

Predella journal of visual arts, n°56, 2024 www.predella.it - *Miscellanea / Miscellany* ■

Direzione scientifica e proprietà / *Scholarly Editors-in-Chief and owners:*

Gerardo de Simone, Emanuele Pellegrini - predella@predella.it

Predella pubblica ogni anno due numeri online e due numeri monografici a stampa /

Predella publishes two online issues and two monographic print issues each year

Tutti gli articoli sono sottoposti alla peer-review anonima / All articles are subject to anonymous peer-review

Comitato scientifico / *Advisory Board:* Diane Bodart, Maria Luisa Catoni, Michele Dantini, Annamaria Ducci, Fabio Marcelli, Linda Pisani†, Neville Rowley, Francesco Solinas

Redazione / *Editorial Board:* Elisa Bassetto, Elisa Bernard, Nicole Crescenzi, Livia Fasolo, Silvia Massa

Assistenti alla redazione / *Assistants to the Editorial Board:* Teresa Maria Callaioli, Angela D'Alise, Flaminia Ferlito, Giulia Gilesi, Alessandro Masetti, Domiziana Pelati, Ester Tronconi

Impaginazione / *Layout:* Elisa Bassetto, Sofia Bulleri, Agata Carnevale, Nicole Crescenzi, Rebecca Di Gisi

Predella journal of visual arts - ISSN 1827-8655

Hamilton's debts. The *Campi Phlegraei* in the context of Vesuvian iconography

William Hamilton's Campi Phlegraei and its Supplement (Naples, 1776 and 1779) are masterpieces of 18th-century illustrated books. Some plates are also among the best examples of landscape art in 18th-century Naples. The article presents Hamilton and his artist Pietro Fabris's hitherto unknown debts to earlier and contemporary Vesuvian iconography and the new temporal sense of these landscapes. Both aspects have been ignored so far due to the scarce study of engraved Vesuvian landscapes compared to painted ones.

A few years after his arrival as British ambassador to Naples in 1764, William Hamilton (1730-1803), art collector and volcanologist, published *Campi Phlegraei. Observations on the volcanoes of the two Sicilies* (Naples, 1776), and the *Supplement to the Campi Phlegraei* (Naples, 1779), two large folio format illustrated books. Both contain an English and French bilingual text. The *Supplement* was necessary after the eruption of Vesuvius in 1779. Some of their plates rank among the artistic masterpieces of the 18th century Neapolitan *veduta* genre and, at the same time, they deeply influenced the development of the then nascent earth sciences (fig. 1)¹. The *Campi Phlegraei* includes fifty-five plates; the *Supplement* five: etchings realised, under Hamilton's supervision, by Pietro Fabris (1740, hence - before 1794), based in most cases on his gouaches, and hand-coloured, mostly in watercolours, by various artists². As such, they are one of the greatest achievements of 18th-century visual culture. The article concerns Hamilton's unknown debts to engravings published in earlier or contemporary treatises on Vesuvius. This iconographic tradition, born in the 17th century, is well known to contemporary volcanologists, who have used it to reconstruct the eruptive history of Vesuvius; however, it has received less attention from art-historical studies, with the exception of Hamilton's plates and, more recently, 17th-century iconography³. Recent and important studies in the history and philosophy of Vesuvian catastrophes have favoured texts over images⁴.

Two little-known aspects of Hamilton's work and of the Vesuvian iconographic tradition in general emerge: the attempt to visualise temporal processes and, linked to this, the reciprocal exchange of images between various authors. In the case of Vesuvian landscapes, the evocation of time, well known in relation to landscapes with ancient ruins, also affected the *veduta*, generally

considered to be aimed only at a faithful representation of the *hic et nunc*⁵. And this occurred in engravings published in the Vesuvian treatises, more than in paintings.

The basic elements of two plates from the *Campi Phlegraei* (figg. 2 and 4) derive from one of the most representative works of this iconographic tradition: Giuseppe Maria Mecatti's *Racconto storico-filosofico del Vesuvio* (Historical-philosophical account of Vesuvius, Naples, 1752, with later additions) (figg. 3 and 5). They represent the emergence of an eruptive cone inside the crater of Vesuvius in 1754 (figg. 2 and 3), followed, in 1756, by the formation of a smaller cone outside the previous one (no. 3 in fig. 5).

