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"Natural Wonders, Ancient Ruins: Early Modern Encounters with Nature and Antiquity in the Bay of Naples"

This paper draws attention to a tradition of exploration and study of classical sites in the Bay of Naples that predates the archaeological discoveries of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth century. It argues that the landscapes of Mount Vesuvius to the east of Naples and the Phlegraean fields to the west were the focus of a distinct early modern revival of antiquity. Natural philosophers ventured on to the slopes of Vesuvius and trampled through the ruins and sulfur fields of Pozzuoli, expressing a fascination with the *mirabilia* of both nature and antiquity. Their experiences with fumaroles, erupting volcanoes, and ruined amphitheaters were documented in printed guidebooks that fused ancient ruin and natural wonder with the notion that the environs of Naples might challenge Rome itself as a place of rediscovered antiquity. This intersection between the material vestiges of a classical past and the splendors of nature took on political significance as sixteenth-century Spanish viceroys undertook a program of recovery and urban renewal, aimed largely at representing their rule as inspired by the highest virtues of the Roman world.

The naturalistic and classicizing itineraries that natural philosophers traced through the wonders of the Bay of Naples were an important precursor to the Grand Tour and the archaeological digs at Pompeii and Herculaneum in the eighteenth century. A fundamental characteristic of this earlier encounter with antiquity was a contrast between the pursuit of cultural rebirth – situated in nature verdant – and the realization that what was being recovered was not only dead, but had been extinguished violently. The great eruption of Vesuvius in 1631, second only to the massive Plinian eruption of 79 C.E., produced a remarkable tension between notions of a pastoral, agricultural and eminently Virgilian landscape, and one dominated by the terrific and unpredictable forces of nature, greatly reinforcing the apocalypticism inherent in this early modern response to the classical tradition *in situ*. The awakening of Vesuvius after centuries of silence came as a supreme recapitulation of a classical moment, one that was well known to have resulted in the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The damage done to contemporary towns like Torre del Greco and San Giorgio a Cremano in 1631 evoked the ancient cataclysm, drawing vivid, if chilling, parallels between the classical experience and the condition of Naples.