BOOK REVIEW


Franz Kerschbaum & Thomas Posch

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On the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Vienna University Observatory, the authors present the first part of a catalogue that lists those Observatory library holdings which were published before 1800. Part I presents 167 items published before 1700.

In an inventory of Austrian libraries of 1900, the University Observatory announced that “a catalogue of the holdings is in preparation, which will be published in the Annals of this institution”. 105 years later, this promise has partly been fulfilled. In an age where library catalogues can be queried world-wide through the internet, such a printed catalogue may appear a little bit old-fashioned. Nevertheless, the authors and the reviewer find good reasons – given at the end of this review – why such a supplementary printed catalogue can be a useful tool.

The book has a brief introduction that informs about the scope of the catalogue, the history of the Observatory and its library, and the development of the book holdings based on publication date. This is followed by the actual catalogue of 167 entries, where one page is assigned to a given book, arranged in chronological order (and followed by an author index), and finally a list of notes to some of the more important books is given.

A book entry contains the name of the author in a modern version and the year of publication. Then follow the title (short as well as extended version), author, place of issue, publisher, language, number or pages and book size, bibliographic information in several catalogues (like Lalande’s Bibliographie astronomique of 1803, or the German Verzeichnis der im deutschen Sprachraum erschienenen Drucke, VD 16 and 17 – see www.vd17.de), the catalogue number in the Observatory library, and listings of additional copies in the Vienna University and Austrian National Libraries. In addition, one, two, three (or rarely more) illustrations from the book are shown – at least the title page of each volume can be inspected.

Although the reviewer can only praise the general contents of the book, and likes to congratulate the authors on their achievement, he likes to focus on a point that is not clearly elaborated. This point, however, can be investigated with the help of the illustrations. The authors plot the individual and cumulative number of books in the Observatory library versus year of publication. Does this graph indeed show the “development of the holdings”? They caution that “indeed, the publication year cannot directly be set equal to the year of purchase, but, with a high probability, the publication number of books in a certain decade reflects the purchase number in the corresponding decade.” I like to challenge this statement.

The first book dates from 1473, and the first University Observatory in Vienna was founded in 1755 by Maximilian Hell S.J. Thus the library cannot have acquired any of the books in this catalogue directly after publication. This is, of course, trivial, and the authors mention that the library has “absorbed” the holdings of older institutions, mainly libraries of Jesuit colleges. Indeed, many books carry the handwritten line “Domus Professæ Soc. Jesu Viennæ”, “Collegij Societatis Jesu Viennæ” and, often added, “Speculæ Astronomiæ 1740”.

But does the graph reveal the purchase activity of these precursor libraries? Apparently, there was a notable influx of old books in fairly recent times, since the reproduced title pages often give hints for the acquisition of a book. Often one notes the old, almost rectangular rubber stamp “Observatorium Universitatis Vindobonensis C: R:”, which seems to belong to the era of Maximilian Hell and his successors. It was replaced by a plain stamp “K.K. Universitäts-Sternwarte Wien”, covering the era 1867–1918. Finally, this was replaced by a round stamp showing a single-headed eagle in the centre, surrounded by the text “Universitäts-Sternwarte Wien”, and obviously used after 1918. All of these stamps are found on title pages of the books printed before 1700. According to my cursory census, 67 books show the rectangular, 33 the plain “Kakanian”, and 15 the round stamp. Indeed, 11 of the 15 books stamped with the post-1918 stamp also carry a rubber-stamped inscription “Vermächtnis Rudolf König”. Since the authors are silent on this, I like to provide some information: Rudolf König (1865–1927), a rich merchant and owner of a private observatory, lived in Hietzing, a suburb of Vienna; he was interested in selenological studies and was the editor of the second part of J.N. Krieger’s Lunar Atlas (1898–1912). Apparently his library was inherited by Vienna University Observatory. It included, e.g., the incunabula *Procli Diadochi Sphaera* of 1499, or Cellarius’ atlas *Harmonia Macrocosmica* of 1661.

That this was not a singular event can be seen from other title page notes. Five books by Kepler, Landsbergen and Scheiner carry the inscription “Ex Libris R. P. Philippi Miller” – and perhaps belonged to Philipp Müller (1583–1659), a professor of mathematics in Leipzig, who was one of Kepler’s correspondents. Handwritten notes indicate that they were incorporated into the Jesuit College library in 1687.

At the end of the catalogue, auxiliary notes are devoted to the 37 more important books of the collection. I found them quite informative, and only discovered one obscure point: It is said about the author of *Apologia pro Galileo*, Tommasso Campanella, that “he intended to move those circles in Rome, which he supposed to be inclined towards the geocentric world view, to counteract the repressive measures against Galilei.” I suspect that the authors wanted to say heliocentric (see also my review of Daxecker’s book).

To conclude, let me add a personal note. On the back cover, Kerschbaum and Posch write “especially in the German-speaking region, there is hardly an astronomical library with comparable, historically grown, holdings”. Almost thirty years ago, the reviewer, in his leisure time, systematically catalogued the historical holdings of the Bonn Observatory library for the first time (H. Duerbeck, Verzeichnis alter Bücher 1482–1800…, Bonn 1976, unpublished typescript). I count 161 items published before 1700. Thus, Bonn Observatory has comparable holdings, although there are no general trends in the names of previous owners on the title pages that allow to elucidate in what way it has “historically grown”. Summing up: More than any on-line version, this fine catalogue of old astronomical books offers many opportunities to the reader to start his or her own inquiries into various historical issues. It is warmly recommended to astronomical libraries and serious students in the history of astronomy.

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