One of Mecatti's plates is by the military engineer Giuseppe Aguir, the other by the woodcut specialist Ignazio Lucchesini (active c. 1739-1762) based on a drawing by an anonymous friend of Mecatti's⁶. In both cases, the authors of the images actually visited the sites with Mecatti, as demonstrated by the inclusion in one of the plates of a figure in the act of drawing⁷. This is one of the first examples of the introduction of small human figures in Vesuvian landscapes, which served not only to indicate that the images were made in the field, but also to suggest, by comparison, the size of the rocky structures depicted.

From 1631 onwards, apart from the spectacular lava flows and volcanic fire and the often dramatic consequences for the local population, the continual eruptions of Vesuvius had offered viewers the spectacle of a constantly changing landscape. New reliefs emerged in the crater or outside the volcano, while others collapsed, and so on. This presented a scenario of great interest in the years when the nascent science of geology was discovering the "history of the earth", i.e., the fact that the earth we see and live on was not created by God but was only the latest, momentary outcome of more or less catastrophic changes in an ongoing process that, as Vesuvius and other volcanoes showed, was occurring in what would come to be called "geological time"⁸. The nocturnal, "sublime" side of paintings of Vesuvian eruptions, for example those by Pierre Jacques Volaire (1729-1799), are well known⁹. We are far less familiar with views of Vesuvius as images of orographic changes whose visualization implied diurnal views. This was the main focus of the plates in the 18th-century treatises on Vesuvius.

Mecatti's plates represent a landscape in metamorphosis, evidence of a phase in the history of the Vesuvius which Hamilton had not been able to see directly. Hence their interest, despite their crudeness from an artistic point of view.

Hamilton does not mention his source. And the same holds true for Mecatti, who includes in his treatise two engravings showing the orographic effects of

the 1631 eruption of Vesuvius that had appeared in texts published in 1632-1633¹⁰. Rather than cases of plagiarism, both used images that had assumed the function of visual documents of a given eruptive event or of a phase in Vesuvius' history. They were therefore shared by a community of scholars, almost as modern-day photographs are.

The two artistically mediocre Mecatti-based plates were an important link in the "historical narrative" of the Vesuvian landscape that Hamilton, like Mecatti, intended to portray. This allows us to fully understand the meaning of other artistically more sophisticated views in both Hamilton's treatises and those of other Vesuvian authors. They are, in effect, "time-lapse landscapes".

Hamilton identified two geo-historical markers compatible with the artistic *veduta*: one botanical, the other orographic. Lusher vegetation marked land that was the result of very ancient eruptions, which over a long time span had generated fertile soil. On the other hand, a mountain with a less preserved conical shape was an extinct volcano that was older than one with an intact cone, because it had been eroded by atmospheric agents over a longer period. In the *Campi Phlegraei*, the plates derived from Mecatti with the "new" cones that emerged in 1754-1756 are followed by a plate with the representation of Mount Sant'Angelo, to the right of Vesuvius, as an "ancient" volcanic cone, which time had decapitated and covered with vegetation (fig. 1). In contrast, Vesuvius, affected by recent eruptions, is depicted as barren.

These two geo-historical markers allowed Fabris to represent dynamic processes in realistic landscapes, avoiding the diagrammatic images that would increasingly become the norm in earth science iconography¹¹. The only plate of the *Campi Phlegraei* with more schematic insets, apart from the map published at the beginning of the book, is the one which uses dotted lines to highlight the progressive metamorphosis of the summit of Vesuvius between 8 July and 29 October 1767 (fig. 6). Proceeding clockwise from top left (no. I in fig. 6), the dotted lines in each image indicate previous configurations. The content is obviously original. But the representative technique had already been used by Giovanni Alfonso Borrelli in his famous treatise on the 1669 eruption of Etna (*Historia et meteorologia incendii Aetnaei anni 1669*, Reggio Calabria, Domenico Ferri, 1670): a dotted line that had represented the decreased height of the summit crater after the eruption (fig. 7)¹². The plate illustrating the treatise by the Neapolitan-born scientist Borelli can be seen as an early development of Vesuvian iconography. The latter originated before that of Etna, following the eruption of Vesuvius in 1631.

