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Scholars and Literati at the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand (1747-1793)

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This note summarizes our research into the group of scholars and literati who were at the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand, or connected to it, from its early meetings to its dissolution.

1 Sources

We rely on a book written by Francisque Mège in 1884 entitled "L'Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts de Clermont-Ferrand – Ses origines et ses travaux". The author was a specialist of the city of Clermont-Ferrand. His book provides a list of the members of the Academy, and examines its history over the period considered here.

2 The Society

In 1747, the *Société littéraire* (literary society) was created. It was the only society of some renown for the whole province of Auvergne. It all started with meetings among various citizens who wanted to have conversations about literature and scientific discoveries. More and more people joined and after some difficulties the new Society was born. The first public meeting was held at the City Hall on 25 August 1747. In 1750, the rules of the Society were published, and it was notified of a royal decision recognizing its existence. In 1793, the Academy was abolished by the Revolutionary Convention as every other academy because of the privileges that it offered.

3 Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics. Overall, we link 129 scholars to the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand. We observe the year and place of birth for about 60% of them.

The average age at first appointment was around 38.3 years, which is relatively late compared to other academies. Longevity is 68.1 years.

The median distance between places of birth and activity is low, at 39km. The coverage of scholars is low in Wikipedia, but it is higher in Worldcat where 31% of them appear. Hence, most of the scholars did not publish.

Period	nb. obs	birth known date	birth known place	mean age at appoint.	mean age at death	med. dist. birth-univ.	with Wiki.	with Worldcat
1747-1793	129	62.8%	58.1%	38.3	68.1	39	17.8%	31%

Table 1: Summary statistics by period

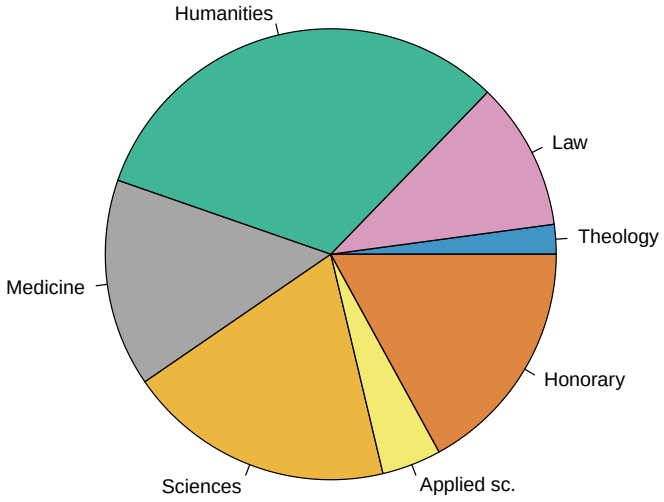

Figure 1: Broad fields at the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand (published scholars only)

4 Fields

Figure 1 shows the balance between the different fields featured at the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand. Science and medicine are quite well represented. The field of study is unknown for 12 members. There is a large number of "honorary" members, people who were not scholars, but were either protectors of the Academy, or simply interested bourgeois.

5 Place of birth

Figure 2 displays the documented birthplaces of the ordinary members active at the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand. Figure 3 shows the birthplaces of the corresponding scholars and literati, who had some epistolary contacts – almost none of them were from abroad.

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. Figure 4 shows the names of all the scholars with a positive human capital index at the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand.

7 Top 5 scholars

Georges Auguste Couthon (Orcet 1755 -– Paris 1794) was a French lawyer and politician. He is known for his service in the Legislative Assembly during the Revolution. He studied at the University of Reims before moving to Paris where he wanted to work as a lawyer. However since he struggled to find clients there, he moved to Clermont-Ferrand where he joined the Academy in 1787. He suffered from joint pain since his childhood and progressively lost the use of his legs. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1791 and therefore moved back to Paris. He was executed on 28 July of 1794 because people thought that he, together with Robespierre, wanted to create a dictatorship.

