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Scholars and Literati at the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society (1769–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati at the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society between its creation in 1769 and 1800.

1 The Society

The Royal Zeeland Scientific Society was founded in 1769, on the initiative of the town of Vlissingen. The aim was to stimulate the arts and sciences and establish a local organization for scientific practice. Like other academies of the time, it was in line with the ideas of the Enlightenment, which sought to improve society through the practical application of science.

In its early years, the society focused mainly on medicine, theology, and applied sciences. The research was geared towards a better understanding of God's creations and purpose. For Protestants, two privileged ways of approaching God's greatness consisted in reading the scriptures and in admiring nature, God's creation. Gradually, the society built up a rich collection that included plants, shells, medals, books, and instruments. Numerous competitions were also organized to stimulate research.

The society was first established in a building on the Oude Haven (old harbour) in Vlissingen, on the site of today's Bellamypark. However, the members' center of gravity was in Middelburg, where a department was set up in 1784.

The decline and uncertainty of the Batavian Revolution brought resignations and financial problems, leading to consider the dissolution of the society in 1799. The society relocated exclusively to Middelburg, where its focus shifted towards contemplative science and a growing interest in history. Later, much of the collection was lost or damaged in the bombings of 1940. The post-war period brought about a reorganization that made the society more public by setting up excursions and working groups.

Today, the society owns a collection comprising over 200,000 objects (paintings, books, fossils, archaeological objects, etc.) and has gained international renown. It is one of the oldest Dutch academies still active today. It maintains a well-developed website at https://kzgw.nl/kzgw/historie/.

2 Sources

To gather information, we used two main sources. Firstly, the official website of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society lists all the people involved in it: directors, members, and donors of objects for the collection. The latter have been considered weak links. For each member, this source provides information on their dates of membership, donations, publications, and biography. Secondly, we used a database compiled by the society, distinguishing between directors, members, and corresponding members (Heyning 2021).

3 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. For the Zeeland Society, we find a list of 492 members from its foundation until 1800. Among these 492 names, 147 have weak links, either because they appear on the website of the society as donors, or because they were foreign members. The scholars involved became members when they were relatively old (40.9), but stayed for the remainder of their lives (mean age at death of 66.5 years). The median distance between their birthplaces and the society was 70 kilometers. As measured by having a Wikipedia page (29.9%) or being listed in the VIAF catalogue (68.7%), we can conclude that the members were generally productive scholars.

Period	nb. obs	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1769–1800	492	78.9%	65.4%	40.9	66.5	29.9%	68.7%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

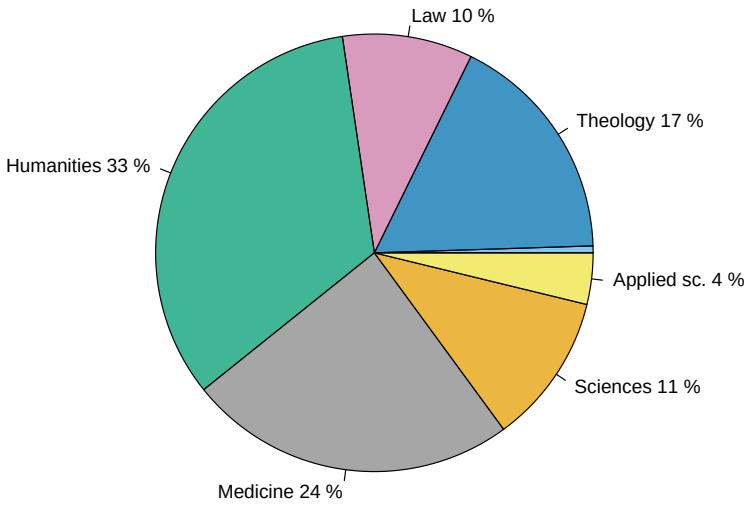

Figure 1: Broad fields at the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society (published scholars only)

4 Fields

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of academic disciplines within the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society. Sciences and applied sciences have a relatively modest share, while medicine is important. Humanities have the biggest share, and theology is far from negligible. The importance of theology is particularly striking for an institution born in the second half of the eighteenth century.

