

## Chapter 2

### Perinaldo, Land of Astronomers

*Je suis né le 8 juin de l'année 1625, et non en 1623,  
comme le prétend l'abbé Giustiniani dans son ouvrage degli  
Scrittori Liguri...*

*Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des sciences  
et à celle de l'Observatoire de Paris, Parigi, Bleuett, 1810  
Jean-Dominique Cassini*

“I was born on June 8 of the year 1625, and not in 1623, as claimed by the Abbot Giustiniani in his book on Ligurian writers...”

The astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini opens his autobiography with these lines in French that specify his exact birthdate. Cassini on this occasion wants to emphasize and correct the error reported by the Abbot Michele Giustiniani in his work, *Ligurian writers*, a book collecting various information about the most important representatives in the fields of Letter and Sciences from Liguria, the region in the Northwest of Italy, where he was born. The attention to such details shown by Cassini should not surprise the reader. Scientific accuracy and rigor always characterized his astronomical work, and sometimes was at the core of conflicts or misunderstandings, even, for example, with the King of France, Louis XIV.

It is therefore again not surprising that the archives of the San Nicolò Parish Church of Perinaldo, the northern Italian hometown of the famous astronomer, prove him right. The Book of Baptisms of the year 1625 records Cassini's christening two days after his birth in this way:

Alli 10 di d.º Gio. Dominico figlio di Giac. Cassino e di Tullia sua moglie è stato battezzato da me sud.º Ber.<sup>do</sup> curato, tenendolo m. Ant.º Maria Crovese e Battista Cassini q. Antonio, natto dui giorni inanti.

Its English translation from the XVII-century Italian is:

On the tenth day of this month of June, Giovanni Dominico, son of Giacomo Cassino and of Tullia, his wife, born two days ago, has been baptized by me, Curate Bernardo, with godparents Antonio Maria Crovese and Battista Cassini.

Cassini's parents, Giacomo Cassino and Tullia Crovese, daughter of a public notary, had nine children in total, of whom survived only the firstborn Giovanni Domenico and two sisters Francesca and Angela Caterina. Cassini in his biography does not report any news of his parents, and only his great-grandson Jean Dominique Cassini, or Cassini IV, wrote in his papers that the Cassini family originated in Siena, in the Italian region of Tuscany.

Probably, Cassini was born in the family's manor, now known as Maraldi's Castle, but we have no documentation about the exact birthplace, so maybe it could have been in another house of the "Contrada Grande", the oldest part of Perinaldo. Today, if you stroll through the old and narrow streets, you can see in Maraldi Street a gravestone on the doorway of the castle. It is written in Italian and commemorates the three astronomers born in this house. Besides Giovanni Domenico Cassini, in fact, his nephew, son of his sister Angela Caterina Cassini, Giacomo Filippo Maraldi was born here. And the third is Gian Domenico Maraldi, the nephew of the latter, whom we will meet toward the end of this book.

Perinaldo is a pleasant place in the hills on the western side of Liguria, from which you have a spectacular view of the Ligurian sea, a part of the Mediterranean, and of the Maritime Alps in the opposite direction. Sitting on a ridge between the valleys of the Rio Merdanzo, a tributary of the river Nervia, and of the river Verbone, Perinaldo is close to the coastal cities of Bordighera and Ventimiglia, a few kilometers inside Italy from the present border with France. These places evoke quite vividly the history of the interplay between the two former states that occupied the Italian territories of Liguria and Piedmont.

Indeed, it has to be remembered that Italy became a unified nation only in 1861. Before this date, and since the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD, the Italian peninsula was divided into many small countries, which were frequently engaged in ferocious fights and wars. In the 17th century, one of these states was the Duchy of Savoy, which comprised approximately the majority of the current Italian regions of Aosta Valley and Piedmont (actually the western part of the latter) and some territories now belonging to France, like the Savoy and Nice. The Republic of Genoa, in contrast, occupied the coastal region of Liguria and the isle of Corsica. Perinaldo was a territory in contention at the border between these two states, and, at the time of Cassini's birth, it belonged to the Duchy of Savoy as part of the province of Nizza, now the French city of Nice.

Probably, the name Perinaldo is derived from Earl Rinaldo, or Rainaldo of Ventimiglia. Between 1045 and 1055, he bought and founded a castle on the site called Villa Junchi, known later as Podii Rainaldo, which in Latin means the Hill of Rainaldo. A small town grew up around this castle, passing through a series of local ownerships. In 1524, the last of the feudatory lords of the territories that included this town, Bartolomeo Doria, was forced to cede Perinaldo to Duke Charles III of Savoy as part of a dispute between powerful local families, including the Grimaldi of Monaco. Such a fight was in turn an episode of the long series of wars fought between France and Spain at the beginning of the 16th century. The duke reunited administratively Perinaldo with the County of Nice, under which it remained until

1818, reaching its present arrangement some time later when the King of Sardinia, Vittorio Emanuele II, integrated the city into the province of Oneglia (Imperia).

The rivalry between Piedmont and the Republic of Genoa over the city of Perinaldo was still burning when Cassini was growing up, under the protection of his uncle Antonio Maria Crovese, a brother of his mother and probably the same referred to as Godfather in the baptism act, who also took care of his initial education. He was a bright child, as it is attested in the writings of astronomer Valperga di Caluso from Turin: “...*sin dalla fanciullezza diede segni di gran talento...*” (...since childhood gave signs of great talent...).

Cassini's tutor was no longer able to follow him, so he spent two years being educated by Father Aprosio of Vallebona, and, at the age of thirteen, he was sent to Genoa by his family to receive higher education in the famous Jesuit College of that city.

## Curiosity

As recognition of the importance of the Cassini family, during his military campaign in 1794, Napoleon himself and Massena, one of his generals, slept one night in Maraldi Castle. Moreover, in 1797, an administrative reform of the French government moved the capital of the canton from Dolceacqua to Perinaldo.



**Fig. 2.1** A showcase in the little Museum of Astronomy in Perinaldo with a telescope of the 17th century that was probably used by Giovanni Domenico Cassini (Author's photo reproduced with the permission of the city of Perinaldo)

Today, Perinaldo is a picturesque little village of less than 1000 inhabitants in the interior of the Province of Imperia in the northwest of Liguria, situated at 600 m altitude at the foot of the Maritime Alps. It is only 14 km from the seaside, 50 km from Monaco, 22 km from San Remo, and 80 km from Nice.

The city hosts a small astronomical observatory and a museum (Fig. 2.1) commemorating not only the Cassini family but also the one of the Maraldis, whose family history is closely interlaced with that of the Cassinis. Its astronomical places of interests include also a “planets street”, which you can walk along, a statue of Giovanni Domenico Cassini, the darkroom sundial in the Sanctuary of the Visitation, a Stars terrace, and two Arc-Meridians.

Giovanni Domenico Cassini

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