IUGS International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences (INHIGEO)

"Anniversaries": Coining the term “geology” 240 years ago

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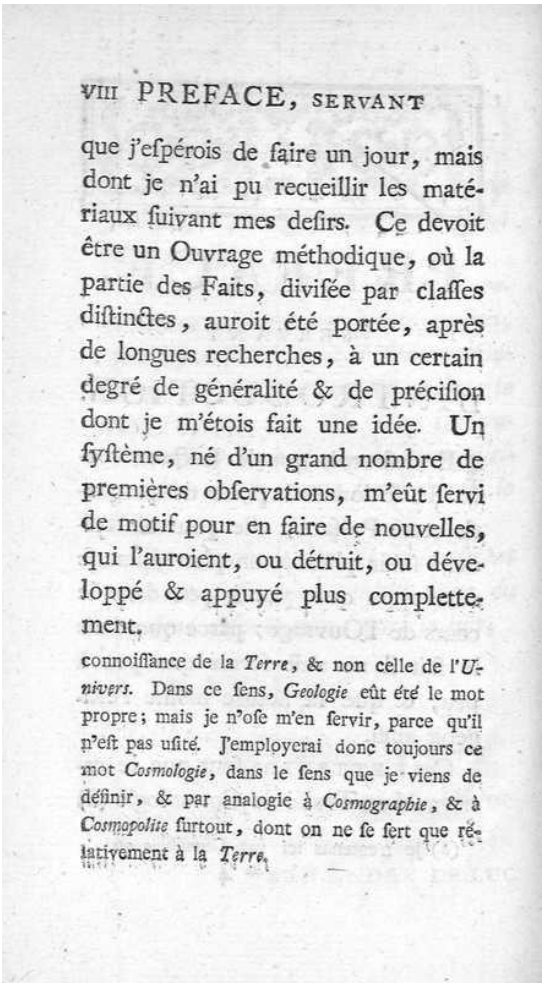

VIII PREFACE, SERVANT

que j'eſpérois de faire un jour, mais dont je n'ai pu recueillir les matériaux ſuivant mes deſirs. Ce devoit être un Ouvrage méthodique, où la partie des Faits, diviſée par claſſes diſtinctes, auroit été portée, après de longues recherches, à un certain degré de généralité & de préciſion dont je m'étois fait une idée. Un ſyſtème, né d'un grand nombre de premières obſervations, m'eût ſervi de motif pour en faire de nouvelles, qui l'auroient, ou détruit, ou développé & appuyé plus complettement.

connoiſſance de la *Terre*, & non celle de l'*Univers*. Dans ce ſens, *Geologie* eût été le mot propre; mais je n'oſe m'en ſervir, parce qu'il n'eſt pas uſité. J'employerai donc toujours ce mot *Cosmologie*, dans le ſens que je viens de définir, & par analogie à *Cosmographie*, & à *Cosmopolite* ſurtout, dont on ne ſe ſert que rélativement à la *Terre*.

Figure A: Jean-André De Luc, Lettres physiques et morales sur les montagnes, et sur l'historie de la terre et de l'homme, Den Haag 1778-1780, 6 Volumes, vol.1, p. VIII (Images Courtesy of the Library of the University of Vienna).

The term ‘geology’ was first introduced by the Swiss bourgeois Jean-André de Luc (also Deluc) 240 years ago. It was a hesitant birth: “Geologie” was only mentioned in a footnote in the first volume of his book “Lettres physiques et morales sur les montagnes et sur l’histoire de la terre et de l’homme” (1778). Geology, defined as a proper noun, was supposed to replace “Cosmologie”. Nevertheless, Deluc avoided mentioning the term in this book because it was not yet common, as he admitted.

To be precise: Jean-André de Luc (1727-1817) did not coin the term. It appeared once in a while before Luc’s lifetime describing the earth as a whole. Richard de Bury used it in his Philobiblon (written in 1344), but it was related to philosphy rather than what we understand as geology today. Ulisse Aldrovandi in Bologna (1603) glossed it as “on fossils”. The term appeared in 1735 in the English dictionary ‘The philosophical Grammar’, compiled by Benjamin Martin, and referred to the terraqueous globe in a rather philosophical sense. It was Deluc who gave the term a new significance, which was taken up a year later by the Swiss geologist Horace Benedict de Saussure. Both men gave an impulse for geology, a field in natural history that previously had been referred to as mineralogy, physical geography or cosmology.

Jean-André de Luc (1727-1817) was an interesting figure among the naturalists of the eighteenth century. Born in Geneva from a bourgeois family, he headed an embassy to Paris and became member of the Council of Two Hundred in his hometown. After travelling through the Alps, his career culminated as a reader at the English court and the Queen. He invented instruments, improved the thermometer, hygrometer and the barometer that was used in the process of detecting the third dimension of the mountains, the height. In his first book Deluc portrayed the former world as being sharply separated by a major revolution. Apart from this binary reconstruction, he developed his geotheory into a geohistory in the time between 1790 and 1793. As a geologist he followed the theory of a catastrophism against James Hutton and his actualism.

For more information on De Luc and his work as geologist:

Marita Hübner, Jean André Deluc (1727-1817): Protestantische Kultur und moderne Naturforschung, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009.

Martin Rudwick, Bursting the Limits of Time. The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Gian Battista Vai & William Cavazza, Four centuries of the Word geology: Ulisse Aldrovandi 1603 in Bologna. Bologna: Minerva 2004.

Dennis R. Dean, The word ‚geology', *Annals of Science* 36 (1) (1979), pp. 35-43.