5 Place of birth

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces of the ordinary members active at the Batavian society. Figure 3 shows the birthplaces of the donors and of the corresponding scholars and literati. The ordinary members of the society came from diverse regions around Rotterdam. There is a distinct geographical pattern to the birthplaces of the corresponding members: a significant number came from the Eastern regions of France, the Holy Roman Empire, Scotland, and Sweden. Interestingly, as is the case of the Batavian Society in Rotterdam (Clément and De la Croix 2024), there were no corresponding members from Italy, Spain, or Portugal.

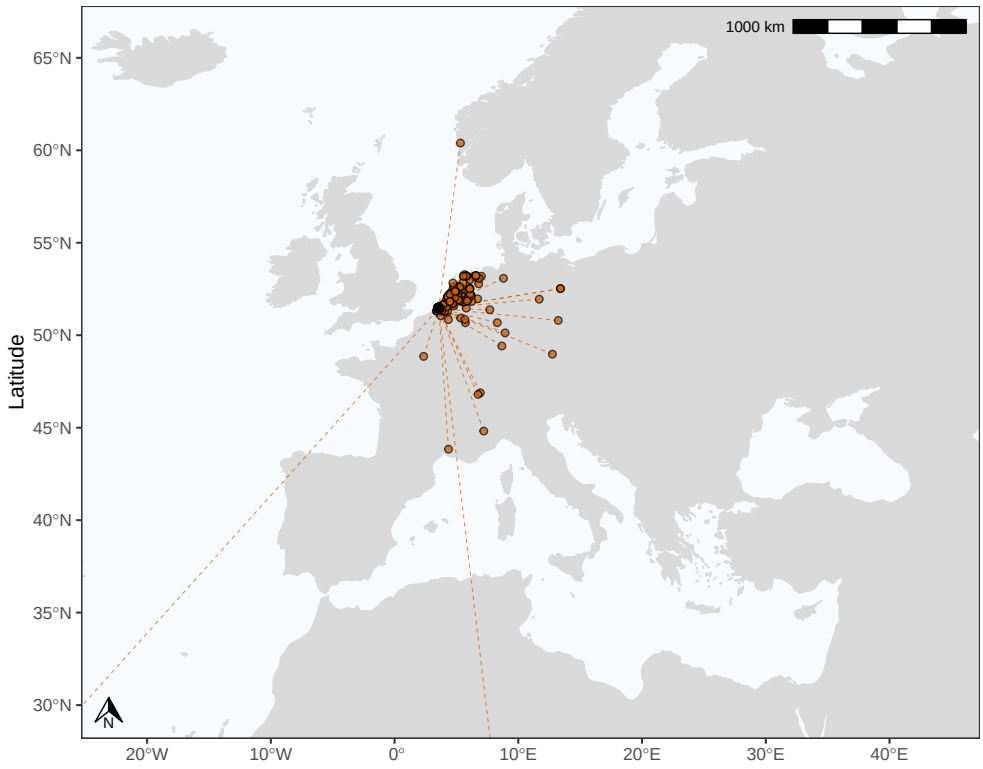

Figure 2: Places of birth of the members of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society

