# Giuseppe Piazzi in Naples

## The First Light of the Capodimonte Observatory (1817–1819)

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# A Century of Suspended Projects

Rooted in Celestino Galiani's 1730s reforms to promote experimental sciences, Naples struggled for nearly a century to build a permanent astronomical observatory.



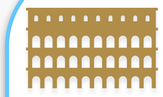
1733

## Sant'Elmo Castel

Celestino Galiani plans to locate the specola on the highest point of the city.

think about the Observatory. It will not need to be so sumptuous, as long as it is comfortable and well situated... it should be built in Castel S. Elmo

Marinoni 1733



1750

## Pizzofalcone

Felice Sabatelli proposes the military garrison for the amenity of the site.

the request for an Astronomical observatory in the Presidio of Pizzofalcone... the King has ordered me to say

Brancone 1750



1768

## Collegio Massimo

Expelled Jesuits, Sabatelli had royal consent to found the specola in the former College.

the King... has resolved that there be in Naples a Botanical Garden and an Astronomical Observatory... [to be] located in the Collegio Massimo.

Tanucci 1768



1791

## Royal Museum

Giuseppe Cassella obtains the decree for the Specola in the Palazzo degli Studi.

[the King] has therefore with his Sacred Characters approved the execution of the Meridian line and Observatory proposed by Cassella.

De Marco 1791

# Trajectory and Ruptures

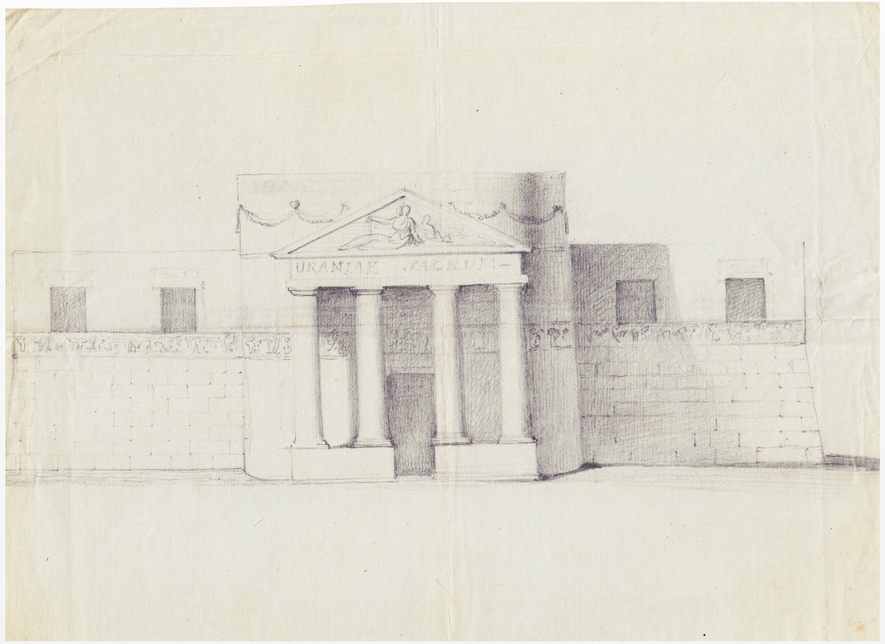



An institution suspended between scientific ambitions and political instability across dynastic changes.

# 1812: The Capodimonte Project
## Architecture & Scientific Ambitions

On 8 March 1812, Joachim Murat determines the construction of a site worthy of Urania.

- Miradois Hill: Innovative choice, isolated from the city center
- Stefano Gasse: First neoclassical building in Naples designed purely for astronomical purpose.
- Movable domes and isolated pillars to reduce vibrations testify to a modern engineering approach for the era.
- “This Observatory is the Vesuvius of Astronomy.” (von Zach).



**no sky more beautiful than the Neapolitan, nor place more suitable for observations than that which has been designated to build the Observatory**

Piazzi 1815

# A Modern Scientific Core

Federigo Zuccari defines an advanced instrument suite to compete with major European observatories.