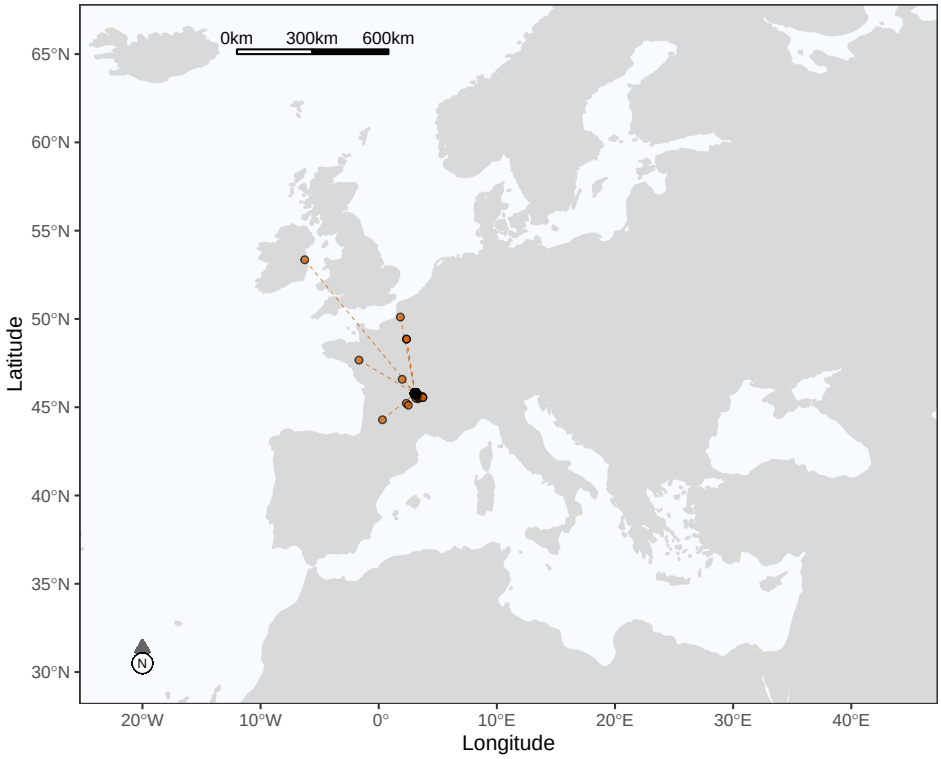

Figure 2: Places of birth of the ordinary members of the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand

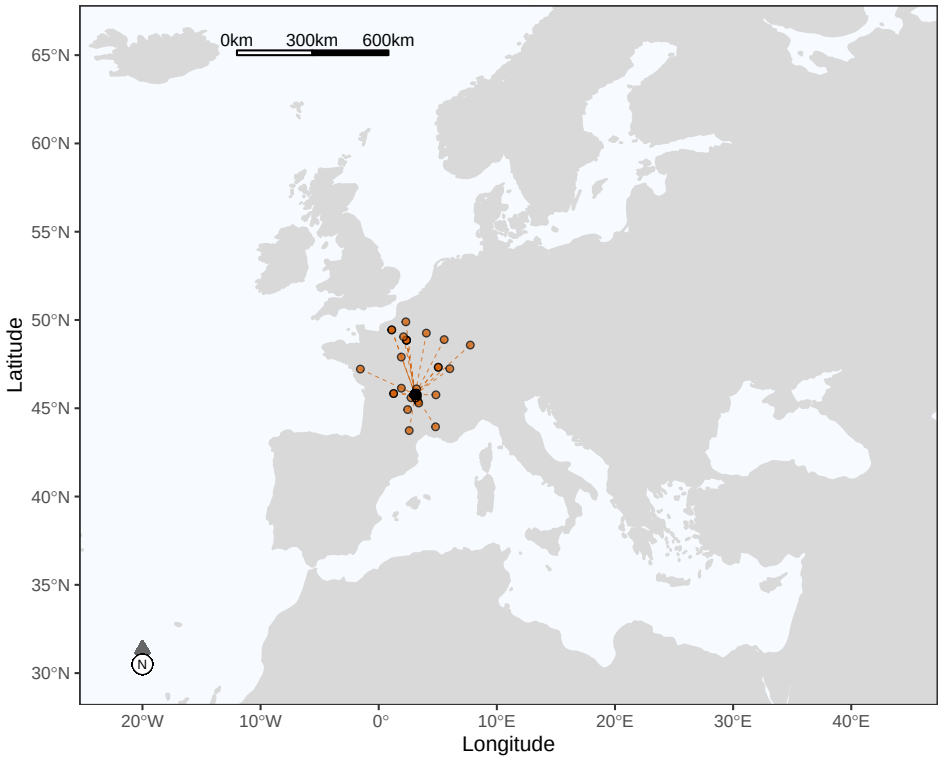

Figure 3: Places of birth of the corresponding members of the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand

Pierre-Charles Roy (Paris 1683 – Paris 1764) was a French poet and lyricist. He obtained a job as a lawyer at the Châtelet Court in Paris, but did not stay there long as he preferred writing. His earliest opera libretto, *Philomèle*, was first played at the Opéra de Paris in October 1705. He was praised for his tragedies, such as *Bradamante, Callirhoé and Sémiramis.* In 1729, he won the prize of the Académie des Jeux Floraux (Toulouse) and of the Académie Française.

