

The Capodimonte Astronomical Observatory Historical Archive: A Multipurpose Tool

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Abstract. The Capodimonte Astronomical Observatory (OAC) has a historical archive comprised of documents attesting to the development of astronomical research in the Southern Italy, mainly pertaining to Naples. The documents span the period of years between 1802 and 1948, i.e. from 17 years before the foundation of the Observatory through the end of the Second World War. Some years ago, the archive was rearranged and an inventory was published. This paper describes the reorganisation of that archive and its progress.

1. The Capodimonte Astronomical Observatory

The Capodimonte Astronomical Observatory, inaugurated in 1819, is among the most ancient institutions of Southern Italy. Thus, conscious of its historical role in Italian society, the OAC undertook the complete recovery of its archival documents. This undertaking not only brought the institution's scientific aspect to light, but also the cultural activities favored by those astronomers who were held in favour by Neapolitan society.

The archival work involved the reorganisation of scientific papers into a computerised catalogue from the software "History", which was supplied by the Library Service of the *Regione Lombardia*. The compilation of data was carried out by expert archivists under the direction of the OAC librarians. The inventory (see Fig.1), published in 1999, (Carrino et al., 1999) is the result of the recovery project and is now available online.

The URL is:

<http://www.na.astro.it/oacmedia/biblioteca/archivio/index.htm>

The OAC historical archive contains 48,000 papers ranging from the years 1802 to the end of the Second World War. The documents were untidily collected into two sections, and generically titled under two headings: "Correspondence" and "Accounting". For this reason, we needed to devise a new method of classification.

Through this project, the archive has been able to retrace the Observatory's history, not only as a place for scientific research, but also as a center for cultural enlightenment in the community. Now, the newly assigned category headings, "Scientific Activity" and "Correspondence and Personal Documents", expose the public to the richness of previously unknown information. The 'Scientific Activity' category contains information on publications,

astronomical and meteorological observation notebooks, International Latitude Service, educational visits, astronomical instruments, library management, and an astronomical calendar (see Fig.2); the other category, “Correspondence and Personal Documents” collects the personal papers of the Observatory Directors. At present, the study of the archival documents has already produced some papers and others will be forthcoming. Some topics for inclusion are:

- By consulting OAC’s inventories, catalogues, and the correspondence concerning purchases, gifts, and exchanges of books, we will reconstruct the development of our ancient book collection.
- We have produced historical panels and technical cards describing the history of the observatory’s instruments currently exhibited in the OAC’s Museum of Ancient Instruments. In addition, we have published a short museum guide (Stendardo, s.d.) for visitors.
- We have been tracing the scientific activity of the astronomers and directors of the Capodimonte Observatory. This study has produced two papers: One concerning the life of the OAC Director, Ernesto Capocci (1798-1864)(Olostro Cirella & Virgilio, 2001); and the other, deals with astronomical developments in Naples during the last two centuries (Capaccioli & Stendardo, 2001). Two other papers regarding the life and work of OAC directors, Carlo Brioschi (1782-1833) and Emanuele Fergola (1830-1915), are in press.
- We will revisit an in-depth study of the educational and public outreach programs at the OAC from its foundation to the present.

Another potential project concerns the preservation of important documents through the use of digital archiving.

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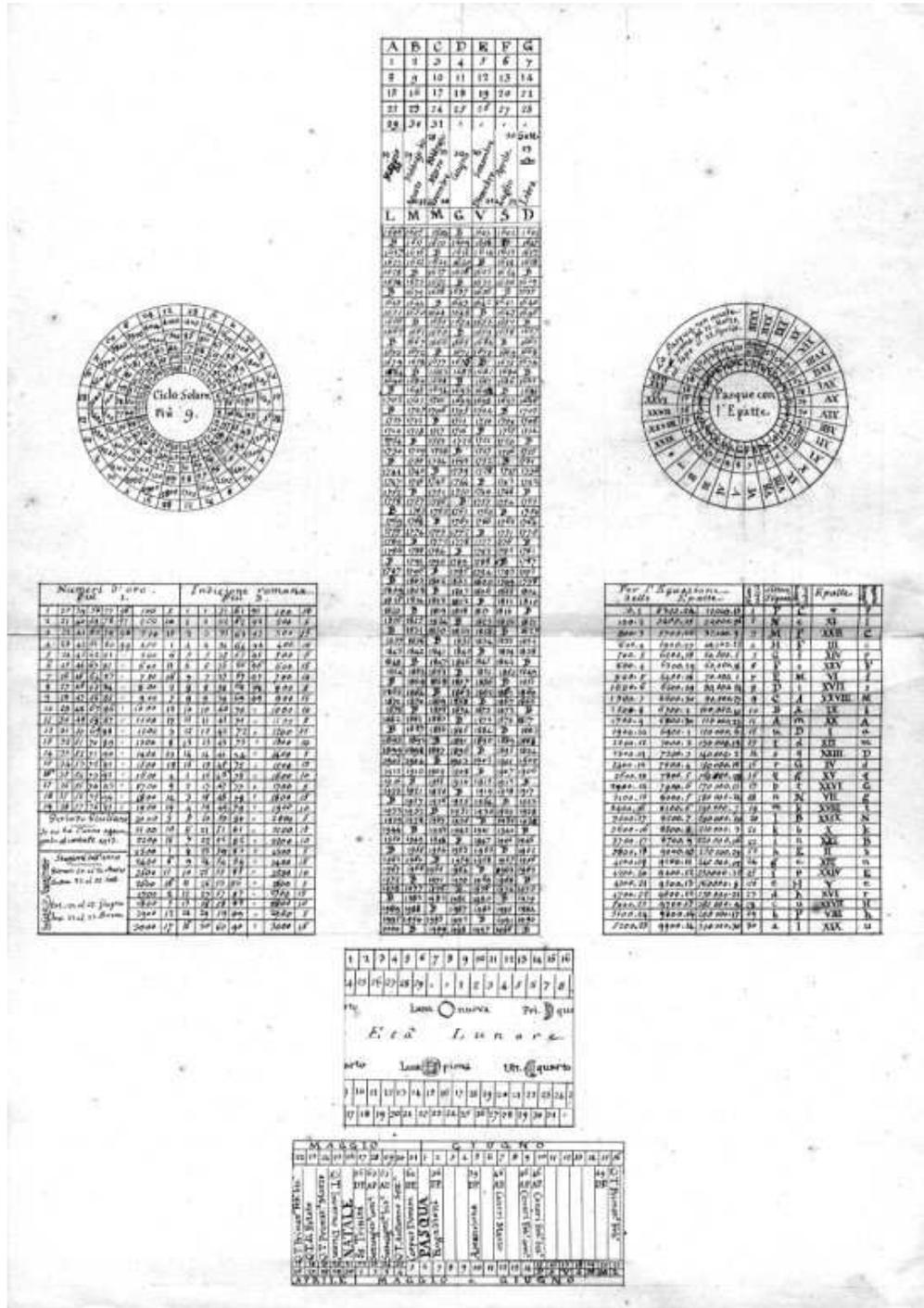


Figure 2. Perpetual calendar. From the historical archive of the OAC.