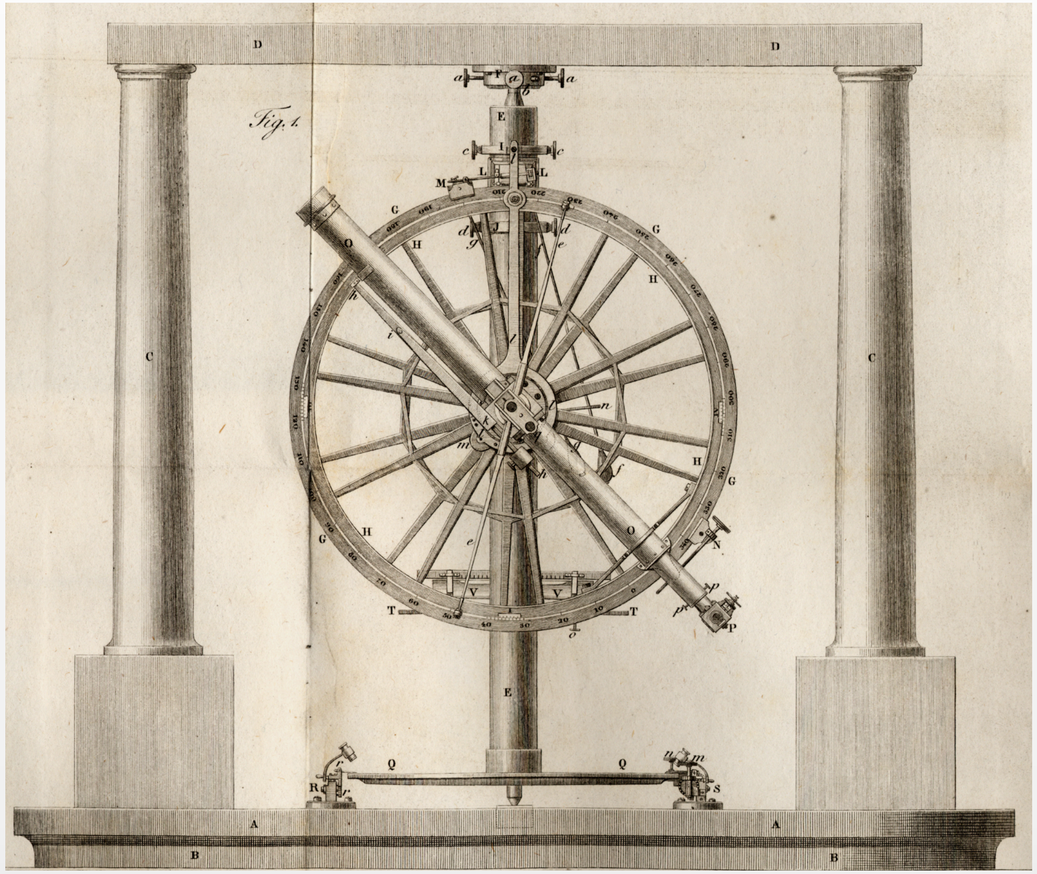
Meridian circle, 2 repeating circles, 2 equatorial telescopes, transit instrument, pendulum clock.

Instruments there are in great abundance both fixed and mobile... they form the most beautiful and precious collection I have ever seen in another observatory... add two good pendulums, the observatory so mounted and provided may peradventure excel all those today in honor.

Piazzi 1817

The great telescope of Reichenbach... will probably be in the Observatory like Achilles' spear in an antiquarian's museum... extremely heavy and truly Teutonic... The head of Reichenbach does not seem to me very different from the head of Kant. Both great men but enemies of simplicity and clarity. A Ramsden will never return again.

Piazzi 1817



# The Authority of Giuseppe Piazzi

Piazzi was called to Naples by Ferdinand I in 1817 to complete the construction of the observatory.

- Prestige: Uses his international fame to reactivate the works.
- Rationalization: Simplifies and corrects Gasse's original plan.
- Efficacy: Transforms political decrees into operational reality.



