

DELO NAŠIH ZAVODOV IN DRUŠTEV/  
ATTIVITÀ DEI NOSTRI ISTITUTI E DELLE NOSTRE  
SOCIETÀ/  
ACTIVITIES BY OUR INSTITUTIONS AND  
ASSOCIATIONS

STAZIONE ZOOLOGICA ANTON DOHRN NAPLES  
From its establishment till this day

## Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn

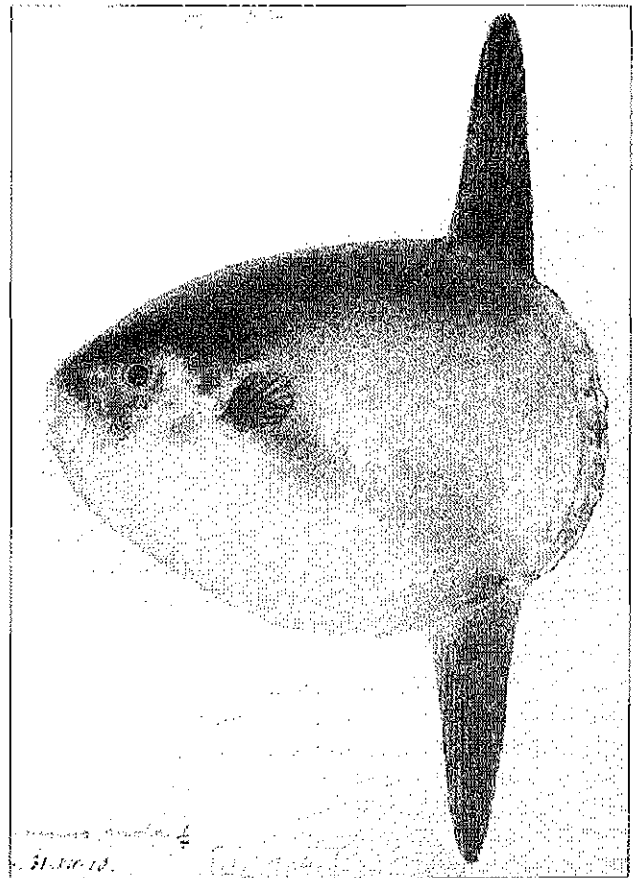


*Stazione Zoologica A. Dohrn* from Naples, which carries the name of its founder, is a unique research institution in the world, and although some similar institutions in Germany, France and the States had existed prior to its setting up, it has been something special from its very start. The first marine laboratory was founded by P.M. van Beneden, a zoologist and parasitologist, in 1843 in Ostende, followed by those on the Atlantic, Mediterranean and American coasts. These, however, were more or less field stations functioning under the auspices of various universities and institutes, and were primarily intended for the students eager to study marine biology within the framework of some short-term field exercises. *Stazione Zoologica* belongs, however, to the second group of marine laboratories, founded as independent research and advanced study centres. At that time, such laboratories were also in Trieste and Sevastopol.

*Stazione Zoologica* was the fulfilment of all Dohrn's dreams and wishes; on his own account, with immense will, diligence as well as imagination he constructed, in no more than three years from the time the foundation was laid in 1872 in the Villa Comunale park in Naples, the building which still stands today. Although it was officially opened on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1875, the first scientists from Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Italy and Holland had worked there as guests as early as in 1873, while the city aquarium began to function a year later. During the first few centuries, from its establishment to the beginning of World War I, the station held the status of a private German foundation. It did not have its own research orientation but, on the contrary, was offering space, infrastructure (equipped labs, and vessels later on) and immense diversity of flora and fauna of the Gulf of Naples. It was the visiting scientists, including the world-famous Norwegian zoologists and Nobel Prize winner Fridtjof Nansen, who laid the foundations of the

permanent research activities and orientations towards various branches of marine biology; here they marked out the basics of embryology, comparative anatomy, systematic zoology and botany, physiology and bacteriology. The most important department in the first years of its development, however, was undisputedly zoology with emphasis on morphology. Apart from the increased widening of the areas of research, the foreign scientists were being joined by domestic Italian scientists and technicians, the best known among them being Salvatore Lo Bianco, a taxidermist from Naples, whom Anton Dohrn took under his own wing. Some of Lo Bianco's preparations from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century can still be admired in the aquarium and in the Institute's special collection.

