

Początki oceanografii – Georges Fournier: Hydrographie
Beginning of oceanography – Georges Fournier: Hydrographie

SUMMARY

This paper deals with two main topics: the beginnings of oceanography as a separate scientific discipline and an examination of the first extensive monograph dealing, among other things, with a variety of issues related to oceanography.

It is argued that the appearance of terms “hydrography”, in various European languages (the term “oceanography” was introduced as late as 19th century) to denote the description and the explanation of phenomena related to the seas is an evidence of the birth of a new discipline. The first occurrences of this term are investigated; the primary sources here are 16th- and 17th-century maps, charts and books. Early German and Dutch maps of the world and of the newly discovered America provide some of the earliest examples of the term “hydrography” and “hydrographia”. Similarly, French and English books, mostly navigation textbooks and accounts of voyages, introduce and define this term.

The second part of the paper examines the mid-17th-century monograph “Hydrographie” by the French Jesuit Georges Fournier (1595-1652). A chaplain in the service of the French Navy, broadly educated and widely travelled, he was the author of several books and treatises on various topics, including mathematics, geography, and engineering. His voluminous monograph “Hydrographie”, written in French to reach a wider audience than a Latin treatise would, deals with a multitude of issues related to the theory and practice of navigation. It also includes several chapters devoted to what would be called nowadays oceanographical phenomena or topics, such as: tides, currents, thunderstorms, fog, winds, gales, salinity, types of sea beds, transparency of the water, etc. Fournier not only describes these phenomena and their practical influence on navigation, but also presents some theories explaining their causes and origins, and discusses the merits of different theories. Other chapters of his monograph are devoted to practical aspects of navigation (such as determining the latitude and longitude), ship building, sea-side fortifications, and even such topics as supervising of the crew by the officers and the importance of religion and morals among the seamen. Many chapters include an historical survey, going back to biblical times. The popularity of the monograph caused the publisher to issue a second edition, published posthumously, but probably prepared, at least partly, by Fournier himself.

The paper was presented in 1993 at the Fifth International Congress for the History of Oceanography at San Diego, California, USA. The year 1993 marked the 350 anniversary of the first edition of Fournier’s monograph (Paris, 1643).