

Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers

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Cassini, Jean-Dominique

Born Paris, France, 30 June 1748

Died Thury near Clermont, Oise, France, 18 October 1845

Last of the Cassini dynasty at the Paris Observatory, J.-D. Cassini was an administrator, a geodesist, and a cartographer. He was the son of César Cassini de Thury. Educated at the Collège du Plessis, Paris, and the Oratorian Collège at Juilly, Jean-Dominique studied under the physicist J. A. Nollet, the mathematician C. Mauduit, and the astronomers Giacomo Maraldi and Jean Chappe d'Auteroche. He was elected adjoint by the Académie des sciences on 23 July 1770, becoming an associate in 1785. Cassini was the editor of Chappe d'Auteroche's posthumous *Voyage en Californie pour l'observation du passage de Vénus sur le disque du soleil*, le 3 juin 1769 (Paris, 1772), and formally succeeded his father as director of the Paris Observatory in 1784. He was married to Claude-Marie-Louise de la Myre-Mory for 18 years. Her death in 1791 left him with five young children: Cécile, Angélique, Aline, Alexis, and Alexandre Henri Gabriel, who became a jurist and a botanist, and with whom the French line of the Cassini family died out.

Cassini IV was put in charge of further tests of the marine chronometer of Pierre le Roy while on an Atlantic cruise in 1768. But his plan to modernize and reorganize the Paris Observatory during the last years of the *ancien régime*, which received royal assent from Louis XVI in 1784, was only partially realized when the Revolution began. His main preoccupation in later years was the completion of the great map of France, a task undertaken by his father, and in 1787 he was involved, along with Adrien Legendre and Pierre Méchain, in geodetic operations joining the Greenwich and Paris meridians.

As a monarchist, Cassini was hostile to the Revolution, and from March 1793 opposed reforms that the new administration wanted to impose upon the observatory. After much bitter dispute, he resigned on 6 September 1793. His departure a few weeks later brought the Cassini reign to a close after 120 years. On 14 February 1794, he was denounced by a revolutionary committee and imprisoned. On his release in August of that year, he retired to the family château at Thury. Subsequently, he declined nomination to the Bureau des longitudes (1795) and to the astronomy section of the new Institut National in January of the following year. Cassini accepted election to the experimental physics (1798) and astronomy sections (1799) of the institute, but when he refused renomination to the Bureau des longitudes, he withdrew from scientific work and devoted the rest of his life to local politics.

Richard Baum

Alternate name

Cassini IV

Selected Reference

Taton, René (1971). "Cassini, Jean-Dominique (Cassini IV)." In *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, edited by Charles Coulston Gillispie. Vol. 3, pp. 106-107.

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