Digitization of the Archive of Plates of the Asiago Observatory and of the Specola Vaticana

Cesare Barbieri[1], Alessandro Omizzolo[2], Francesca Rampazzi[1]

[1] *Department of Astronomy, University of Padova*
[2] *Specola Vaticana, Castelgandolfo*

Abstract

A pilot program to digitize the archive of plates of the Asiago Observatory and of the Specola Vaticana has been started in 2001 with funds from the University of Padova. Two high-quality commercial scanners with dedicated personal computers have been installed in Padova and in Asiago. This paper presents some of the results obtained so far, both for large format images of the Schmidt telescope and for spectroscopic plates. An overview of the future plans is also given.

Introduction

A great amount of highly valuable information is stored in the photographic archive of plates of many Observatories, and in particular in those of Asiago and of Castelgandolfo. A proper digitization of these real treasury is therefore of paramount importance, both for the preservation of a volatile support and for the fuller exploitation of the scientific content. We have therefore undertaken this work of digitization, and present here a report of activity covering the period from August 2001 to March 2002. Some considerations about the future activity are also presented.

Maintenance and Repair

The photographic plate is a fragile and perishable support implying the risk, in time, to lose its entire information. It is urgent therefore to provide the means for an *adequate conservation* of this material and for its repair where necessary.

Indeed, a preliminary examination of a random sample of plates has revealed areas where *the emulsion is detaching from its glass support*, with consequent loss of part of the image data. We provide two examples of this deterioration in **Figure 1.**

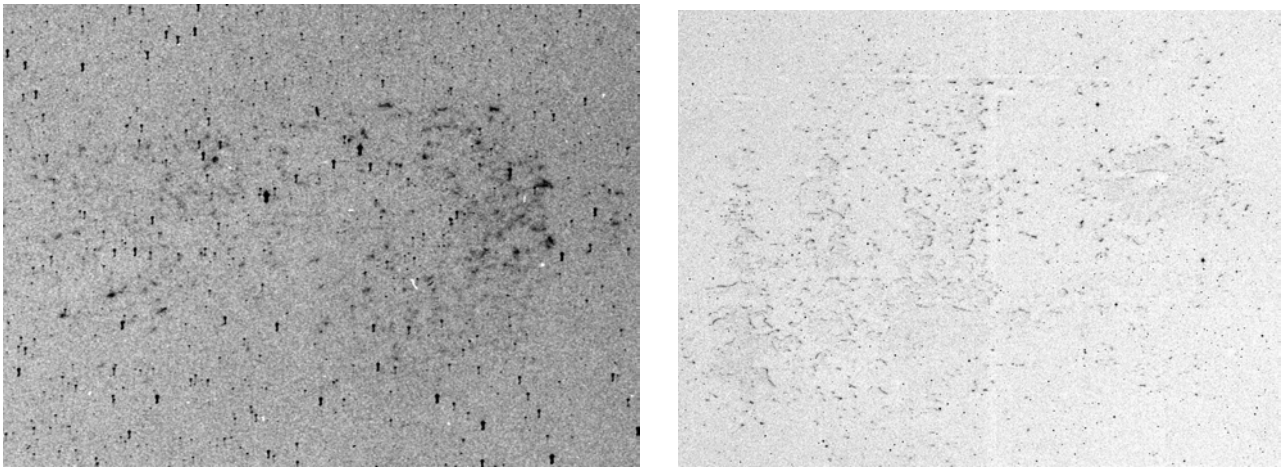

Figure 1 – Exfoliation of the emulsion in two plates from the archive of the Specola Vaticana.

Therefore, a first intervention is being performed of visual inspection of the archives, to quantify the amount of damaged plates. If sufficient resources will be available, a reconditioning of the rooms and of the vaults will be carried out. The advice of experts will be sought in order to find ways to stop the deterioration of the emulsion, and if possible to restore its integrity.
The Asiago photographic archive consists of the following units (
Table 1)

Table 1 – The photographic archive content

Images with the 122 cm, since 1942 to 1997, nr. 9720
Spectra with the Newtonian spectrographs of the 122 cm, since 1958 to 1991, nr. 3220
Spectra with the Cassegrain spectrographs of the 122 cm, since 1951 to 1994, nr. 18584
Images with the 182 cm , since 1973 to 1989, nr. 3870
Spectra with the 182 cm since 1973 to 1988, nr. 4301
Images (direct + objective prism) with the Schmidt S 67/92 cm since 1966 to 1998, nr. 16729 + 1087
Images (direct + objective prism) with the Schmidt S 40/50 cm since 1958 to 1992, nr. 18411 + 2006.

