



# MERIDIANO

## ITALY'S PRIME MERIDIAN

Allan Ceen  
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### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this exhibit is to use maps of Rome and Italy to illustrate the national prime meridian which passes through Monte Mario in Rome. In doing so, attention is being drawn not only to Monte Mario, but also to the Osservatorio Astronomico di Roma and the Museo Copernicano dell'Astronomia, both housed in the Villa Mellini located near the top of that hill. The observatory's association with the prime meridian is direct since until recently the astronomic instrumentation used to determine it was housed there in a dedicated building-annex labelled "Primo Meridiano" on a plaque over the door.

Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, maps of Italy used a variety of prime meridians. 18<sup>th</sup> century maps favored the "Meridiano dell'Isola del Ferro (Hiero in Spanish). This was a prime meridian based on the westernmost of the Canary Islands off the coast of North Africa, which was thought by ancient geographers to mark the western limit of the world, hence they reckoned longitude from it. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century some maps continued to rely on the Ferro meridian (Cat.1 & 4); others used the prime meridian of Paris (Cat.2), while yet others used the prime meridian of Rome (Cat.3). In 1884, President Chester A. Arthur of the United States called for an international conference in order to decide on a global prime meridian. Italy was among the 41 delegations which met in Washington DC, and settled on Greenwich as the international prime meridian. However this did not mean that Italian maps after that date always used this as the basis for longitude.

Various maps of the Papal States dating from the 1860s show the 0° meridian passing through Rome (Cat.2). On 15 February 1870, seven months before Rome was captured by royal troops, thereby putting an end to the Pope's dominion over the city, the Pontifical government announced a plan for the geodetic survey of the Papal States. The triangulation was to be based on Monte Mario where a "stazione-osservatorio astronomico-geodetico fondamentale" was erected<sup>2</sup>. While the scheme was temporarily interrupted by the annexation of Rome to the Kingdom of Italy after September 1870, the principle of using Monte Mario as the starting point for the national geodetic grid was maintained by the new Italian government.

From then until the 1960s, most maps of Italy used the Monte Mario meridian as their 0° Longitude line. However the same maps made use of the international system of latitudes for the parallels. Monte Mario is 12°27'08.40" East of the Greenwich meridian, the international Prime meridian. The continued use of the Monte Mario meridian, in spite of Italy's adherence to the 1884 International Meridian Conference which settled on Greenwich as the international Prime meridian, is a significant indication of the young Italian state's desire to emphasize its unity and individuality. Longitudes in school atlases (see Cat.6 & 12) were usually based on the Monte

Mario meridian, thus helping perpetuate its use among the younger generations until relatively recently.

Following the prime meridian from Monte Mario on the maps exhibited is an instructive geography lesson. Heading south, after leaving land at Tor Vajanica, the line crosses the Tyrrhenian sea and grazes the west coast of Sicily at Marsala. Heading north, it passes just east of Perugia (the “heart of Italy”), bisects the sovereign state of San Marino and enters the Adriatic sea at the mouth of the Rubicon river. When it enters the Venetian lagoon we realize that this city is almost due north of Rome. The prime meridian crosses the border with Austria near the Passo di S. Croce di Comelico.

Even though it is no longer used as the base for modern maps, the Monte Mario Prime meridian remains an important symbol for Rome and Italy. At a meeting entitled UN SEGNO PER MONTE MARIO held in the Studium Urbis on 22 November 2002, a group of professionals from various backgrounds discussed ways and means of restoring cultural and scientific importance to the summit of Monte Mario. Participants were asked to consider the notion of placing an unspecified mark on Monte Mario, based on the national Prime meridian, which would focus attention on a series of possible interventions, including the reactivating of the Astronomical Museum which has been closed for the past three years. The current exhibit of maps is designed to further this endeavor.

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<sup>1</sup>Attilio Mori, *La Cartografia Ufficiale in Italia e l'Istituto Geografico Militare*, Roma, 1922. Pp. 82-83.

## CATALOG

Cat. 1

No date [~1850]

Title: **Carta delle Due Sicilie**

Published by: (Calcolitografia Fratelli Doyen, Torino)

Scale: ~ 1:2,300,000

Cm. 25 x 33

Cat. 2

No date [~1860]

Title: **Italia Centrale**: Romagne, Marche, Umbria e Sabina from Marmocchi Geografia Universale

Published by: (Calcolitografia Fratelli Doyen, Torino)

Cm. 22 x 30

Scale: ~ 1:1,600,000

Cat. 3

1868

Title: **Corografia di Cinque Province dello Stato Pontificio**

Published by: Civiltà Cattolica

Scale:

