History of the Bibliothèque

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Since its creation in 1785, two centuries after the foundation of the Observatoire, the history of the Library, which was for a long time headed by astronomers, is part and parcel of the history of its collections which constitute the memory of the establishment and of its research activities.

The library of Cassini IV (1785-1795)

It was Cassini IV, the last of the dynasty of astronomers who had founded and directed the Observatoire, who created the Bibliothèque de l'Observatoire de Paris in 1785.

In his project to restore the Observatoire, presented on the 13th of May 1784 to the Baron de Breteuil, Minister of the Royal House (ministre de la maison du roi), Cassini IV gave pride of place to the creation of a library. This project, which had the support of the Baron de Breteuil, and the Count of Angiviller, Minister for the Royal Buildings (ministre des bâtiments du roi), was accepted by Louis XVI, in spite of the unfavourable report submitted by the commission of the Académie des sciences which had organized a special meeting for this purpose on the 4th of August 1784.

In the 26th of February 1785 document concerning the reorganization of the Royal Observatory, a chapter devoted to the Library specifies and clarifies the various arrangements for its running and administration (articles 29 to 33) :
Composition of the collections (books on astronomy or on geometry applied to astronomy)
Inventory and catalogue
Right to borrow, with a registration, duration of the loan, reminder
Opening times in summer and winter
Annual report to the minister, justifying the running expenses

Regulations of the Observatoire Royal, 1785

Règlement de l'Observatoire Royal, 1785

The annual allowance of 600 pounds, complained Cassini IV, was more than enough for the day-to-day running, but totally inadequate to build up the collections. In this difficult situation, Cassini IV donated a part of his own library and obtained the authorization of the Baron de Breteuil to exploit commercially a new printing of the Carte de la Lune made by his great grand father, in order to enrich the collections. The archives were considered to be an integral part of the Library, its core even, with the registers of observations made at the Observatoire royal from 1671 to 1791.

The French revolution did not stop the creation of the Library, quite the opposite. The records for the 1st of April 1791 list 285 volumes, including the complete set of 76 volumes of the /Philosophical transactions/, the works of Hevelius, the memoires of the academies of Berlin, Vienne, St. Petersburg, Uppsala, the /Journal des Savants/. Two year later, the inventory handed over to citizen Perny, temporary director of the Observatoire de la République, listed 574 volumes.

There is some uncertainty about the original location of the Bibliothèque. Soon after its creation, a part of the collections were apparently placed in the rooms next to the large meridian room, on the north west side. In 1692, these rooms were split to make two floors in order to house, on the lower floor the machines of the Académie des sciences, and to transform the upper floor into an apartment. After the transfer of the machines to the Jardin du Roy, Cassini IV's Carte de France was placed there 1757, where it stayed until 1787, at which time it was transferred to Cassini's house in the rue Maillet.
The Bibliothèque under the governance of the Bureau des longitudes (1795-1854)

In 1795, the library of the Observatoire was considerably enriched by the astronomical collections created by Joseph-Nicolas Delisle (1688-1768).

As a preparation for a *Traité complet d'Astronomie*, which was neither finished nor published, Delisle collected throughout his life most of the published books on astronomy, as well as a vast number of manuscripts, both originals and copies.

Soon after his election to the Académie des Sciences as astronomy student (1714), he had copies made of the observations preserved in the archives of this same academy. In 1719, he acquired the papers of La Hire through the son’s inheritance. The regular correspondence he kept up with the most important astronomers of his time for over 60 years (1709-1767) also enabled him to obtain observations from everywhere.

Invited to Russia in 1726 as a consequence of Peter the Great’s trip to France, he established during the journey contacts with the principal German astronomers: Doppelmayer, les frères Rost, Müller, in Nuremberg and in Altorf, Weidler in Wittenberg, Christfried Kirch in Berlin. Passing through Danzig, he acquired one of the central items of his collection, the written correspondence of Hevelius, and his observational notebooks.

During his stay in Russia, which lasted for twenty-one years, he continued to enrich his personal collection with collated copies of observations, when unable to buy the originals: he was thus able to copy and translate into Latin the observations of Gottfried Kirch, before obtaining the original notebooks after the death of his son, Christfried.

The correspondence he kept up with missionaries in China, and in particular with Father Gaubil, enabled him to obtain manuscripts relating to Chinese astronomy and chronology. This part of his collection increased significantly after the acquisition of a part of Nicolas Fréret's papers, and the correspondence of Father Souciet.

