Vesuvius, Etna, Stromboli, Vulcano: symbolic dimension of active volcanoes in southern Italy

Vesubio, Etna, Stromboli, Vulcano: dimensión simbólica de volcanes activos en el sur de Italia

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Artículo científico

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Abstract

The altitude, shape, prominence and explosive manifestations of volcanoes in southern Italy have contributed to an elaborated traditional syncretism between preRoman, Roman and Christian beliefs; as well as religious rituals oriented to prevent or appease the destructive forces unleashed during eruptions. Mount Etna in Sicily and Fossa di Vulcano in the Aeolians appear in Classical mythology as the abode of Hephaestus, the Greek god of metalwork, later called Vulcano by the Romans. Constantly active for the last 2000 years, Stromboli is known as "the lighthouse of the Tyrrhenian". Mount Epomeo and the hot springs on the island of Ischia are also interpreted in connection with the mythology of giants, which accounts for the secondary manifestations of volcanic activity in the Phlegraean Fields of the Gulf of Naples. This paper analyzes the symbolic dimension and religious role of active volcanoes in southern Italy, starting with the worldrenowned Vesuvius and its historic eruption, which covered in ashes and mud the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Additionally, venerated relics of Catholic saints, such as Saint Genaro or Saint Agatha, are also analyzed in connection to their protective role against the potentially destructive eruptions of Italian volcanoes.

Keywords: sacred mountains - active volcanoes - southern Italy - history

Resumen

La altitud, la forma, la prominencia y las manifestaciones explosivas de los volcanes del sur de Italia han contribuido a un elaborado sincretismo tradicional entre las creencias prerromanas, romanas y cristianas, así como a rituales religiosos orientados a prevenir o apaciguar las fuerzas destructivas desatadas durante las erupciones. El monte Etna

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en Sicilia y la Fossa di Vulcano en las Eolias aparecen en la mitología clásica como la morada de Hefesto, el dios griego de la metalurgia, más tarde llamado Vulcano por los romanos. Activo de manera constante durante los últimos 2000 años, Stromboli es conocido como "el faro del Tirreno". El monte Epomeo y las aguas termales de la isla de Ischia también se interpretan en relación con la mitología de los gigantes, que explica las manifestaciones secundarias de la actividad volcánica en los Campos Flégreos del golfo de Nápoles. Este artículo analiza la dimensión simbólica y el papel religioso de los volcanes activos en el sur de Italia, comenzando por el mundialmente famoso Vesubio y su histórica erupción, que cubrió de cenizas y lodo las ciudades romanas de Pompeya y Herculano. Además, también se analizan las reliquias veneradas de santos católicos, como san Genaro o santa Ágata, en relación con su papel protector contra las erupciones potencialmente destructivas de los volcanes italianos.

Palabras clave: montañas sagradas - volcanes activos - sur de Italia - historia

Introduction

The historic and symbolic dimension of mountains is increasingly becoming the focus of academic analysis, considering the many ways in which volcanoes and sacred peaks work in the strengthening of local identity, the preservation of heritage, and the development of cultural tourism. Rituals and beliefs around sacred mountains offer a key to understanding important aspects of folklore and popular devotions—such as the cult of relics and pilgrimages—which play a significant part in the history of mentalities and religions.

Around the mountains of the Italian peninsula, an elaborated syncretism has been interwoven between ancient beliefs, deities introduced by the Roman Empire, and Christianity. The Pennine Alps in northern Italy are named after "Giove Penino", a wellknown Roman deity (Jupiter or Giove) "adapted" to the Celtic Lord of the Forest (Pan), eventually replaced by the Catholic devotion to san Bernardo de Aosta (Ceruti, 2019a). On the eastern side of the Alpine Arch, the extreme verticality of the Dolomites has inspired syncretic popular beliefs about dragons, sorcerers, giants and witches (cfr. Ceruti, 2017; 2018a; 2020a).

In central Italy, the highest elevations of the Apennine range are historically and symbolically connected to Roman myths and pontifical figures of the Catholic Church (Ceruti, 2020b). On the Pontine coast of Lazio, Mount Circeo is linked to mythical figures of the GrecoRoman world, such as the hero Ulysses, the god Jupiter and the sorceress Circe (Ceruti, 2019b). Near the Adriatic coast of Puglia, mount Gargano has been historically connected to the Roman cult of the bull, subsequent apparitions of the Arch-

angel Saint Michael, medieval hermits known as "*pulsanenses*" and the monastery of the worldrenowned XX century saint, Padre Pio of Pietrelcina (Ceruti, 2014a). Coastal promontories in the south of Sardinia are crowned with altars from the PhoenicianPunic period, where cinerary urns were placed with charred children's remains and sandstone steles representing miniatures of buildings dedicated to ancient worship (cfr. Ceruti, 2018b).

