

History of the Observatory

A new course

Under Domenico Ragona's (1820-1892) directorship, the Observatory obtained from the Bourbon government the funds required to completely renew the instrumentation. Ragona spent two years in Germany, where he acquired two noteworthy instruments: a meridian circle from Pistor & Martins and a 25 cm equatorial telescope from Merz in Munich.

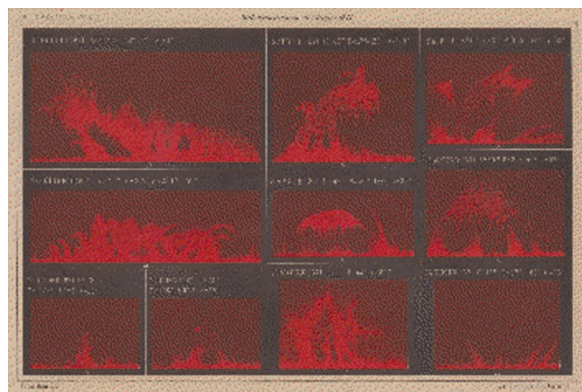
Swept away by the vicissitudes of Risorgimento that led to the unification of Italy, Ragona was forced to quit and Gaetano Cacciato – his 1849 dismissal having been due to his anti Bourbon activities – was reinstated as Director of the Observatory of Palermo.

It became soon clear that there was an urgent need for an efficient assistant to join Cacciato, for the excellent Merz telescope was still laying unpacked in its case and its installation was one of the scientific priorities of the Observatory,

Thus, the young astronomer Pietro Tacchini (1838-1905) was appointed as Astronomo Aggiunto in the Observatory. Former director of the small Observatory in Modena, Tacchini installed the Merz equatorial telescope with which he started a modern line of research – solar physics – that brought the Observatory of Palermo once again under the international spotlight.



Pietro Tacchini



Solar prominences as observed by Tacchini

Tacchini used the Merz telescope to study the sun and took part in the international scientific debate about the nature and structure of the photosphere; he was also the author of one of the early classifications of solar prominences, as well as the founder of the Società degli Spettroscopisti Italiani in 1871 together with Angelo Secchi S.J. (1818-1878).

The astronomer gave a boost to the activities of the Observatory, as indirectly shown by the large amount of books and instruments purchased since 1864.

When Tacchini moved to Rome in 1879, the Observatory of Palermo started losing its scientific importance and fell into another declining period due to the reduction of research staff and the enforcement of unfavourable national legislative acts.

A long decline

Regarded as the natural heir of Tacchini, Annibale Riccò (1844-1919) soon left Palermo to become Director of the newly-established Observatory of Catania. The following Director, Temistocle Zona (1848-1910), neglected the astrophysical research and devoted himself to astrometry and comet observation.

During his long directorship, Filippo Angelitti (1856-1931) unsuccessfully tried to move the Observatory out of town, in order to take advantage of a clearer sky, more suitable for astronomical observations.

After the death of Angelitti, the Directorship was almost exclusively assigned on a *pro tempore* basis, thus producing a total scientific paralysis of the institution, which by then no longer was a State Astronomical Observatory, having been turned into a mere University Cabinet of Astronomy, engaged just in teaching.