One failure marred the complete satisfaction of this happy collector, according to Guillaume Bigourdan, he could not obtain Kepler's manuscripts, which were in Vienna.
When he returned to France, Delisle exchanged, in return for a life annuity and the title of Marine astronomer, his entire collection, which became part of the Dépt. de la Marine around 1750.

In 1795, the Comité de Salut public decided that the astronomical part of this collection should be given to the Bureau des longitudes which had just been founded. The act which established the Bureau stipulated, in effect (chapter XVI) that "from the various centres belonging to the Nation, appropriate books, and redundant copies thereof which are in the Bibliothèque nationale, should be taken to complete the astronomical library begun at the Observatoire." The structure of the Saint-Sulpice Bibliothèque was transferred to the Observatoire in order to accommodate all these books. On the 21st of December 1795, the minutes of a visit to the Observatoire, signed by 5 members of the Bureau des longitudes (Borda, Laplace, Caroché, Lalande et Delambre), state that the books from the dépôt. de la Marine have been delivered to the apartment of Citizen Cassini, until the woodwork of the library are installed.

François Arago, portrait de Charles Steuben

The Bureau des longitudes was extremely careful about the installation of the bibliothèque, which took a long time and was expensive: a letter from Mâchain dated May 3rd 1800 highlights carpentry work for the library on the floor of the Meridian room. Under the aegis of the Bureau and thanks to its members, donations flowed in: the collections were enriched with the manuscripts of Le Monnier; Cassini IV or his executive brought numerous manuscripts concerning his project for a Celestial History (1822-1823-1846). In 1840, Jérôme Lalande’s and La Caille’s collections were offered to the Observatoire by François Arago.

A post of secretary-librarian became essential. From 1801 onwards, the post was occupied regularly: Marc Agoustenc was the first to occupy the post, followed by Auguste Mâchain in 1802, François Arago in 1805, Claude Mathieu in 1807. However, this post disappeared from the new organization which arose from the 1854 decree.

Once again, the restoration of some kind of order involved the establishment of an inventory, and in fact the Observatory has the one that was done in 1850-1851 by Ludovic Lalanne, librarian of the Institut.
A troubled period (1854-1877)

The separation of the Bureau des longitudes and the Observatoire de Paris is sealed in 1854, when Urbain Le Verrier, a brilliant, but also ambitious, scientist, broke with the collegial tradition inherited from the Revolution, and arranged to be appointed Directeur de l’Observatoire de Paris.

The decree dated January 30th 1854 concerning the organization of the Observatoire impérial formalized the separation of the Bureau des longitudes from the Observatoire, and also formalized the Bibliothèque as a major symbol. Article 7 allowed the Bureau the use of the joint library only when in session, but the rules as announced were never adopted.

The 8th of March 1854 minutes indicate that the library room situated on the 2nd floor to the north-west of the meridian room would henceforth be reserved for the meetings of the bureau.

The decree dated April 3rd 1868, concerning the constitution of an Imperial Observatory Council (Conseil de l'Observatoire impérial), defined the assignments of the personnel, and entrusted the archives and the library to the care of the secretary, the accountant. The scientific journals and new books were to be placed henceforth in a special room to be used as a reading room.

But this reorganization did not last long. The astronomers, who found Le Verrier's rule intolerable, sent to the Ministry of Public Education in 1870 a Mémoire sur l'état actuel de l'Observatoire impérial (Notes on the state of the Imperial Observatory). They highlighted, among other serious dissensions and dysfunctions, "that the Observatory library is, in common with the other services, in a state of total confusion. Valuable collections are absent or incomplete. The books addressed to the establishment all go to the Director, who gives them to the library at his own convenience, which is often a long time after their arrival. A sum of 600F is allocated each year to the library; this year, this sum was not given to the library and used otherwise..." ("que la bibliothèque de l'Observatoire est, ainsi que tous les autres services, dans le désarroi le plus complet. Des collections précieuses sont absentes ou incomplètes. Les livres adressés à l'établissement sont tous reçus par le Directeur qui les donne à son heure au bibliothécaire et..."
History of the Bibliothèque

Through a resolution dated February 4th, the minister established a special commission to investigate the situation at the Observatoire: it certified that the 1868 reorganization had failed, the responsibility was ascribed to Le Verrier, who was relieved of his functions.

