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SCUOLA DI INGEGNERIA AEROSPAZIALE: THE CRADLE OF ASTRONAUTICS IN ITALY

Abstract

The Scuola di Ingegneria Aerospaziale has been established at Sapienza University of Rome in 1926, and is indeed one of the oldest academic institutions in the field, for sure among the ones still operating nowadays. The School's long history can be reasonably divided in three phases. The first one, focussed on Aeronautics, is intimately related to the Italian Air Force, at that time Regia Aeronautica: the School, as the academic counterpart of the research centre located in Guidonia, was – through its professors – part of the research activities, including the experimental ones, making Italy one of the leading countries in aeronautics in the '30s, up to the transatlantic cruises and the Schneider trophy adventure. After World War 2, amidst effort for country's reconstruction, it is possible to observe a second phase, starting slowly and at a sound, well-reasoning pace under the leadership of Luigi Broglio. This period includes familiarization with missile launches, selection of bright minds and willingly, capable, to-become personnel, build-up of academic and friendly links with NASA. Overall, this phase marks the actual birth of Italian space activities (indeed the label of the School as “cradle”), and in remarkably short time will lead to the launch of the San Marco from Wallops Island (December 15th, 1964) and to the first launch from the Italian equatorial site, also the first sea-based launch platform (April 26th, 1967). A third phase, more focussed on education, starts in mid '90s and makes the School a pioneer in microsatellites, with 11 launches in the 2000-2022 interval.

The paper is intended to describe, from an insider's point of view, such an evolution. Sources of information are School's documents and theses for the first part, the discussion with some of key people for the second portion, as well as a significant literature existing about Broglio era, and finally the personal experience of the author, a faculty member and currently the dean of the School for the third phase. While space is becoming a key asset in Italian development plans, it is in fact a strong belief, shared among School's community, that every effort in understanding the roots, the records attained and the lost challenges, the pros and cons of the astronautics in this country could be a useful help to better perform in future.