

The Long Pre-History of Lalande's Bibliographie astronomique

Rapport sur les contributions

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When Jérôme de Lalande published his *Bibliographie astronomique* in 1803, he stood at the apex of his career. As one of the most influential astronomers in Europe, he was well aware of the implicit power wielded by histories and bibliographies of a discipline such as astronomy, especially in an age when the production of such works remained relatively scarce –namely, that of presenting and organizing the past of the discipline by separating the chaff from the wheat to be fed to new generations of increasingly professionalized astronomers. Indeed, as Lalande himself recognizes in the preface to his work, it was the Ministry of Public Instruction who provided the means to carry out his enterprise; and that is why «mere erudition» and «completeness» were never his objectives, for they would have rendered his book a «simple waste of time». However, Lalande did not start accumulating data from scratch. He could rely on a long lineage of direct predecessor who had been accumulating bibliographical materials in the previous two centuries, within the same State-driven economy of astronomical knowledge. As I will show on the basis of recent archival research, it was Giovanni Domenico Cassini who, at the end of the XVII century, started organizing astronomical materials in his capacity of chief scientific administrator for the Parisian Academy of Sciences. Later, his pupil Joseph-Nicolas Delisle resumed this project from where it was left, putting it on an entirely new footing. He soon started to involve other scholars from all over Europe to help gathering the information he needed; sometimes, he even commissioned others (like the Wittenberg wolffian scholar Johann Friedrich Weidler) to complete some its parts. Even though Delisle's work was ultimately left unaccomplished, his pupil Lalande took it up once again and extensively deployed it in compiling his *Bibliographie*, thereby embedding it in the wider structure of the Ancient Régime's political epistemology of astronomy.

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