

## AN EARLY ITALIAN ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY FOUNDED IN TURIN IN 1906

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Birth, development and death of an Astronomical Society founded in Turin at the beginning of the twentieth century with the intention of disseminating scientific knowledge, Astronomy and connected disciplines in a popular form accessible to all in Italy and abroad.

The ongoing work of rearranging and inventorying the papers of the historical-scientific archive of the Turin - Pino Torinese Astronomical Observatory has thrown up documents referring to the relatively little known Turin-based Italian Astronomical Society, which in the early years of the present century (more precisely, the period 1906-1914) was important as a 'muster point' for Italian astronomers. Through its official journal, the '*Rivista di Astronomia e Scienze Affini*', it sought, at least in its early stages, to disseminate, popularise and promulgate new discoveries in the astronomical and scientific fields among the public at large.

Its collection of documents comprises:

- Memoranda of association, Articles and Regulations.
- Elections to positions of responsibility within the Society.
- Balance sheets and financial statements.
- Deeds referring to the winding up of the Society.
- Correspondence with members.
- Documentation on the various activities which grew up and developed within the Society.
- Manuscripts, drawings and sketches sent in by authors for publication in the '*Rivista di Astronomia e Scienze Affini*'.
- The full set of the '*Rivista di Astronomia e Scienze Affini*', published monthly from January 1907 to December 1913.

No minutes of meetings survive, but their absence is, fortunately, atoned for by their partial publication in the '*Rivista*' in the chapter entitled 'Atti della Società' (Society Dealings). Reading them, it is possible to reconstruct the history of the Institution in some detail.

The meetings which led to the setting up of the Society took place at the premises of the Turin Astronomical Observatory (then housed in Palazzo

Madama) on the evenings of October 28 and November 9 1906. On these occasions, the Society Articles and Regulations were approved and an Executive Committee appointed to develop the Society organically and increase the number of its members. The Committee was presided over by the man who devised and was mainly responsible for promoting the initiative, Father Giovanni Boccardi, then the Director of the Turin Observatory and a scholar renowned both in Italy and overseas. On the evening of November 24 of the same year, the Society was officially founded. The first elections were held on January 10 1907. Ing. Ottavio Zanotti Bianco of Turin was appointed chairman, but declined the post immediately. A fresh election was held on the evening of January 19 1908, and the founder himself, Giovanni Boccardi, was placed at the helm of the new Institution. Besides the chairman, a deputy chairman, directors, a secretary, a treasurer and a librarian were also appointed.

The new Society enjoyed immediate success. The lists of the names of the founding members and members who joined in the first year, resident not only in Turin but all over Italy and abroad as well, testify to the great enthusiasm with which the initiative was received. The heterogeneousness of the professions of members clearly reveals that interest for astronomy and connected disciplines was great in every social class.

In a short space of time, the number of the members increased so much it was necessary to open two branches, one in Milan and the other in Florence. The initiatives promoted by the Society ranged from the setting up of a library to the organising of conferences on astronomical subjects, the planning of observation evenings in the cities in which the main office and branches were situated (documents have survived referring to the renting of a terrace in Turin at Corso Oporto 2 on which a telescope was installed for exclusive use by members) and, last but not least, the forming of a so-called 'Solar Commission' of members keen on observing sunspots. Aided and abetted by Professor Wolfer (a member of the Zürich Polytechnic Observatory) and encouraged by G. V. Schiaparelli, these members eventually completed numerous studies on the subject.

At the end of the first two-year period, as envisaged by § 11 of the Society Articles, on December 17 1908 a new chairman and a new Management Committee were elected (re-election being rigorously forbidden). The choice fell upon Vincenzo Cerulli, director of the Collurania Observatory (Teramo). The Astronomical Society continued to prosper and to attract new members, not to mention fresh new contributions for the '*Rivista di Astronomia*'. Besides articles of specific interest by distinguished scholars, the journal was now also packed with exhaustive journalistic-type.

information to keep readers up to date with astronomical phenomena and related initiatives such as conferences, congresses and lectures.

Dealings with analogous Astronomical Societies, Observatories and Scientific Institutes in Europe and beyond were fuelled by a constant exchange of publications. The *'Rivista di Astronomia'* was thus able to command an extremely wide circulation.

In April 1909, the premises of the Astronomical Observatory ceased to be available and new offices had to be found for the Society. A precise agreement was reached with the Società Fotografica Subalpina whereby the two Societies were to make joint use of the latter's premises in Turin at Via Maria Vittoria 23.

In late 1910, at the end of the second two-year period in the Society's life, the first signs of crisis suddenly appeared. In a meeting held on November 29, a proposal was tabled to modify the afore-mentioned § 11. The idea was to re-elect Cerulli, who as chairman had done a great deal of work to develop the Society. The proposal was unanimously approved and a referendum was called to allow members resident outside Turin to vote.