Hamilton published the *Supplement* after the 1779 eruption. Two images in plate I (nos. I-II; fig. 8 and 10) show, respectively, the eruption and the state of the

volcano afterwards. They correspond to two plates published in the same year, in the book on the same eruption by Gaetano del Bottis, Professor of Natural History at the University of Naples: *Ragionamento storico intorno all'eruzione del Vesuvio che cominciò il dì 29 luglio dell'anno 1779 e continuò fino al giorno 15 del seguente mese di Agosto* (Historical assessment of the eruption of Vesuvius that began on 29 July of the year 1779 and continued until the 15th day of the following month of August), Naples, 1779 (figg. 9 and 11). One of the plates is by Francesco Giomignani, after Hamilton's artist Pietro Fabris; the other by Nicola Fiorillo, after the painter Saverio della Gatta. We know about the intense scientific relationship between Hamilton and De Bottis thanks to the studies of Maria Toscano, who also highlighted the similarity between two other images published by these authors¹³. In the *Supplement*, Hamilton mentions De Bottis's book as being in progress, and De Bottis does the same for Hamilton's book, praising in particular Fabris's representations of volcanic rocks¹⁴. De Bottis's book was the official publication, promoted by King Ferdinand IV and printed by the *Stamperia Reale* (Royal printing press). Hamilton must have known about it. The pair were in contact and praised each other¹⁵. But, again, no mutual credit is given for the plates in question.

In one instance Hamilton's and De Bottis's versions of the same image contain few but important differences, reflecting the different interests of the two authors (figg. 10-11). De Bottis's plate is a true miniature which not only includes three human figures in the near foreground, but also two men and a donkey in the background: distant and therefore very small, but useful for making a visual comparison of the great size of the two rocky masses to their right, catapulted from the volcano during the eruption. De Bottis's text accurately describes these and other rocky masses¹⁶. In the Hamilton plate the small human and animal figures next to the two large blocks have been eliminated and replaced by a representation of the different colours generated by the sulfur fumes, accurately described by Hamilton in his text¹⁷.

In conclusion, Hamilton, thanks to his artist Pietro Fabris, succeeded in transforming the realistic landscape used in previous treatises on Vesuvius into an iconographic formula that managed to combine artistic beauty, realism and scientific research in the best possible way. However, as his debts show, Hamilton's work was the culminating episode of a well-defined iconographic tradition, which, taken as a whole, is a little-known "artistic" chapter in the slow affirmation between the 18th and 19th centuries of one of the key ideas of modernity: the temporality of the natural world, from geology to biological evolutionism.