Digitization of the plates

A feasibility study has started to assess the implications of the digitization and its techniques by using funds provided by the University of Padova. Two good quality scanners have been bought by the Department of Astronomy, one for the Asiago station and one for Padova:

- scanner Epson 1640 XL, A3 format, optical resolution 1600x3200 dpi, in Padova
- scanner UMAX Powerlook 1100, A4 format, optical resolution 1200x2400 dpi, in Asiago.

After an initial period of testing, we have decided to provide for Asiago an Epson scanner identical to the one in Padova, that will be installed as soon as possible, to guarantee uniformity of results. What's more, the same model of scanner is used by DLR in Berlin, an Institute with which we have underway a fruitful exchange of experiences (in particular for the ADAS survey of asteroids, see http://planet.pd.astro.it/adas/). Dr. S. Mottola of DLR has therefore installed in our computer stations a series of routine programs he wrote himself, that greatly enhance the ease of data acquisition, working in the Windows operating system and providing as output a ***positive*** FITS image that can be directly analyzed with IRAF.

Both scanners have been connected to identical dedicated PCs, with 1 GB of RAM, 40 GB of hard disk and DVD/CD writer. The size of the files deriving from the 20x20 cm S67/92 plates, scanned at 1600x1600 optical dpi, is around 280 MB and this poses a serious storing problem. We are for the moment saving the files to DVDs of 4.7 GB each, but this can only work as a backup, a dedicated system being necessary for the future.

Since August 2001, several plates were digitized mostly by F. Rampazzi in Asiago and J. Civale in Padova, experimenting with the scanners' optical parameters.

Figure 2, Figure 3 and **Figure 4** show examples of scans acquired in Padova (Epson) and in Asiago (Umax). **Table 2** reports the data regarding the spectra of **Figure 3**.

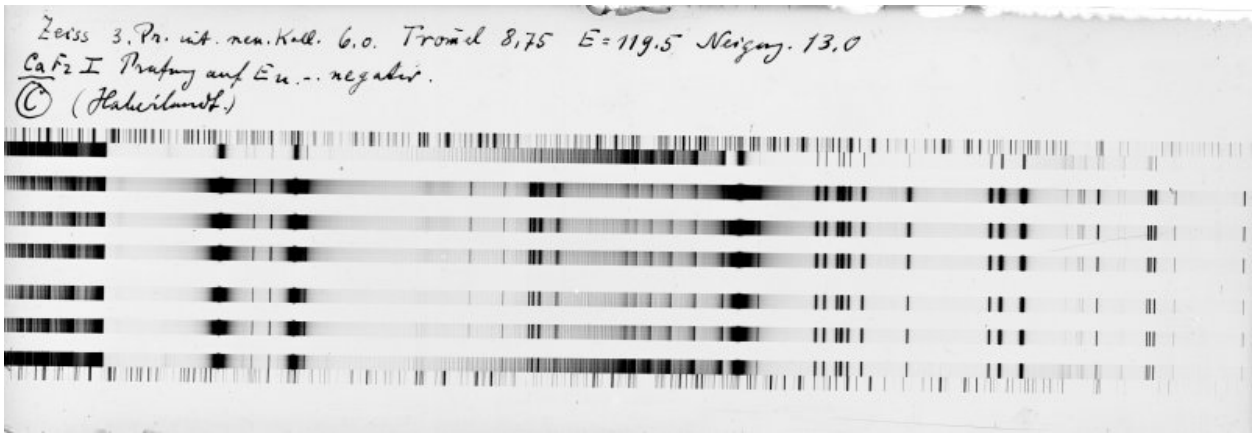

Figure 2 – Ca F_2 I spectra from the Specola Vaticana scanned in Padova.