The principal volcanoes in the southern part of Italy, to which this paper is dedicated, offer additional examples of syncretism between preRoman, imperial and Christian beliefs, as well as material evidences of ancient rituals, oriented to appease their destructive forces. The conic shape, altitude and prominence of volcanoes, all work in favor of the conception of these mountains as places of power; a perception that is historically and geographically enhanced by the explosive manifestations of volcanic activity.

In these pages I analyze the symbolic dimension and social impact of the main volcanoes in southern Italy, starting with the worldrenowned Vesuvius and its historic eruption, which covered in ashes and mud the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Mount Epomeo and the hot springs on the island of Ischia are analyzed in connection to the mythology of giants, which also accounts for the secondary manifestations of volcanic activity in the Phlegraean Fields overlooking the Gulf of Naples.

Active volcanoes in the extreme south of Italy, such as Mount Etna in Sicily or Fossa di Vulcano in the Aeolian archipelago, appear in Classical mythology as the abode of Hephaestus, the Greek god of metalwork; later known as Vulcano among the Romans. Constantly active for the last 2000 years, Stromboli is known as "the lighthouse of the Tyrrhenian".

Last but not least, venerated relics of Catholic saints, such as Saint Genaro or Saint Agatha, are also analyzed in connection to their protective role against the potentially destructive manifestations of volcanic eruptions.

Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii and Herculaneum

Vesuvius has been considered a sacred mountain for more than two millennia. Ancient Romans called it "*Giove Sacro Vesubio*", indicating a connection with *Giove* or Jupiter, the Roman version of the Greek god Zeus, a divinity known to dwell on mighty summits.

The SommaVesuvius complex is composed of two concentric volcanic structures that rise from a common base (Abatino, 2004). The pinnacle named Somma has been inactive for thousands of years, whereas Vesuvius—"the great cone"—became famous for its destructive activity during the first century AD.

A massive eruption of Vesuvius took place in August of 79 AD and lasted for three days, extinguishing the lives of more than 2000 people. As a result of the catastrophe, the city of Pompeii ended up covered in seven meters of ashes and lapilli; and the city of Her-

culaneum by a fifteen-meter-thick mudflow or *lahar*. In his letter to Tacitus, Plinius the Younger recorded aspects of this highly destructive volcanic incident.

Built on a terrace of Vesuvian lava that overlooks the river Sarno, and combining local Etruscan culture and Greek heritage, ancient Pompeii had become an important city under the Roman Empire. Severely affected by earthquakes in the year 62 AD, it was undergoing reconstruction at the time when it ended up being destroyed by the unexpected explosive eruption of Vesuvius (Figure 1). Archaeological excavations in the XIX and XX centuries revealed a considerable wealth of architecture, sculptures, frescoes and mosaics in an extraordinary state of preservation.

Public architecture in Pompeii included administration buildings, the *forum*, a basilica for the administration of justice; markets, granaries, cafeterias (*thermopolium*), Roman baths— complete with *frigidarium, tepidarium* and *caldarium*—a gymnasium (*palestra*) and a brothel or *lupanare*, famous for its erotic frescoes. Monumental architecture comprised a large elliptical amphitheater used for gladiator battles, which offered commanding views of Mount Vesuvius, as well as a great theater and a small one, additionally destined for the public plays of mimes and pantomimes. Funerary architecture and burial sites were located near the different gates of the city, in the necropolis of *Porta Ercolano, Porta Vesuvio, Porta Nocera* and *Porta Nola*.

Domestic architecture can be examined in dozens of houses named after the owners and/or their professions (i.e., "house of the surgeon", "house of the baker", "house of Caecilius Jucundus"). Mosaics, frescoes, sculptures and instruments have remained exquisitely preserved in the domestic units, as a consequence of the volcanic ashes that covered the city. Villa of Mysteries is one of the dozens of villas discovered in the Vesuvian area, planned as town "getaways", and embedded in a Greek ambiance, with wonderfully preserved frescoes which depict detailed ritual scenes.

Religious architecture in Pompeii included an ancient Doric temple consecrated to Athena and Hercules; a *capitolium*, dedicated to the worship of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva; a sanctuary for the public Lares, a well preserved temple of Apollo, a temple of Asclepius; and a temple of Venus, one of the most visually captivating buildings, enhanced by a commanding view of Mount Vesuvius.

The tragedy of the 79 AD eruption can be grasped in the dramatic plaster casts that reproduce the shapes and positions of the bodies of residents who were trying to flee from their deaths (Figure 2). In the late XIX century, excavators poured liquid plaster into the cavities formed in the volcanic sediment by the decomposition of the bodies of those who had been killed by the ardent cinder clouds. A few plaster casts of victims of the eruption are on display at the Forum Granary; others can be seen *in situ*, at the socalled "garden of the fugitives".

