Dominique François Jean Arago

1786 - 1853

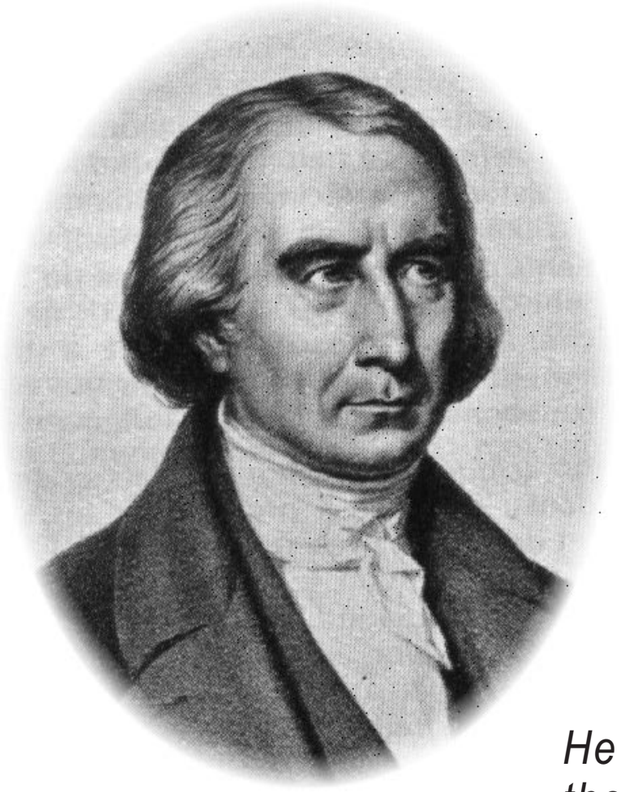
Dominique François Jean Arago was, in the early 19th century, one of the most prominent statesmen and scientists. He made contributions to the development of many areas of physics and astronomy.

In physics his first investigations concerned the polarization of light and he confirmed Fresnel's light wave theory. He also found that an electric current produces temporary magnetisation in an iron coil and later he saw that a rotating non-magnetic metal disc deflects a magnetic needle placed above it.

As an astronomer, Arago is remembered as the discoverer of the solar chromosphere (the atmosphere just above the Sun's surface) and for its accurate study.

Arago was born in 1786, in Estagel, France. The family moved to Perpignan in 1795 when Arago's father was made cashier at the Mint. There, Arago completed his classical education. He studied at the École Polytechnique in Paris and was then appointed to the Bureau of Longitudes.

He travelled to Spain with Jean Biot in 1806, where they intended to measure an arc of the terrestrial meridian. After being held prisoner in Spain and Algeria, where he only just escaped from being sold into slavery, he returned to France and was elected to membership of the French Academy of Sciences. In the same year (1809) Arago was appointed to the chair of analytical geometry at the École Polytechnique, a post he held until 1830. Later he became a permanent secretary there.



From C Wolf: Histoire de l'Observatoire de Paris

He was the Director of the Paris Observatory

Arago had a stormy relationship with other scientists, such as Biot, Thomas Young, and Brewster.

As a person he was (according to his biographers) restless, inquisitive, volatile and full of enthusiasm and optimism. Married in 1811, Arago had three sons and lived in an apartment at the observatory. In his later years he gradually lost his eyesight, and went blind. He wished to find how a medium affected the speed of light in it, but the Revolution and his blindness prevented him.

Arago also played a part in the July Revolution, and, as a member of Chamber of Deputies, voted with the extreme Left. In 1848 he became a member of the provisional government and was named minister of the navy and the army. As minister, he signed decrees abolishing slavery in the French colonies.

He resigned his post upon the coronation of Emperor Napoleon III, refusing to take the Oath of Allegiance to the Emperor. He died soon afterwards in Paris in 1853.

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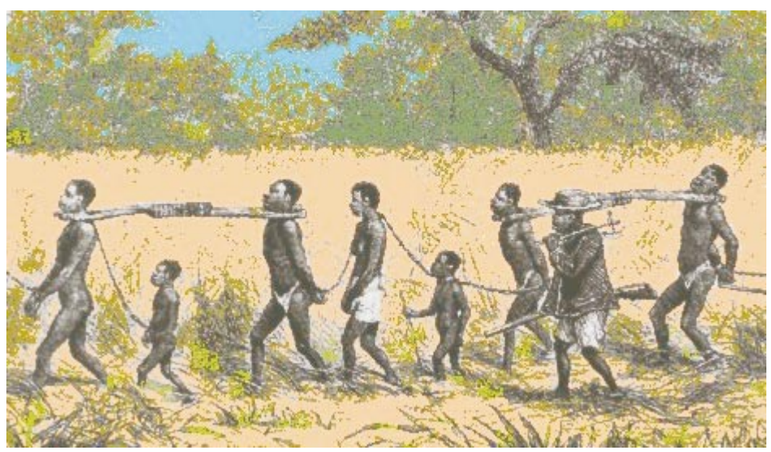

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