Figure 3 – Spectra of the stars φ Persei and ψ Persei obtained in 1951 with the122-cm spectrograph A camera III..

Table 2 – Logbook of the spectra shown in Figure 3

spectrum nr.	Date and time	Object	Emulsion	Exp. Time	Observer
270	15 02 1951 UT 21 07	φ Persei	Ferrania normale	15 m	Mannino
271	15 02 1951 UT 21 19	φ Persei		5 m	
272	15 02 1951 UT 21 39	ψ Persei		19 m	
273	15 02 1951 UT 21 54	ψ Persei		5 m	

First evaluation of the photometric and astrometric capabilities

To evaluate the photometric capability of the output digital files we have examined the Selected Area 57 using for comparison the photometric data given by A. Purgathofer, Publ. of Lowell Observatory (1969).

These preliminary calculations have been performed on scans obtained with the Umax scanner in Asiago. We have taken several images of the SA57 (see **Figure 5** for one example) at 14 bit and 1200 dpi, from plates nr. 2329 and 2348, varying the parameters for *lights*, *shades* and *midtones*. Since every plate has its own intensity, there are no fixed parameters to use: a choice has to be made each time for best results. Checking star profiles and saturation we found that a good solution is to keep zero value for shades, to regulate lights so that the background is visible but not too noisy, and to choose a midtone value so that the faintest stars are still clearly perceptible while brighter ones are not saturated (the brightest stars will be saturated anyway).

The digital files have been analyzed with the IRAF-DAOPHOT package, adjusting some of the parameters to the photographic plate and to the scale of our Schmidt telescope.

Figure 4 - Detail of M33 from Asiago Schmidt plate nr. 1917 (1968) scanned in Asiago.

Figure 6 shows the results obtained by two successive digitization of the same plate (nr. 2348, taken on 1969, April 17, UT 24h09m, 103a-O + GG13, 15 min exposure time) with different values of the midtone parameter: the results provide in both cases an excellent fit to the B-sequence of Purgathofer, with a small difference in zero point.

Figure 5 – Central part of the Selected Area 57. Asiago Schmidt plate nr. 2348 (1969)

IRAF provides also an evaluation of the internal error, that raises from few hundredths of mag for the brighter stars to around 0.1 mag for the faintest objects.

We have also checked the precision in the coordinates on the digital files. A comparison of two plates scanned with the UMAX (1200 dpi) in two successive dates provide the following results:

***Delta X* = 0.00 ± 0.43 px, *Delta Y* = 0.00 ± 0.44 px**

corresponding to a standard deviation of about 0.9 arcsec, intrinsic to the scanner itself.
Then we have used the coordinates of the SA 57 stars provided by USNO-A2.0 (http://www.nofs.navy.mil/, epoch 1955.287490) to check the equatorial coordinates. By a second order interpolation algorithm (Bertini, 2001) the following standard deviation has been derived:

St. Dev . in RA = 0".41, St. Dev. in Dec = 0".62

We have no explanation for the larger St. Dev. in Dec, more checks are needed to confirm the existence of this effect.

