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*L'eruzione vesuviana del 1631. Una storia d'età moderna\** by Alfonso Tortora

Rome: Carocci Editore, 2014. Pp. 150. ISBN 978-88-430-6049-8. Cloth €17.00

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In the early morning of 16 December 1631, Mount Vesuvius erupted in what was one of its most destructive explosions in recorded history (after, of course, the infamously renowned event of AD 79). Between December 16th and 17th, a catastrophic combination of pyroclastic and lava flows buried and destroyed a great part of Portici, Torre del Greco, San Giorgio a Cremano, Torre Annunziata, Boscotrecase, Ottajano, Somma Vesuviana, and several other villages—including Barra, Ponticelli, and San Giovanni a Teduccio, now part of the municipality of Naples—killing about 4,000 people and thousands of cattle and other livestock. As a consequence of this disaster, a multitude of refugees sought shelter in the nearby city of Naples, whose Spanish government had to deal with an unprecedented, enormous humanitarian crisis.

From this dark, dramatic background, Alfonso Tortora takes his cue to address an extremely wide array of subjects such as history, social history, archaeology, urban geography, history of literature, philosophy, religion, politics, economics, bibliographical studies. Unfortunately, the shortness of the book does not allow him to delve into all these issues with the level of detail that they would deserve (and demand). Still, it provides a useful and complementary approach to the study of one of the most noteworthy episodes related to the Earth sciences in the early modern period.

The extreme thematic variety of this work is, at the same time, both a strength and a weakness. If, on the one side, it offers a stimulating outlook on a crucial moment in the history of Southern Italy; yet, on the other, it may disorient the reader by its sudden and loosely connected changes of topics that follow one another in a hasty sequence of just 150 pages. This is particularly evident

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\* *The Vesuvian Eruption of 1631: An Early Modern History.*

in the first chapter, ‘On the Origin of the “Vesuvian Bibliography”’ [11–51],<sup>1</sup> the content of which, however meant as an introduction to the following parts, feels too thematically disjointed from the rest of the volume.

This chapter focuses on the bibliographic work of Friedrich Furchleim, an Austrian publisher and bookseller who settled in Naples in the second half of the 19th century, and on his *Bibliografia del Vesuvio* [1897],<sup>2</sup> the first, systematic attempt to assemble an exhaustive collection of all the historical records and studies devoted to this troubled volcano. Tortora describes this work as ‘imbued with positivism’ [23],<sup>3</sup> as a result of the influence that Auguste Comte’s philosophy had on the many branches of scientific enterprise in that period. Bibliography, philology, and librarian studies were no exception to this trend, though traditionally considered as cross-boundary disciplines between humanities and science. And with particular respect to the context of Southern Italy, the efforts in the previous years by such intellectuals as the Palermitan bookseller Giuseppe Mira, with his *Manuale teorico-pratico di bibliografia* [1861],<sup>4</sup> and Tommaso Gar (a scholar from Trento, who was director of the Library of the University of Naples from 1863 to 1867), with his *Lecture di bibliologia fatte nella Regia Università degli Studi in Napoli* [1868],<sup>5</sup> paved the way for a rigorous redefinition of bibliographic methodology [26–38], eventually leading to the adoption of descriptive bibliography. The same criteria, Tortora notes, were assimilated by Furchleim and applied to his *Bibliografia*, which still today is regarded as an essential reference point for any scholar interested in the history of Vesuvius [41–51].

‘On the Background of Vesuvius’<sup>6</sup> is, in fact, the title of the second, short chapter [53–69], that abruptly shifts from the 19th to the 17th century, and from bibliography to history. But such a title is deceptive and, indeed, too narrow for a chapter with geographical limits stretching from France and Spain to the Holy Roman Empire [§§2.1, 2.3], from the Duchy of Savoy [§§2.2, 2.3] to the Republic of Venice [§2.4], and from the Republic of Genoa

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Alle origini della “bibliografia vesuviana”’.

<sup>2</sup> *Bibliography on Vesuvius*.

<sup>3</sup> ‘una nuova materialità del testo... intrisa di positivismo’.

<sup>4</sup> *Theoretical-Practical Manual of Bibliography*’.

<sup>5</sup> *Lectures on Bibliography made in the Royal University of Studies in Napoli*.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Sullo sfondo del Vesuvio’.

[§2.5] to, at last, the Kingdom of Naples [§2.6]. Actually, the author provides here a general overview of the main political, cultural, and military events that scourged and shaped Europe during the entire span of the dramatic 17th century (e.g., the bloody Thirty Years' War, the decline of Venice and Genoa, the incessant conflicts between the Sun King and the Habsburgs, and the ambitious rise of Victor Amadeus II of Savoy), leading to the gradual and inexorable decline of Spanish hegemony over the Continent to the advantage of France. The evident purpose of these pages is to act as a hasty prelude to the following part of the book, where the main subject is finally addressed in two complementary chapters: 'The Vesuvian Eruption of 1631: The Event Experienced' [71–108]<sup>7</sup> and 'The Vesuvian Eruption of 1631: The Event Described' [109–150].<sup>8</sup>

Chapter 3 opens with an evocative phrase from the Jesuit Ascanio Capece. On 30 December 1631, he wrote from Naples to Antonio, a brother of his Order in Rome, 'it was as if the whole world was in flame' [72].<sup>9</sup> As Tortora interestingly suggests, the dramatic tone of this note seems to allude to more than a (however dreadful) natural phenomenon. As the capital of the Spanish possessions in Southern Italy, Naples felt with particular sharpness the damaging effects of the Habsburg's ruinous military expenses on the region's economy and on its population, burdened as it was with constant requests for soldiers, funds, and supplies [73–75]. It is not by chance that one of the most passionate opponents of Spanish policies in Italy was Giulio Cesare Braccini, an abbot, natural philosopher, and political writer from Lucca, who wrote both a protest letter against Spain's vexatious taxes (*Discorso intorno a' donativi, che si fanno in Napoli alla Maestà del Re Cattolico* [1629])<sup>10</sup> and a detailed report on the eruption of 1631 (*Dell'incendio fattosi nel Vesuvio a XVI di dicembre MDCXXXI* [1632]).<sup>11</sup>

This second document contains far more than a merely *philosophical* dissertation about the natural disaster. Braccini was well aware that the eruption would worsen an already critical situation in the Neapolitan region, where, in the early 17th century, economic production struggled to keep up with de-

<sup>7</sup> 'L'eruzione vesuviana del 1631. L'evento vissuto'.

