

The Professors Who Would Become Popes

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Abstract

Between 1000 and 1800, 131 popes ascended to the papal throne of the Catholic Church. Drawing on a new database dedicated to early European academia, we identified 21 popes who held university teaching positions before their election. Our analysis shows that these scholar-popes did not differ from their non-academic counterparts in terms of quantitative proxies for papal activity —measured by the number of cardinals created, saints canonized, and papal bulls issued—but generally came from more modest social backgrounds. A striking chronological pattern emerges: all popes with academic experience were elected before 1625. We interpret this phenomenon as the combined result of the progressive secularization and decline of early modern universities compared to their medieval predecessors, the increasing control of papal elections by Roman aristocratic families, and the rise of seminaries after the Council of Trent, which offered an alternative path for theological training and ecclesiastical advancement.

Keywords: Social Mobility, Church and Universities, Human Capital in History, Early Modern Institutions, Historical Political Economy

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1 Introduction

When exploring the history of universities in Europe, it immediately appears that it is tightly intertwined with that of the Church. As Jacques Verger explains, the universities persisted as ecclesiastical institutions (“Les universités restaient des institutions de l’Eglise”¹). Although universities initially emerged as autonomous congregations of students or professors, advocating for a universalistic approach to education, the Church soon recognized their relevance, progressively integrating them into its sphere of influence. This universalistic nature directly linked universities to the universal authority of the papacy.

Popes would confirm their privileges, grant the *licentia ubique docendi* through the chancellor, and protect professors and students from the “abuses” of local authorities, whether secular or ecclesiastical. In return, popes expected universities to be faithful and orthodox supporters of Roman teaching and to welcome individuals who were particularly devoted to the papacy within their ranks, such as mendicant friars.²

During the medieval period, the Church played a fundamental role in adapting the courses and statutes of pre-existing schools, many of which were initially intended for clergy training. Cathedral schools are notably considered to have been the direct precursors of universities, as they were among the first places where structured and systematic higher education was imparted. An illustrious example is the University of Paris, which originated as an extension of the Notre-Dame Cathedral School. The *universitas magistrorum et scholarium Parisiensis* was officially recognized first by King Philip Augustus in 1200 and later by Pope Innocent III in 1215, marking an important convergence between secular and ecclesiastical authority in supporting and promoting higher education.

The close relationship between the Church and universities not only reflects the historical events that marked both institutions, but also concerns the individuals who breathed life into university and ecclesiastical life and shaped it. Every category of the ecclesiastical hierarchy participated to varying degrees in the life of universities. Popes in particular promoted the establishment of numerous universities, certified the existence of others, and granted them significant privileges. They exerted their influence both directly and indirectly in the crucial decisions made by academic institutions, intervening in student matters and imposing professors of their choice or removing those deemed troublesome due to their ideas. Through these actions, popes steered education and, consequently, knowledge over the centuries. One might thus ask: how many popes actually held teaching positions at university, engaging in direct pedagogical activity? What disciplines did they teach and in what time periods?

By compiling a database of professors and scholars who taught at universities and academies from the year 1000 until the Industrial Revolution, we have been able, at least in part, to quantify how many clergymen taught at universities, and their biographies have revealed how important their contributions were to the advancement of knowledge in Europe. Among the

1. Jacques Verger, *Chapitre IV. Les universités et l’Eglise*, ed. Jacques Verger (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013), 111–137.

2. Verger, *Chapitre IV. Les universités et l’Eglise*.

numerous names encountered, there are not only renowned theologians like Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), but also jurists, such as Cardinal Henricus de Segusio (1200–1271), who taught in Bologna, Paris, and Avignon; physicians, like Teodorico Borgognoni (1206–1298), a professor of surgery in Bologna; and mathematicians, such as Luca Pacioli (1447–1517). The list also includes international figures who bridged the gap between different academic traditions, such as the English philosopher William of Ockham (1285–1347), active in Oxford and Paris, or the polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680), whose work at the Roman College.

From this general overview, we sought to determine how many of the scholars present in the database became popes over this long period. To our surprise, we found 21 popes who had taught at various universities across Europe. We then asked ourselves how to interpret this: should the number of scholar-popes be considered small or, on the contrary, significant? Another intriguing historical pattern emerges when examining the election of academic popes: all 21 of them were chosen before 1625 (Figure 1). This temporal concentration suggests a fundamental shift in the relationship between universities and the papacy, which we attribute to three interrelated developments. First, the Scientific Revolution brought significant changes to Early Modern universities, leading to their increasing secularization or, in some cases, their relative decline compared to their medieval predecessors. Second, the rise of powerful Roman aristocratic families in the Early Modern Period led to their dominance over the papacy, thus restricting access for outsiders, including academics. Finally, the institutional changes following the Council of Trent, particularly the establishment of seminaries, provided an alternative route for theological education and clerical advancement, reducing the role of universities in training future popes. In this paper, we explore these three explanations in detail, examining their historical foundations and assessing their plausibility in shaping the pattern observed.

We initially analyzed the biographies of popes who held teaching roles at universities. Biographical analysis allowed us to examine the networks of family, political, and religious relationships that characterized the lives of these figures. Subsequently, we considered the evolution of the cultural and social context during the period under examination. The great cultural and religious revolutions, such as the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation, undoubtedly exerted a profound influence on universities. These movements not only redefined the paradigms of knowledge and teaching, but also changed the structure and mission of academic institutions. The Renaissance, with its rediscovery of the humanities and the promotion of critical thinking, fostered a more open and interdisciplinary intellectual environment. The Protestant Reformation introduced new theological and pedagogical ideas, leading to new universities being founded and existing ones reformed. The Counter-Reformation, on the other hand, influenced the organization of Catholic universities, emphasizing the centrality of theology and scholastic philosophy.

We correlated the data obtained from the database with other elements, such as the number of bulls issued by each pope, the number of cardinals created, and the canonizations performed. This allowed us to compare the actions of scholar-popes with those of all other popes and antipopes who succeeded one another during this period, in order to understand whether their

experience in university teaching influenced their papacy.

2 Methodology

This study draws upon a large prosopographical database compiled within the Upper Tail Human Capital project, which records professors and scholars active in European universities and academies between the year 1000 and the eve of the Industrial Revolution. The RETE (*Repertorium Eruditorum Totius Europae*) database makes it possible to identify scholars who taught in recognised centres of higher learning and to reconstruct their careers through extensive biographical documentation.³

A central methodological feature of RETE is its bottom-up construction. Rather than starting from a predefined list of prominent scholars, the database is built institution by institution, drawing on university- and academy-specific sources to reconstruct teaching staffs as systematically as possible. The identification of popes with prior teaching experience thus emerges from a broader mapping of the academic world rather than from a targeted search for well-known figures, thereby reducing selection bias and strengthening the historical interpretation of our findings.

It is important to specify that in some cases the sources do not allow us to know the teaching institution with certainty. In these cases, scholars are referred to as Weaklink, to highlight the fact that their connection to the university is uncertain or not direct. An example related to popes is that of Pius V, Ghislieri Michele. In his *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Herbermann⁴ lists him as a professor for 17 years without specifying the institution, and *Enciclopedia dei Papi* (*The Treccani Enciclopedia dei Papi*) 2000 also confirms that Pope Pius V was active in teaching. He certainly taught at several *studia* of the Dominican order present in the region,⁵ including that of St. Thomas in Pavia,⁶ and he created the Ghislieri University College in Pavia in 1567 to accommodate students.⁷

3. RETE was developed within the framework of economic history and human capital studies to provide a large, comparable dataset for the long-run analysis of the formation and circulation of academic human capital. The database currently contains more than 80,000 individuals and is primarily based on secondary sources. While this approach ensures exceptional spatial and temporal coverage, it necessarily privileges consistency and breadth over the level of detail attainable through focused archival research. RETE is therefore intended to complement, rather than replace, historical reconstruction grounded in primary sources. For further information on the UTHC project, see: <https://perso.uclouvain.be/david.delacroix/uthc.html>.

4. Charles George Herbermann, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, Incorporated, 1913).

5. In this regard, Von Renke 1866 explains: "When he taught, he did so with precision and benevolence; [...]"

6. Girolamo Catena, *Vita del gloriosissimo papa Pio quinto scritta da Girolamo Catena. Con una raccolta di lettere di Pio V. à diuersi principi, & le risposte, con altri particolari. E i nomi delle galee, & di capitani, così christiani, come turchi, che si trouarono alla battaglia nauale*, ed. Stamperia del Manelfi (Roma, 1587).

