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Campania in Classical Antiquity

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyze how ancient Greeks and Romans perceived the geographical particularities of the landscape. We focused on the image of Campania – an interesting region due to its volcanic and seismic specificity. We have considered a large variety of sources. The information given by literary sources was enriched with data from iconographic material. As it resulted from the sources, Campania appears to have had a contrastive image which the ancients connected with its most important landmark, the Mount Vesuvius. Firstly, Campania was the principal agricultural area of ancient Italy, notorious for its grapevine and grains. This idea of prosperity is symbolically stressed by the two patron-gods of Campania, Bacchus and Ceres. The rhetoric device which describes its gifts of nature is locus amoenus. So Campania is represented as a place belonging to a new Golden Age, where the land bears fruit without the need of human labor. This image of natural paradise is completed by the facilities of the urban life, as a characteristic of the Greco-Roman civilization. Secondly, Campania and Mount Vesuvius had a negative image. From a philosophical and ethical point of view, the excessive richness of the place was considered to be the cause of moral corruption. But Campania represented also a boundary territory. In mythological accounts, this region was one of the entrances to the Underworld. The eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79 revealed dramatically how dangerous the place could be.

Introduction

Nowadays Campania is known worldwide especially due to the discovery, during the eighteenth century, of the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, buried beneath the ashes of the Vesuvius in A.D. 79. During Antiquity, the region was associated with two opposite images: on the one hand, Campania was praised for its beauty and incredible fertility. On the other hand, this land was considered a dangerous place, related to the Underworld.

In this paper I analyze the image of ancient Campania from these two perspectives, as a *locus amoenus* and as its counterpart, *locus horridus*.

I based my research on two types of sources. On the one hand, I considered the ancient written sources which mention Campania both from a mythological and geo-sociological perspective. In this category I included literary texts such geographical, mythological accounts, agriculture and architectural treatises. On the other hand, the iconographic material is of capital importance for a correct and a more complete understanding of the representation of Campania in ancient times.

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For the iconographic material I use especially the material from Pompeii and the other neighboring cities (wall paintings and sculptures).

Campania as a *locus amoenus*

I shall start this section by quoting a Roman historian of the II century C.E.:

The district of Campania is the fairest of all regions not only in Italy but in the whole world. Nothing can be softer than its climate: indeed it has spring and its flowers twice a year. Nowhere is the soil more fertile; for which reason it is said to have been an object of contention between Liber and Ceres. Nowhere is the coast more hospitable, which contains the famous harbours of Caieta, Misenus, Baiae with its hot springs, and the Lucrine and Avernian Lakes where the sea seems to enjoy perpetual repose. Here are the vine-clad mountains of Gaurus, Falernus and Massicus, and Vesuvius, the fairest of them all, which rivals the fires of Etna. Towards the sea-coast lie the cities of Formiae, Cumae, Puteoli, Naples, Herculaneum and Pompeii, and Capua, queen among cities, formerly accounted among the three greatest in the world (Florus I, 11, 3-6).

In Florus' description Campania personifies the *locus amoenus*, a literary topos created and developed by the poets in order to present a place of a great beauty (Curtius 195; Petrone 3-18). The elements which compose this idealized image of Campania are as follows: a mild climate, springs, proximity to the sea and a fertile soil suited for all kind of crops. The divine contention between the two gods patronizing two of the most important agricultural products in ancient Mediterranean area, grain and wine, gives a symbolical dimension to a real landscape, alluding to the mythic Golden Age. What individualize this particular region are the concrete geographic references: the harbors spread along the sea-coast and the two lakes. Hot springs are also part of the region's particularities. The mountain, in spite of its general interpretation in Antiquity as a dangerous place (Giorcelli Bersani 27), is "domesticated" by the human activity. The sea – another "marginal" landmark (Buxton 97) – is hospitable, *hospitalius mari*, and calm, *mari otia*, in the Bay of Naples. Another important feature of the *locus amoenus* is the city – the expression of the *ciuitas* in opposition to a primitive way of life. Therefore, the list of the Campanian cities, given by Florus, is both symbolical and real. Indeed, the Campanian shore was a highly urbanized area from early Antiquity, being colonized, before the Romans, by the Oscans, the Greeks and the Etruscans.

As we could see, for the Romans the *locus amoenus* was mostly a recreated landscape, embellished by the human intervention (Grimal, 1964, p. 25). In this view the agriculture played an essential role.