Photocopy from R.Mammucari, Campagna Romana, Città di Castello: 2002

Cat. 4

1892

Title: **Manuale Hoepli: Atlante Geografico**

Published by: Ulrico Hoepli, Milano

Scale: various

Cat. 5

1892

Title: **Carta Topografica della Provincia di Roma...**

Published by: Istituto Cartografico Italiano, Roma

Scale: 1:250,000; inset: 1:75,000

Cat. 6

1898

Title: **Italia Settentrionale Fisica, Italia Centrale  
Politica, Italia Meridionale Fisica**

Three sheets from: G.Pennesi, *Atlante Scolastico*

Published by: Istituto Cartografico Italiano

Scale: 1:2,250,000; insets: 1:500,000

Cat. 7

No date [1901]

Title: **PIANO DI ROMA** (sheet 1 of 4)

Published by: Istituto Cartografico Italiano, Roma

Scale: 1:6,000

Cm. 61 x 83; whole map: Cm. 123 x 163

Cat. 8

No date (1906-1914)

Title: **Carta d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano**

Foglio 28 [di 59] **Roma**

Published by: Istituto Geografico Dott.G. De Agostini & C. Roma

Scale: 1:250,000

Cm. 34 x 45

Cat. 9

1909

Title: **PIANO REGOLATORE E DI AMPLIAMENTO DELLA CITTA`  
DI ROMA**

Published by: Comune di Roma (Edizione ufficiale)  
Scale: 1:10,000  
Cm. 104 x 96

Cat. 10  
1919

Title: **ROMA DALL'AEROPLANO**  
Published by: Umberto Nistri [Aerofotogrammetrica, Roma]  
Scale: 1:10,000  
Cm. 64 x 75

Cat. 11  
1920

Title: **ROMA E DINTORNI**  
Published by: Istituto Geografico Militare  
Scale: 1:25,000  
Cm. 83 x 74

Cat. 12  
1920

Title: **Italia Centrale Politica**  
Tavola 15 of: G.Pennesi, *Atlante Scolastico*  
Published by: G.B. Paravia, Milano  
Scale: 1:2,250,000; Roma e Dintorni inset: 1:500,000

Cat. 13  
1922

Title: **PIANTA DI ROMA**  
Published by: Istituto Geografico De Agostini, Novara  
Scale: 1:12,000  
Cm. 60 x 81

Cat. 14

no date [1925-1935]  
Title: **Roma e Dintorni**  
Published by: Touring Club Italiano, Milano  
Scale: 1:200,000  
Cm. 77 x 54

Cat. 15

No date (1926-1935)  
Title: **Italia alla scala di 1:500.000** (No. 4, 6, 7 [of 13])  
Published by: Touring Club Italiano, Milano

Scale: 1:500,000  
Cm. 66 x 32

Cat. 16  
1937  
Title: **ROMA**  
Published by: Consociazione Turistica Italiana  
Scale: 1:12,500  
Cm. 51 x 14 (strip I of 4)

Cat. 17  
1943/1951  
Title: **Italy Road Map** (Sheets 3 & 6)  
Published by: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
Scale: 1:200,000  
Cm. 108 x 48 (each sheet)

Cat. 18  
1950  
Title: **ROMA**  
Published by: Istituto Geografico Militare, Firenze  
Scale: 1:20,000  
Cm. 76 x 77

Cat. 19  
1950-1955  
Title: **Italia 1:100,000** (Fogli 100, 101, 108, 109, 115, 116,  
122, 123, 130, 131, 137, 138)  
Published by: Istituto Geografico Militare, Firenze (IGM)  
Scale: 1:100,000  
Cm. 48 x 38

Cat. 20  
1950  
Title: **Comacchio** (Foglio 77)  
Published by: Istituto Geografico Militare, Firenze (IGM)  
Scale: 1:100,000  
Cm. 48 x 38

Cat. 21  
1960  
Title: **ROMA**  
Published by: Guida Monaci,

Scale: 1:10,000

Cat. 22

1960

Title: none [Aerial photograph of Rome]

Published by: Aerofotogrammetrica, Roma

Scale: 1:10,000

Cm. 88 x 100

Cat. 23

1972

Title: Italia 1:100,000 (Tav.16)

Published by: Istituto Geografico Militare, Firenze (IGM)

Colored photocopy of plate 16 of Istituto Geografico Militare, *Catalogo delle Pubblicazioni*, Firenze: 1972

Cat. 24

1992

Title: **ROMA**

Published by: Touring Club Italiano, Milano

Scale: 1:10,000

Cat. 25

1998

Title: none (detail of section 37406, sheets F & L)

Published by: Cartesia, Roma

Scale: 1:2,000

Photocopy with added color

Cat. z

1914/1964

Title: Vedute Fopanoramiche da Monte Mario

Published by: Casa Editrice Ardità, Rome

Cm. 290 x 32 (each of the two views)

From: Memmo Caporilli, *Vedute Fopanoramiche da Monte Mario*