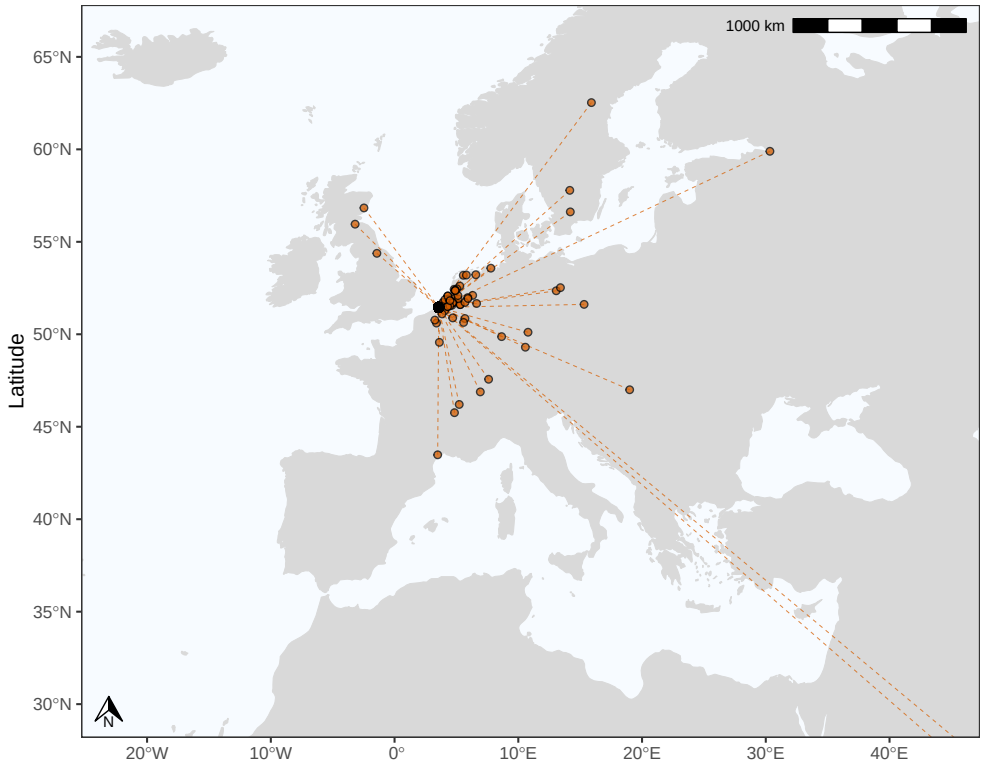

Figure 3: Places of birth of the corresponding members of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society

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 Zeeland Scientific Society.

7 Top 5 scholars

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

Petrus Camper (Leiden 1722 – The Hague 1789)) was a Dutch physician, naturalist, and biologist. After obtaining a doctorate in medicine in Leiden, he taught at various universities in Franeker, Amsterdam, and Groningen. He traveled frequently throughout Europe and was involved in his country's political life. His numerous works cover a wide range of subjects, from the osteology of birds to the anatomy of the orangutan. Camper is also the author of the theory of facial angles, whose racist underpinnings are criticized today. In 1772, he became a member of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society, a position he held for over 15 years.

Hieronymus David Gaub (Heidelberg 1705 – Leiden 1780) was a German physician and chemist. He studied medical sciences at the universities of Harderwijk and Leiden, then worked as a city physician in Deventer. His intervention in a deadly epidemic in Amsterdam in 1727 brought him recognition. Gaubius taught at the University of Leiden (De la Croix and Stelter 2021), where his lectures were much appreciated, and was appointed chancellor there for several years. His reputation led him to become the personal physician to Prince of Orange William V. He was a member of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society from its foundation in 1769 until his death.

Pieter Boddaert (Middelburg 1730 – Utrecht 1795) was a Dutch physician and naturalist. He studied medicine at the University of Utrecht, where he taught natural history. He is credited with publishing an identification key to Daubenton's "Illuminated plates," in which Boddaert described several new animal species. As a member of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society from 1768 until his death, he submitted several competition proposals and publications.

Sebald Justinus Brugmans (Franeker 1763 – Leiden 1819) was a Dutch physician and botanist. He studied philosophy, mathematics, and physics in Franeker and Groningen. He later taught botany in Leiden. In 1795, he was put in charge of the military medical service of the Batavian Republic, which brought him great renown. Brugmans became Louis Bonaparte's physician and State Councilor. He worked in particular on improving hospital and barracks facilities and highlighted the importance of hygiene. From 1788 until his death, he was a member of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society and a donor as well.