First of all, the richness of Campania is due to its fertile soils. Most of the ancient authors interested in agriculture, geography or even history, mention their extraordinary capacity of producing two crops a year (Florus I, 11). Cato the Elder speaks of the black soils of Campania, *pullea*, that can be easily ploughed (Cato Maior CXLIV, 2; Columella I, 5; II, 10). Vergil adds a poetic explanation for this remarkable fertility of the soils: they have the capacity of absorbing moisture and progressively releasing it into the air as mist and vapors. As a result, both soils and

air reach a perfect balance of humidity (Vergilius, 1988, pp. II, 228-229). A more “scientific” explanation of Campanian soils is given by Strabo and by Vitruvius. Both authors linked the volcanic activity to the soils’ fertility as the volcanic ashes have nutrient proprieties (Strabo V, 4, 8; Vitruvius II, 6, 6).

The wine was one of the typical products of Campania and also another symbol of civilization in the Greco-Roman world (Guzmán-Armario, “Las externas gentes” 66). Almost all ancient ethnographic digressions opposed the civilized Romans or Greeks who drank wine mixed with water to the Barbarians who, either ignored this beverage or drank it improperly (Guzmán-Armario, “In vino civilitas” 77-78). The ancient authors counted the Falernian type among the best wines of the Mediterranean area (Columella III, 2, 10; Statius II, 4, 62; Vergilius II, 96). The numerous amphora inscriptions discovered in Rome and elsewhere testify an intense activity of wine producing, storing and trading for this area (Andreau 223-273). As we have seen from the description quoted at the beginning of this section, the Campanian mountain was first of all associated with viniculture, and its patron-god, Bacchus. An interesting and unique wall painting (Gigante, “Bacco e il Vesuvio” 216), discovered on the wall of a lararium in the House of the Centenary, at Pompeii, depicts Bacchus and the Mount Vesuvius. The composition had a religious significance. On the top of the painting a garland sustains a bird. Below, a sacred serpent (Boyce, 1942, pp. 13-22) gets near to the altar prepared for the sacrifice. In the central part, on the left, is represented Bacchus. His head is crowned with vine, his left hand holds the thyrsos and with his right hand he makes a libation. He is clothed in grapes and beneath, he wears a green-blue himation. Scholars had hypothesized that the model for the painting must have been a statue of “Pompeian” Bacchus (Gigante, “Bacco e il Vesuvio” 217). Vesuvius is represented between the god and the altar. The two mountain’s peaks are differently depicted: one shows a gentle slope, the other one a sheer cliff. The mount is covered in vine, except for the summit. As depicted, Vesuvius incarnates the image of abundance.

Other artistic products also show the importance of viniculture (Feemster Jashemski, Meyer and Ricciardi 171, 174). Most of the frescoes are still life depicting grapes with animals, or in combination with other fruits. More interesting are those showing uindemia scenes. The characters depicted in these scenes are mythological figures associated with the cult of Bacchus: Satyrs, Cupids, animals dear to Bacchus, such as the panther. These data are relevant for the nature of Bacchus’ cult in the area. For the Bacchus worshipped in Campania has an agrarian function who lacks the violent connotation of the Greek Dionysus. It is significant that no temple of Bacchus was identified in the Vesuvian cities, though numerous objects related to this cult were found in the rural areas (Van Andringa 139).

The other agrarian product for which Campania was famous is the grain. Before Sicily, Campania assured Rome ‘supply with grain. Pliny the Elder notes that millet flourished well in Campania and it was used for making white porridge and sweet bread (Plinius Maior XVIII, 102).

If Bacchus was the divinity of Mount Vesuvius, the Campanian plains were under Ceres’ protection. The goddess was quoted as patron-divinity of Naples, together with Apollo and the twins, Castor and Pollux (Statius IV, 8, 50; Miranda

234-235). The difference between these two agrarian divinities is considerable. Bacchus was a more local figure, closely related to the rural life, whereas Ceres kept her urban Greek nature.

The ancient authors mention others famous Campanian crops such as the olive and the fig. The wall paintings depict also a large variety of flowers, edible plants and animals domesticated or wild (Feemster Jashemski, Meyer and Ricciardi 80-180).

Water is another component of locus amoenus. It is indispensable for any kind of human activity, from agriculture to religious practices (Horden and Purcell 417). For Campania the water supply consists of springs, lakes, thermal sources and, of course, the sea (Florus I, 11, 1-3; Plinius Maior III, 60-62). As Lise Bek observed, in ancient times, the aesthetic value of the landscape was given by its functionality (28). So, the river Sarnus was praised for its quality of being fitted for navigation. Strabo states that the river “takes the cargoes inland and sends them out to sea” (V, 4, 8). As for the lakes, Avernus and Locrinus, what counts for the ancient writers is their variety of fish and the high quality of this production (Strabo V, 4, 6). The popularity of the Campanian hot springs is well known for Antiquity (Strabo V, 4, 7; Petronius LIII, CIV; Florus I, 11, 4). In fact, the thermal sources from Baiae and Puteoli were object of devotion due to their curative properties. It is worthwhile to mention the progressive grow in popularity of the gods of medicine, Asclepius/Serapis and the Nymphai Nitrodes in the bay of Naples. It is likely that these cults originated during the Greek period of domination and became important in the early Imperial period as we can deduce from both the literary sources and the plentiful ex-votos dedicated to these deities discovered in the area (Larson 224-225)

