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Polvere di Stelle (Stardust) : The national historical archives for astronomy on the web

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Abstract. In 2009, the International Year of Astronomy, the four hundredth anniversary of the first Galilean observation of the Moon and of the Jupiter *medicei* satellites, the Archive and Library Service of INAF - National Institute for Astrophysics - has realized a web portal of the national historical archives for astronomy. In this paper we present and describe the web pages collecting the information about all twelve Italian astronomical archives. It is the first Italian project to show in a complete and homogeneous way the treasures hiding in folders and sheets. Each archive presents on the web pages an analytic abstract and the index of the papers with a wide gallery of images.

Key words. History of astronomy: Archives

1. The Italian astronomical archives

In 2009, the International Year of Astronomy, the Archives and Library Service of the National Institute for Astrophysics, Italy, has promoted a project **Polvere di stelle** (Stardust)[1] that has the goal to realize a web portal dedicated to the historical archives of the Italian astronomical observatories[2] with the aim to increase the knowledge of scientific national historical own and the astronomical culture in the Italian society. The large collection of papers and letters preserved and studied in the ancient astronomical sites is the most important witness to the scientific activities of the Italian astronomers.

Documents rather than books, can be found inside the historical archives. Most of them are handwritten, and reveal the relationships among the astronomers and the scientific community, the politicians, and the society of the time. The historical archives contain firsthand sources for historical research and are a precious and unique cultural heritage. These documents cover about three centuries of astronomical researches and studies. The Observatories historical archives contain highly scientific

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[1] http://www.archivistorici.inaf.it

[2] The historical archives of the Italian Observatories are part of the National Institute for Astrophysics (INAF), except the Bologna archive that is part of the Department of Astronomy of the University.

Fig. 1. Donati correspondence receiving worldwide informations about the aurora Borealis of 4 February, 1872 - Archives of Arcetri (left) ; Positions of the main stars made by Carlo Brioschi, 1802 ca. - Archives of Capodimonte (right).

documents such as accounts of observations, astronomical calculations and meteorological data, together with records related to the ordinary running of the Observatories (see Fig. 1). There are also papers which provide evidence of the activities carried out by astronomers: tracing a meridian line to mark the civil time in the Cathedrals of Bologna, Palermo and Milan, drawing out the ephemerides as an aid to navigation, regulating clocks and calendars, drafting reliable geographical maps. As astronomers used to spend their entire lives inside the observatories, archives include also private documents, such as letters, accounts, diaries and family records. They are inestimable sources to study, investigate, and learn some aspects of history of science.

In the year 2000 the *Specola 2000* Project (Chinnici, Mandrino, & Bònoli (2006)) was set up, as a result of the cooperation between Consorzio Nazionale per l'Astronomia e l'Astrofisica, the Ministero per I Beni Culturali e Ambientali Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Archivistici, and the Società Astronomica Italiana, in order to rearrange, reorder and valorize the documents held in the twelve astronomical Observatories archives. Rearranging these records is a long and hard task comparable to solving a puzzle not knowing how the finished picture will turn out, and finding help from vague clues: the colour of a cover, unknown initials, a special folding. By concluding the job of rearranging archives, a new important source for history of astronomy becomes available. It should not be overlooked that astronomers were men of their time, thus linked with civil society and political power, sometimes playing prestigious political roles (Giovanni Schiaparelli and Giovanni Celoria were senators), having a large network of acquaintances. For these reasons it is impossible to know beforehand what kind of information the archives will unfold; probably a different answer to each inquiring person, depending on the question raised.

2. The web portal project

On the web portal (see the home page screenshot in Fig. 2) all the information about all twelve Italian astronomical archives (Florence, Bologna, Milan, Cagliari, Naples, Catania, Padua, Palermo, Rome, Teramo, Turin, Trieste) is presented. It is the first Italian project to show in a complete and homogeneous way the treasures hiding in folders and sheets in the field of history of science. The portal has three main sections:

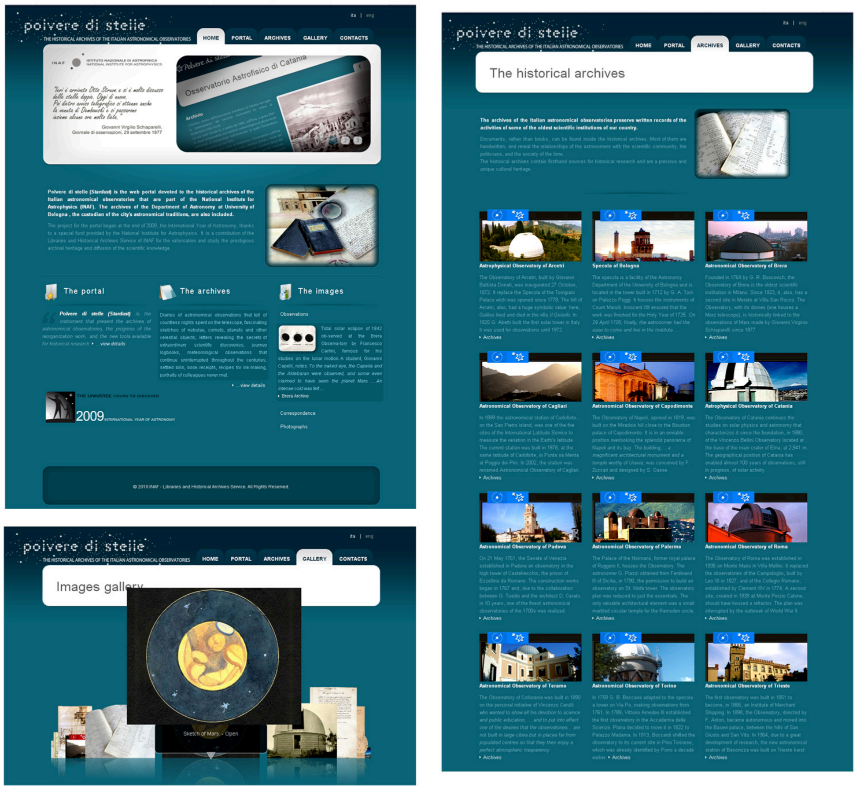

Fig. 2. The **Polvere di stelle** web portal in english version. Home page (left-top), the twelve astronomical archives (right), and an image gallery of the most important e peculiar archives chart (left-bottom)

1. a description of the plan and goals of the portal, and the work done to recover, reorder, and build any archives;
2. a summary about the structure and the contents of each astronomical archives;
3. a wide gallery presenting a selection of images of the most important and beautiful documents preserved in any archives.

Every archives present a small view of the institution housing it and a complete description of its historical heritage. Each archival series offer an abstract and a detailed list of the archival units. The fonds of the astronomers have specially many documents reporting information on important scientific activities and glimpses of their private life. This web portal is a dynamic work because each section will be updated as the reordering of the archives will be completed. *Polvere di stelle* will therefore be the stargate, the main door to access the archives of Italian astronomical Observatories, and to keep track of the progress of the work of reorganization and of new tools available for historical research. It will allow old and new visitors and scholars interested in our history, to deepen their studies or start new ones.

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