7. The Dominican convent of St. Thomas was chosen as the *studium generale* by Duke Galeazzo II Visconti and recognized by a Decree of Foundation by Emperor Charles IV in 1361. This decree stated that the *studium* and those attached to it should enjoy "forever every privilege, freedom, immunity, indult and grace with which the *Studia* of Paris, Bologna, Oxford, Montpellier or any other general *studium* are recognized as endowed" Emanuela Fugazza, "Il diploma di Carlo IV," in *Almum Studium Papiense. Storia dell'Università di Pavia*, ed. Dario Mantovani (Milano: Cisalpino, Istituto editoriale universitario, 2012), 229–232 The convent of St. Thomas granted the University of Pavia the main chapel in 1392. (MS Bib. Univ. Di Pavia "Annali della Chiesa di San Tommaso" by Father Rilucanti cit. In Diplomatic Codex). The *Facultas* of St. Thomas where theology was taught granted degrees and licenses MP Andreolli Panzarasa, "Il convento di San Tommaso, la comunità domenicana e l'Università dal Tre al Cinquecento," *Annali di storia pavese*, 1989, 18–19

The close connection between the convent of St. Thomas and the city’s university has led us to attribute his teaching to this institution, but since we did not find it in official university documents (such as the *Rotuli* (rolls), or the Diplomatic Codex), we have preferred to indicate it with a less strong tie.

In compiling the list of universities to be considered, we relied on the foundational work for the history of universities by Frijhoff 1996 and Rashdall 1895. However, we also found it useful to include some of the more important monasteries founded during the early Middle Ages, and the choice was determined by the number of scholars we were able to identify. In many respects, the monasteries can be seen as embryonic forms of what later became universities.⁸ Lastly, we decided to exclude the scientific academies in the database because numerous prelates were members of them, and their admission almost always had an honorary value.

As previously mentioned, the database encompasses a wide disciplinary breadth, ranging from theology to mathematics. These examples illustrate both the disciplinary breadth of medieval and early modern universities and the degree to which clerics contributed to intellectual life in Europe. Starting from this corpus, we identified those scholars who subsequently became popes. In total, twenty-one individuals in the database held university teaching positions before their election. Our methodological approach aims to contextualize these twenty-one figures within two main analytical dimensions. First, we evaluate the statistical weight of this group relative to the total number of pontiffs to determine its historical significance. Second, we examine the factors behind the sharp chronological decline after 1625, interpreting this shift as a reflection of the changing institutional relationship between the Holy See and European universities.

First, we conducted a biographical analysis of the popes who taught, reconstructing their family backgrounds, networks of patronage, political and religious affiliations, and academic trajectories. Second, we situated their careers within the broader cultural and institutional environment of their time, taking into account the effect of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation on university structures and educational practices.⁹ In order to explore whether academic experience left any measurable trace on the exercise of papal authority, we correlated the biographical information with several indicators of papal activity: the number of bulls issued, the number of cardinals created, and the number of canonisations performed. Although these measures have obvious limitations, they offer a comparative means of examining whether popes with teaching experience displayed distinctive patterns of governance compared with their contemporaries.

3 The Church and Universities: A Long History

Although the origin of universities cannot definitively be traced to the religiously-oriented schools that developed within monasteries and cathedral schools, it is undeniable that the

8. David De la Croix and Mara Vitale, “A Timeline of Medieval Universities,” *Repertorium Eruditorum Totius Europae* 8 (2022): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.14428/rete.v8i0/timeline>.

9. For the biographical reconstruction, we relied in particular on the works of Leopold von Ranke *History of the Popes*; Ludwig von Pastor, and the *Enciclopedia dei Papi* published by Treccani, as well as on numerous monographs devoted to individual figures.

Name	Papal Name	Academic career				
		University	Begin	End	Field	Election
Gerbert d'Aurillac	Silvester II	Reims (Cath. Sch.) ^a	972	997	Theo, Maths	999
Eudes de Châtillon	Urbanus II	Reims (Cath. Sch.) ^b		1070	Theology ?	1088
Alberto Di Morra	Gregorius VIII	Bologna ^c	c. 1150		Canon Law	1187
Pedro Juliano Rebello	Ioannes XXI	Siena ^d	1245	1250	Medicine	1276
Pierre de Tarentaise	Innocentius V	Paris ^e	1259		Theology	1276
Jacques Fournier	Benedictus XII	Paris ^e	1317	1317	Theology	1334
Pierre Roger	Clemens VI	Paris ^e	1320	1321	Theology	1342
Etienne Aubert	Innocentius VI	Toulouse ^f	1321	1340	Civil Law	1352
Guillaume de Grimoard	Urbanus V	Paris ^e /Montp./Avig.	1342	1362	Canon Law	1362
Bartolomeo Prignano	Urbanus VI	Naples ^g	c. 1360		Canon Law	1378
Pedro Martinez Luna	Benedictus XIII	Montpellier ^h	1375	1375	Canon Law	1394
Cosimo de' Migliorati	Innocentius VII	Perugia/Padua ⁱ	c. 1380		Both Law	1404
Pietro Filargo	Alexander V	Paris ^e /Pavia	1370	1386	Theology	1409
Alfonso de Borgia	Callixtus III	Lleida ^j	1400	1416	Civil Law	1455
Enea Silvio Piccolomini	Pius II	Siena ^d	1429	1431	Humanities	1458
Francesco della Rovere	Sixtus IV	Bologna ^c /Padua/etc.	c. 1450		Theology	1471
Adrianus Florentii	Adrianus VI	Louvain ^k	1478	1507	Theology	1522
Michele Ghislieri	Pius V	Pavia ⁱ	1528	1544	Theology	1566
Ugo Boncompagni	Gregorius XIII	Bologna ^c	1530	1540	Civil Law	1572
Felice Peretti	Sixtus V	Rome ^l /Siena	1545	1564	Theology	1585
Alessandro Ludovisi	Gregorius XV	Bologna ^c	c. 1570		Civil Law	1621

^a See John R. Williams, "The Cathedral School of Rheims in the Eleventh Century," *Speculum* 29, no. 4 (1954): 661–677, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2847092>.

^a See Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, *Treccani. Enciclopedia dei Papi* (Roma: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2000), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/elenco-opere/Enciclopedia_dei_Papi.

^c See Serafino Mazzetti, *Repertorio di tutti i Professori antichi e moderni della famosa Università, e del celebre Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna* [in Italian] (Bologna: tipografia di San Tommaso d'Aquino, 1847).

^d See Luigi Moriani, *Notizie sull'Univeristà di Siena* [in Italian] (Siena: Tip. Sordo-Muti di L. Lazzeri, 1873).

^e See Jean-Philippe Genet, "Projet Studium Parisiense" [in French] (Accessed October 5 2024, 2019), <http://studium-parisiense.univ-paris1.fr/>.

^f See Antonin Deloume, "Personnel de la Faculté de droit de Toulouse depuis la fondation de l'Université de Toulouse au XIIIe siècle" [in French] (manuscript, 1890).

^g See Giovanni Giuseppe Origlia Paolino, *Istoria dello studio di Napoli* [in Italian] (Torino: Stamperia di Giovanni di Simone, 1754).

^h See M Faucillon, *Les professeurs de droit civil et canonique de la faculté de Montpellier* [in French] (Montpellier: Académie des Sciences, 1862).

ⁱ See Charles George Herbermann, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, Incorporated, 1913).

^j See Francisco Esteve Perendreu, "Las bulas pontificias concedidas al Estudio General de Lleida (siglos XIII–XVI)," *Revista de Historia Jerónimo Zurita*, no. 72 (1997): 195–209, ISSN: 0044-5517.

^k See Emiel Lamberts and Jan Roegiers, *Leuven University: 1425–1985* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990).

^l See Nicola Spanò, *L'Università di Roma* [in Italian] (Roma: Casa Editrice Mediterranea, 1935).

Table 1: Popes who taught at university: teaching periods, fields, and election

Church played a significant role in their development. The debate over the genesis of universities was heated among historians in the late eighteenth century, leading to the emergence of two schools of thought: one considering universities as secular and innovative institutions, and the other viewing them as the result of a transformation process from Church schools.¹⁰ However, the evolution of research on the history of European universities has helped moderate this extreme polarization and recognize both secular and Church schools.¹¹ They are considered as embryonic forms of universities.

Even after universities were officially established, the contribution of the Church in terms of professors, funding, and organization was very significant, and popes themselves showed interest in these new institutions. In fact, the rise of universities in the 12th century coincided with the assertion of the papacy's international power and the centralization of ecclesiastical governance at the Roman Court.¹² The beginning of the papacy's interest in these new institutions was particularly linked to the intervention of Pope Alexander III (1159-1181), who countered simoniacal practices in the scholastic sphere,¹³ decreed the presence of masters in cathedrals and collegiate churches, and imposed the free concession of the *licentia docendi* (teaching license) for those who were sufficiently prepared,¹⁴ marked the first noteworthy rapprochement between the two institutions.¹⁵

A quick glance at the history of universities in Europe is sufficient to see that various popes played a role in the development of universities, with different forms of involvement. For example, Innocent III made his official collection of laws (*Compilatio tertia*) a subject of teaching,¹⁶ Honorius III intervened to defend the *libertas scholarium*, and many popes promulgated papal bulls to establish or confirm the privileges of universities (such as Martin V, Boniface VIII, Eugene IV, Paul III, etc.). Alongside this, censorship is another area in which the strong link between universities and the papacy can be observed. The promulgation of the Index by Paul IV in 1559 had significant consequences, particularly within academic circles. Numerous professors and students were expelled from lecture halls, while others faced even harsher penalties.¹⁷ ¹⁸ In addition to regulating the internal organization of universities and teaching,

10. Paolo Rosso, *Le università nell'Italia medievale. Cultura, società e politica (secoli XII-XV)*, vol. 1273 (Carocci editore, 2021).

