

The Observatory today

The revival: Giuseppe Salvatore Vaiana

Despite the loss of its role as a research institution, the Observatory managed to survive until the 1970s. Endowed with the vestiges of its ancient magnificence, namely the prestigious site inside Palazzo dei Normanni and the precious collections of books and instruments, it was staffed with just a single elderly researcher and devoid of funds. Investing energies in the revival of such an institution, would require a great deal of imagination and faith.

In 1976 Giuseppe Vaiana (1935-1991) became the new Director of the Observatory. After long years spent doing research in the United States with the Riccardo Giacconi's team, at American Science & Engineering (AS&E) and later at the Harvard University, in 1975 Vaiana won two university chairs: Solar Physics at the University of Florence and Astronomy in Palermo.



Giuseppe Salvatore Vaiana

He chose the second chair and brought new ideas to the Observatory while maintaining his contacts with Harvard, thus creating an astronomy school in Palermo, which would soon be raised at an international level.

He managed to attract many young researchers, who promptly joined the new main program that he was developing: stellar X-ray astronomy.

In the meantime the restoration of the site in Palazzo dei Normanni had started and the collections of historical instruments were being surveyed and repaired.

Independent research centre

On 18th July 1988, a decade after the frenetic awakening of the research activities started under Vaiana's far-sighted guide, by decree of the President of the Italian Republic the institution was reinstated among the State Astronomical Observatories, thus regaining its proper dignity and the prerequisites for becoming an independent research centre, like the other eleven Italian Observatories.

The sudden death of Vaiana on 25th August 1991 struck the Observatory at the beginning of its recruitment project for research and support personnel and its participation in a series of important science programs.

Among the latter, the High Resolution Camera (HRC) for the X-ray astronomy space Observatory Chandra, to be orbited by NASA in the mid-1999, and the European Photon Imaging Camera (EPIC) for XMM-Newton, the space observatory launched by the European Space Agency (ESA) at the end of the same year.

In the crucial decade from 1991 to 2001 the Directorship passed to Salvatore Serio, who continued the Observatory development plan with persistency and devotion, and started, among other things, a project for the construction of a new site.

National Institute for Astrophysics (INAF)

Nowadays research programs in astrophysics are run very differently from those of the past century: owing to their size, costs and complexity they are conceived, carried out and controlled by a network of research centres.

In line with this purpose, in 2002 the twelve Italian Observatories merged into the National Institute for Astrophysics, which was established to make the Italian astrophysics community play an active role in the new international research programs. In 2005 three astrophysical institutes of the CNR (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italian National Research Council) also joined INAF: IRA, IFSI and IASF.

Nowadays INAF is the benchmark for Italian astrophysical research; approximately a thousand people, mostly researchers, are operating within it.

Salvatore Sciortino has been the Director of the Palermo Observatory since 2002.