On March 3rd 1870, Charles Eugène Delaunay replaced him. An 1872 decree envisaged that the Observatoire be inspected regularly by a commission composed of members of the Bureau des longitudes, of two members of the Institut designated by the Académie des sciences and of five persons chosen by the Minister from the major state organs. The first commission, in May 1872, noted that, during the long months of the siege of Paris, Charles Delaunay had put some order into the establishment's library and its important manuscript collection. The Bibliothèque was installed in the gallery on the first floor and in the adjacent rooms, one of which had been set up as a reading room. The bibliothèque opened every working day from 10 h to 4 h.

After the violent death of Delaunay in 1872 and the return of Le Verrier as head of the Observatoire, the Bureau des longitudes moved to the rue Mazarine in 1874. The library collection was divided between the two institutions, but it remained intact: the Bureau only took the works of which there were two copies, and its own archives, but not those of the Observatoire.

The revival of the Bibliothèque and of the Museum (1878-1926)

The arrival of Admiral Mouchez at the head of the Observatoire marked a turning point for the Bibliothèque and the heritage. His ambition was in effect to endow the establishment with an important museum and a modern library...
Right from his appointment in 1878, the rear-admiral Mouchez created a valuable tool to survey the activity of the Observatory: the annual reports. Thanks to them, it is possible to track not only the research carried out in the establishment, but also the organization and growth of the Library collections, and also the birth of the Museum.

Mouchez realized that the situation of the Bibliothèque was critical. There were important gaps in its modern collections, which he remedied by a grant of 2,000 francs for the acquisition of works and their bindings. The state of the catalogues was no better. The printed matter was listed in alphabetical order of authors in three ledgers created around 1850; subsequently, books were added as they arrived. The important transfers, such as the supernumery works which went to the Bureau des longitudes and the transfer in 1879 to the Bureau central de météorologie of all the meteorological volumes and brochures had not been recorded. A modern catalogue, using cards, was begun in 1871 but then abandoned in view of the size of the task. Manuscripts fared no better: the manuscript and archive collections had suffered enormously at the turn of the century: Guglielmo Libri, the biggest robber in the whole history of French libraries, was a frequent visitor to the Observatoire and served himself well. The catalogue established in 1854 was very concise and incomplete, as shown by a summary stocktaking made in 1870. There again, something had to be done. Clearly, the accountant was not able handle the situation alone, and it was necessary to appoint specialized supporting staff. The Library’s reading room ended up... occupied for some time by calculators.

With a profound feeling for history, Mouchez envisaged also a major astronomical museum at the Observatory. A search for all the instruments preserved at the yielded meagre results: many instruments had been lost or destroyed. Nevertheless, there was one lucky discovery - a number of very beautiful XVIth century instruments were found in an archive cupboard. A grant of 5,000 Francs enabled them to be presented in 1879 on the first floor, in the octagonal room of the West Tower, in the central showcase. The room, decorated with the portraits of the Observatory Directors, includes a medal collection, copies of Mercator's spheres; five other showcases contain the metric system standards, Fresnel’s, Arago’s, Fizeau’s and Cornu’s instruments, as well as various portable devices. In 1881, a second room was set up, the East Rotunda, in which are exposed the drawings and photographs which came to the Observatory from Observatories all over the world.
During the following years, the re-establishment of the library and the parallel expansion of the museum were spectacular. Although they were not explicitly part of the same service, they clearly maintained close relations, since Mouchez attributes to the Museum the numerous manuscripts which arrived thanks to an active acquisition policy. In 1881, a subsidy from the Ministère de l'Instruction publique enabled 453 volumes (including 28 incunabula) to be acquired from the sale of the library of the academician Michel Chasles. Donations flowed in: the manuscripts of the 3rd edition of the Laplace's Système du monde, Lalande's calculations for the 1769 solar transit of Venus, observations of the astronomer Flaugergues (from 1782 to 1830), Arago’s handwritten notebooks, the library and archives of the astronomer Yvon Villarceau, the correspondence between the baron de Zach and J.J. Lalande (1792-1804).

A part of the letters taken by Libri from the Hevelius’ correspondence was returned to the Observatoire by the Bibliothèque nationale, and 16 packets of manuscripts from the Delisle collection, on loan to Russia, were returned by M. Struve, director of the Pulkovo Observatory.

In spite of the budgetary restrictions which began in 1886, the library collections grew considerably between 1879 and 1918, rising from 8,000 to about 22,500 volumes or works and journals. In the post-war years, the growth of the collections came mainly from exchanges or donations (journals, brochures), because of the very high price of English or American works. A few donations to the old collections are to be noted also, although their rate decreased.