11. For example, see the timeline summary De la Croix and Vitale, "A Timeline of Medieval Universities"

12. Gaines Post, *The Papacy and the Rise of the Universities* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004351882>.

13. Thierry Kouamé, "La construction d'un ordre juridique de l'enseignement. La politique scolaire d'Alexandre III et sa réception jusqu'au concile de Latran IV," *Journal des Savants* 2, no. 1 (2017): 277–301, <https://doi.org/10.3406/jds.2017.6394>.

14. According to Alexander III, "Scientia donum Dei est, unde vendi non potest" (Knowledge is a gift from God; therefore, it cannot be sold).

15. Gaines Post, *Alexander III, the Licentia Docendi and the Rise of the Universities* (Houghton Mifflin, 1929).

16. Girolamo Arnaldi, *Natale 875: politica, ecclesiologia, cultura del papato altomedievale* (Roma: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 1990).

17. Fabio Blasutto and David De la Croix, "Catholic censorship and the demise of knowledge production in early modern Italy," *The Economic Journal* 133 (656 2023): 2899–2924, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/uead053>.

18. Numerous scholars were silenced by the Inquisition, and some of the most renowned examples include figures whose works or persons were targeted by the Church, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Galileo Galilei, and Giordano Bruno. However, there were also lesser-known professors who faced similar consequences, such as Claudio Betti from the University of Bologna, Aonio Paleario from the University of Pavia, and Matteo Gribaldi di Mofa da Chieri from the University of Padua Adriano Prosperi, Vincenzo Lavenia, and John Alfred Tedeschi,

the Church sought from the beginning to help students by establishing scholarships or creating colleges. Among the earliest colleges is that of Paris, founded in 1257 by Robert de Sorbon, the chaplain of Louis IX, who later would give his name to the entire Paris theological faculty, the Sorbonne.¹⁹²⁰. A college that was directly the fruit of a pope's decision is the Ghislieri of Pavia, created in 1567 by Pope Pius V to assist less fortunate students and ensure that they would receive a good education.

The presence of these twenty-one academic popes invites a deeper interpretation of the clergy's access to education. What factors explain such a significant presence, and how should it be evaluated in the broader context of the Church's history?

At first, one might think that this number is not particularly large. In fact, clerics were an educated part of society at the time, and had easier access to scholastic institutions.²¹

In fact, during the height of the Middle Ages, clergy could train in different types of schools. There were less structured ones, such as parochial schools, where priests gave lessons in reading, writing, singing, and the knowledge of sacred texts. However, it was also possible for clergy to attend communal schools or active teaching centers at cathedrals and monasteries. There, it was possible to learn theology and law. In the end, Biblical theological knowledge could also be acquired in the *studia* of mendicant order convents, which were already active in the 13th century,²² thus giving them access to second-rate teaching. These schools, which were mostly related to Cistercian and Cluniac monasticism, held great importance and fostered an early mobility of students and teachers from different regions of Europe. It has been observed, for example, that in the 12th century many Roman students went to French abbeys to further their studies and later pursue their careers in the Curia.²³

The first decades of the year 1000 marked a turning point for teaching, in line with the great social and political changes that Europe was experiencing at the time. During this phase of great upheaval, the Church managed to increase its influence in all fields. As historians have noted, Carolingian humanism, which attached great importance to the study of the classics, was replaced by a growing interest in the Bible and religious texts.²⁴ Reformers thus saw the need to limit the study of the liberal arts, which could divert clerics into secular careers.

For the clergy, the end of the 12th century brought further change. Indeed, the Third

Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale Pisa, 2010).

19. Léo Moulin, *La vie des étudiants au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2010).

20. By 1350, in Paris, there were 19 such colleges, with 375 free places

21. However, it cannot be said that the clergy were generally well-educated. During the Middle Ages, the education level of clerics was low and declined further after the Black Plague. Due to the shortage of clerics, individuals lacking a solid cultural background were often allowed into priesthood. Additionally, in most cases, those entrusted with the management of a church – not always priests – were chosen for the integrity of their lives rather than for their academic background. Admission to priestly ordination required only basic schooling, ensuring the ability to read, write, and sing (as will be seen later concerning a 1289 provision for cathedral canons). Therefore, not all clerics could be considered educated individuals by default.

22. Paolo Rosso, *La scuola nel Medioevo. Secoli VI-XV*, vol. 511 (Roma: Carocci editore, 2018); Julia Barrow, *The clergy in the medieval world* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316091364>.

23. Peter Classen, *Rom und Paris: Kurie und Universität im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1983).

24. Pierre Riché and Jacques Verger, *Maîtres et élèves au Moyen Âge* (Paris: A. Fayard-Pluriel, 2013).

(1179) and Fourth (1215) Lateran Councils established new rules on the education of clergy, and from this time on, the most promising clerics with the social and financial means began to attend universities in Paris and Bologna and gradually all those created across Europe.²⁵ This change also coincided with the development within the Church of new and increasingly complex entities. Thus, figures trained in law and theology were needed, individuals who would know how to perform bureaucratic and administrative functions, as well as to spread a certain ideology of papal power.²⁶²⁷ Having acquired the license to teach, many of them remained in university classrooms as teachers (*magister*)

However their teaching careers did not last very long. At the University of Pavia, for which the knowledge of prelate professors is fairly precise, their careers lasted four or five years on average, and the same is true for the theology faculty at the University of Coimbra. In many cases, teaching was a compulsory step before an ecclesiastical career, or before becoming a professor at colleges run by the Church and religious orders.²⁸

4 Academic Experience and the Exercise of Papal Authority

We analysed whether experience at university—either as simple readers or as professors with longer-term appointments—distinguished popes who had an academic background from those who did not. To conduct this analysis, we included all the popes and antipopes appointed over the eight centuries under study, from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution.

As heads of the Catholic Church and sovereigns of the Papal States, popes exercised extensive legislative and normative power, utilising various types of official documents. Although the use of papal documents as tools of governance dates back to the early days of the Church, the main types of documents—such as bulls and decrees—began to be structured and formalised between the 8th and 9th centuries. Among these, papal bulls, encyclicals, apostolic constitutions, *motu proprio*, apostolic letters, briefs, and decrees represented the means through which the pope fulfilled his role as spiritual leader, legislator, and administrator of the Catholic Church.

29

Referring to the *Magnum Bullarium romanorum*, the work initiated by Laerzio Cherubini

25. Rosso, *Le università nell'Italia medievale. Cultura, società e politica (secoli XII-XV)*.

26. Dario Internullo, “Istruzione, mondo ecclesiastico e mobilità sociale: osservazioni sul baronato romano (secoli XIII-XIV),” in *La mobilità sociale nel medioevo italiano 5. Roma e la Chiesa (secoli XII-XV)*, ed. C Carbonetti and M Vendittelli (Roma: Viella, 2017), 75–98.

27. In this period, legal and theological preparation was highly valued. Classen 1983 mentions a document from 1178 from which it is understood that the pontiff asked for the names of prominent personalities to nominate to the college of cardinals. In the legate’s response, Cardinal Pietro di San Crisogno justified his choice by saying that he followed a very specific hierarchy of criteria. Candidates were to distinguish themselves first by *literatura*, and only then by *honestas et religio*.

28. It was not until the 14th century that academic studies began to become a significant requirement to pursue an ecclesiastical career, which led to an increase in the number of monks and clerics attending higher studies and, consequently, of clergymen with an academic degree involved in governmental duties.

29. The bull is one of the oldest official documents of the Catholic Church, used since the 8th century. The use of a lead seal (the bulla) to authenticate documents dates back to the pontificate of Adrian I (772–795). Starting in the Middle Ages, bulls became the primary instrument for solemn decisions and for expressing papal authority.