Figure 1
Vesuvius and the Roman city of Pompeii (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Figure 2
Cast of ancient Pompeian victim of the 79 AD eruption of Vesuvius (© María Constanza Cerut i)

The Roman city of Herculaneum (Ercolano) ended up buried under extensive mudflows caused by the eruption of Vesuvius. Streets and houses were covered up to an average elevation of sixteen meters, which allowed for the preservation of the upper floors of the buildings (Figure 3). Unlike the neighboring city of Pompeii, the extraordinary conditions at Herculaneum contributed to the preservation of organic material such as textiles, wood-

en beams that were part of the buildings, a wooden ship, and human bones. Killed by the cinder clouds from the eruption, as many as three hundred skeletons of residents were discovered inside the ruins of vaulted storage buildings in the port of Herculaneum.

Mount Vesuvius has changed its appearance with each subsequent major eruption, until the last one, which took place in 1944. Yet the massive eruption in the first century AD seemingly affected the overall shape of the mountain: a Roman fresco discovered at the Centennial House of Pompeii shows Bacchus dressed in grapes, and a hardly recognizable Mount Vesuvius in the backdrop, with vineyards covering its slopes. Another fresco, found in the catacomb of Saint Genaro, which dates back to the VII century AD, depicts the volcano with two distinctive peaks (Abatino, 2004, pp. 57).

Nowadays, Vesuvius is 1276 meters high and has the shape of a truncated cone. Located on the top, the crater is about 600 meters wide, with a depth of 300 meters (Abatino, 2004, p. 7). The small active cone inside the rim has now disappeared, but fumes are still visible near the highest section of the outer crater (Figure 4). The summit could originally be climbed with an expert guide (as I did during my ascent in 2002); but in more recent years it has remained offlimits (as documented in 2018). It offers unobstructed views of the Gulf of Naples, the volcanoes in the Phlegraean Fields, and the island of Ischia.

In the early XIX century, tourists ascended Vesuvius on mules, guided by local farmers; and towards the end of the century, a funicular cableway was inaugurated—and soon immortalized in the popular folk song *Funiculi, Funicula*. Nowadays, it is possible to get close to the summit crater by coach or by car, and after a final milelong walk up hill, the dome of the crater can be admired from a lookout point built in the lowest part of the rim.

Figure 3
Ruins of the Roman city of Herculaneum (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Figure 4
Summit crater of Vesuvius
(© María Constanza Ceruti)

San Genaro (Saint Januarius) is the patron saint of Naples. The coagulated blood of the martyr is preserved as a relic in the local cathedral; and it is known to miraculously become liquid again, every year, at the festivity of the saint. During my ascent to the summit of Vesuvius, I learnt from a local volcanologist that the blood of San Genaro is also worshipped as a symbolic means of protection against lava flows from Vesuvius. Residents in Naples believe that their city will remain protected from the rage of potential volcanic eruptions as long as the blood of San Genaro is properly preserved and venerated.

Mount Epomeo in Ischia, the Phlegraean Fields and a mythology of giants in the Gulf of Naples

The area to the northwest of the city of Naples is known as the Phlegraean Fields or *Campi Flegrei*. Its name derives from a Greek word that stands for "burning", and it perfectly describes a landscape dotted with extinct craters, hot springs and fumes. The Phlegraean coast preserves important archaeological ruins dating back to the ancient Romans, such as the port of Julius, currently submerged as a consequence of subsidence. Interestingly, popular folklore attributes the sinking to the wrath of Saint Paul.

Occupied since Roman times, the village of Pozzuoli became depopulated after an eruption in 1538 AD, which created Monte Nuovo, locally described as "the youngest

mountain in continental Europe". The Solfatara volcano, with its elliptic crater, still exhibits impressive fumaroles, sulfur streams, small cones that spit hot mud, and bubbling jets of sand. Due to its volcanic origin, Lake Avernus has traditionally been considered as one of the entrances to Hades.

Classic mythology about giants locked beneath mountains, aptly accounts for these diverse manifestations of secondary volcanic activity. Hephaestus allegedly caused a giant called Minas—brother of Encelado—to end up buried under Vesuvius. Consequently, the eruptions of the volcano were interpreted as the breathing of the giant; earthquakes were said to be caused by his movements while trying to free himself; and the boiling reddish mud in the Phlegraean Fields was thought to be his blood (Buchner & Gialanella, 1994).

A beautiful volcanic island in the Gulf of Naples, Ischia, was called Aenaria by the Romans, and had been previously named Pithecusae by Greek colonists who arrived around 770 BC (Figure 5). Archaeological evidence of the early occupation of Ischia include *aryballos* and other kinds of classical pottery, which demonstrate the remarkable extension of the ancient nets of commerce, with exotic objects coming to southern Italy from Greece, Etruria, Egypt and Syria. The highest peak in Ischia, Mount Epomeo, is occasionally climbed for recreational purposes. Interestingly, I have photographed evidence of ritual activities in the deposition of "love locks" on its summit (Figure 6).