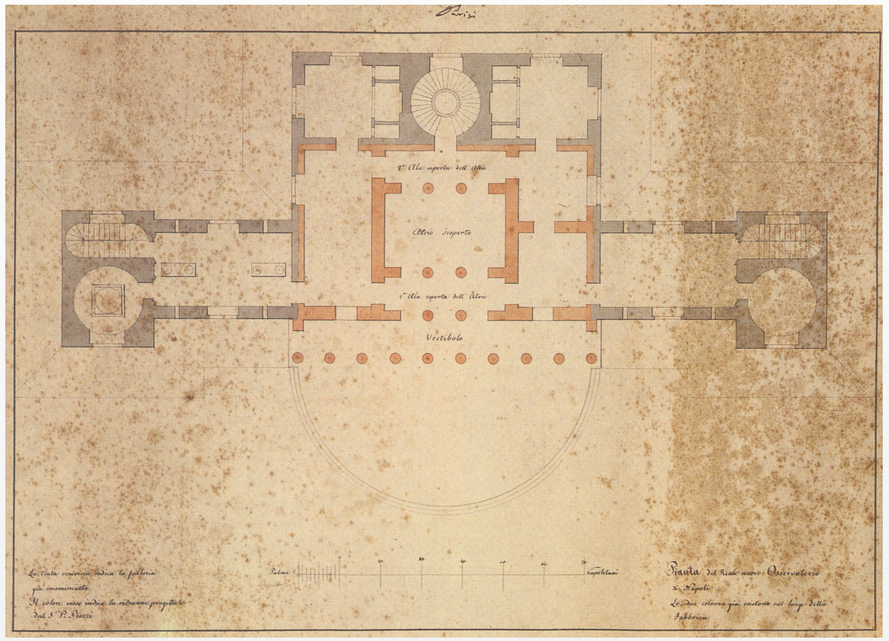
> For now it does not seem that in Naples they are thinking about establishing the Observatory... [von Zach and Zuccari] can do a hundred times better and more than me. Furthermore, my advanced age and several other reasons keep far from me any thought of moving from where I am. If from here I can be of any help, rest assured that I will not remain idle.
>
> Piazzi 1815

> H.M. called me there to give order to that Observatory, nor were granted to me more than eight days to prepare for departure. All this dismayed me.
>
> Piazzi 1817

# 1817: Persuasion and Project Reform

Giuseppe Piazzi's intervention transforms a stagnant monumental construction site into a cutting-edge European scientific observatory.

- Convinces King Ferdinand I to complete the work.
- Transforms the great circular hall into a sober and functional environment.
- Arranges spaces for the instrumentation.




The Neapolitans are convinced that a pompous and rich building, given the name of Astronomical Observatory, is all science asks for. Fortunately, explaining that little energy I have left, I reached putting into my hands 22 thousand ducats... With this sum expended with economy and shrewdness, I hope I can satisfy national genius and order the Observatory properly.

Piazzi 1818

# “Like a Vesuvius that erupts gold”



the most beautiful and precious collection I have ever seen in any observatory…
it may peradventure excel all those today in honor

Piazzi 1817

# The Directorship of Carlo Brioschi

Advised by Oriani, Piazzi identifies young Milanese Carlo Brioschi as the ideal figure “to fix Astronomy” in Naples.

- Guarantees methodological rigor and precision in observations.
- Manages final placement of instrumentation in the domes.
- Becomes the first effective director of the new Observatory.

Neither in Naples nor in Sicily do I see a person to whom I can entrust the direction of the new Observatory... The choice of the Director is the most essential thing... Here we need a man who, besides knowledge of science, loves work, feels glory, and has severe and honest morals... such seems to me Mr. Brioschi. Speaks little? So much the better, he will work more. Does not write with elegance? That is no defect in an astronomer, who must state facts, not words.