In order to maintain the collections at a high level, an exchange service Bibliothèque nationale was inaugurated in 1924, directed by Benjamin Baillaud.

Work on the catalogues was slow, through lack of hands. The accountant-librarian, Auguste Fraissinet, who headed the library until 1909, did however get in 1883 the help of an employee of the Institut's library in order to restart work on the catalogue; this was finished the following year. As far as the manuscript catalogue is concerned, this was finished two years after the death of Admiral Mouchez, by Guillaume Bigourdan who published it in 1895 in the 21st volume of the Annales de l'Observatoire de Paris with the title "Inventaire général et sommaire des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de l'Observatoire de Paris" (General and summary inventory of the manuscripts in the library of the Paris Observatory).
Shortly before the first world war, the way of describing the collections changes. In 1908 the library applied the new instructions for the classification and cataloguing using the system prescribed by the governing administration for university libraries. In 1913, Léon Bultingaire published the /Catalogue des incunables de la bibliothèque de l’Observatoire de Paris/ (Catalogue of the incunabula in the library of the Paris Observatory), and began a catalogue of the journals using the sections of the/International catalogue of scientific literature/. In spite of a temporary halt due to the war, and with the help of Félix Boquet, this catalogue, containing some 800 titles was finished in 1919. Léon Bultingaire began also a systematic analysis of the principal journals and collective works devoted to astronomy, and published it in the /Revue générale des travaux astronomiques/ from 1919 to 1924. Alfred Lacroix, perpetual secretary of the Academy of Science, gave him the task of coordinating the publication of the /Inventaire des périodiques scientifiques des bibliothèques de Paris/ (Inventory of the scientific journals in the libraries of Paris) which appeared in 1924-2925 and included therefore the catalogue of the journals in the Bibliothèque de l’Observatoire de Paris.

As far as the manuscripts were concerned, the Inventaire général et sommaire continued with the appearance in 1921 of a new numerical sequence starting at number 1001. That same year, a catalogue of the 86 medals commemorating astronomical or scientific events was created. Finally, between 1922 and 1925, an analysis of the Deslisle collection was begun, with the creation of an alphabetic index.

When the Library of Meudon Observatory joined that of Paris...
History of the Bibliothèque

E. Esclangon

Under the leadership of Henri Deslandres, who directed the observatories of Paris and Meudon, henceforth united, was born the idea of a library at Meudon. It saw the light of day with Ernest Esclangon who attributed to it in 1928 a post of secretary-librarian: M. Lamiable was the first one. This improvement was however of short duration since, in 1932, he became secretary-accountant in Paris, and so the Meudon post was suppressed.

An astronomer, Marguerite Roumens, took up the project to review the catalogue and to rearranging the space. To the library was attributed a large room on the ground floor of the "Communs" building, whose installation was finished in the spring of 1933. Cabinets furnished by the librarian of the Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève enabled the works in the various neighbouring rooms to be grouped together. Marguerite Roumens was assigned the task of looking after the library, but kept her post of Pérot Professor.

With the help of M. Bertaud and of Mlle Markoff, she created the new catalogue using an author and title index system of cards for the 12000 volumes in the library i.e. 8 000 cards.

Salle de lecture, vers 1930

In 1934, a subsidy from the Beaux-arts enabled two small rooms on the first floor adjacent to the main room, to be combined into one. In this way, two reading rooms became available, one for journals and the other for general works on astronomy and related sciences.

Under her new name of Madame Azambuja, Marguerite Roumens, exploiting the exchange possibilities with the scientific academies of Stockholm, Rome, Tokyo, Leningrad and various foreign observatories, managed to complete the journal collections, which she then arranged to have bound into volumes. There were 80 journals, and 240 publications of various observatories, institutes and learned societies.
In Meudon, the Bibliothèque left the "communs" in 1971, for the building destined to house the Laboratoire d'Astrophysique de Meudon (LAM). Gradually, the equipment expanded and became more professional on both sites but nevertheless, the Bibliothèque has kept its unity. In 1980 it became the astronomy-astrophysics CADIST. In 2006, it attained the status of Joint Documentation Service, and in 2009 implemented a documentation charter. Finally, in 2012, a partnership was established with the Bibliothèque nationale de France of which it is now an "associated pole" ("pôle associé").