

Preface

Scientific letters, of great importance in the history of science and scientific instrumentation, have particular relevance in those sectors of the earth sciences in which structured observation networks are distributed across the territory, such as seismology, meteorology, geomagnetism and astronomy. It may come as a surprise to know that information bearing a certain scientific novelty may be found in the historical scientific letter collections. The current scientific relevance for seismology of the contents of some historical letters is one of the key aspects meriting investment in this kind of research, more by seismologists than by science historians. In order to discuss the methodological aspects of the study of the scientific correspondence and its scientific relevance, I organised two seminars, one held on 10th May 2002 in Rome and the other on 30th September 2003 in Forio (Isle of Ischia).

The first seminar was organised in collaboration with INGV and the former Ufficio Centrale di Ecologia Agraria (now CMA – Unità di Ricerca per la Climatologia e la Meteorologia Applicate all' Agricoltura), at the congress hall of the UCEA, historic headquarters of meteorology and seismology in Italy. In addition to leading scholars involved in studies of this, the descendants of illustrious Italian scholars of earth sciences were also invited to the seminar: Mario Baratta (1868-1935), Michele Stefano De Rossi (1834-1898), Pietro Caloi (1907-1978) and Giulio Grablovitz (1846-1928), along with some prestigious representatives of the public, private and ecclesiastic Italian archives of interest for this sector.

The second seminar was organised in collaboration with INGV and the Municipality of Forio at Villa «La Colombaia», marking the 75th anniversary of the death of Giulio Grablovitz, director of the Observatory of Casamicciola (one of the first in the world), and a prominent scholar in the international seismological scenario of his day.

Most of the contributions presented at the two seminars are published here and without claiming to be exhaustive they bear witness to the variety of experiences and documentary wealth available for these disciplinary fields.

The following scholars also made a contribution to the seminars, without submitting texts for publication: Loredana Esposito, Anita McConnell, Paola Milone, Francesco Obrizzo, Lydia Salviucci Insolera, Edvige Schettino and Pasquale Tucci.

Over the last thirty years, historical data in seismology has grown increasingly in importance, becoming irreplaceable in the definition of the characteristics of seismicity and the hazardousness of an area. Many important research projects for the recovery and scientific use of descriptive historical sources and historical seismic recordings have been launched all over the world in the past few decades, with special regard to Italy and the Euro-Mediterranean area. In the past twenty years, INGV in Italy has focused on this sector as well, understanding its importance, both as an autonomous scientific source and complementary to instrumental seismic recordings, and as a fundamental source for the discipline's history. Nonetheless, that wealth of information, even with sole reference to Italy, is still mostly unexplored and often underestimated and thus at risk of being dispersed.

My own personal hope is that the historical epistolary sources pertaining to the field of the earth sciences may acquire greater importance in the near future, and that projects for the recovery, reproduction, cataloguing, dissemination and study of this kind of documentation may involve a growing number of researchers, along with research and conservation institutions.

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