Antoine Delarbre (Clermont-Ferrand 1724 – Clermont-Ferrand 1807) was a French botanist and geologist. He led botanical expeditions in the Auvergne mountains. He organized and paid for the Botanical Garden of Clermont-Ferrand. He taught natural history and wrote 8 memoirs about flora and topography. He was also the parish priest attached to the Cathedral of Clermont.

Antoine Bergier (Circoux 1742 – Clermont-Ferrand 1826) was a French lawyer and politician. After the Revolution, he was a Member of Parliament for the Puy-de-Dôme, wrote several legal books, and became the 6th mayor of Clermont-Ferrand in 1795. From 1811 to 1823, he was the President of the Clermont-Ferrand Association of Lawyers.

Blaise Monestier (Authezat 1717 – Toulouse 1776) was a French philosopher. He was a mathematics teacher at the Clermont-Ferrand secondary school. He wrote several essays on various topics. One of his colleagues said that he knew everything: physics, music, mathematics, theology, and even poetry. He received prizes from several academies, such as those of Bordeaux and Nancy.

8 Related scholars

In addition to the ordinary members residing in Italy, several individuals were linked to the Academy through a foreign or corresponding membership status. The six scholars shown here belong to this category. These scholars are included in the calculations for all figures but Figure 4.

Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau (Dijon 1737 – Paris 1816) See De la Croix and Delvaux (2022).

Jacques Valmont de Bomare (Rouen 1731 – Paris 1807) was a French naturalist. He started his schooling with the Jesuits in Rouen. His father wanted him to learn law, but he preferred nature. He studied anatomy, pharmacy, and chemistry, and also taught natural history. Through visits across Europe, he learned about precious metals. He is the author of an important book entitled *Dictionnaire raisonné universel d'histoire naturelle.* He was the member of several academies, including those of Caen and Rouen.

Philippe André Grandidier (Strasbourg 1752 – Alsace 1787) was a French Benedictine monk, historian, and archaeologist. He became a historiographer of France at the age of 35. Based on extensive archival research, he wrote about the history of Alsace by taking the bishop of Strasbourg as a focal point. His work includes *Histoire ecclésiastique, militaire, civile et littéraire de la province Alsace, Histoire de l'Église et des princes-évêques de Strasbourg* and *Notice sur la vie et les ouvrages d'Otfried.* He died prematurely due to an inflammatory fever.

François-Xavier Pagès de Vixouse (Aurillac 1745 – Paris 1802) was a French journalist and memorialist. He was against sharing communal land because it deprived the poor of their resources. He was a member of the revolutionary Jacobin Party and created his own newspaper *Le Cantaliste.* His work includes *La Philippide*, *La France républicaine*, and *La Révolution, ou les ordres réunis.*

Antoine-Grimoald Monnet (Champeix 1734 – Paris 1817) was a French mineralogist, metallurgist, and geologist. He was trained at the Freiberg School of Mining. In 1776, he became Inspector General of the Corps Royal des Mines. He was a member of the academies of Stockholm and Turin.