Figure 5
Mount Epomeo in Ischia (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Figure 6
Lovelock on the summit of Mount Epomeo (© María Constanza Ceruti)

The volcanic origin of the island is connected in the Greek myth of Tifeo, a rebel giant condemned by Zeus/Giove to be trapped underneath Pithecusae. The hot springs and fumes in Ischia were traditionally explained in connection to the "vital functions" of this mythic giant; and the earthquakes were attributed to his "movements". Ischia continued to be called "the island of Tifeo" by Latin poet Virgilio; and the association with the mythical giant was also reinforced in the writings of Petrarca and other Italian writers of the *Rinascimento*.

Narrated by Homer in the *Iliad*, the myth of Tifeo also linked the volcanic activity in the region of Campania with that of the southernmost tip of Italy. According to Pindaro, the body of giant Tifeo extended all the way down to Mount Etna, on the island Sicily (Buchner & Gialanella, 1994).

Mount Etna, a furnace of the gods

Important archaeological sites in the island of Sicily were designed to take advantage of the majestic view of Mount Etna. Such is the case of Taormina, the ancient city of Tauromenion, founded by the Greek in 328 BC. The town virtually hangs from the slopes of the Tauro Mountain, overlooking the Ionic Sea. There is little room for doubt about the prominent role that Etna plays in the backdrop of the GrecoRoman theater at Taormina: the amphitheater was carefully oriented so that the audience could simultaneously enjoy the view of the volcano and the coastline below (Figure 7).

At the marbled coastal city of Siracusa, the ancient capital of Sicily, the white volcanic layers are perforated with underground rock formations, such as the emblematic "Ear of Dionisio" or the "Grotta dei Cordari". Since the VI century AD, some of those natural caves and troglodyte burial sites were reused as cellars for the reclusion of hermits and monks.

The Greek ceremonial complex at the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento is not in direct view of Mount Etna, due to its distant location on the southern side of the island. However, amidst temples consecrated to the Chthonic deities and Zeus, the valley also houses a temple dedicated to Vulcano, the mountain deity believed to dwell inside the active crater of Etna.

Classic mythology describing giants locked beneath mountains used to account for diverse manifestations of volcanic activity around Mount Etna. According to Virgilio, a mythical giant named Encelado was locked and buried under Mount Etna by Athena herself, as punishment for having rebelled against the deities of Mount Olympus. His brother Minas also got imprisoned under Vesuvius, by Hephaestus. Consequently, the boiling reddish muds in the Phlegraean Fields were thought to be the blood of Minas, and the eruptions of Etna were interpreted as the breath of Encelado.

Rising 3340 meters above sea level, on the eastern side of Sicily, Mount Etna is the highest volcano in the island. The stratovolcano initiated its eruptive activity around 50 000 years ago, and its present surface covers approximately 1250 km^2. In addition to being considered among the most active volcanoes in the world, Etna is one of the most active volcanoes in Europe. Its activity is characterized as "moderated and persistent", with emissions of gas and cinder followed by short periods of stillness, and sporadic lava flows.

The summit area of Etna rises above 2900 meters and comprises a central crater, a northeastern crater and a southwestern crater, which are frequently swept by fumes of ammonium and sulfur (Figure 8). The main summit of the volcano is known as Mongibello, or "mountain of mountains", according to the Arab roots of the name—in Arab "gebel" stands for "mountain". Subsequent eruptions have modified the landscape around the Mongibello, creating secondary craters, lava flows, lava bombs and lava caves, which are all part of the volcanic system of Etna. Some of the satellite craters, located between 1800 and 2500 meters above sea level, formed in the XXI century.

Greek mythology portrayed Mount Etna as the abode of the god of fire and metalwork. After being cast off from the Greek Olympus due to his deformed appearance, Hephaestus allegedly took residence inside the active crater of this particular volcano. The fumes rising from the summit of Etna were thus interpreted—by Greek sailors—as a clear sign that Hephaestus was busy with his customary metalwork. Romans later assimilated the volcanic deity of the Greek into their own pantheon, as the blacksmith god of fire, with the name of Vulcano (Bernbaum, 1990, p. 106).

Although Pindaro described the volcano as a "celestial column"—a poetic notion seemingly borrowed from traditional metaphors for mountains in the eastern world—Etna was customarily perceived as "the furnace of the gods", based on its persistent and highly visible volcanic activity. Even the shield carried by the famous warrior Achilles was allegedly forged by Hephaestus in the "furnace" of Mount Etna, with the assistance of the Cyclopes.

According to Homer, one of the Cyclopes, Polifemo, dwelled at Mount Etna; and alternatively, at the rocky outcrops of Aci Trezza, in a section of the Ionic coastline known as the "Rivera of the Cyclopes". Polifemo was also associated with a cave that carries his name (Grotta di Polifemo), located at Cape Milazzo, in the northern part of Sicily (Apolodoro, 1950, p. 146).

