

Paul Vidal de la Blache Biography

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Contents

Paul Vidal de la Blache Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Biography.....	3

Biography

Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918) was the founder of the modern French school of geography through his writings on human and regional geography and his remarkable "Atlas," first published in 1894.

A native of Mediterranean France, Paul Vidal de la Blache was born at Pézenas, Hérault, on Jan. 22, 1845. After his course in history and geography at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, he went to the École Française in Athens and during the next three years traveled widely in the Mediterranean. He spent long periods in Rome, became familiar with the Balkan peninsula (then under Turkish rule), visited Syria and Palestine, and was present at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

Vidal de la Blache's first published works were on classical subjects. On his return to France, after a short period of teaching at Angers, he joined the staff of the Faculté des Lettres at the University of Nancy, but he went to the Sorbonne in 1877. His first directly geographical publication was an article in 1877, on the first census of India, taken in 1871. It shows an appreciation of the influence of social traditions and aptitudes as well as of physical environment on population distribution.

Other articles and school textbooks followed during the 1880s. Subjects ranged from studies of the regional units, or *pays*, of the French countryside to the effects of the Mediterranean climate on its inhabitants and of the great migrations of people at various stages in history. The *Atlas général Vidal-Lablache*, with its history and geography sections, first appeared in 1894 and is still in print. In preparation for 10 years, it opened a fascinating panorama of human history in relation to the physical environment. Vidal de la Blache was one of the founders of the great *Annales de géographie* (1892), and in 1903 his *Tableau de la géographie de la France* appeared. The first volume of Ernest Lavisse's *Histoire de France*, it is a perspicacious study of the regional variety of France and of the place of each *pays* in the whole.

For over 30 years Vidal de la Blache meditated on the problem of the eastern frontier of France. This interest was deepened by his years at Nancy and led to the publication of *La France de l'est* in 1917. Vidal de la Blache died on April 5, 1918, at Tamaris-sur-Mer, Var.