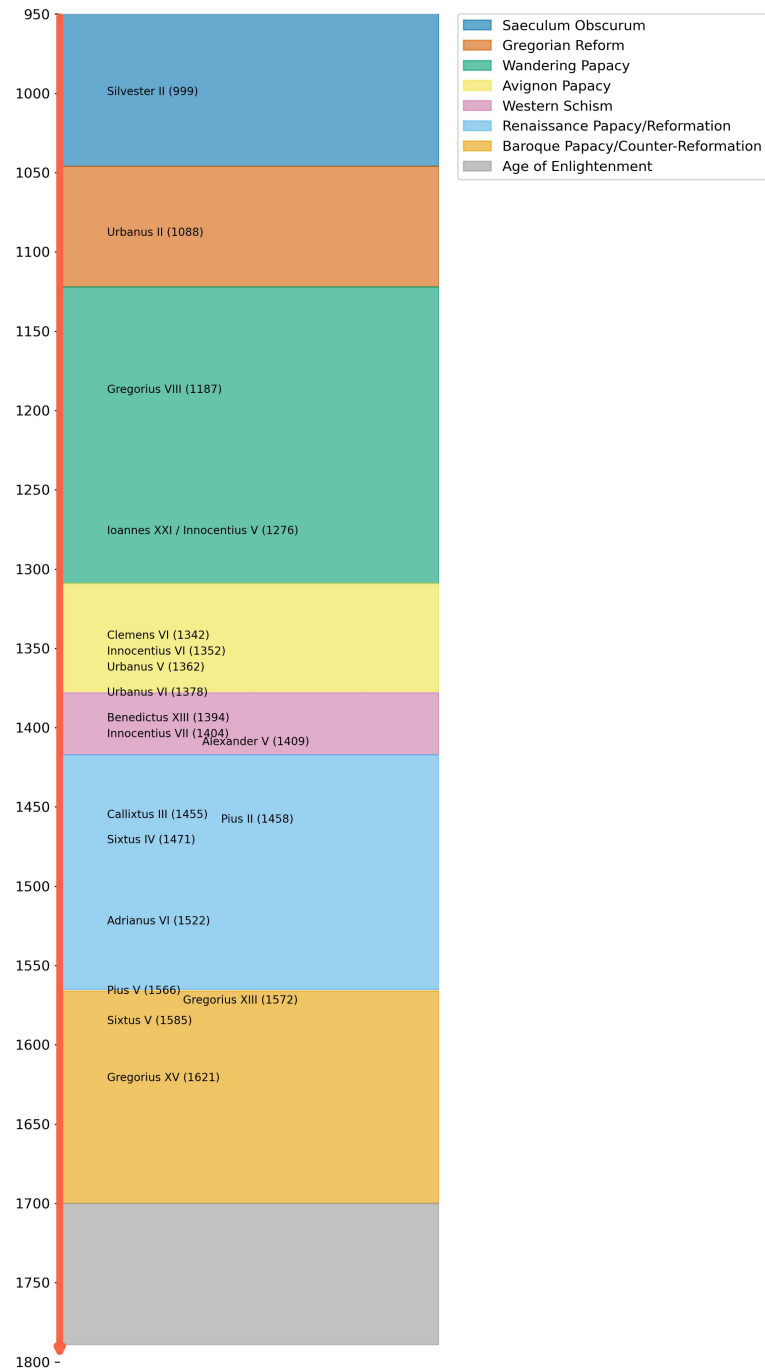


Figure 1: Chronological timeline of academic popes across historical eras (950–1800).

in 1586 (1742), with the aim of collecting all the official documents issued by popes, we used the number of papal bulls issued by each pope as an indicator of their productivity. Although the collection is not complete, we chose to rely on this source due to its accessibility and its ability to provide a good representation of papal activity over the centuries. To ensure comparability, the number of bulls was weighted against the duration of each pontificate, allowing us to obtain a Standardised measure of each pope's work. In addition to the number of bulls issued, we also considered the number of canonizations. This ritual, which involves the recognition of the sanctity of a deceased individual, could only be performed by bishops until the 11th century. However, towards the end of that century, popes began to assert their exclusive right to authorize the veneration of saints, in contrast to bishops' traditional rights. Initially, the proclamation of sainthood occurred through *vox populi*, with bishops responsible for the investigation and proclamation of saints. However, with the election of Urban II, a process of centralization began, which granted the pope the exclusive right to decide on canonizations. This act, which often bore political connotations, allowed popes to consolidate their power, strengthening their authority through popular support and intervention in political contexts.³⁰

Examples of this abound. Saint Thomas Becket, possibly the most famous one, was canonized just three years after his death in 1173, a decision that was deeply political. Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in 1170 following a conflict with King Henry II over the rights of the Church. His swift canonization helped solidify his position as a martyr for the independence of the Church, promoting the idea of papal supremacy over royal authority.³¹ Furthermore, his canonization was a form of political resistance against Henry's attempts to control the Church. Canonizations often reflected the priorities of the Church during a specific pontificate, highlighting the strategic themes that popes sought to promote, such as ecclesiastical reform, the defense of orthodoxy, and evangelistic missions. For example, Saint Dominic of Guzmán (canonized in 1234 by Gregory IX), the founder of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans), represented the Church's fight against heresy, particularly against the Cathars. His canonization underscored the medieval Church's commitment to defending orthodoxy and strengthening its doctrinal authority.

Table 2 summarises our findings on whether prior experience in academia affected a pope's productivity. Each column corresponds to one of our productivity measures: the number of bulls issued, the number of cardinals elevated, the number of saints canonized, and the length of the Treccani entry. The statistical significance is indicated by stars. The year of nomination is a significant determinant of productivity in three out of four cases, suggesting that more recent popes tended to be more productive than their predecessors. The length of the pontificate is also significant in three cases, which is unsurprising—longer pontificates provided more time to issue bulls, elevate cardinals, and canonize saints. By contrast, having been a professor has no statistically significant effect on any measure of productivity. Therefore, academic popes appear no different from their non-academic counterparts in these four dimensions.

30. André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

31. Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (University of California Press, 1986).

	Dependent variable: 4 measures of productivity			
	no. of bulls	no. of new cardinals	no. of new saints	length of Treccani page
constant	-35.80*** (7.87)	-9.06* (5.34)	-6.00 (4.15)	-4.97 (8.74)
year nomination (time trend)	4.77*** (1.00)	1.26* (0.68)	0.78 (0.52)	2.02* (1.11)
length pontificate	0.33*** (0.09)	0.48*** (0.06)	0.12*** (0.05)	0.10 (0.10)
having been professor	-0.27 (0.48)	0.03 (0.33)	-0.12 (0.25)	0.57 (0.54)
R^2	0.24	0.38	0.08	0.05

Note: 119 observations. Ordinary Least Squares. Significance levels: ***: 1%, **: 5%, and *: 10%
All variables transformed with inverse hyperbolic sine.

Table 2: The productivity of popes

5 Academic Backgrounds and Disciplinary Profiles

The analysis of the disciplines taught by future popes highlights an institutional configuration of knowledge that cannot be understood without taking into account the specific character of theological teaching in medieval and early modern Italy. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, theology, while remaining central to ecclesiastical identity, occupied a structurally ambiguous position within Italian universities: often lacking an autonomous faculty, it was largely taught in the *studia* of religious orders, in colleges, and, after the Council of Trent, in seminaries.³² More generally, early modern universities tended to privilege disciplines endowed with clear administrative and juridical utility, whereas theology, although central at the doctrinal level, often remained marginal within the university framework.³³ Although this configuration is particularly evident in the Italian context, similar dynamics of disciplinary and institutional differentiation can also be observed in other European universities—such as those of Paris or the Iberian world—where theological teaching retained a greater degree of institutional centrality.³⁴ The data presented here clearly reflect this configuration. Popes who taught theology prior to their election almost invariably belonged to a religious order—Dominican, Franciscan, Benedictine, or Cistercian—confirming that theological teaching functioned above all as a form

32. Paolo Broggio, *L'insegnamento della teologia negli antichi stati italiani tra conflittualità regolare e fermenti politici: alcune note (secoli XVI–XVII)*, ed. Gian Paolo Brizzi and Antonello Mattone (Bologna: CLUEB, 2013), 331–342.

33. Paul F Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2002); Paul F Grendler, *The University of Mantua, the Gonzaga, and the Jesuits, 1584–1630* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.3437>; Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, “Mobility,” in *A History of the University in Europe. Vol II*, ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 416–448.

34. Jacques Verger, *Les universités au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986); Jacques Verger, “Patterns,” in *A History of the University in Europe. Vol. I: Universities in the Middle Ages*, ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 35–76.

of symbolic and institutional capital internal to the orders, rather than as a fully recognised university credential.

If the teaching of theology thus appears to be closely connected to membership in a religious order, a different logic governs the presence of canon law and the arts among the disciplines taught by future popes. In these cases, university teaching constituted a broader institutional resource, not confined to the internal circuits of the orders and potentially accessible also to secular clerics. Law, in particular, occupied a central position within the Italian university system and was directly relevant to the exercise of curial and administrative functions. Legal teaching therefore offered a form of academic capital endowed with public value, capable of being converted into curial advancement and, in some cases, into ascent to the papal throne. The arts, often understood as philosophical and propaedeutic training, fulfilled a similar function, allowing entry into and consolidation within the university world without passing through the more tightly controlled channels of theological instruction. This configuration helps to explain why university teaching experience is more frequently found among popes of relatively modest social origins, for whom the possession of publicly recognised academic credentials could compensate for the absence of strong aristocratic or curial networks.