In the mythology of the first Greek colonists, bad weather and tempests were also connected to Mount Etna. The terrible Tifeo was allegedly casted to the depths of Mount Etna by Zeus himself, after a lengthy persecution all over the mountains of Tracia; and the tongues of fire that came out from the volcano were consequently interpreted as caused by Zeus's weaponry of lightning and thunder (Apolodoro, 1950, p. 27).

Built on a flat promontory in the central plateau of Sicily, the citadel of Enna has some interesting links to the mythology around Mount Etna. Crowning the highest point of a promontory at the edge of the citadel, a conspicuous outcrop known as "the rock of Ceres" is carved with canals and basins that were part of an ancient shrine dedicated to the goddess of fertility and agriculture. The shrine was presumably used in ancient times to perform animal sacrifices and offerings of primes. The rock of Ceres offers a commanding view of the distant Mount Etna, as well as that of nearby Lake Pergusa. Mythology links Etna (one of the abodes of Vulcano), the sacred rock of Ceres and Lake Pergusa in the legendary kidnapping of Proserpina, the daughter of Ceres and Jupiter, who was allegedly dragged by Vulcano to the depths of Lake Pergusa.

Figure 7
Mount Etna and the GrecoRoman theater in Taormina (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Figure 8
Summit crater of Mount Etna in Sicily (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Greek author Pausanias described offerings of gold and silver vessels, as well as sacrificial victims thrown into the active crater of Etna for divination purposes (Bradley, 2000, p. 24). If existed, such ancient offerings would have been inevitably obliterated by the ulterior volcanic activity. No signs of modern worship were visible on the summit area of Mount Etna during an ascent I undertook in 2009. But in spite of Sicilian residents customarily denying "pagan rituals" that might still take place in connection to the mountain, Christianity has enshrined the relics of a female saint, allegedly capable of stopping the lava flows that threaten the cities and villages at the foot of the volcano.

Erected near the ancient Achillian thermal springs and constructed in dark gray volcanic stone from the slopes of Mount Etna, the cathedral of Catania houses the relics of Agatha, the patron saint of the main port city in western Sicily (Figure 9). The relics are preserved inside a clay sculpture reproducing the features of the martyr, together with considerable wealth in gold and jewelry—carefully concealed out of sight and behind bars, having often been targeted by plunderers. The relics are shown to the devotees only once a year, on July the 2nd. The mummified remains of a local bishop (who passed away in 1988) are permanently exhibited—with a bronzed mortuary mask—in an adjacent crystal case.

The robes ("*le vestite*") that cover the relics of Saint Agatha have been used in connection to historic eruptions of Mount Etna, since they are allegedly endowed with the ability to stop lava flows from advancing towards Catania. This ritual action to appease the volcano was performed for the first time on February 5th 253 AD, only a year after the martyrdom of Agatha, when the veil of her sepulcher was used to stop a lava flow descending from Mount Etna. The ritual has been repeated throughout the history of

Catania—up to recent times—with variable degrees of efficacy (i.e., the procedure was not deemed particularly successful during the eruption of 1669).

Residents in Catania show respect towards Etna; but they are not terrified of the eruptions, since they firmly believe that the volcano "will give them time to escape". As far as I could observe *in situ* during my ascent, there were no obvious evidence of worship directed towards the volcano (as with offerings presented near the active craters). However, there are several shrines on the outskirts of the mountain town of Nicolosi that have been erected by popular devotion, in times when lava flows have threatened the village. Although the town is permanently endangered by eruptions—and has been repeatedly shaken by earthquakes and covered in ashes—Nicolosi has always stood in the same place, on the lower skirts of Mount Etna, since the construction of the Benedictine monastery of San Nicoló L'Arena in medieval times. Nicolosi is proudly considered as "the gateway to Etna".

Figure 9
Cathedral of Saint Agueda in Catania (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Vulcano, a fuming crater in the Aeolian Islands

Located to the northeast of Sicily, in the Tyrrhenian Sea, the majestic Aeolian archipelago comprises seven islands, with a common history and unique geological features: Lipari, Panarea, Vulcano, Salinas, Stromboli, Alicudi and Filicudi. The islands of Lipari and Panarea (ancient Hycesia) are the most intensely visited by tourists, and they offer the best examples of Aeolian architecture, with its characteristic whitewashed and pastel square houses built in volcanic stone. Alicudi and Filicudi are the remotest and most isolated, with preserved sections of ancient stonepaved trails and staircases that communicate the small villages in the islands.

Volcanoes dominate the Aeolians and contribute to their landscape's sacred dimension. Salinas has twin volcanic cones rising about 900 meters above sea level and a church on the saddle between them, which functions as an important pilgrimage center. The ancient name of the island Didyme (= "twins") was inspired by the two volcanoes, which have remained apparently dormant throughout historic times, in spite of signs of secondary activity such as underwater fumes and gas emanations.

