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Strasbourg Astronomical Observatory: Its People through its Multinational History

Introduction

Strasbourg Observatory is quite an interesting place for historians: several changes of nationality, high-profile scientists having been based there, with important projects born (Hipparcos) or installed (CDS) in its walls, and so on.

On the other hand, most of the documents circulating on the history of the Observatory and on related matters are poorly referenced, if at all, casting some doubt on the authenticity of the elements they are presenting. And, as can be expected, those texts are indiscriminately reproduced in all kinds of publications.

This led me to initiate the edition of a book that will offer fully-documented historical facts and references. The chapters will be authored by scientists and/or historians, not belonging to the Observatory staff, with authority and competence in the field, and

after *ad hoc* return to the archives of the time. The book will also emphasize the contributions of the major individual scientists over the years. A few 'technical' appendices (lists of scientific personnel, of council members, of monographs, and so on) will usefully complete the volume.

Schematic history

Coming just after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, the decision to set up an astronomical observatory in Strasbourg is to be seen as a political move, in line with the construction, East of the old city, of an imperial university and extensive new quarters.

The erection of the observatory started in 1877 with H. Eggert as architect. The building was inaugurated in September 1881 with a General Assembly of the *Astronomische Gesellschaft*.

The first German period of the institution ended just after World War I. Then came the first French period until basically the outset of World War II when the French university emigrated to Clermont-Ferrand. German staff however ran the activities in Strasbourg during the conflict. The second and current French period started just after World War II.

Table 1 gathers together the successive observatory directors. It should be noted that several by-laws changes occurred in the years following the 1968 events and that directors are now elected for limited terms. This explains the current high turnover compared to the directorships of, for instance, Lacroute (30 years) and Becker (22 years). Also, considering the way research orientations are set and managed today, both nationally and internationally, persons in charge nowadays have to be considered more as administrators than directors.

Table 1. Strasbourg Observatory Directors

1872–1882/6	A. Winnecke
1882–1886	W. Schur (*)
1886–1887	H. Kobold (*)
1887–1909	E. Becker
1909–1918/9	J. Bauschinger
1918–1919	M. Baldit (*)
1919–1929	E. Esclangon
1929–1945	A. Danjon (–Clermont-Ferrand)
1941–1944	J. Hellerich (Strasbourg)

1946–1976	P. Lacroute
1976–1986/7	A. Florsch
1987–1988	D. Egret (**)
1988–1990	A. Heck
1990–1995	M. Crézé
1995–2000	D. Egret
2000–	J. M. Hameury

(*) ad interim

(**) provisional administrator

The book project

The book will be entitled *Strasbourg Astronomical Observatory: Its People and their Science Over the Years*, edited by the undersigned and published by Kluwer Academic Publishers. It is expected to be out in 2005.

Its detailed contents can be found online at a permanently updated page¹.

Roughly speaking the German periods, as well as the French post-WWII period, are already very well covered by chapters from renowned scholars.

More contributions have been announced, especially on the between-WW Strasbourg years of E. Esclançon and A. Danjon who both became subsequently directors of Paris Observatory and remain known to history as inventors respectively of the 'talking clock' (or 'phone clock') and of an 'impersonal' astrolabe.

Acknowledgements: I am very grateful to the contributors to the book for responding positively as well as to numerous persons who helped in establishing the necessary contacts and in collecting all kinds of documents.

André Heck, Strasbourg

¹ <http://vizier.u-strasbg.fr/~heck/sxtoc.htm>

Nachruf

Historian of Astronomy and Astronomer: Jerzy Dobrzycki (1927–2004)

Professor Jerzy Dobrzycki, astronomer and historian of astronomy, whose academic career was mostly connected with the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and the Institute for the History of Science, died in Warsaw on 1 February 2004.

Jerzy Dobrzycki was born in Poznań on 8 April 1927 as the sixth and youngest child of Stanisław Dobrzycki, a renowned philologist and historian of Slavonic literature, professor of the Universities of Fribourg and Poznań. Jerzy's mathematical talent, classical education acquired at secondary school and keen intellect, honed in the stimulating environment of his home, were a perfect combination for a researcher working on the borderland between natural science and the humanities. Ultimately, he took up the history of astronomy as his chosen discipline, although he did manage to make his contribution to astronomy as such, too. In 1949, he co-discovered (with A. Kwiek) asteroid 1572 Posnania. In December 1960, he obtained a doctorate in mathematical and physical sciences at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań for his dissertation on *Studies of the Movement of Comet Holmes: Approach to Jupiter in 1906–1913*.

The qualities that make an eminent historian of astronomy – skilful use of source material, awareness of its historical context and perfect knowledge of the mathematical apparatus of classical astronomy – are demonstrated in his thesis for habilitation as lecturer, *Precession Theory in Mediaeval Astronomy*, published in 1965. In spite of its title, this study covered the evolution of the views on one of the essential elements of astronomy from the Hellenistic era until the times of Copernicus.

Jerzy gained a worldwide renown thanks to his works on Nicolaus Copernicus. In the mid-1960s he made what was probably the most sensational discovery of the decade in Copernican studies: he found out that a manuscript penned by the Scots physician Duncan Liddel and attached to his copy of the 1566 edition of *De revolutionibus* contained the text of *Commentariolus*. The manuscript, held at the King's College Library in Aberdeen, turned out to be the third surviving copy (and the second complete one) of the first account of the heliocentric system left by Copernicus. This discovery was subsequently announced in *Nature*.

In his studies of the history of science, and especially mediaeval and Renaissance astronomy, Jerzy built upon the tradition of Ludwik Antoni Birkenmajer and Aleksander Birkenmajer. This aspect of his research was crowned by the meticulous annotations to the groundbreaking edition of the Polish translation of *De revolutionibus* (1976): it covers the mathematical sections of Copernicus' treatise, from Chapter 12 of Book 1 to the end of Book 6; the initial, cosmological chapters of Book 1 were annotated by Aleksander Birkenmajer. Jerzy was the editor of not only the Polish edition of *De revolutionibus*, but also the Latin and English ones (respectively, 1975 and 1978).

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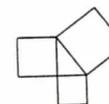
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Wolfgang R. Dick und Jürgen Hamel

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