Taken together, these elements make it possible to interpret university teaching experience not simply as an indicator of a high level of intellectual formation, but as the reflection of a specific institutional configuration of knowledge and ecclesiastical careers. In this sense, post-Tridentine reforms contributed to the progressive relocation of theological training towards seminaries and colleges, strengthening institutional control over orthodoxy and reducing the role of the university as a space for the formation of the higher clergy. In this context, university teaching gradually ceased to represent a strategic stage in careers destined for the highest levels of the Church. The disappearance of popes with prior experience of university teaching after the early seventeenth century therefore does not signal a decline in the level of papal education, but rather a profound reconfiguration of the channels through which academic knowledge and ecclesiastical authority were brought into relation.

6 Family Origins and the Rise of Popes

Historian Von Ranke,³⁵ in his *History of the Popes*, writes:

"Hereditary principalities or aristocracies transmit their power from one generation to the next throughout the world, but the sovereignty of the Church has this peculiarity: its throne can be reached by men from the lowest strata of society."

This observation, at the beginning of Ranke's analysis of the pontificate of Sixtus V, is not limited exclusively to the latter. The examination of scholar-popes reveals that this was a recurrent phenomenon. When analyzing their biographies, it emerges that many of them came from humble origins or from the minor local nobility. This characteristic, shared by almost half

35. Leopold Von Ranke, *The History of the Popes: Their Church and State, and Especially of Their Conflicts with Protestantism in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*, vol. 3 (Bell / Daldy, 1866).

of the popes included in this study, takes on particular significance. In fact, belonging to noble or influential families exerted a decisive influence on access to the papacy. This phenomenon highlights the centrality of family power within the Church, particularly in the early centuries, when Roman dynasties managed to maintain substantial control over papal elections. These families not only enjoyed a privileged role within the city of Rome, but also extended their influence to the most critical ecclesiastical decisions, perpetuating a system of appointments that solidified the dominance of local aristocracies. Tracing the course of history, scholar-popes can be grouped into seven periods, corresponding to the main phases of ecclesiastical history. Figure 1, which represents a timeline, provides a visualization of these major historical periods and the scholar-popes who played a leading role in them. During Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, it was primarily families from the Roman aristocracy that secured access to the highest office in the Church. Until 1059, the papal electoral system allowed only Roman clergy to be elected pope, effectively reserving decision-making power to influential local families. Even during the *saeculum obscurum*, these powerful Roman dynasties successfully imposed their candidates, maintaining direct control over the Church and the papacy, often at the expense of individuals from other social classes or regions. Another aspect considered is geographic origin: five of these scholar-popes were not Italian. The first two scholar-popes are among them: Gerbert of Aurillac, who became Pope Sylvester II in 999, and Eudes of Châtillon, known as Urban II. With the advent of the new millennium, a significant change occurred: new centers of learning, such as cathedral schools, emerged, laying the foundations for the birth of universities. At the same time, the selection of popes ceased to be the exclusive prerogative of great Roman aristocratic families, occasionally shifting towards figures from the growing ecclesiastical and academic worlds. Although these two phenomena cannot be considered directly related, it is clear that the new centers of learning and, later, the universities, played a crucial role in shaping the ecclesiastical class, creating opportunities for social advancement even for those from more modest backgrounds.³⁶

This is the case, for example, of the first two popes encountered in this study. The first, Sylvester II, came from a modest family in Aquitaine. In a letter to Bishop Wilderod (Letter 217, 69), he even explained that he was born in poverty.³⁷

Gerbert studied at the Monastery of Saint-Géraud, where he acquired extensive knowledge of Aristotle's works and those of classical Roman authors. Later, he accompanied Count Borrell

36. The *saeculum obscurum* ("dark century", 904–1046) refers to a period of papal crisis, marked by corruption, immorality, and the strong influence of Roman aristocratic families, who manipulated papal elections to serve their political interests. Frequent changes of popes, political instability, and a decline in spiritual authority characterized this phase, further "darkened" by the scarcity of reliable sources. It ended with the intervention of Otto I, who restored greater order and papal authority. Von Ranke, *The History of the Popes: Their Church and State, and Especially of Their Conflicts with Protestantism in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*.

37. [...] Quod ita non esse, sacerdotalis dignitas, Gallia testis est, testes reges, et procures. [...] Cur ita factum sit si forte requiras, nescire me fateor, fateor, inquam, me nescire, cur egenus, et exul, nec genere, nec divitiis adjutus, multis locupletibus et nobilitate parentum conspicuis praelatus sit, nisi quod tui est muneris, bone Jhesu, qui de stercore erigis pauperum ut sedeat cum principibus, et solium gloriae teneat ([...] That this is not so, witness the priestly dignity of France, the kings, the nobles [...] witness that a poor and exile, not sustained by birth or wealth, was preferred to many rich and illustrious by nobility of kin, except that this is not Your gift, good Jesus, that You raise the poor from the dung to make him sit with princes).

to Catalonia, visiting the relics of Saint Géraud and beginning his study of the *quadrivium* (astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, and music). His erudition led him to travel extensively before returning to the Monastery of Reims, where he assumed the role of *scholasticus* (master). During his tenure, Reims reached its peak, becoming a key center for the teaching of theology.

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His election to the papacy was supported by Emperor Otto III of Saxony (980–1002), ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, who sought to challenge the dominance of the powerful Roman families for political, religious, and personal reasons, while also pursuing his ideal of renewing imperial authority.³⁹

Eudes de Châtillon, the future Urban II, was born in 1035 in Châtillon-sur-Marne to a family of modest knights, although it was long believed that he was of noble descent.⁴⁰ After beginning his ecclesiastical education in Reims, he continued his studies in Cluny, where he encountered the Cluniac monastic movement, which deeply influenced his career and pontificate. His election to the papacy in 1088 occurred during a period of intense tensions for the Church, marked by the Investiture Controversy with Emperor Henry IV and the presence of an antipope, Clement III. Supported by the reformist faction and proponents of Gregorian reforms, Urban II represented continuity with the policies of Gregory VII, of whom he was a devoted disciple. These reforms aimed to strengthen papal authority, combat simony and Nicolaitism, and oppose lay investiture. His reputation for moral integrity and diplomatic skill made him an authoritative and respected figure, who was capable of uniting the diverse supporters of reform.

His election was further supported by his connection to Cluny, a center of monastic reform of extraordinary political and religious importance, whose influence extended throughout Europe. In fact, the Cluniac order was a powerful ally of ecclesiastical reforms, helping promote a Christianity that was closer to its original ideals and removed from the influence of secular powers. Through their geographic expansion, monasteries succeeded in embedding this vision of Christianity, laying the groundwork for the major transformations that would lead to the

38. Count Borrell was a prominent figure in 10th-century Catalonia. Under his rule, the Counties of Barcelona, Girona, Urgell, and Vic were united. During this period, Catalonia maintained good relations with both the papacy and the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba, an important Western cultural center. Caliphs Abd al-Rahman III and his son Abd al-Hakam amassed works from various parts of Europe in their library. Furthermore, it is known that Arabic works were translated into Latin at the Abbey of Ripoll in Catalonia, a key center for manuscript transmission, alongside Vic, which served as a bridge between Islamic culture and Western Latin culture.

39. Otto III aimed to centralize imperial power and reassert the emperor's authority over the papacy and the process of electing popes, removing it from the influence of powerful Roman families. As the successor of a reforming dynasty inaugurated by Otto I, he pursued the ambitious project of restoring the ancient Christian Roman Empire, with Rome as the political and spiritual center of the Christian world. To achieve this vision, it was essential to diminish the influence of Roman families, who often acted autonomously and in opposition to the concept of a centralized universal government. Otto III surrounded himself with intellectuals and religious reformers who shared his vision, including Gerbert of Aurillac. He aspired to a papacy led by educated and morally upright men, capable of advancing a reform agenda aligned with his ideals. This stood in stark contrast with the practices of these Roman families, who often promoted the election of corrupt or politically compromised popes, which was incompatible with the image of a purified and independent Church. Finally, Otto III drew inspiration from ancient Rome and the model of the Byzantine Empire. The dominance of Roman aristocratic families, with their factional management of power, posed a threat to his vision of a universal ruler, a guardian of the common good and of a renewed harmony between temporal and spiritual authority.

40. John W. O'Malley, *A History of the Popes: From Peter to the Present* (Government Institutes, 2009).

Gregorian Reform under Pope Gregory VII. It was within this context of monastic renewal, with Cluny at its heart, that Eudes de Châtillon became the pope.

