

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

© 2007 Springer

Cassini de Thury, César-François

Born Thury near Clermont, (Oise), France, 17 June 1714

Died Paris, France, 4 September 1784

Cassini de Thury was best known as a cartographer and was a key figure in the controversy over the shape of the Earth. He was the son of Jacques Cassini (Cassini II) and Suzanne-François Charpentier de Charmois. César-François was educated at the family home in the Paris Observatory by his granduncle Giacomo Maraldi. Elected to membership of the Académie des sciences in 1735, he succeeded his father as director of the Paris Observatory

Cassini began his career just as the controversy over the shape of the Earth reached its peak, with the Cartesian concept seemingly on the rise. At this stage, he was loyal to the family's Cartesian leanings that the Earth is elongated along the line of its poles. In 1733/1734, he, along with others, assisted his father to determine the arc of the great circle perpendicular to the meridian of Paris, a survey necessary for mapping France. These measurements seemed to confirm the Cartesian view. But to settle the matter, the Académie sent out geodetic expeditions to Lapland (1736/1737) and to Peru (1735-1744). The results did not support the Cartesian position. Although his father refused to renounce his long-held belief, Cassini III eventually accepted the view that the Earth is an oblate spheroid

The experience he gained in geodetic theory and practice enabled Cassini in 1733 to persuade the Académie des sciences of the importance of such operations, and in 1735/1736 he completed the guidelines of his most important work, a new map of France. Using geodetic data acquired between 1733 and 1740 as a basis, he drew up a map in 18 sheets on the scale of 1:870,000 (*circa* 1746), and later a more detailed map in 182 sheets on a scale of 1:86,400.

Richard Baum

Alternate name

Cassini III

Selected Reference

Hahn, Roger (1971). *The Anatomy of a Scientific Institution: The Paris Academy of Sciences, 1666–1803*. Berkeley: University of California Press