The fruitfulness which characterizes both the locus amoenus and Campania had also a negative connotation for the ancients. The definition of locus amoenus given by Servius is the key for understanding its ambiguous significance. Servius states that “amoena sunt loca solius uoluptatis plena ... unde nullus fructus exsoluitur” (5, 734). So, the delightful places are only for pleasure but from them do not come anything profitable. For Roman moralist writers the prosperity generates luxury which leads to both moral and physical corruption (Naas 378, 392-393).

Strabo associates directly Campania’s prosperity with moral decadence (Strabo V, 4, 13). The Greek author constructs his image of Campania using the rhetorical device of suasoriae and controuersiae. After a detailed description of the incredible richness of the region – charming landscape, fruitfulness of the soil and pleasant climate, he gives the contra-arguments for the same richness. In this view, prosperity becomes synonym to luxuria, a corrupting, negative richness. He gives two examples of this luxuria: one driven from everyday life and the other one, from the military activity. Firstly, he criticizes the habit of the Campanians to invite gladiators (slaves) at their banquets. Conviviality with slaves meant a serious rule-breaking by making permanent an exceptional situation⁵⁷. The other example shows how pleasures endangered warfare. For Strabo, Hannibal’s defeat in Italy was mainly caused by the luxuria which had made his solders effeminate.

⁵⁷ This type of conviviality was permitted only during the religious carnival of *Saturnalia*, once a year.

The negative connotations of *locus amoenus* explains better the other face of Campania as a dangerous place.

Campania as a *locus horridus*

The mythical topography of Campania can be read as an exemplification of *locus horridus*. The “Campanian cycle” of myths has a strong meteorological connotation, due to the region’s particularities. One of most famous myths is that of the Gigantomachy, settled in the Phlegraean Fields. Another mythological tradition places the entrance to Hades in Campania, near the Lake Avernus (Strabo V, 4, 4). According to Strabo, the cavernous soil stimulated the indigenes’ imagination who considered that beneath the earth laid Plutonia, the city of the Cimmerians, a people with the gift of prophecy (V, 4, 4). The oracle and the name of Avernus, “the bird killer”, were related to the poisonous nature of the lake.

This was the menacing mythological setting to a real geography by no means inferior in dangers. Though, throughout Antiquity, the volcanic phenomenon remained unknown⁵⁸ (Casevitz 127), the ancient writers had established empirical connections between such similar phenomena. The volcanic activity of the Phlegraean Fields was associated to Vesuvius as early as the Hellenistic era. Lycophorn, in his poem *Alexandra*, describes the topography of Campania through Cassandra’s prophecy for Odysseus (688-700). Vesuvius was identified by modern scholars with either Polydegmon “the difficult hill” or with Lethaeon “the high” mentioned by the poet (Gigante, “Bacco e il Vesuvio” 213-214). But Diodorus Siculus was the first author to state that: “This plain was called Phlegraean (“fiery”) from the mountain which of old spouted forth a huge fire as Aetolia did in Sicily; at this time, however, the mountain is called Vesuvius and shows many signs of the fire which once raged in those ancient times.” (IV, 21, 5).

Though the sources spoke of the signs of Vesuvius’ volcanic activity (Cassius Dio, 1914-1927, pp. LXVI, 21), it was not until the great eruption of A.D. 79 that the ancients realized the true nature of the mountain and its permanent menace.

The eruption of 79 had been preceded by several seismic events such as an earthquake in A.D. 37 in the Island of Capri, a more devastating one in A.D. 62 and, shortly after, in A.D. 64, the theatre in Naples crumbled after Nero’s performance (Tacitus XV, 34, 1). These events should have provoked a rising anxiety in Campania in the second half of the 1st century C.E. as testified by the frescoes from Pompeii depicting expiatory ceremonies and *ex-votos* offered by the survivors (Van Andringa 74, 87, 92).

The ancient references to the eruption of A.D. 79 present the catastrophe in an apocalyptic view, melting real events with mythological allusions.