Martinus van Marum (Delft 1750 – Harlem 1837) was a Dutch physician, inventor, and scientist. He obtained his doctorate in natural sciences and medicine from the University of Groningen. He then worked as a physician in Harlem, lecturing on physics and developing scientific instruments. As director of the Teylers Museum, he supervised the construction of the largest electrostatic generator of his time. He was a member of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society from 1782 until his death.

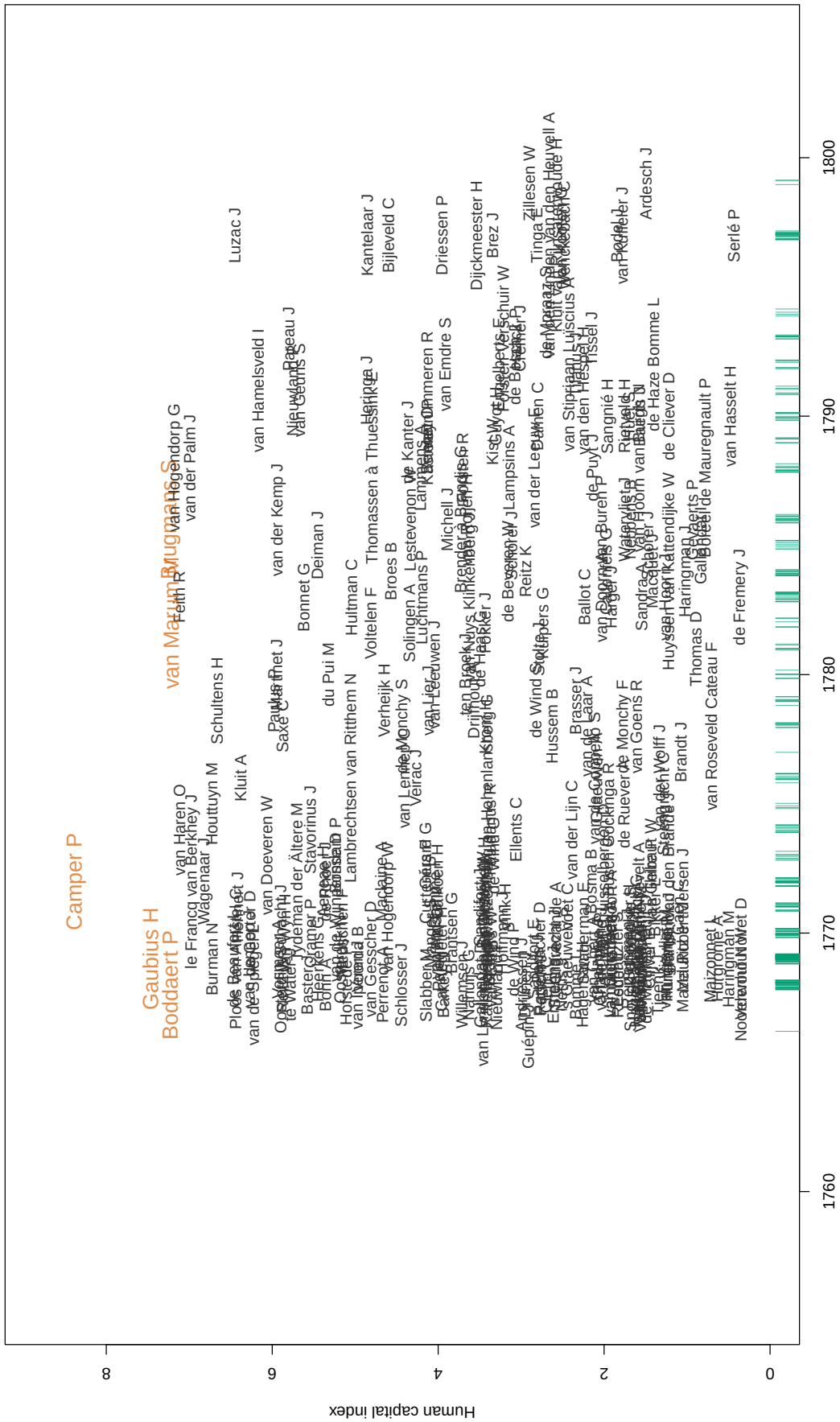

Figure 4: Famous scholars at the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society