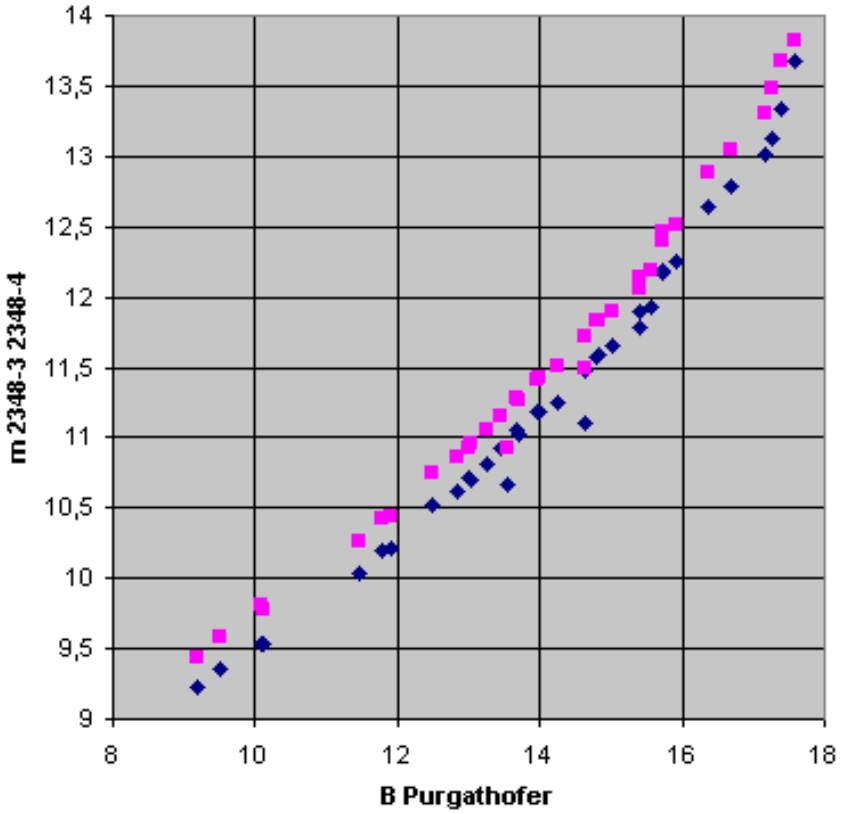

Figure 6 – The photometric curve of SA 57. Abscissae: B mag by Purgathofer: ordinates: instrumental magnitude.

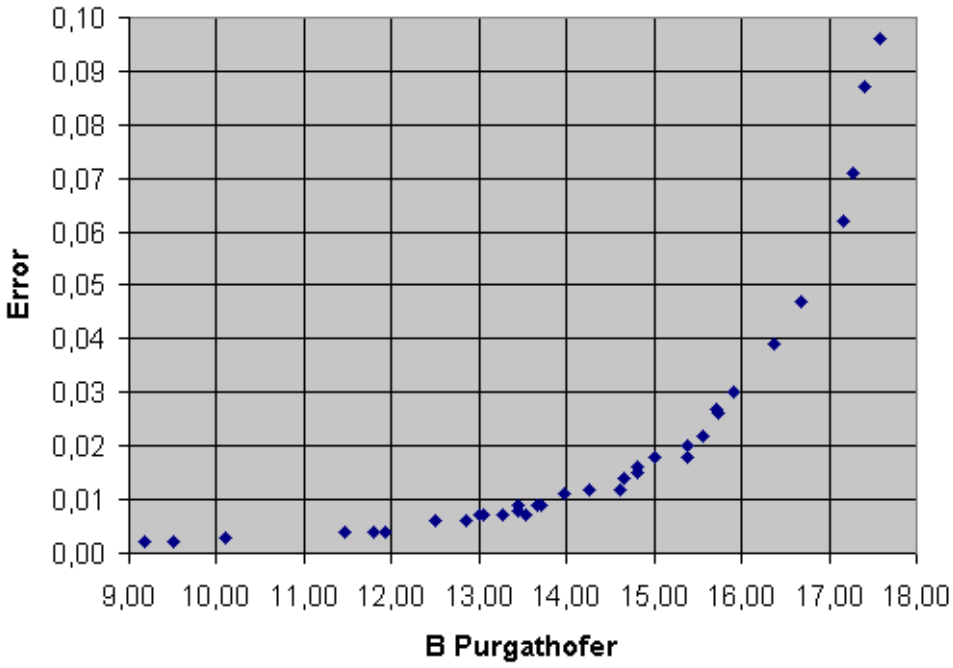

Figure 7 – The dependence of the IRAF error against the magnitude.

We consider that these results are extremely encouraging.

Future plans

We briefly sketch our plans for the rest of 2002:

- confirm with further tests the astrometric and photometric accuracy of the digitized plates
- digitize some 1000 plates well distributed among the several telescopes;
- make those files (in .jpg format) accessible to the general user through the web for a quick view, and ask for comments;
- start a call for ideas in order to selectively digitize those plates that give a maximum scientific return.

Acknowledgments

We thank Drs. I. Bertini and G. Pignata, and J. Civale, S. Dalle Ave and S. Magrin for the kind assistance.

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