

Pierre Varignon Biography

Pierre Varignon

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Biography

Although Pierre Varignon is principally remembered for his contributions to the area of statics, a branch of **mechanics** that concerns resting objects or forces in equilibrium, he also made advances in **calculus**.

The son of a poor mason, Varignon was born in Caen, France on an unknown date in 1654. He began studying at a Jesuit college in his hometown at a late age. There are few historical records of his life at this point, except those confirming that he entered religious life by becoming a monk in 1676. Varignon apparently became interested in mathematics after reading the works of Euclid and **René Descartes**.

As a member of a religious order, Varignon was eligible to study at the University of Caen, where he completed a master's degree in 1682. The following year he was ordained as a priest, and in 1686 he left Caen and traveled to Paris. Paris provided Varignon with a wider audience for his talents, and in 1687 he was able to publish his *Project on the New Mechanics*. He accepted a nomination to the Academy of Sciences a year later, and was also appointed a professor of mathematics at the College Mazarin, where he would remain for the rest of his life.

Varignon was so busy with teaching that from the 1690s on he only had time to write articles and memoirs for publication. However, his frequent correspondence with **Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz** and **Johann Bernoulli** left important records of his work. In addition to his job at Mazarin, Varignon began teaching mathematics at the Royal College in 1704.

Varignon was one of the first French scholars to realize the value of calculus and, by adapting Leibniz's calculus to the inertial mechanics in Isaac Newton's *Principia*, helped to develop analytic dynamics. Varignon's other works include a 1699 publication on applying **differential calculus** to fluid flow and water clocks, while in 1702 he used calculus to investigate spring-driven clocks. Meanwhile, at the end of the century, he had refuted Michel Rolle's objections to the "new" calculus, helping to speed progress in that area.

In his last year at the Royal College, Varignon reportedly planned to discuss the basics of **infinitesimal** calculus, but before he could present more than a mere outline of his ideas, he died on December 22, 1723. In 1731 Varignon's College Mazarin lectures were compiled and printed in *Éléments de mathématiques*.