The Aeolians were repeatedly visited during the Neolithic due to their abundance of obsidian. In the Bronze Age, islanders settled on visible promontories that crowned the capes, such as Capo Milazzese at Panarea and Capo Graziano, at the "*montagnola*" (little mountain) in Filicudi. They constructed distinctive enclosures called "*capanas*" and became involved in commerce across the Mediterranean. Greek colonists from Cnido arrived around the VI century BC. Romans eventually controlled the Aeolian archipelago, and they cleverly used local volcanic resources—as attested by the Roman baths in Lipari, which took advantage of the preexisting hot springs in the island.

Intensive raids by Arab pirates marked the medieval period and preceded ulterior occupations by the Normans and the crown of Aragon. The archipelago also became a haven for the French corsairs in the XVII and XVIII centuries (Brea & Cavalier, 1996).

The island of Vulcano is formed by four volcanoes: Lentia, Vulcano Piano, Fossa di Vulcano and Vulcanello. The largest one is the active crater named Fossa di Vulcano, which rises over 300 meters above sea level. The bottom of the crater is located at an elevation of 208 meters, and the summit reaches 362 meters. It takes about one hour to climb from the foot to the top of the volcano (Figure 10).

The highest point is crowned by a large cairn of stones, which overlooks the vast lunar landscape of the central crater (Figure 11). While the outer rim is swept by strong winds, the deepest section of the inner rim is saturated with acidic fumes, and it has been used historically as a sulfur mine. One of the lasts recorded eruptions of Fossa di Vulcano took place in 1890 and caused cinder outbursts and lava bombs.

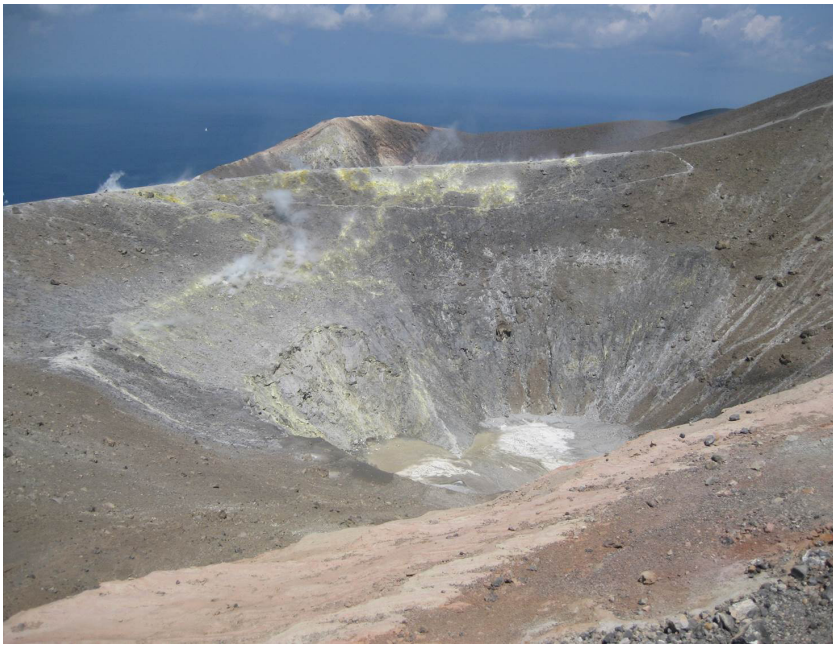

Figure 10
Active crater in the Aeolian Island of Vulcano (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Figure 11
Cairn of stones on the summit of Fossa di Vulcano (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Secondary volcanic activity in the island has given rise to boiling mud, thermal springs, underwater fumes, and geothermal pools which are currently used as tourist attractions. The island is also famous for its black sand beaches, coastal cliffs and the "Valley of the Monsters", with solidified lava outcrops eroded by rain and wind.

Known as the "island of fire", Vulcano was considered a sacred destination in ancient times, to which Greek colonists gave the name of "*Hiera*". The island was also believed to be the abode of Aeolus, the Greek god of wind. But the permanent activity of the summit crater meant that Vulcano was primarily conceived as another "furnace of the gods", where Hephaestus devoted himself to his metalwork with the assistance of the Cyclopes. The local importance acquired by the Greek deity of volcanoes is attested archaeologically in the evidence of ancient coins that portrayed him. In the *Iliad*, Homer mentioned that Vulcano dwelled in the island that carried his name.

Medieval monks found shelter in the remote island of Vulcano, where they soon interpreted the summit as the entrance to the Christian hell. The "infernal" crater was "haunted" by "condemned souls and devils", whose "lamentations" could be heard in the gas explosions. Towards the end of the X century, a local hermit allegedly referred a vision of German king Teodorico being thrown into the crater, on the very same day the monarch died.