The autonomy gained with the Gregorian Reform faced a setback during the period known as the "wandering papacy" (1124–1309). The interference of Roman noble families and German emperors created a time of significant instability, forcing several popes to reside outside of Rome.⁴¹ During this phase, there were three scholar-popes: Gregory VIII, Innocent V, and John XXI. Little is known about the origins of Pedro Julião Rebelo and Innocent V, but it is highly likely that they did not belong to noble families. In contrast, Alberto di Morra was the son of Count Sartorius di Morra, a prominent member of an influential family from Benevento.

Innocent V (born Pierre de Tarentaise) most likely did not come from a wealthy family, and it was certainly his academic achievements that led him to the highest office in the Church. After his initial education and a period of teaching as a lector in one of the convents of his province, he was sent in the summer of 1255 to the *Studium generale* at the convent of Saint-Jacques in Paris, where he obtained the title of *magister* in theology.⁴²

Between 1259 and 1264, Pierre de Tarentaise taught at the University of Paris. After periods of teaching (1259–1264 and 1267–1269) and serving as provincial prior (1264–1267 and 1269–1272), Gregory X made him cardinal and bishop of the Suburbicarian See of Ostia (sometime between May 23 and 28, 1273). His close relationship with Gregory X explains the decision of the cardinals, who, after the pope's death, elected him to the Roman See on the first ballot. The conflict between the Roman and Franco-Angevin factions was thus resolved by choosing a well-known figure who was close to the late pope, but less directly aligned with either of the two dominant factions in the Sacred College.⁴³

The new pope, the first monk from the Dominican order to ascend to the papal throne, was crowned on February 22, 1276. Prior to this, Charles of Anjou, who was seemingly supportive of the Dominican's election, met with the pope in Viterbo between February 7 and 15, during Innocent's journey to Rome. The pope's installation in the Eternal City could not proceed without negotiations with Charles, who had taken advantage of Gregory X's absence to strengthen his control over Rome. On March 2, 1276, Innocent officially confirmed Charles's position, appointing him as senator of Rome and imperial vicar of Tuscany.

The few months of Innocent V's pontificate were dominated by a central goal—expressed in the programmatic document *Fundamentum aliud* (February 25, 1276)—of preparing a crusade to reclaim the Holy Land, which was firmly held by Muslims.⁴⁴

Another scholar-pope from this period is John XXI. It should be noted that his biography

41. Some of the papal residences during this period included Viterbo, Orvieto, Anagni, and Perugia.

42. As a master, he collaborated with Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Florent of Hesdin, and Bonhomme the Breton on the commission of five masters appointed by the General Chapter of Valenciennes (June 1259) to prepare the *ratio studiorum* of the Dominican Order.

43. holding the so-called "Chair of the French," one of the two chairs assigned to the Dominicans for about thirty years.

44. The pope's efforts to bring peace between Genoa and Charles of Anjou (formalized in the peace treaty signed on June 18, 1276, which also ended the city's interdict) and to cease hostilities between Ghibelline Pisa and the cities of the pro-Guelph Tuscan League (peace was signed on June 13, 1276) should be understood in this context.

remains uncertain, at least until his election to the papacy, and for a long time, historiography identified him with Pedro Hispano, a professor of medicine at the University of Siena between 1245 and 1250. However, recent studies have questioned whether the individual who taught at the University of Siena and John XXI are one and the same.⁴⁵

As for Pedro Julião, precise information about his family is lacking. According to some sources, he was the son of a physician and belonged to a noble family from Lisbon. However, during his stay in Siena, he faced significant financial difficulties: a notarial act found in the Monastery of Lecceto reveals that he lived in the city's poorest districts, such as Valle Piatta. The same document indicates that his financial situation was so dire that he was forced to sell his Bible, a valuable copy, to a friar named Fantino for seven lire.⁴⁶

In 1261, Pedro Julião was appointed Archbishop of Braga and subsequently Cardinal-Bishop of Frascati in 1273, before being elected pope in 1276. Given the uncertainty surrounding his identity, it is difficult to determine whether his potential academic career played a key role in his ecclesiastical rise. However, it is known that the College of Cardinals, tasked with electing Gregory X's successor, unanimously chose Pedro Julião. This decision reflects a desire to entrust the leadership of the Church to an erudite figure who would be able to mediate between the various urban factions in conflict at the time. During the Avignon Papacy, as many as four popes with academic experience can be identified. Among these, two—Étienne Aubert (Pope Innocent VI) and Guillaume Grimoard (Pope Urban V)—came from wealthy families. It is worth noting that the pontificate of Urban V, a nephew of Innocent VI, was characterized by his close ties to the papal court and his integrity. His reign was particularly notable for the emphasis placed on higher education.⁴⁷

Once elected pope, Urban V not only reformed or issued new statutes for the universities of Orléans, Orvieto, Toulouse, and Paris, but also founded universities in Kraków (in collaboration with King Casimir III the Great, in 1364), Orange (with Emperor Charles IV, in 1365), and Vienna (1365), as well as several colleges in France.

When criticized for financial extravagance in supporting young scholars who might never join the Church, he reportedly replied: "It will always be beneficial for anyone to have studied" (Treccani). His erudition also enabled him to significantly enhance the library of the Papal Palace in Avignon, without neglecting university libraries. The period of the Avignon papacy ended with the election of Pope Urban VI, marking the beginning of a new historical phase for the Church, characterized by internal divisions that led to the formation of two opposing poles, each with its own pope.

45. José Francisco Meirinhos, "Les manuscrits et l'attribution d'œuvres à Petrus Hispanus," 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1484/m.tema-eb.4.00769>; Angel D'Ors, "Petrus Hispanus OP, Auctor Summularum III: Petrus Alfonsi or Petrus Ferrandi?," *Vivarium* 41, no. 2 (2003): 249–303.

46. R. Accademia dei Rozzi, "Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria," *Bullettino Senese di Storia Patria*, 1894, Paolo Nardi, *L'insegnamento superiore a Siena nei secoli XI-XIV. Tentativi e realizzazioni dalle origini alla fondazione dello Studio Generale* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1996).

47. Urban V was elected pope after just two weeks of conclave. Initially, the cardinals – divided between the ambitions of Guy de Boulogne, nephew of King John II of France, and Élie de Talleyrand de Périgord – chose Hugues Roger, a brother of Pope Clement VI. However, Hugues declined the papal tiara. Influenced by Guillaume d'Aigrefeuille the Elder, the cardinals unanimously agreed on a candidate outside the Sacred College: Guillaume Grimoard.

Even in this transitional phase, a scholar-pope can be identified: Urban VI, born Bartolomeo Prignano, who also had teaching experience at the University of Naples. After seven French popes, Gregory XI returned the papal seat to Rome. Upon his death in 1378, a highly controversial conclave was held, which ultimately led to the Western Schism. The election of Urban VI was highly contentious, occurring in a particularly tense atmosphere as demands for a Roman, or at least Italian, pope were strong. Prignano's intellectual qualities were not a decisive factor in his selection; on the contrary, he was considered a modest man. However, his strong legal training undoubtedly influenced his immediate decisions. Among his earliest actions was a clear intention to complete Gregory XI's initiatives. He also focused on an area of particular importance to him—universities—by granting Orvieto the *Studium Generale* status, a privilege the city had repeatedly requested from his predecessor.

Urban VI's primary goal appears to have been ecclesiastical reform. He sought to assert papal authority over the College of Cardinals, famously declaring, "omnia possum et ita volo" ("I can do everything, and so I will"). His determined and forceful approach aimed to combat material and moral corruption within the Church's upper hierarchy.

Callixtus III came from a family of small landowners. His election took place in a particularly tense historical context. Upon the death of Nicholas V in 1455, the conclave unfolded amid significant international tensions. Beyond the longstanding rivalry between the Orsini and Colonna families, which had plagued all fifteenth-century conclaves, the fall of Constantinople had alarmed Europe regarding the growing threat posed by the Turks and led to an urgent call for a new crusade. The conclave included seven Italian cardinals, four Spaniards, two Frenchmen, and two Greeks. The numerical dominance of non-Italian cardinals and the magnitude of the international challenges likely played a decisive role in the election of a foreign pope.⁴⁸

The modest social background of several other popes further highlights a broader shift in ecclesiastical careers. Innocent VII belonged to the minor nobility of Sulmona, as did Sixtus V, whose father cultivated a small plot of rented land in the territories of Fermo. In Sixtus's case, as with other popes, belonging to a religious order was a decisive factor in advancing his career, as was his encounter with a prominent figure of the time, Michele Ghislieri—later Pope Pius V—then a prominent inquisitor. Similarly, documents related to Adrian VI's admission to the University of Louvain indicate that he required financial assistance to pursue his studies.⁴⁹

The return of the papal seat to Rome gave rise to two rival factions within the Church, with popes and antipopes clashing over control of the papal throne. This occurred during a time of political and social upheaval in Europe, marked by the decline of the feudal system and the Church's gradual loss of social and political centrality. The King of France, Philip the Fair, openly clashed with Pope Boniface VIII in a struggle for absolute power. The entire Christendom was divided between those who recognized the pope in Rome and those who supported the pope in Avignon. Numerous attempts were made to resolve the schism, including

48. The French cardinals favored a Greek cardinal, Bessarion, but Borja emerged as the best compromise candidate. He was the oldest cardinal, widely respected, and known for his passionate and deeply held conviction in advocating for a crusade.