The ballot papers were counted on December 15 1910 and the modification to the Society's Articles was approved. The new text of § 11 now read: *'The chairman and members of the Management Committee and the librarian shall remain in office for two years and all may be re-elected.'* Nevertheless, Vincenzo Cerulli declined the offer to stay on and expressed the wish that he be succeeded by Father Camillo Melzi d'Eril of Florence.

In a meeting held on January 1911, the candidature of Father Melzi was officially announced. The move caused the wrath of Giovanni Boccardi, who expressed not only open perplexity about the person put forward, but also stinging criticism of Cerulli's chairmanship during the preceding two-year period. Despite the founder's unfavourable opinion, however, the outcome of the elections of January 21 confirmed the majority tendency, and Melzi was thus made chairman.

Boccardi and his supporters aired their protests immediately. They supported a different candidate, Federico Sacco, a professor at Turin Polytechnic, and a different list. One of their various criticisms was against the very recourse to a referendum, which was not envisaged in the Society's Regulations, and the use of pre-printed forms to indicate preferences with the official Society heading. They argued that the presence of the heading

might have led voters to believe that the forms had been issued officially by the Society and not by a single group of its members.

Cerulli's responded to the accusations by arguing that:

- 1) the referendum was the only possible way of acting in a Society whose members resided in different towns and cities;
- 2) it was the chairman's job to ask members to vote, the relevant letter being accompanied by a form, left blank to allow total freedom of choice;
- 3) finally, *'the fact that the protest has been made only on hearing the outcome of the vote, unfavourable to the list sponsored by the signatories of the protest itself, clearly demonstrates that this was their only motivation, which leads one to believe that the members who signed it would not have done so had their list won.'*<sup>2</sup>

The reaction of Boccardi and the group of members who supported him was immediate. In a letter dated January 30 1911 and forwarded to all members of the Astronomical Society, the reasons for the protest were listed in detail, and the recipients were explicitly asked to resign from the Italian Astronomical Society to join the fledgling Urania Society, chaired by Boccardi himself, with premises at the Turin Astronomical Observatory. To make things even easier for budding schismatics, a pre-printed letter of resignation was annexed.

It read as follows:

*'I, the undersigned, provided that:*

*1st: the present line of the Italian Astronomical Society founded in 1906 by the well-deserving Prof. Boccardi boils down to:*

- a) the demolition of the work built up with such great care and sacrifice by the founder;*
- b) the transformation of the Society, which was originally intended as a place for serene scientific investigation, popularised for the general public, into a gymnasium of scientists whose barely intelligible publications and abstruse formulas are in no way conducive to popular understanding;*
- c) hence the perversion of the character of the Society and its popular review, with the turning of the former into an Academy and of the latter into a highbrow journal.*

*2nd: since one part has failed to meet the commitments undertaken, once the basis of the Society and the motive which persuaded so many*

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<sup>2</sup> *Rivista di Astronomia e Scienze Affini*, year V, 1911, p. 31.

members to join, the other part is also now free, and that, in actual fact, the above-mentioned Society has failed to perform the obligations undertaken in its Articles and in the programme of its Journal (November 1 906) which were, among other things, to disseminate scientific knowledge in a popular form accessible to all, to arrange visits to Observatories, to educate members through interviews and conferences and to have a Vetting Commission and an Editorial Committee, both conspicuous by their absence for two years and more.

**3rd:** for these reasons and also because there can be no doubt as to the invalidity of the latest vote for the appointment of the Management Committee, resign and declare myself free of any connection with the above-mentioned Society.'

The chairman and the Management Committee of the Astronomical Society responded by sending a letter of their own, dated March 1 1911, to all members. In it, they argued out each point in detail. The letter concluded that, '*we hope that you, sir, will have been persuaded that the orientation of the Society, founded by the well-deserving Prof. Boccardi, has been changed in no way, and that its line, like all things human, may even be improved in the future*', and that, finally, '*the present Management Committee was presented at the Society elections with a programme for the popularisation of Astronomy and related sciences in a form accessible to all. Why not, therefore, wait for it to perform this programme, which corresponds exactly to the one you, sir, demanded after the elections?*' The letter ended by asking all those who had resigned to withdraw their resignations.

A fair number of members adhered to Boccardi's proposal and joined the new Society, but the majority stayed on as members of the Italian Astronomical Society. In reality, the problem had very little to do with the contents of the '*Rivista di Astronomia*' and its failure to put its popularising intentions into practice. In fact, '*Saggi di Astronomia Popolare*', the official organ of the Urania Society, was in every way comparable to the '*Rivista*' from the outset.

The real reasons for the dispute derived from fierce struggles for power and personal prestige. These determined sudden alliances and no less sudden withdrawals, all of which was exacerbated by the forceful personality of Giovanni Boccardi, a man never willing to accept compromises, but ever ready to enter into fierce polemic and open argument.

