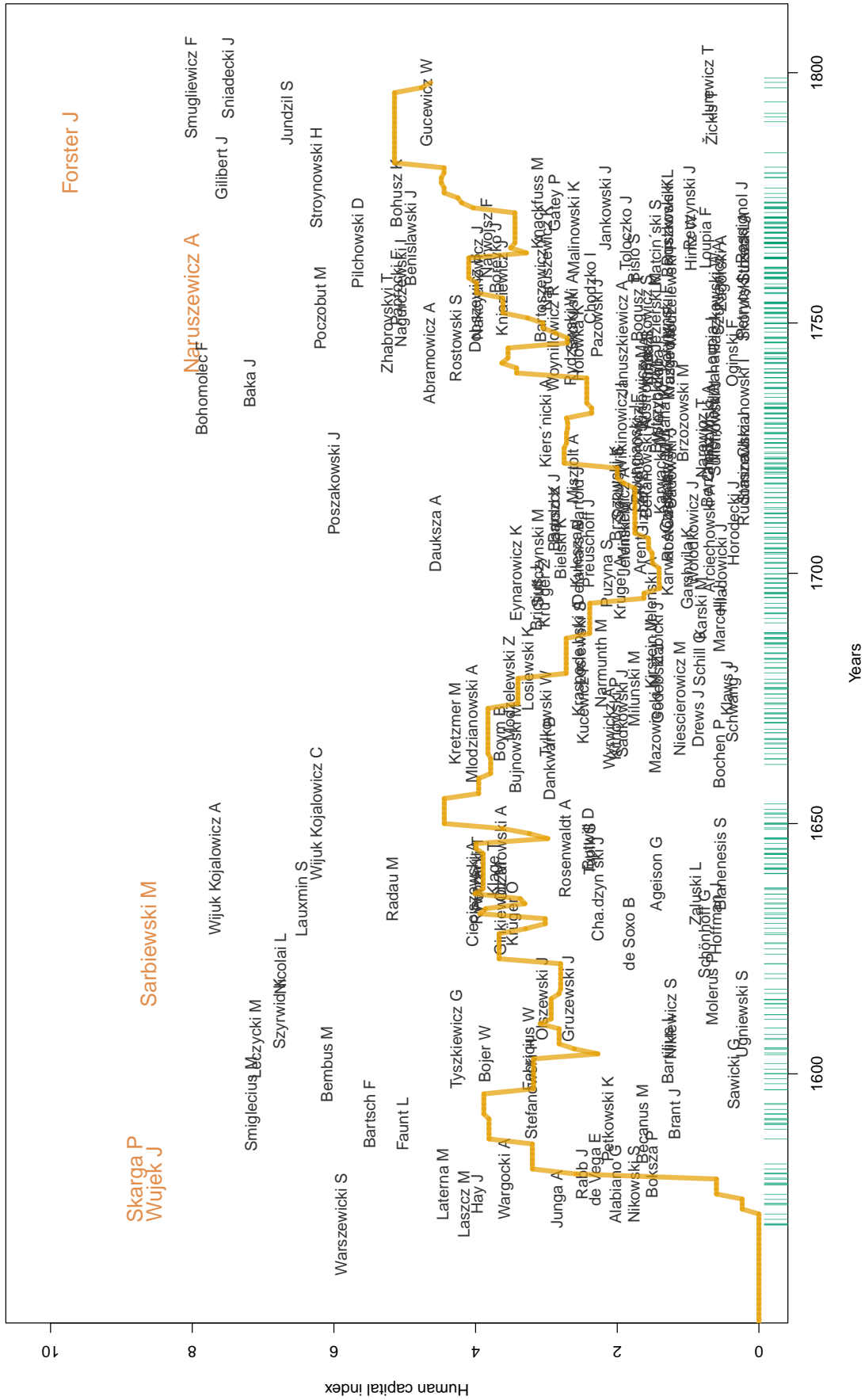


Figure 4: Famous scholars and university notability (orange)