<sup>8</sup> 'L'eruzione vesuviana del 1631. L'evento raccontato'.

<sup>9</sup> 'Pareva che tutto il mondo ardesse'. This passage is quoted in Riccio 1889, 496.

<sup>10</sup> *Discourse about the Tributes Paid in Naples to the Catholic Majesty*.

<sup>11</sup> *On the Blaze that Occurred in Vesuvius on December 16, 1631*.

mographic growth. Sadly, his prediction was confirmed, when—according to Braccini himself and to other witnesses such as the Secretary of Neapolitan People Gianbernardino Giuliani, the Jesuit priests Capece and Giulio Cesare Recupito, the Marquis Giovan Battista Manzo, and two anonymous Spanish reporters—Naples was invaded by a desperate stream of people fleeing the ravaged rural areas [77–101].<sup>12</sup>

As in any humanitarian crisis, the dangers were many and great: social turmoil, famine, spread of epidemics, and looting, especially in the abandoned villages. These risks were not underestimated by the Spanish Viceroy, the Count of Monterrey, Manuel de Acevedo y Zúñiga. He immediately put armed guards to protect the city and the outer zones ('as fear often turns into revolt')<sup>13</sup> and involved both nobles (the so-called *gentil' homini*) and priests in assisting the refugees. Many churches and palaces in Naples were opened and used as shelters, and generous donations provided food for the indigents [84–101]. These facts are reported in great detail by the authors. In particular, Giuliani and the two unknown Spaniards insist on the exemplary behavior and courage shown by the Viceroy and by several noblemen in dealing with the emergency: a rhetorical emphasis, writes Tortora, which seems to suggest the political and ideological intent of these documents as a sort of pro-government propaganda.

Chapter 4 focuses on Braccini's report, *Dell'incendio fattosi nel Vesuvio*. Tortora examines it mainly from a cultural, sociological, and literary perspective, and (especially in §§ 4.2 and 4.3) points out the importance of the historical analogy between the event of 1631 and the iconic explosion of AD 79.

The Kingdom of Naples was a society dominated and shaped by the Counter-Reformation. In such a delicate and problematic context, learned clerics were the most suitable persons to act both as defenders of the *true* religion and as mediators between the potentially subversive content of natural philosophy and the vast mass of illiterate people. Therefore, they played a crucial role in adapting the philosophical and scientific analysis of natural phenomena to the rigorous theoretical frameworks of Catholic orthodoxy and Classical tradition. Braccini's treatise is an emblematic example of this approach, as it combines a 'technical' and philosophical description of the eruption with

<sup>12</sup> About 40,000 people, according to Capece [Riccio 1889, 497–498].

<sup>13</sup> '...essendo solita...rivolgersi la paura in seditione' [Recupito 1635, 107–108].

frequent literary references to the renowned Plinian account [142–150] along with a religious, moralistic interpretation of the disaster. Human sins—the so-called *mediocritates innominatae*, as he defines them [118]—caused divine wrath and, thus, the Vesuvian eruption, an explanation that recalls a dominant and, somehow, still unresolved issue in Western theology [118–121]. As a direct consequence of this belief, the Catholic Church (along with its secular counterpart, the Spanish government) is the only safe shelter for the penitents. Hence Braccini's insistence on the concept of miracle, which is both a source of wonder and social cohesiveness for the people and a sign of reconciliation between God and humans. In this case, of course, the famous miracle of the liquefaction of the blood of Saint Januarius had a particular devotional and, therefore, political meaning, and was considered as an omen of God's will to save the city and its population [123–133].

Once more, religion and politics merge into a single stream in an effort to strengthen the unstable relationships among the different social strata of the Kingdom. Yet, Braccini does not spare the Spanish rulers from criticism. As in his previous *Discorso intorno a' donativi*, he protests against the excessive taxes imposed on Southern Italy by Madrid. Moreover, the many references to the Plinian eruption serve to highlight the wisdom of Emperor Titus in braving the disaster of AC 79 and, thus, as a sort of admonition to the Spanish central government to follow the virtuous path traced by its illustrious precursor [133–142].

As noted before, Tortora's study has the merit of providing a remarkable and original contribution to our understanding of the social and cultural background of Southern Italy in the first half of the 17th century. Still, the issues raised by the author are so many and so important that the book is unquestionably too short to achieve a thorough, in-depth analysis of this challenging and fascinating context. It is probably because of this that not a few topics and sections seem to be loosely and hastily pasted together in the volume, and to create in the reader an odd sense of confusion. Furthermore, the lack of a bibliography and an index of names is a serious and, quite frankly, perplexing flaw, especially in light of the great importance that the author himself attributes to bibliographical studies and to Furchleim's work for a reconstruction of the history of Vesuvius.

In short, the book, though noteworthy, is excessively eclectic reading, given the contrast between its brevity and the crucial importance of the subjects

that it discusses. From this point of view, it cannot be denied that it is a partially missed opportunity.

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