The Society eventually managed to overcome this initial period of crisis, but the rot had set in. A slow decline began which, in the space of a

few years, was to bring about its dissolution. The reasons for this were many and various; first and foremost, the Urania Society was a source of real competition.

On January 11 1913, the chairman and Management Committee were appointed for the third two-year term of office. The position was once more entrusted to Vincenzo Cerulli but, following a series of bitter arguments with the Committee, he resigned after a few months. Writing to the members who met on July 10 1913, Cerulli claimed that, *'The only thing I can do to acknowledge the courtesy of the members is, despite my resignation, to carry ahead the magazine to the end of the year, suspending any preventive censorship and admitting the unabridged publication of all articles...'*<sup>3</sup> We have no news of the outcome of this particular episode, but an announcement in the December issue of the Journal does advise members not to pay their subscription for the year until the crisis has settled.

An extraordinary meeting was eventually convened for January 26 1914, but the outgoing Cerulli did not attend. In the meantime, the members of the Management Committee had also submitted their resignations *en bloc*. In the course of the meeting, a second extraordinary meeting was convened. The only item on the agenda was the *'Deliberation, under article 20 of the Articles of the Society formed in Turin on November 24 1906 and provisions relative thereto.'* The motivations for the decision ranged from the now formal discontinuation of all Society activities (of all those promoted, the only one which survived was the publication of the *'Rivista'*) to evident lack of interest by the former chairman, who was blamed for not calling new elections before the end of 1913.

Only a few members attended the meeting of February 10 1914. Vincenzo Cerulli sent a letter listing the reasons why the calling of elections to positions of responsibility in the Society had been delayed: *'...I believed, and still do so, that elections had to be called by the Committee and not by myself, since my resignation preceded its. Despite that, however, I by no means neglected the fate of the Society. On the contrary, I sounded out fellow astronomer-members - and my colleagues in Turin were duly informed of this - and asked them to submit to the Committee a list of candidates for the different positions to be voted on immediately. This list of course took some time to compile, but had already been forwarded to Turin when the Meeting of January 26 met convened...'* At the end of a fierce debate over the work of the former chairman, the following Agenda was approved:

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<sup>3</sup> *Rivista di Astronomia e Scienze Affini*, year VII, 1913, p. 302.

*'a) Considering that the Agenda for the winding up of the Society was forwarded to all members;*

*b) provided that, with the exception of the letter of Prof. Bemporad to the Secretary, no other proposals contrary to the Agenda have been received by the chairman of the Meeting;*

*c) and that no tangible proposal was conveyed to the Meeting, which suggested suspending the proposal to wind up the Society;*

*d) being deemed valid the Meeting in third summons also with regard to the winding up of the Society;*

*the Agenda proposed by the Meeting is hereby approved and forwarded to all members as of January 31 1914, as follows:*

*deliberation under art. 20 of the Society Articles of the Society formed in Turin on November 24 1906.'*<sup>4</sup>

The last information we have about the Italian Astronomical Society dates from November 29 1924, the day on which the liquidators drew up the statement of discharge. Under article 20 of the Articles, (*'Every activity resulting at the period of resolution shall be handed over to Institutions with analogous scientific purposes'*), the Italian Astronomical Society was transferred into the Urania Society. The list of surviving property of the former Society comprised a set of shelves and a blackboard; the library, made up of works received as gifts from authors and others received in exchange for the *'Rivista di Astronomia'*; three complete sets of the *'Rivista di Astronomia'* (seven years) and other incomplete sets; stereotypes used for publications in the *'Rivista'*; a Mailhat telescope with a 75 mm lens, variable latitude equatorial setting and three eyepieces; a terrestrial telescope with 50 degrees of magnification and two sky telescopes with 80 and 60 degrees of magnification; a Zeiss-made Colzi helioscopic eyepiece; and, finally, 133.20 lire in cash (...) *'In view of which, this statement constitutes a document of acceptance by representatives of the Urania Society and of discharge by the liquidators of the Italian Astronomical Society.'*<sup>5</sup>

An enterprise which for seven years had made a notable contribution to the promotion and popularisation of astronomical sciences in Italy and abroad thus came to an end. The memory of the experience was not lost, however, and the name of the old Institution reappeared in a letter of March

<sup>4</sup> Extract from the minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of February 10 1914.

<sup>5</sup> Statement of discharge of the liquidators of the Italian Astronomical Society.

5 1920 sent by Vincenzo Cerulli, now chairman of the Society of Italian Spectroscopists, to colleagues and astronomy enthusiasts. In the letter, Cerulli announced the transformation of the Society into the Italian Astronomical Society: *'We thus ask our own Observatories and Institutes and lovers of sciences related to astronomy to prepare themselves to offer a valid contribution to the new Series of Memoirs which we hope will see the light as soon as possible.'*

Although there was no direct connection between the two Societies, it is nonetheless possible to identify at least a symbolical link, a direct handing over of duties, in the figure of Vincenzo Cerulli, the last chairman of the old Astronomical Society and first chairman of the new one.