The most famous accounts of this eruption are two letters addressed by Pliny the Younger to the historian Tacitus (Plinius Minor VI, 16; 20). The content of these two letters is well known and has been studied and analyzed by scholars from different domains of science (Gigante, “Il racconto pliniano” 322-323). Due to their

⁵⁸ We have to note that the Greeks and the Romans had not any specific name for describing the category “volcano”.

notoriety, I won't insist on these two letters. What interests me here is not the "scientific" Plinian approach, but the image the author creates of the volcano.

The letters are constructed on the principle of antithesis. At a visual level, we have the opposition between shadow and light, and between white and black. The "fair" Campania (Plinius Minor VI, 16, 9) is replaced by an eternal night, where the only light comes from Vesuvius' flames. Even though Pliny does not mention textually the "dark" mythology related to Campania, the picture he gives resembles the Underworld with its eternal darkness, its fires and its torments. In this scenery, the sunlight does not bring reassurance. In fact the sun is not shining; it has a yellowish appearance as during the eclipse. Its function is negative for it shows the disastrous effects of the eruption – a land deserted and covered in ashes (Plinius Minor VI, 20, 18).

Cassius Dio's account on the same events is more influenced by mythology (LXVI, 21-23). In particular, he must have had in mind the episode of the war between the Giants and the Olympian gods. The first part of the account is a digression about Mount Vesuvius (Cassius Dio LXVI, 21). Vesuvius appears to be "an exhaustible fountain of fire". Its slopes "support both trees and vines in abundance, but the crater is given over to the fire and sends up smoke by day and a flame by night; in fact, it gives the impression that quantities of incense of all kinds are being burned in it" (Cassius Dio LXVI, 21, 3). The description of the eruptions begins with the image of the Giants. They appear as shadows, wandering on the mountain, in the surrounding country and through the cities (Cassius Dio LXVI, 22, 2). The subterranean rumblings are associated with the thunder, an allusion to Jupiter's weapon and the explosion provoked by the eruption is compared to a new revolt of the Giants (Cassius Dio LXVI, 23, 1).

In evoking the consequences of the eruption, Dion does not pay much attention to the landscape. More interest is paid to the emperor's reaction at learning about the calamity. He mentions that the emperor himself went in the region to evaluate the damages, and then, he sent two former senators to attend the needs of the Campanians (Cassius Dio LXVI, 24, 1-3).

The poet Statius, a native Campanian, makes many interesting references to the eruption. In a poem of lament over his deceased father, Statius describes his father's feeling confronted to the tragedy (V, 3). He compares the brunt of the Roman Capitol, during the civil war of A.D. 69 with the eruption. His father wrote in that occasion a lamentation and, according to Statius, intended to do the same for the eruption. The comparison of the two events is not a fortuitous one, for the fire that destroyed the Capitol is a symbolic anticipation of the eruption (Statius V, 3, 196). In a poem dedicated to a friend, Vitorius Marcellus, Statius appears pessimistic about the future of the region. Vesuvius' summit, even after the eruption of A.D. 79, was still capable of producing an equal devastating catastrophe, *letale minari* (Statius IV, 4, 78-86). On other occasions, Statius spoke optimistically about the post-eruption reconstruction process. A major problem such as depopulation was presented both humorously and full of hope for a new era of prosperity. For example, Statius encouraged his wife to go to Naples assuring her that the eruption did not empty Campania of men and their daughter could find a proper husband there (III, 5, 78-86). In another poem, Statius praised his friend for being blessed

with a child. This birth was important not only for his friend's family but for the entire region (Statius IV, 8, 4-5).

A more striking impression on the reception of the eruption of 79 is given by the references in mythological and historical poems such as *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus or *Punica* of Silius Italicus. In these poems, the eruption has an epic function describing situations and characters. Flaccus compares the eruption and its violent spread of ashes with a battle (III, 208-211; IV, 507-511). Silius Italicus' most interesting allusion to the eruption is related to the second Punic war. He inserts an imaginary Vesuvian eruption inspired by that of A.D. 79 in a series of natural disasters announcing the Roman defeat at Cannae (Silius Italicus VIII, 653-655).

Conclusions

Due to its geographical characteristics, Campania had an ambiguous image in ancient classical sources. Firstly, due to its fertile soils, Campania was famous for its vines and grains. Hot springs, numerous in this area, were very popular in Ancient World and contributed to the development and the urbanization of Campania. The calm sea favoured navigation and, by consequence, trade. This fruitfulness had also "a dark" side. In a philosophical stoic view, prosperity brings corruption and the Campanians' way of life became synonym for luxuria. A more negative image, we could even call it "hellish", imposed itself soon after the great eruption of A.D.79. Campania and Mount Vesuvius tend to identify themselves with Hades.

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