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Scholars and Literati at the Batavian Society for Experimental Philosophy in Rotterdam (1769–1800)

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This note is a summary description of the set of scholars and literati at the Batavian Society for Experimental Philosophy (Bataafs Genootschap der Proefondervindelijke Wijsbegeerte) in Rotterdam between its creation in 1725 and 1800.

1 The Society

The Batavian Society for Experimental Philosophy is a learned society that was founded in Rotterdam in 1769. It was the brainchild of physicist and instrument maker Steven Hoogendijk, who bequeathed his fortune for the creation of a foundation to promote experimental philosophy. In 1787, the inaugural course took place in the grounds of Rotterdam's "Beurs" building (stock exchange).

The Society's primary goal was to contribute to the development of science and technology, mainly by organizing scientific competitions. For instance, it played a key role in the installation of a steam pumping station in Rotterdam. In total, the Society organized more than 250 scientific competitions, ranging from water management to the understanding of physiological processes and public health. The Society boasted a laboratory, a rich collection of scientific instruments, and a large library of historical innovations.

However, the French period had adverse effects on the Batavian Society and it lost a significant amount of capital. Despite a major resurgence in 1865 with the establishment of a secondary school, the upheavals of the Russian Revolution (when the Russian bonds owned by the Society became worthless) and the Second World War had a profound impact. The Society regained some importance in 1946, primarily by organizing of scientific conferences.

2 Sources

To complete the database, we mainly used a publication by Lieburg (1985), which offers a bibliographical and documentary review of the Batavian Society. The review lists the members of the Society and describes certain scholars' contributions, for example their treatises. We have also relied on lists provided by the Society itself (BGPW 2022). Finally, the Digital Library of Dutch Literature (DBNL 2024) frequently mentions scholars' membership of the Society.

3 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. For the Batavian Society, we find a list of 286 members from its foundation until 1800. These scholars became members when they were relatively old (43.6), but stayed for the remainder of their lives (mean age at death of 67.4 years). The median distance between their birthplaces and the Society was 70 kilometers. As measured by having a Wikipedia page (42%) or being listed in the VIAF catalogue (65.7%), 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	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with VIAF
1769-1800	286	67.8%	57 %	43.6	67.4	70	42%	65.7%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

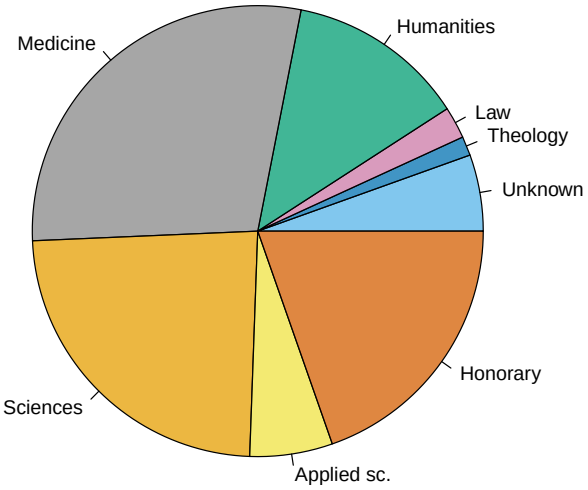

Figure 1: Broad fields at the Batavian Society (published scholars only)

4 Fields

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of academic disciplines within the Batavian Society. The scientific fields, encompassing medicine, natural sciences, and applied sciences, command the largest share in the pie chart. There is another pattern that is common in learned societies and academies: a substantial number of the members cannot be considered to be scholars as they held honorary positions. Their presence significantly enhanced the institution's prestige and credibility.

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 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 and Southeastern regions of France, the Holy Roman Empire, and Sweden. Interestingly, there were no corresponding members from Italy, Spain, or Portugal.

6 Human capital of scholars and literati

For each person in the database, we compute a heuristic human capital index, identified by combining information from Worldcat and Wikipedia using principal component analysis. 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 Batavian Society.