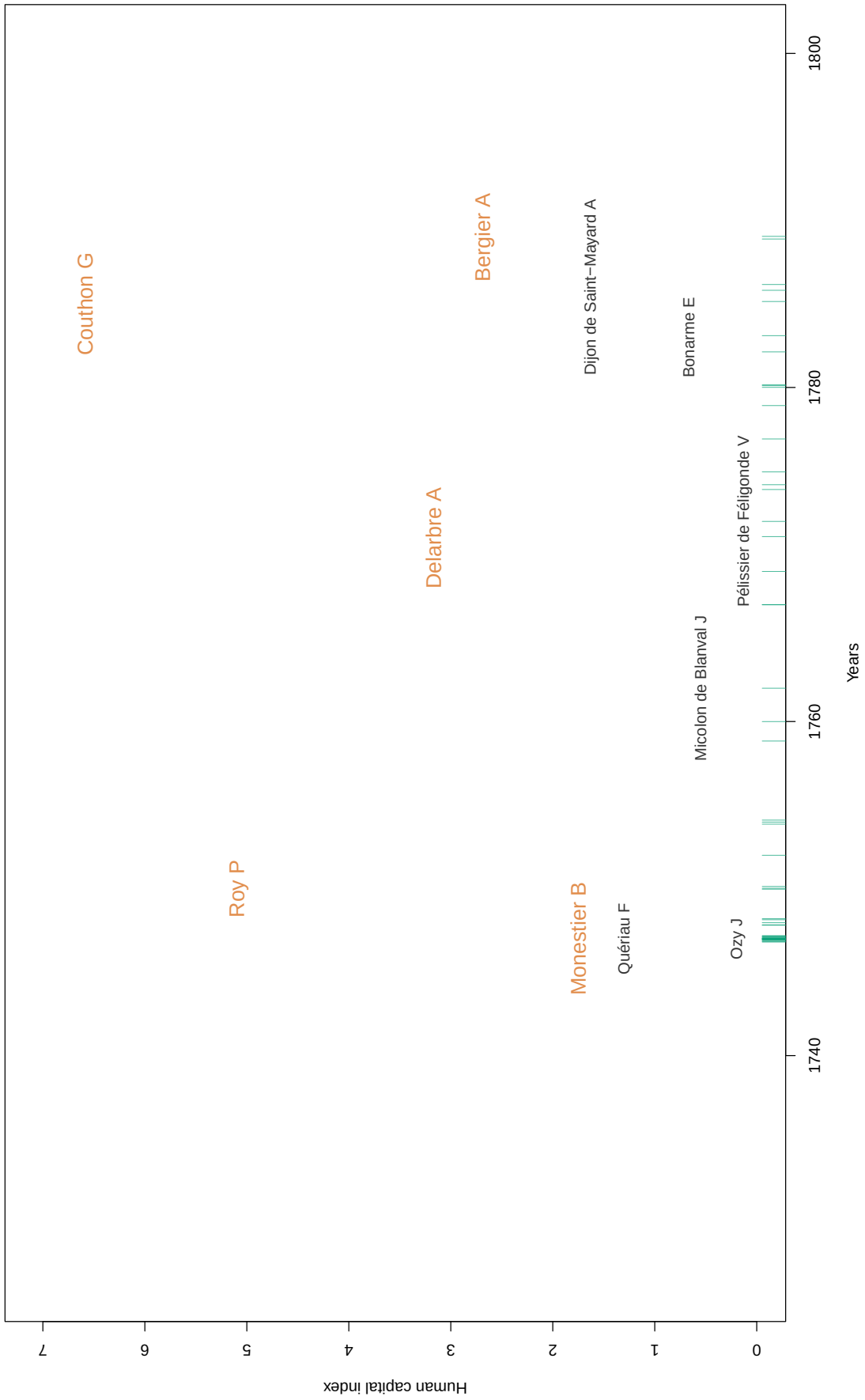

Figure 4: Famous scholars of the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand

Hugues Maret (Dijon 1726 – Fresne-Saint-Mamès 1786) was a French physician. He was born in a family that had been practicing medicine for over a century. He followed the same path as his forebears and studied medicine in Montpellier. He was also interested in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, physiology, literature, and history. He was a member of the academies of Dijon, Caen, and Bordeaux. He was also the father of Hugues-Bernard Maret, who was a confidant of Napoléon I.

9 Anecdotes

Despite the meager output of this academy, Mège (1884) is quite enthusiastic about it. He wrote that the members of the Academy did not only study sciences in their applications, but that every modern astronomical, physical, and meteorological discovery – such as the barometer, the thermometer, magnetism, electricity, the lightning rod, the aerostat – was discussed and examined. In addition, some members of the Academy studied each of these more in depth.

In other parts, Mège (1884) holds a more realistic view of the limitations of the Academy. He reports a letter written in 1788 by one of its members, which reads: "Among the many literary societies which exist in France, the Academy of Clermont-Ferrand is the most lazy, the most languishing, and the most useless. (...) as soon as a young man in Clermont-Ferrand has some energy and willingness to become better, his only desire is to leave and go to Paris (425 km)."

10 Final Thoughts

The members of the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts of Clermont-Ferrand did not produce much in the 18th century. The geographical isolation of Clermont-Ferrand might be a key factor behind this mediocrity.

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