

History of the Observatory

The foundation: Giuseppe Piazzi

The foundation of the Astronomical Observatory in Palermo took place during the blissful time of the Bourbon reformism embodied in Sicily by the viceroys Caracciolo and Caramanico.

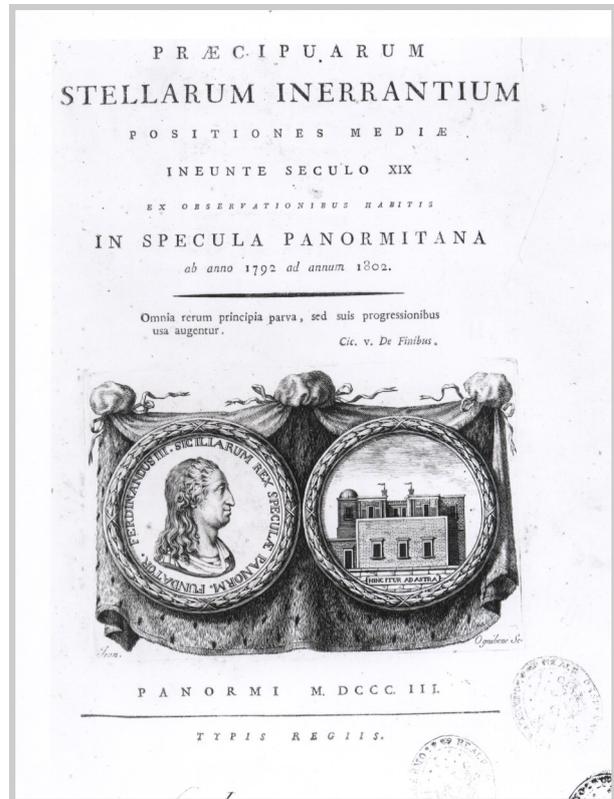
The establishment of a chair for Astronomy in Palermo – and the resulting foundation of an astronomical Observatory – had been part of a wide re-launching program for scientific culture, which also included the realization of a botanical garden and an anatomical theatre.

In December 1786 the "Deputazione de' Regi Studi" (the early name of the University of Palermo) proposed to the Viceroy Prince of Caramanico the appointment of Giuseppe Piazzi (1746 - 1826), cleric regular of the order of the Theatines, as chair of Astronomy. Even if he wasn't an astronomer – as a matter of fact he was an unknown Lecturer of Mathematics – Piazzi proved to be the right person in the right place at the right time, capable of making Palermo one of the best astronomical research centres in the whole of Europe.

Almost concurrently with his appointment, Piazzi was allowed to travel to Paris and London to get accustomed to practical astronomy. During his two years abroad he became acquainted with the most renowned French and English astronomers, and,



*Giuseppe Piazzi pointing at Cerere
(G. Velasco, 1805)*



Title page of the first edition of Piazzi's star catalogue

most importantly, he developed a sound scientific program for the forthcoming building of the Observatory and obtained the most suitable instruments for this purpose. Among these, the notable Ramsden's Circle, a masterpiece of the English 18th century precision mechanics, designed to improve accuracy in the measurement of the position of celestial bodies.

With this instrument Piazzi attained the two most important achievements of his career: in 1801 the discovery of Ceres, the first of the asteroids - a new class of celestial objects -, and the publication of the Star Catalogue in 1803 (followed in 1814 by a new enlarged edition).

Piazzi's successors

In 1817 Piazzi was summoned in Naples to bring to completion the construction of the Capodimonte Observatory. Piazzi's successors – assistant Niccolò Cacciato (1780–1841) and then his son, Gaetano Cacciato (1814–1889) – were not able to keep high the prestige of the Observatory: the instruments had in the meanwhile turned outdated and until approximately 1850 the Observatory had been falling into a period of scientific decline, aside from Cacciato senior's meteorological studies.