Volcano Stromboli and its lava fountains

The island of Stromboli has been inhabited since the Bronze Age, due to its strategic position for the control of Mediterranean traffic, as well as the abundance of obsidian on the slopes of its towering volcano. Nowadays, it is home to approximately 700 *strombolani*, who live in small, isolated fishing villages on two sides of the mountain. Local residents look upon the active volcano with utmost respect, as they are recurrently forced to evacuate due to the danger of eruptions and tidal waves.

The island was originally named in Greek as "Strongyle", after its rounded shape. Interestingly, an identical name had been given, in Minoan times, to the rounded Aegean island of Santorini, before the cataclysmic eruption that created its semilunar volcanic caldera (Ceruti, 2014b).

Stromboli is a nearly perfect conic stratovolcano with abrupt ashy slopes that rises 924 meters above sea level (Figure 12). One of the slopes of the volcano is known as the "stairway of fire" (*sciara del fuoco*), since it is occasionally bathed in the lava that spills from the crater. The islet of Strombolicchio resembles a medieval castle and is part of a larger, underwater volcanic caldera.

Boat excursions are customarily conducted at sunset, to better appreciate the eruptions of mount Stromboli from the sea. The volcano has been constantly active for the last 2000 years, and it is therefore known as "the lighthouse of the Tyrrhenian". Its normal activity, known as "Strombolian cycle", involves frequent explosions of intermediate intensity alternated with occasional cinder outbursts and lava flows.

Figure 12
Volcano Stromboli in the Aeolian Archipelago (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Perceived as a sacred and "untouchable" mountain, Stromboli was part of the mythological kingdom of Aeolus, the Greek deity of wind, historically worshiped with offerings presented into votive circular cysts known as "*bothros*". The island is supposedly endowed with a particular vital energy, which has inspired a diverse array of local artistic productions.

In an ascent completed in 2009, I noticed that eruptions and lava fountains in the summit crater tended to occur at intervals of ten to twenty minutes. The summit used to be visited in guided ascents that required about three hours climbing along the steep southwest side of the volcano, to reach a natural terrace located at 918 meters, two hundred meters above the active crater. From this natural outlook point, at sunset, the lava fountains and cinder explosions offer one of the most magnificent volcanic views on the planet. After an hour of contemplation, we took advantage of the ashy scree on the southeastern side of the mountain for a quick descent back to the Aeolian village of San Vicenzo.

Lipari and the crypt mummies of Quattropani

Lipari is the largest island in the Aeolian archipelago, as well as the most developed. It is named after Liparo, a legendary chief and descendant of the first Ausonian king, who ruled back in the XIII century BC.

The largest town, also named Lipari, is located near a highly visible promontory, used as an acropolis in ancient times. In addition to a GrecoRoman necropolis, the area had a "*bothros*" shrine, a cyst meant to receive offerings presented for Aeolus, the Greek god of wind, after whom the archipelago was named. Norman cloisters, castles and numerous churches were built in Lipari during the Middle Ages.

From a volcanic standpoint, the island was much more active in the past. According to early written sources, local women abstained from drinking wine in order to appease the eruption from Mount Pelato. Some of the most distinctive beaches in Lipari, such as the white pumice beaches on the northeastern side of the island, resulted from lava flows that occurred in historic times.

Located in the mountainous center of the island, the village of Quattropani has an old chapel built in the XVI century and dedicated to Santa Maria della Catena. The church is located in a setting with a commanding view of the sea and the twin volcanoes in the nearby island of Salinas. From 1882 until 1923 the crypt of the church was used as the local cemetery. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, the crypt remained closed; but in the XXI century, the local priest decided to reopen it to the public.

I was invited to visit the village church in Quattropani by a resident who worked in Lipari, at the family hotel where I was staying. His cousin lived next door to the Quattropani church, kept the keys to the crypt and was excited to welcome visitors to the more remote part of the island.

The entrance to the underground crypt in Quattropani was located on the left side of the main altar. Half dozen niches carved on the walls, as well as underground, contained various human remains in different stages of mummification and decay. The niches were covered—but not sealed—with glass panels, thus permitting the display of their macabre content (as well as a noticeable smell of decomposition). Infant skulls were grouped inside one of the niches, together with clay sculptures representing angels. Another niche showed a pelvic cavity still attached to some of the lumbar vertebrae. Small paper signs described the anatomic parts on display.

A large underground chamber covered with a glass ceiling was visible in an adjacent room (Figure 13). It contained the mummified bodies of three individuals. Candles had been placed on the four corners, as if to recreate the ambience of a funeral. The mummy in the center was preserved by dehydration and dressed in what appeared to be a religious garment. The two corpses on the sides were in a more advanced state of decomposition—mostly reduced to skeletons—although still wearing shoes and clothing with which they had originally been buried. They also dated back to the XIX century.