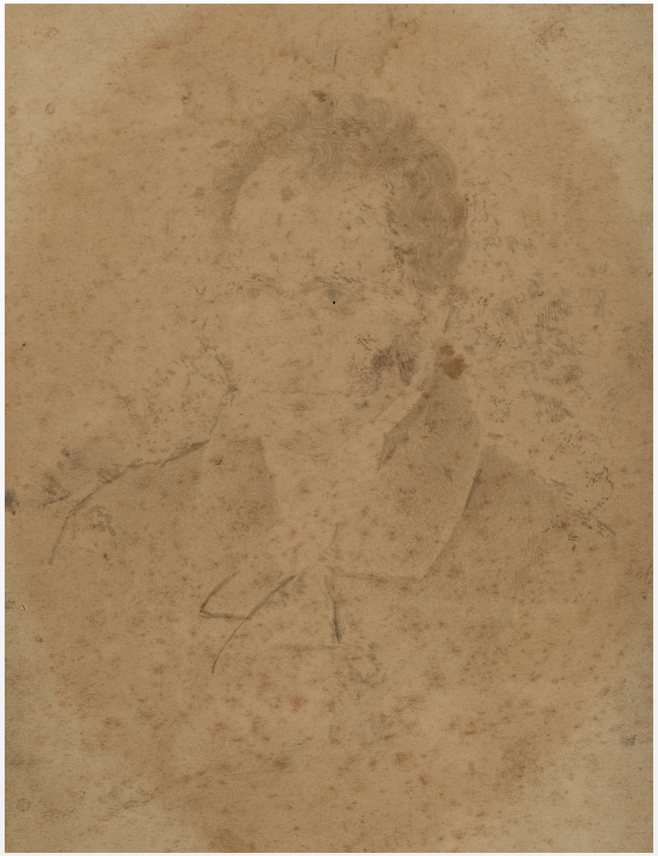
Piazzi 1818

Brioschi works with the utmost zeal, and I am extremely pleased with him. Without him, I would have found myself in a great fix.

Piazzi 1819

The facade of the Observatory building is satisfactory... in imagining this Specola astronomers were forgotten, and also some needs of astronomy.

Brioschi 1819



# First Light

## 1819

17 December

## *Operational Completion*

Brioschi carries out the first observation from Capodimonte, measuring the zenith distance of α Cassiopeiae with the repeating circle.
The Observatory ceases to be a construction site and becomes an active scientific institution in Europe.

Most astronomers reasonably hold Reichenbach's works in high esteem: Not so Piazzi; afflicted with Anglomania, and more especially Ramsdenomania, he fiercely disapproves of them, saying that the Author deserves hammer blows to the head: I cannot place much weight on his reasons, and I see nothing but prejudice in them; furthermore, he is a declared enemy of repeating circles

Brioschi 1819

The Observatory is finished, the instruments are already in place, and he has already begun to make observations. Brioschi shows himself extremely intelligent in all he does, and never stops working, though with great composure. In any case, I am pleased with him, and would only wish for greater flexibility in him: once he has pronounced his judgment, he can no longer be moved from it... in general, I am pleased with him.

Piazzi 1820

Of Don Carlo's other works I can tell you nothing, for he does not speak at all, and seems to me a bizarre blend of stoicism and cynicism, with whom any conversation is pointless.

Piazzi 1820

# Historical Synthesis: From Instability to Reality

## A Century of Challenges

The foundation was the culmination of a troubled journey of nearly a century to which Piazzi gave solid conclusion

Astronomy, this most noble branch, and peradventure the first of human knowledge, will finally among us have both life and motion, and growing in vigor, will one day bring us those precious fruits that are its own.

Piazzi 1821

## The Legacy of Science

Across four dynastic transitions and deep political ruptures, astronomers preserved research continuity until 1819 success.

The main purpose of the observatory... [is] to advance the science of the heavens through the continuous observation of various celestial phenomena... hoping [astronomers] will follow in its footsteps, thereby endearing themselves to Urania, and to their homeland.

Piazzi 1821

# “Praying the Great Geometer of the universe for clemency in my transit”



Naples
22 July 1826
Buried in Basilica di San Paolo Maggiore

Astronomy owes more to Piazzi and Maskelyne than to all astronomers since Hipparchus.

Jean-Baptiste Delambre XIX sec.

# Astronomiae Incremento




Piazzi 200 / Palermo 30 September - 2 October 2026