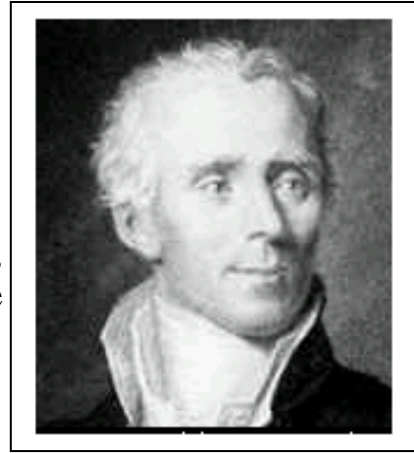


Pierre Simon Laplace (1749 – 1827)

A French mathematician and astronomer who made a number of important discoveries about the movements of the planets and put forward a theory of origin of the Solar System.

Pierre Simon Laplace was born in Beaumont-en-Auge, Normandy, the son of a poor farmer. He became connected with the military school of his town, first as a day pupil, then as teacher. He became an usher in that school.



His father expected him to make a career in the Church or the army. At the age of 16 Laplace entered Caen University, where he discovered his mathematical talents and his love of the subject. Credit for this must go largely to two teachers of mathematics at Caen.

When he became distinguished he had the pettiness to hold himself aloof both from his relatives and from those who had assisted him. Once he knew that mathematics was to be his subject, Laplace left Caen without taking his degree, and went to Paris. Although Laplace was only 19 years old when he arrived in Paris he quickly impressed d'Alembert. Not only did d'Alembert begin to direct Laplace's mathematical studies, he also tried to find him a position to earn enough money to support himself in Paris.

The year 1771 marks Laplace's first attempt to gain election to the Académie des Sciences but Vandermonde was preferred. Laplace tried again in 1772 but this time Cousin was elected. Laplace felt very angry at being passed over in favour of a mathematician who was so clearly markedly inferior to him.

The 1780s Laplace made him one of the most important and influential scientists that the world has seen. It was not achieved, however, with good relationships with his colleagues. Laplace was rapidly making much of his own life's work obsolete and this did nothing to improve relations, they saw his changes of views as merely attempts to win favour. Although he wanted to repay by stressing the importance of d'Alembert's work, for the help and support he had given.

It does appear that Laplace was not modest about his abilities and achievements, and he probably failed to recognise the effect of his attitude on his colleagues.