49. Von Ranke, *The History of the Popes: Their Church and State, and Especially of Their Conflicts with Protestantism in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries*.

the Council of Pisa in 1409, which sought to depose the two rival popes and elect a third, Alexander V. However, this only worsened the crisis. The schism was finally resolved in 1417 at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), convened at the request of Sigismund, King of the Romans and Holy Roman Emperor. This council restored the unity of Christendom under a single pope, Martin V. In this historical context, among the scholar-popes feature Antipope Benedict XIII, Pope Innocent VII, and Antipope Alexander V. The latter was born into a poor family originally from Neapolis, on the island of Crete. Orphaned at a very young age, he was entrusted to the care of a Conventual Franciscan friar who recognized his extraordinary intellectual talents, and sent him first to Oxford and then to Paris to continue his education. In Paris, Pietro Filargis delivered lectures *super libros sententiarum*, a fundamental requirement to obtain the title of *magister*. In 1381, he was granted the license to teach, although rumor had it that he paid a bribe to secure it.

His academic career then began, and it continued at the University of Pavia. For several decades, Pietro Filargis was one of the most influential figures in Lombardy's intellectual life. His reputation as a humanist caught the attention of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, who also recognized his exceptional diplomatic skills. His encounter with the Lord of Pavia would prove decisive for his rise to the papal throne. He was elected at the Council of Pisa in 1409, during which his two rivals, Gregory XII and Benedict XIII, were deposed. However, the Church considered Alexander V an antipope, as the Council of Pisa lacked the authority to convene itself, to depose a legitimate pope, and to elect a new one while the previous pope was still alive. Once again, it appears that humble origins were not a hindrance to attaining the highest office. As highlighted in other examples, belonging to a religious order often proved a decisive factor, providing access to high-level education and facilitating connections with the most influential figures of the time.

The case of Pietro Filargis is emblematic of a broader dynamic. If for these seventeen popes belonging to an influential family was not the reason for ascension to the papacy, for all the others it certainly was. This is likely the reason why, from the middle of the 17th century onward, no popes had taught at European universities prior to becoming supreme pontiffs. From that point on, popes came again predominantly from great Roman or Italian families—such as the Medici, Barberini, Pamphili, Albani, and Orsini—who alternated in power. These aristocratic families competed to increase their political influence through ecclesiastical appointments (bishops, cardinals, and popes).

At the same time, the Church's authority needed to be reinforced: by the late 17th century, the papacy's political position was weak and increasingly powerless in the face of the growing strength of absolutist monarchies. This was the century when royal absolutism was firmly established, along with the idea that the monarch was the rational agent of God's will. This phenomenon can also be explained by considering the changes observed at European universities over the period. In particular, the role of universities underwent a significant transformation: until then, the ideals of Humanism, the development of bureaucracy within civic and state structures, and the increasing demands of the Church had driven the spread of universities.

Yet, from the seventeenth century onward, this dynamic shifted significantly, as universities ceased to function as the principal channels for producing the intellectual leadership of the Church. Starting in the 17th century, a more rational and secular view of science began to prevail, leading to the emergence of the figure of the researcher as it is still known today. In the sciences, the theories of Copernicus and Galileo gained increasing traction, paving the way for the experimental method and challenging traditional intellectual authorities, such as Aristotle, whose foundational texts were questioned. These new approaches and discoveries prompted the Church to distance itself from the ideas that circulated in cultural and academic circles. In this context, the Inquisition intensified its activities, turning universities into some of the primary institutions to be monitored, and censoring new currents of thought.

7 The Decline of Academic Popes after 1625: Three Converging Dynamics

The absence of popes with an academic background after the mid-17th century cannot be seen as a mere statistical anomaly. Rather, it reflects a profound transformation in the relationship between universities and the Church. In our view, this shift can be explained by three interconnected historical dynamics: the secularization of European universities during the Scientific Revolution; the return of the hegemony of pontifical families, which reasserted control over the papacy through powerful Roman dynasties; and the Tridentine reform, which introduced a new model of clerical training centered on seminaries.

7.1 The Secularisation of European Universities

Beginning in the second half of the 16th century, universities began to lose their central role in the training of ecclesiastical elites. This process of secularisation had deep cultural roots in the Renaissance transformation of university learning. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, humanist scholars in Italian universities—such as Lorenzo Valla, Guarino da Verona, and Francesco Filelfo—challenged scholastic traditions and promoted philological and historical methods. Their influence led to significant shifts in university curricula, emphasising classical languages, textual criticism, and empirical approaches to law, medicine, and natural philosophy. In some cases, their teaching extended beyond universities and helped redefine the boundaries of legitimate knowledge.⁵⁰ The emergence of the Scientific Revolution introduced radically new paradigms of knowledge—grounded in observation, experimentation, and rational inquiry—that increasingly clashed with the theological and scholastic framework on which medieval universities had been built. Disciplines such as mathematics, physics, astronomy, and medicine gained prominence in academic curricula, often at the expense of theology and canon law. At the same time, scientific academies multiplied throughout Europe, becoming privileged spaces for scholars to present and debate their discoveries. These institutions, often operating with greater intellectual freedom than universities constrained by ecclesiastical oversight, became key sites

50. Gian Paolo Brizzi, “Le università italiane tra Rinascimento ed età moderna” (1996), <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:192894892>.

for the circulation of new ideas and methods.⁵¹

This transformation was particularly marked in academic centers more open to innovation, such as Padua, Leiden, Glasgow, and Uppsala. These universities became laboratories of modern knowledge, where new methodologies challenged both the traditional Aristotelian worldview and, at times, Church orthodoxy. Academic figures like Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton advanced ideas that often directly contradicted official doctrine. The Church's reaction was one of increasing control: the trial and condemnation of Galileo in 1633 marked a turning point, both as a symbolic limit to theological tolerance and as a warning to those inclined toward intellectual autonomy.⁵²

In the wake of such confrontations, universities were placed under growing surveillance. Ecclesiastical authorities sought to curtail academic freedom by censoring content and discouraging speculative inquiry. Professors suspected of harboring heterodox views were dismissed or silenced and were increasingly unlikely to pursue successful ecclesiastical careers. As a result, the university was no longer seen as a suitable environment for shaping the doctrinal and political profiles required of high-ranking Church leaders. The progressive secularization of university life distanced professors from the core priorities of the Counter-Reformation Church, which came to prefer candidates formed within seminaries and curial bureaucracies. Consequently, the possibility of a university professor ascending to the papacy became increasingly remote.⁵³

7.2 The Return of the Hegemony of Pontifical Families

Starting in the seventeenth century, access to the papacy became increasingly concentrated within a small number of pontifical families who exerted growing influence over the Roman Curia. Families such as the Barberini, Chigi, Pamphili, Aldobrandini, and Borghese dominated the ecclesiastical political scene, controlling not only the appointment of cardinals but also shaping papal elections. This system of power, based on clientelistic networks and dynastic alliances, made it increasingly difficult for individuals outside these circles—such as university professors—to rise to the highest ecclesiastical office.

Although not an entirely new phenomenon, in the seventeenth century this dynamic became systemic. The papacy evolved into a central node of the Roman and Italian nobility, and the skills required of future popes shifted from theological or academic expertise to diplomatic experience, administrative management, and political mediation. Ecclesiastical careers were increasingly built through service in apostolic nunciatures, the Secretariat of State, or the various Congregations of the Curia, rather than through academic teaching positions in European universities.

51. Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

52. John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Pietro Redondi, *Galileo Heretic*, Originally published as *Galileo: eretico*, Einaudi, 1983 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

53. Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Even when nepotism was formally restricted—such as with Innocent XII’s 1692 bull *Romanum decet pontificem*, which forbade the creation of cardinal-nephews—the principle of family and patrician continuity within the papal power structure remained intact. The hegemony of pontifical families created a closed selection mechanism, one that privileged social and political connections over intellectual or academic merit. As a result, universities lost much of their historical role as a recruitment ground for the highest ecclesiastical elites. While in earlier periods, a university professorship could represent a plausible pathway to the papacy, from the seventeenth century onward, this possibility became increasingly remote, replaced by curial careers based on social status, diplomatic service, and familial ties.