During the first and second World Wars as well as in the period between them, *Stazione Zoologica* went through a number of changes: from the initially private institution it was transformed into a semi private institution (*ente morale*), presided by the Executive Committee headed by the Mayor of Naples, and then retained this status until 1982. The Dohrn family, how-



*Orthagoniscus mola*. Drawing by V. Serino (1910), from the special collection of scientific drawings, *Stazione Zoologica A. Dohrn, Naples*.

ever, kept its leading role in the institute's direction and scientific policy making until 1967, when the presidency of the Zoological Station's Scientific Board was concluded by Peter Dohrn, the last of the Dohrn family. During the two wars, too, *Stazione Zoologica* retained its special international position, although the so-called "Italian international" character was being increasingly affirmed: the visiting foreign scientists were still highly independent in their research work aided by the station's laboratories and research equipment. More and more independent and unique was also at that time the only scientific project of the institute, which was to complete the systematics of flora and fauna of the Gulf of Naples initialised in the previous century. During World War II, the station was practically closed; there were just a handful of scientists and technicians who were taking care of just some urgent repairs, such as the functioning of the aquarium, and preventing the American soldiers to occupy and destroy the institute. Thus they managed to save, almost in full, its exceptionally rich library by transferring it to a small village in the town's hinterland. To be fair to the allied troops we must underline, however, that the American and British Governments financially supported the Zoological Station at that time by paying wages to its employees and by covering all the maintenance costs, which no doubt raised the reputation of the allied armies. It was due to this very international concern that the Zoological Station was able to reopen, with almost no major wartime consequences at all, the door to its scientists, director Rinald Dohrn and the entire library in the summer of 1944. Research could be restarted at once where it had been interrupted at the beginning of the war, while in 1947 the Station received and paid its first postgraduate students.

In the years following World War II, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, *Stazione Zoologica* was virtually blossoming: all research and other (technical and infrastructural) activities were in full swing, supported by most reputable institutions in the world, governmental organisations and private foundations (the American National Research Council and National Science Foundation, Woods Hole Institute, Rockefeller Foundation, UNESCO, The Royal Society of London, etc.). In Villa Comunale, world congresses were held virtually one after the other, and the Zoological Station was being entered by the greatest scientific personalities of the world, one of them being the biologist Watson, who in 1951, while attending a scientific meeting on the use of X-rays in the research of ultramicroscopic structures in cellular protoplasm, got an inspiration for his research on the double spiral together with his colleague Crick. And there is probably no need to say how it all ended with the Watson-Crick research.

In 1967, Dohrn's era finally came to an end, due to which a new statute and new rules were necessary for the Station to obtain a solid and permanent financial

base. For almost a century the Italian state recognised the Zoological Station's special status as a private institution within a wide international framework. In the mid-1960s, however, this was no longer possible. *Stazione Zoologica* thus yet again entered the tumultuous period of financial-administrative changes, which eventually ended in 1982, when the Italian Parliament adopted a special law on the Zoological Station, by enthroning it as a public institution (*ente pubblico*) of a special scientific concern. This means that the Station is fully financed by the state and controlled by the Ministry of Science and Technology, but is not part of the Scientific National Council's framework like many other national institutions. And this at the same time means a full developmental and scientific autonomy. Thus the descendants of Anton Dohrn managed to retain this unique status, which has accompanied *Stazione Zoologica* from its establishment onwards. With all the changes in the last 30 years, the number of the foreign visiting scientists has also fallen a great deal; in 1978, there were only 48 (in comparison with 130 in 1960). Due to the Station's new requirements and orientations, the scientific tourism from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century became increasingly less important and at times even useless. The Italian researchers, who came to the Station in the middle of the tumultuous 1960s, still remember their foreign bosses and occasionally tense relations between the Station's home personnel and "tourist scientists". In spite of this, however, the corridors of the old building are still swarming with foreign scientists. These are postgraduate students, postdoctoral and visiting scientists gathering invaluable knowledge within the walls of *Stazione Zoologica*, the heritage of more than 130 years of scientific research.



*The author of the article while paying a visit to the Italian researchers, with Stazione Zoologica A. Dohrn in the background. (Photo: V. Saggiomo)*

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