7 Top 6 scholars

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

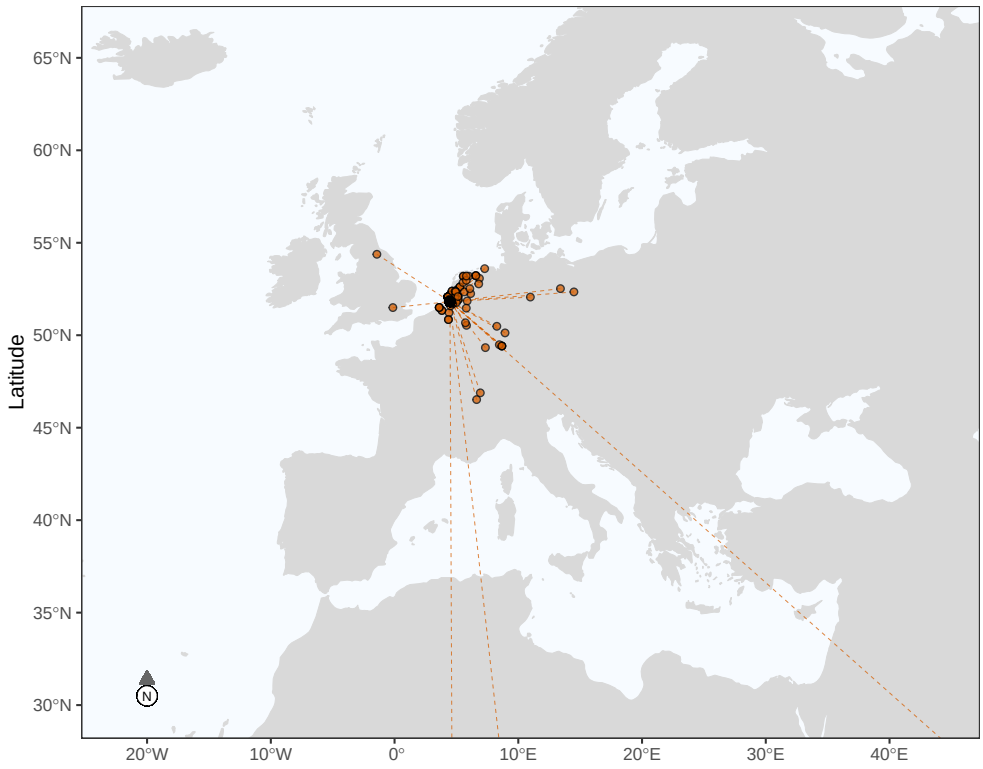

Figure 2: Places of birth of the members of the Batavian Society

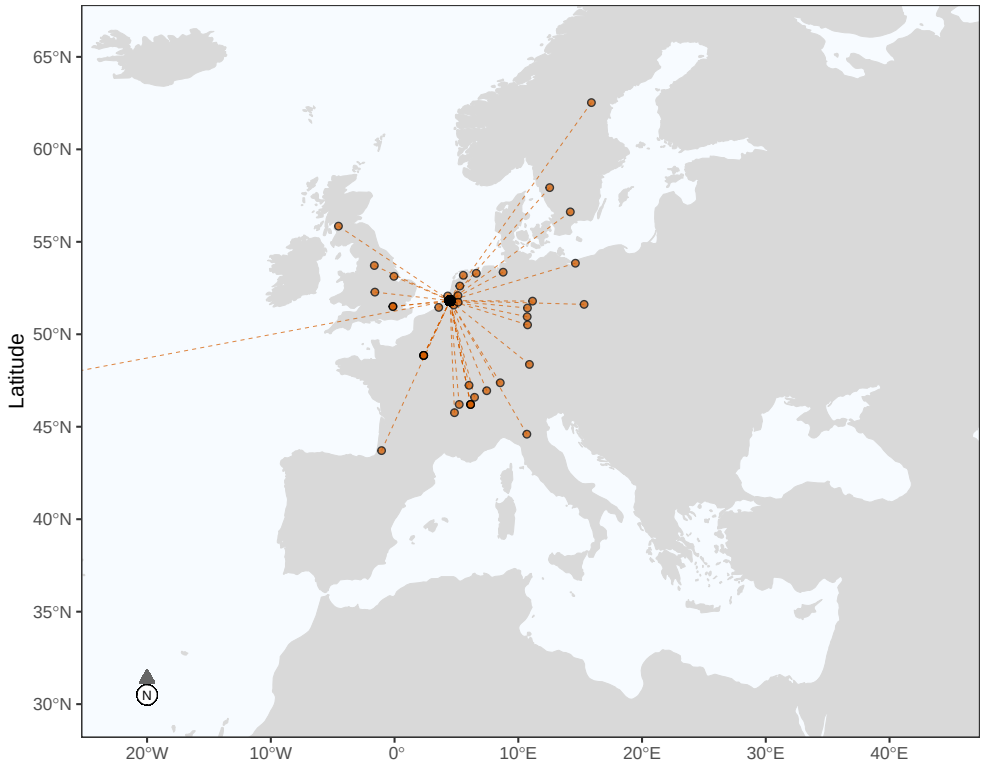

Figure 3: Places of birth of the corresponding members of the Batavian Society

Petrus Camper (Leyden 1722 – The Hague 1789) was a Dutch physician, anatomist, physiologist, surgeon and botanist. The son of a wealthy clergyman, he began studying medicine and philosophy in Leyden in 1734. His study trip to London in 1748 brought him into contact with some of the great scientists of his time. He taught medicine and philosophy in universities such as Franeker (1749-1755), Amsterdam (1755-1761) and Groningen (1763-1773). He was also a member of numerous academies (such as in Edinburgh, see De la Croix and Delvaux (2023)). As a consultant member of the Batavian Society, Camper wrote about bird osteology and frog behavior. His work covers a wide range of subjects, including fractures, orangutan anatomy and craniology, which he pioneered.

Bernhard Siegfried Albinus (Frankfurt [Oder] 1697 – Leyden 1770) was a German anatomist and surgeon. He was the son of a professor of medicine and also studied this discipline at the University of Leyden. In 1718, he moved to Paris to further his knowledge. He returned to Leyden to teach anatomy and surgery at the age of just 24. His teaching and expertise in dissection brought him great renown. Like Camper, he was a consultant member of the Batavian Society. Albinus is considered one of the most important descriptive anatomists of the 18th century.

Hieronymus David Gaubius (Heidelberg 1705 – Leyden 1780) was a German physician. He studied science and medicine in Harderwijk, Leyden and Paris. He practiced medicine for several years in Deventer, before being called to Amsterdam to organize treatment for a deadly epidemic, which he did with great efficiency. In 1731, Gaubius began teaching chemistry, and later medicine, at the University of Leyden (De la Croix and Stelter 2021). In 1760, he became personal physician to Prince Wilhelm V. He was also a member of the jury for scientific competitions organized by the Batavian Society. His most famous publication is a manual of pathology.