8 Related scholars

In addition to the ordinary and consulting members, several individuals were linked to the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society through a foreign or corresponding membership status. In this group, several scholars were linked to a large number of academies. The top 5 is: Carl Linnaeus, Leonhard Euler, Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande, and Carl Peter Thunberg.

9 Diversity

One of the distinctive features of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society is that it had a women's branch: The Natuurkundig Genootschap der Dames (The Middelburg Ladies' Physics Society), which is described in Jacob and Sturkenboom (2003) and Harbers and Gáldy (2020). It existed between 1785 and 1887 and was the world's first all-women's scientific society. The aim was to study physics through lectures and experiments. It was housed in the same building as its male counterpart. Although no woman was officially a member of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society, we included with a weak link those who donated a gift to the society: Susanna Johanna Winckelman de Chuij (Isaac Winckelman's wife), Constantia Susanna Lambrechtsen van Boeschot (Anthony Pieter Lambrechtsen's wife), Elisabeth Clijver d'Ailly (Jacob Clijver's wife), and Jacoba van den Brande van de Perre (Johan Adriaen van de Perre's wife).

10 Links with universities

In Figure 5, we show that 32 members of the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society were also university professors at a nearby university: 19 at Leiden, 12 at Utrecht, and 1 both at Leiden and Utrecht (data from De la Croix and Stelter (2021) for Leiden and Academia Rheno-Trajectina (1861) for Utrecht).

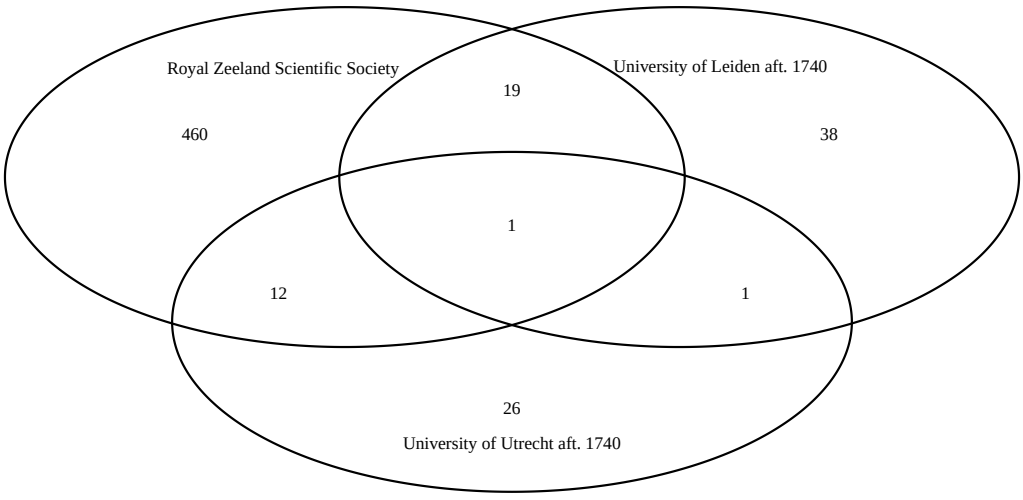

Figure 5: Scholars at the Royal Zeeland Scientific Society and at nearby universities

11 Final thoughts

The Royal Zeeland Scientific Society was a provincial academy that successfully focused on medicine and theology, and established a distinguished roster of renowned corresponding members.

Acknowledgments

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Homepage: https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html
Twitter: https://twitter.com/UTHCerc
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