Figure 13
Mummified corpses in the crypt of the church at Quattropani, in Lipari (© María Constanza Ceruti)

Volcanic tuff and the Capuchin mummies of Palermo

The capital of Sicily, Palermo, was known in ancient times as Panormos (= "all port"). Founded by the Phoenicians on the northern coast of the island, it was later colonized by Greeks and Romans, and eventually invaded by the Arabs and the Normans. The Punic necropolis attests to the early days of the Phoenician occupation; Arab influences are clearly visible in the magnificent Cathedral, as well as in the Cuba Soprana, a palace surrounded by pools and gardens, later reused as a fortress in times of the Norman invasion.

Palermo is known worldwide for the Capuchin catacombs that house the mummies of numerous friars and ancient citizens who were laid to rest in the convent crypt. Along several corridors, dozens of mummified bodies have been placed side by side, in a vertical position, whereas a handful of bodies remain in a horizontal position within niches and open coffins. The mummies have been arranged according to social categories and occupations: there is a pavilion for women and children, and another pavilion for men. Some corridors have been destined for friars and priest; other cor-

ridors have been arranged according to diverse professions (soldiers, lawyers, medical doctors, etc.). Virtually all bodies are displayed with the attire and uniforms worn at the time when they were alive.

The hot and arid climate of Palermo, as well as the volcanic tuff in the Capuchin catacomb walls, have contributed to the natural mummification of these corpses; a feat that was first noticed in the early XVII century. Mummification techniques were later introduced to assist in the process: the bodies were initially placed on top of a rock strainer—the *colatoio*—and they were later washed with balsamic *aceto* and vinegar. Sometimes they were immersed in arsenic, or in calcium milk. A particular technique of mummification—which included the use of glycerin, zinc, alcohol and acid—was applied with extraordinary results on the remains of an infant girl named Rosalia Lombardo, who died at the end of the XIX century. Carefully displayed inside a glass coffin, her extraordinarily preserved body has become an object of popular veneration.

The Capuchin mummies have played a significant role in the construction of the social identity of modern *palermitanos*. Not only were they actively venerated with candle wakes through the XIX century, but also mentioned frequently in poems and artwork (Farella, 1982).

Considerations and conclusions

In ancient times, Vesuvius was a sacred mountain associated to the worship of Jupiter or "Giove". Its massive eruption in 79 AD covered in ashes and debris the Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, allowing for an extraordinary preservation of their exquisite archaeological heritage. However, as demonstrated in this paper, the historical and geographical impact of volcanoes in southern Italy is certainly not limited to Vesuvius. It expands towards the south of the peninsula, reaching Sicily and the archipelago of the Aeolian Islands.

Active volcanoes, such as Etna in Sicily, or Fossa di Vulcano in the Aeolians, appeared in Classical mythology as the abode of Hephaestus, the Greek god of metalwork, later known as Vulcano among the Romans. Mount Etna was singled out as the "furnace of the gods" where the legendary shield of Achilles was casted. Offerings and sacrifices were reportedly tossed into its active crater, according to Pausanias. While the ancient Greek considered the island of Vulcano as sacred—and thus called it "*hiera*"—its main crater with perpetual fumaroles became a "gateway to Hell" for the hermits and monks that dwelt in the islands in medieval times. Located in the Phlegraean Fields, near the coast of the Gulf of Naples, Lake Avernus was also perceived as an entrance to the Hades.

Aeolus, the deity of wind, was thought to dwell on the island of Vulcano, and wor-

shipped at the *bothros* in the neighboring island of Lipari. Mount Etna and Stromboli were also connected symbolically with atmospheric manifestations such as storms and tempests.

As elsewhere, the mythology of giants played a major role in the popular explanation of phenomena associated to volcanism, with seismic activity interpreted as "movements of chained giants" and eruptions perceived as their "breath". A giant called Minas was allegedly locked underneath Mount Vesuvius (by Hephaestus); another giant named Encelado was reportedly imprisoned (by Athena) underneath Mount Etna; and Tifeo, in the volcanic island of Ischia and the *Campi Flegrei*. Cyclops Polifemo was also thought to visit Mount Etna and partake in Hephaestus metalwork.

Mummies and relics still play an important part in the social and ritual life of southern Italy, from the worldknown Capuchin mummies in Palermo—and the locally renowned bones of Santa Rosalia on Mount Pellegrino in Mondello (Valdini, 2005)—to the virtually unknown mummified remains documented in the remote Aeolian village of Quattropani (and preliminarily described in this paper). Relics of Catholic saints are still believed to have the power to stop the most threatening lava flows that occasionally come down from the active volcanoes: the blood of Saint Genaro is thought to preserve the city of Naples from the dangers of Mount Vesuvius; and the robes of Saint Agatha allegedly protect the Sicilian port of Catania from the eruptions of Etna.

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