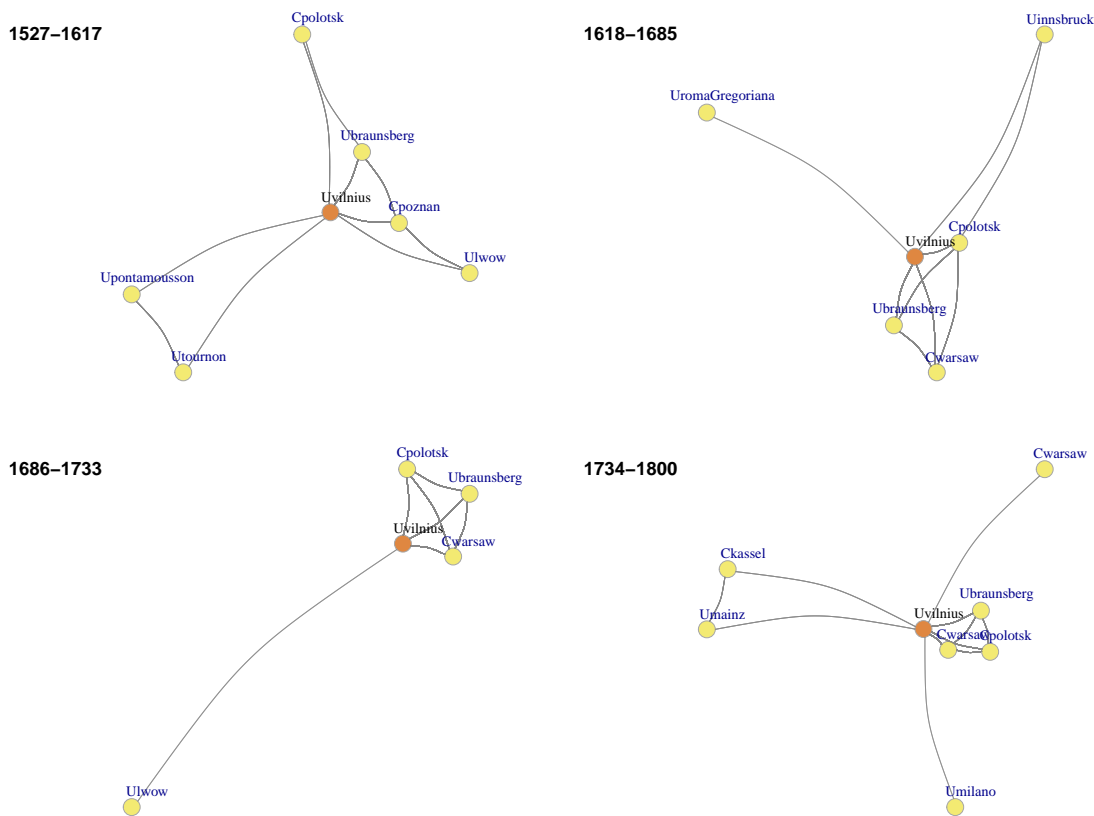


Figure 5: Links between Vilnius and other universities through scholars' mobility

9 UNIVERSITY NETWORK

We assume that when a professor held positions at multiple universities during their career, it established a connection between those institutions. Figure 5 displays the universities that were linked to Vilnius during the various periods. It is surprising to see relatively few universities connected, while the majority are Jesuit institutions. It reflects the fact that Vilnius's scholars did not move much outside the Jesuit world.

10 FINAL THOUGHTS

The University of Vilnius was an important Jesuit university in Europe. It rose fast thanks to professors hired in Western Europe, then slowly declined. After the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1773, a new golden age started, with a modernized curriculum. By 1800, the University of Vilnius had evolved into a prominent center of Enlightenment philosophy and natural sciences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 883033 "Did elite human capital trigger the rise of the West? Insights from a new database of European scholars."

We are very grateful to Andrzej Paweł Bieś for his help and advice in navigating the website of the "Encyclopaedia of Information on the Jesuits on the Territories of Poland and Lithuania, 1564-1995".

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

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

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

First version 1 October, 2024.

REFERENCES

- Ackerknecht, Erwin H. 1955. George Forster, Alexander von Humboldt, and Ethnology. *Isis* 46 (2): 83–95.
- Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. 2024. Piotr skarga. Accessed 3 October 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Piotr-Skarga>.
- Bumblauskas, Alfredas, Birutė Butkevičienė, Sigitas Jegelevičius, Paulius Manusadžianas, Vygintas Pšibilskis, Eligijus Raila, and Dalia Vitkauskaitė. 2004. *Universitas Vilnensis, 1579–2004*. Vilnius: Spauda.
- Curtis, Matthew, and David De la Croix. 2023. Measuring Human Capital: from WorldCat Identities to VIAF. *Repertorium Eruditorum Totius Europae* 10:17–22. <https://doi.org/10.14428/rete.v10i0/hc>.
- De la Croix, David, Frédéric Docquier, Alice Fabre, and Robert Stelter. 2024. The Academic Market and the Rise of Universities in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (1000-1800). *Journal of the European Economic Association* 22 (4): 1541–1589. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvad061>.
- De la Croix, David, and Anna Maria Gkopi. 2024. Scholars and literati at the college of Polotsk (1580–1800). *Repertorium Eruditorum Totius Europae* 12:27–33. <https://doi.org/10.14428/rete.v12i0/polotsk>.
- Flood, John L. 2006. *Poets laureate in the Holy Roman Empire: a bio-bibliographical handbook*. de Gruyter.
- Grzebień, Ludwik. 2004. *Encyklopedia wiedzy o jezuitach na ziemiach polski i litwy: 1564-1995* [in Polish]. Cracow: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Massonius, Piotr Marian. 2005. *Dzieje uniwersytetu wileńskiego, 1781-1832* [in Polish]. Vilnius: Biblioteka Uniwersytecka.
- Region Wielkopolska. 2024. Wujek, jakub (1541–1597). Accessed October 3 2024. <https://regionwielkopolska.pl/en/artykuly-wybitni-wielkopolanie/wujek-jakub-1541-1597/>.
- Sommervogel, Carlos. 1890. *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus* [in French]. Brussels: Oscar Schepens.
- Stelter, Robert, David De la Croix, and Mikko Myrskylä. 2021. Leaders and Laggards in Life Expectancy among European Scholars from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Century. *Demography* 58:111–135. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00703370-8938107>.