Jan Hendrik van Swinden (The Hague 1746 - Amsterdam 1823) was a Dutch mathematician and scientist. He studied many disciplines such as philosophy, physics and anatomy at the University of Leyden. He went on to teach at the University of Franeker, then Amsterdam. His work on the magnetized needle and on the similarity between magnetism and electricity won him international awards. For the Batavian Society, where he was a consulting member, he wrote a treatise on the steam engine.

Sebald Justinius Brugmans (Franeker 1763 - Leyden 1819) was a Dutch botanist and physician. He obtained his doctorate in philosophy, then in medicine, at the University of Groningen. From 1785, he was professor of physics, astronomy, logic and metaphysics in Franeker. He then taught botany and medicine at the University of Leyden. In 1787, Brugmans became a consulting member of the Batavian Society. In 1795, he was appointed Chief of the Military Health Service of the Batave Republic, then seventh Inspector General of the Grande Armée, by Emperor Napoleon himself. His treatise on gangrene, renowned for its meticulous analysis, delved into and elucidated the causes of the disease.

Martinus van Marum (Groningen 1750 – Haarlem 1837) was a Dutch physician, naturalist, and scientist. He studied physiology and philosophy at the University of Groningen and also obtained a doctorate in medicine. From 1776, he practiced medicine in Haarlem, concurrently delivering scientific lectures. Between 1780 and 1783, the Rotterdam Academy awarded him gold medals in several scientific competitions. He became a member in 1784 and wrote several treatises for the Academy, notably on electrophorus (an instrument to produce an amount of electric charge). That same year, van Marum was appointed the first director of the Teylers Museum, a natural history and technical museum. There, he supervised the construction of the world's largest electrostatic generator.