- 1 M.J.S., Rudwick, *Bursting the limits of time*, Chicago and London, 2005, pp. 36-37, 60, 78-79, 120-121.
- 2 É. Beck Saiello, *Pietro Fabris dieci anni di attività napoletana*, in «Napoli Nobilissima», 9, 2008, pp. 76-88.
- 3 See the website VVH, *Volcanoes Visual History. Iconografia vulcanologica tra XVII e XIX secolo*, edited by D. Laurenza and A. Clericuzio, University of RomaTre and University of Cagliari. E. Beck Saiello's important studies concern paintings (e.g. *Pierre Jacques Voltaire, 1729-1799, dit le Chevalier Voltaire*, Paris, 2010; *Napoli e la Francia. I pittori di paesaggio da Vernet a Valenciennes*, Roma, 2010). For 17th century engravings, from a mainly social history perspective, see V.F. Koppenleitner, *Katastrophenbilder: der Vesuvsausbruch 1631 in den Bildkünsten der Frühen Neuzeit*, Berlin, 2018, and M. Viceconte, *The Other Hero: Viceroy Monterrey in Literary and Figurative Sources on the 1631 Eruption of Vesuvius*, in *Heroes in Dark Times, Saints and Officials Tackling Disaster (16th-17th Centuries)*, edited by M. Viceconte, G. Schiano, D. Cecere, Roma, 2003, pp. 183-208. For Hamilton see *Vases & Volcanoes. Sir William Hamilton and his collection, exhibition catalogue, London 1996*, edited by I. Jenkins, K. Sloan, London, 1996; C. Knight, *Hamilton a Napoli. Cultura, svaghi, civiltà di una grande capitale europea*, Napoli, 1990; M. Toscano, *Gli archivi del mondo. Antiquaria, storia naturale e collezionismo nel secondo Settecento*, Firenze, 2009, pp. 42-50, 223-243, the latter study with interesting insights into other authors besides Hamilton. See also the volume, appeared as this article went to press, *Eruzioni di carta. Quattro secoli di stampa sui vulcani*, edited by E. Scirocco, P. Helas, G. Maurer, D. Cecere, H. Sophie Stegemann, M. Viceconte, Napoli, 2024.
- 4 *Heroes in Dark Times*, cit.; *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples. Politics, Communication and Culture*, edited by D. Cecere, C. De Caprio, L. Gianfrancesco, P. Palmieri, Roma, 2018; J.E. Everson, *The melting pot of science and belief: studying Vesuvius in seventeenth-century Naples*, in «Renaissance Studies», 26, 5, 2012, pp. 691-727; S. Cocco, *Watching Vesuvius. A History of Science and Culture in Early Modern Italy*, Chicago, 2013.
- 5 On the *veduta* as representation of *hic et nunc* see L. Ciancio, *Le colonne del Tempo. Il "Tempio di Serapide" a Pozzuoli nella storia della geologia, dell'archeologia e dell'arte (1750-1900)*, Firenze, 2009, pp. 75-77; A. Ottani Cavina, *I paesaggi della ragione. La città neoclassica da David a Humbert de Superville*, Torino, 1994; *ead.*, *Pittura di luce. I paesaggi di fine secolo*, in *La pittura di paesaggio in Italia. Il Settecento*, edited by A. Ottani Cavina, E. Calbi, Milano, 2005, pp. 11-25; C. Casero, *Il paesaggio in età illuminista. Natura e memoria classica*, in *Lo sguardo sulla natura. Luce e paesaggio da Lorrain a Turner*, edited by P. Biscottini, E. Bianchi, Cinisello Balsamo, 2008, pp. 37-47.
- 6 U. Thieme, F. Becker, *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 1907-1950, vol. XXIII, Leipzig, 1929, p. 434.
- 7 Mecatti, *Racconto storico-filosofico*, cit., pp. 437-438, 442, 588; Cocco, *Watching Vesuvius*, cit., pp. 192-194.
- 8 Rudwick, *Bursting the limits*, cit.
- 9 See especially Beck Saiello, *Pierre Jacques Voltaire*, cit., pp. 130-139.
- 10 Koppenleitner, *Katastrophenbilder*, cit., pp. 90-91.
- 11 M.J.S., Rudwick, *The Emergence of a Visual Language for Geological Science. 1760-1840*, in «History of Science», 14, 1976, pp. 149-95; *id.*, *Bursting the limits*, cit., pp. 75-80; D. Oldroyd, *Maps as Pictures or Diagrams: The Early Developments of Geological Maps*, in *Rethinking the Fabric of Geology*, edited by V.R. Baker, Boulder, 2013, pp. 41-102; K.L. Taylor, *Early*

Geoscience Mapping, 1700–1830, in *Maps in the Geoscience Community: Proceedings of the Geoscience Information Society*, Alexandria, VA, 1985, pp. 15-49. K.V. Magruder, *Global Visions and the Establishment of Theories of the Earth*, «Centaurus», 48, 2006, pp. 234-257.

- 12 In the plate: «X. Depressione della cima» (X. Depression of the summit). See also pp. 99, 116, 167, 169, 181.
- 13 *G. De Bottis, Ragionamento Istorico intorno all'eruzione del Vesuvio che cominciò il di 29 luglio dell'anno 1779 e continuò fino al giorno 15 seguente mese di agosto*, edited by M. Toscano, Napoli, 2012; *ead.*, *Gli archivi del mondo*, cit., p. 43 on the similarity between a plate in W. Hamilton, *An Account of an Eruption of Mount Vesuvius [...]*, *Philosophical Transactions*, vol. LXX, 1780 and De Bottis's plate (fig. 7).
- 14 *De Bottis, Ragionamento Istorico*, cit., pp. lxxi-lxxii (footnote) and lxxix (footnote); Hamilton, *Supplement*, cit., p. 1. See *G. De Bottis, Ragionamento Istorico*, cit., pp. 26-30.
- 15 *G. De Bottis, Ragionamento Istorico*, cit., pp. 26-30.
- 16 *Ivi*, pp. 73-75.
- 17 Hamilton, *Supplement*, cit., p. 23.