7.3 The Tridentine Reform and the Rise of Seminaries

The third key factor was the establishment of seminaries following the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which profoundly and permanently reshaped clerical education. Designed to respond to the needs of the Catholic Reformation, seminaries gradually supplanted universities as the primary channel for the training of future priests. Emphasis shifted toward obedience to ecclesiastical authority, spiritual discipline, and strict doctrinal conformity, rather than theological debate or the exploration of universal knowledge.⁵⁴

This new, standardised educational model—strictly supervised by the Church—ensured coherence with the post-Tridentine Church’s priorities but offered little space for intellectual independence or scholarly innovation. Unlike medieval and Renaissance universities, which had been dynamic centers of knowledge production and formation of both ecclesiastical and civic elites, seminaries produced regular clergy prepared for pastoral duties but rarely shaped influential thinkers, theological innovators, or actors in Europe’s broader intellectual transformations.⁵⁵

8 Becoming Pope and the Occupational Choice of Academics

The data suggests that for many scholars, the Church represented not only a spiritual calling but also a strategic occupational choice. In a pre-industrial society where universities and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were deeply intertwined, academic prestige served as a powerful signal of ‘elite human capital.’ For an ambitious academic, entering the clergy was a way to convert intellectual talent into political and institutional influence, with the papacy representing the ultimate peak of this career path. However, as we have seen, this path became increasingly narrow after the 16th century, when the requirements for the throne of Peter shifted from scholastic reputation to diplomatic and theological-administrative rigour.

The possibility for professors to access higher positions, such as that of pope, clearly enhanced the attractiveness of the academic career, but it may also have diverted talents from

54. Simona Negruzzo, “The Tridentine Proposal for the Formation of the Clergy: The Seminaries,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Trent*, ed. Nelson H. Editor Minnich, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 209–224.

55. John Tracy Ellis, *Essays in seminary education* (Fides Publishers, 1967).

productive tasks. Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith discusses the issue, hence contributing to a better understanding of the dynamics related to scholar-popes at European universities. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith devotes a substantial part of the fifth chapter to the expenses that a nation must bear for education, not only of the young but also of adults. In the third article, Smith begins his reflection by stating that educational institutions for men of all ages are predominantly religious in nature. He describes this type of instruction as:

“[...] a species of instruction of which the object is not so much to render the people good citizens in this world, as to prepare them for another and a better world in a life to come.”

Smith continues his analysis by focusing on the academic world, examining how clergymen choose to join universities and the opportunities they can thus obtain. He draws a clear distinction between the Protestant and Catholic contexts. Smith observes that in countries where church benefices are modest, a university chair generally represents a more advantageous position than a church benefice. In this context, universities can select their members from among all the country’s clergymen, who constitute the largest class of men of letters. On the contrary, if church benefices are more substantial, the Church tends to attract the majority of the most eminent university scholars, who often find a patron willing to secure them a clerical appointment.⁵⁶

As a result, in countries where church benefices are modest, universities are likely to be populated by the nation’s best men of letters. Conversely, in countries where church benefices are substantial, there are few eminent scholars and they are often among the youngest members of the institution, who then tend to leave the academic world before acquiring sufficient experience and knowledge to make a significant contribution. The situation described by Smith can also be found at universities in Catholic countries and among the popes in our database. A significant example is Ugo Boncompagni, known as Pope Gregory XIII, who pursued a distinguished academic career at the University of Bologna, where he taught law for ten years. In 1540, he requested a salary increase, but his request was denied, prompting him to accept Cardinal Pietro Paolo Parisio’s invitation to move to Rome as a lawyer. There, he received the tonsure and, in 1542, was ordained a priest. His rise began when the reigning pope, Paul III, recognized his abilities, appointing him as the chief judge of the capital and later as a member of the college of abbreviators at the Council of Trent (1546). This example, which could also be extended to other ecclesiastical positions, illustrates how an academic career could open the door to better-paid professions within the Church. This undoubtedly attracted a wider audience, drawn by the prospect of academic advancement. However, the Church’s appeal can

56. “In countries where church benefices are the greater part of them very moderate, a chair in a university is generally a better establishment than a church benefice. The universities have, in this case, the picking and choosing of their members from all the churchmen of the country, who, in every country, constitute by far the most draw on numerous class of men of letters. Where church benefices, on the contrary, are many of them very considerable, the church naturally draws from the universities the greater part of their eminent men of letters; who generally find some patron who does himself honour by procuring them church preferment. In the former situation men of action we are likely to find the universities filled with the most eminent men of letters that are to be found in the country. In the latter we are likely to find few eminent men among them, and those few among the youngest members of the society, who are likely too to be drained away from it, before they can have acquired experience and knowledge enough to be of much use to it.” Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Originally published in 1776 (1776; New York: Modern Library, 1937).

also be interpreted as a diversion of many promising talents, who were thus steered away from more productive occupations that, over time, could have contributed more actively to major scientific discoveries.⁵⁷

Adam Smith’s position must be understood within the intellectual context of the Enlightenment, a period when reason, empirical observation, and scientific progress were valued as privileged tools for understanding the world and improving society. In this cultural climate, religious institutions were often perceived as obstacles to free thought and the renewal of knowledge, due to their tendency to preserve traditional educational structures and to exercise ideological control over teaching. Smith’s critique of universities with strong ecclesiastical ties thus reflects a broader Enlightenment skepticism toward forms of education oriented more toward spiritual training and preparation for the afterlife than toward the promotion of scientific and civic knowledge.

However, this does not mean that the Church excluded scholars from academia; on the contrary, it recognized the university system as a crucial space for the advancement of knowledge. A significant example of this openness is Ludovico Marrocci, who is known for his translation of the Bible into Arabic. This eminent scholar was directly appointed by the pope as a professor at the University of Rome in 1657, due to his extensive expertise, and was entrusted with the Chair of Arabic, which he held for 33 years. In addition to his academic role, Marrocci also held significant ecclesiastical positions, including those of papal confessor, master of novices, prefect of youth, rector, and procurator general. Although his salary as a professor was not particularly high (40 scudi in 1657, rising to 150 scudi by the end of his career), his other ecclesiastical roles provided him with financial stability.⁵⁸

9 Conclusion

In this contribution, we explored the relationship between the papacy and teaching at European universities over the course of eight centuries. By analysing a database of university professors and academics, we found that 21 popes held teaching roles before being elected. What stands out most clearly is that there were scholar-popes up until the first half of the 17th century. After Gregory XV, no pope (at least until 1800) had any university teaching experience.

We started with the hypothesis that early modern universities were less open to social mobility. This led us to examine these popes’ biographies, focusing in particular on their social origins and their path to the highest office in the Church. We discovered that many of them came from humble backgrounds and were not connected to the great Roman noble families that had traditionally dominated papal elections.

Their life journeys show that being academics had a significant impact, especially for the popes of the first millennium. Monasteries, particularly Cluny, had achieved great recognition both within and beyond the Church. These institutions served as centers of educational excel-

57. Serafino Mazzetti, *Repertorio di tutti i Professori antichi e moderni della famosa Università, e del celebre Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna* [in Italian] (Bologna: tipografia di San Tommaso d’Aquino, 1847).

58. Emanuele Conte, *I maestri della Sapienza di Roma dal 1514 al 1787: i rotuli e altre fonti* [in Italian] (Roma: Pliniana, 1991).

lence, renowned for their high level of instruction and their emphasis on moral discipline. This environment prepared Cluniac monks to take on administrative and diplomatic roles at royal and imperial courts. Emperors frequently relied on such monasteries to hire trusted personnel, particularly to manage dioceses and handle diplomatic missions.

In other cases, university education and teaching experience proved essential steps for entering courts and engaging in diplomatic activities, which eventually paved the way to the papacy. More broadly, our research shows that these popes from modest backgrounds benefited significantly from their time at university, as it brought them closer to the political and diplomatic circles of their era.

Another significant finding is that scholar-popes often appeared during transitional periods in the history of the Church. During times of political shifts or internal changes within the Church, universities regained their relevance by resolving disputes, offering guidance, and providing expertise and resources to overcome challenges.

In our analysis, we also considered the cultural changes that may have led to the absence of scholar-popes from the 17th century onward. The modern era was also a period of great discoveries and intellectual and scientific revolutions. The Church, like universities, was affected by these developments. For universities, this marked the beginning of a period of decline: they lost their central role in the field of knowledge, a position they would struggle to regain in subsequent centuries. The Church, for its part, distanced itself from new scientific discoveries.

With the Council of Trent came the creation of seminaries, institutions dedicated to training the new ecclesiastical class. They were characterised by an education that was removed from the new ideas circulating in academic circles and focused instead on greater cultural preparation and deeper spiritual training. We then examined scholar-popes' productivity, seeking to understand whether their academic activity added value to their pontificate or, more broadly, influenced their contribution to the Church. Based on the available information, there is no evidence to suggest that their teaching experience had a significant impact compared to the role played by popes without a similar background.

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