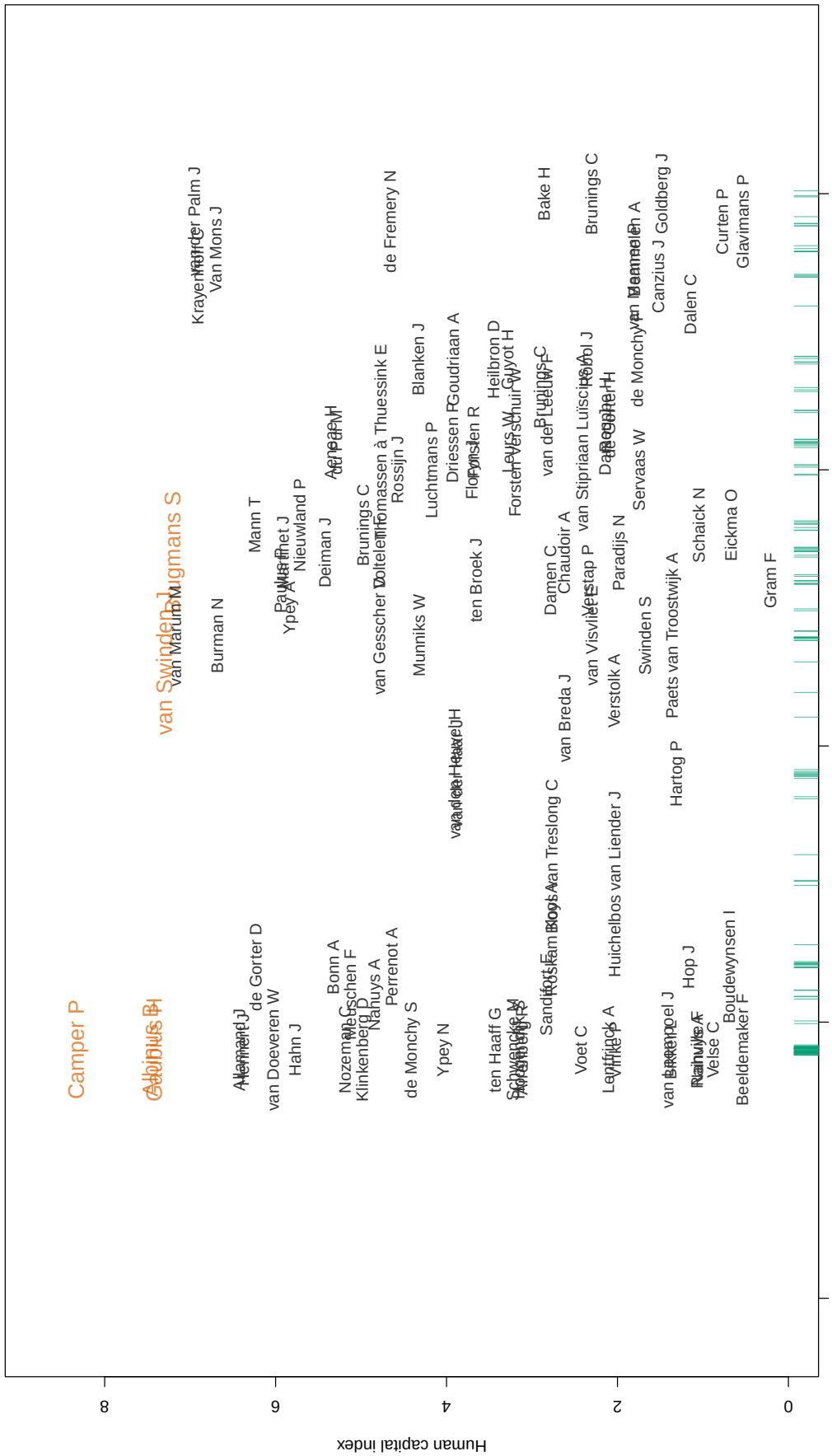

Figure 4: Famous scholars at the Batavian Society

8 Related scholars

In addition to the ordinary and consulting members, several individuals were linked to the Batavian Society through a foreign or corresponding membership status. In this group, we find several scholars who were linked to a large number of academies. The top 5 is: Carl Linnaeus, Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestley, James Watt, and Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande.

9 Final Thoughts

The Batavian Society was a provincial academy that successfully focused on sciences and medicine, and established a distinguished roster of renowned corresponding members.

Acknowledgments

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