Fig. 1. Pietro Fabris, *View of Mount S. Angelo and Vesuvius*, in W. Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei. Observations on the volcanos of the two Sicilies* (Naples, 1776), plate XXXVI, etching hand-colored by anonymous artist, 390 x 215 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 2. Pietro Fabris, *The crater of Vesuvius before the eruption of 1767*, in W. Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei. Observations on the volcanos of the two Sicilies* (Naples, 1776), plate IX, etching hand-colored by anonymous artist, 390 x 215 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 3. Giuseppe Aguir, *The crater of Vesuvius in 1754*, in G. M. Mecatti, *Racconto storico-filosofico del Vesuvio* (Naples, 1752 with later additions), etching, 296 x 310 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 4. Pietro Fabris, *The crater of Vesuvius before the eruption in 1756*, in W. Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei. Observations on the volcanos of the two Sicilies* (Naples, 1776), plate X, etching hand-colored by anonymous artist, 390 x 215 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 5. Ignazio Lucchesini, *The crater of Vesuvius in 1756*, in G. M. Mecatti, *Racconto storico-filosofico del Vesuvio* (Naples, 1752 with later additions), woodcut, 180 x 360 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 6. Pietro Fabris (after an earlier drawing by W. Hamilton), Successive forms of Vesuvius' crater between 8 July 1766 and 29 October 1767, in W. Hamilton, *Campi Phlegraei. Observations on the volcanos of the two Sicilies*, Naples: Pietro Fabris, 1776, plate II.



Fig. 7. Anonymous artist. Etna eruption in 1669, in Giovanni Alfonso Borelli, *Historia et meteorologia incendii Aetnaei anni 1669*, Reggio Calabria: Domenico Ferri, 1670.

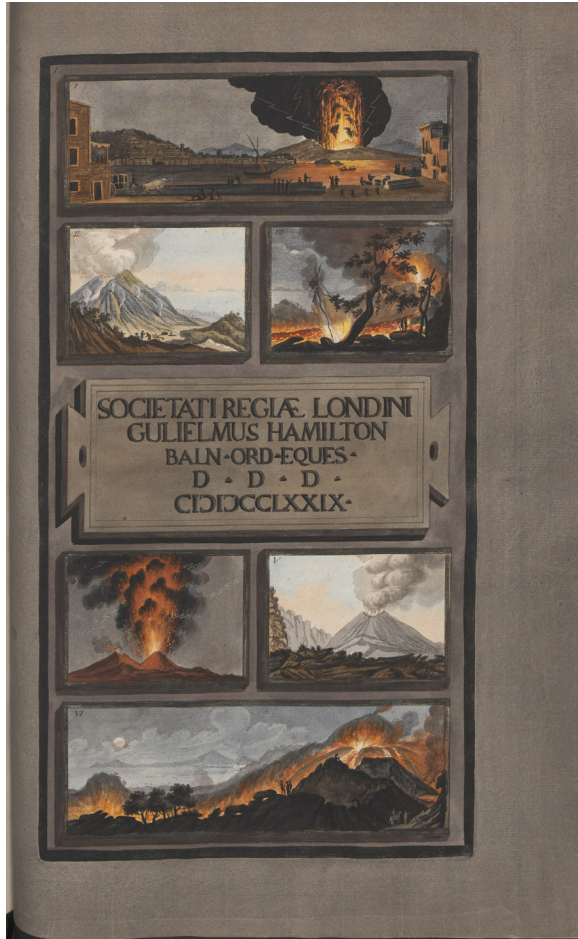


Fig. 8. Pietro Fabris, *Vesuvius eruptions in 1777 and 1779*, in W. Hamilton, *Supplement to the Campi Phlegraei* (Naples, 1779), plate I, etching hand-colored by anonymous artist, 390 x 215 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 9. Francesco Giomignani after Pietro Fabris, *Vesuvius eruption in 1779*, in G. De Bottis, *Ragionamento istorico [...]* (Naples, 1779), plate II, etching, 420 x 295 mm. Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.



Fig. 10. *Vesuvius after the eruption of 1779*. Detail of fig. 8



Fig. 11. Nicola Fiorillo after Saverio della Gatta, *Vesuvius after the eruption of 1779*, in G. De Bottis, *Ragionamento istorico* [...] (Naples, 1779), plate IV, etching, 405 x 287 mm .
Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek.