

*Wanderings around Naples*  
*Part 3 – Neapolitan Funerary Matters*  
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*The Lost Stradivarius* (TLS) is very intensely connected with Death, in various ways, both real and imaginary, and this article will primarily be concerned with specific matters of a funerary nature from within the TLS text. Firstly, however, we need to offer a solution to the problem which is often generated by those who attempt to discuss Neapolitan matters.

### **A Neapolitan Proverb**

If you ask anyone to finish the popular proverb: ‘See Naples and ...’, you might well be given the word ‘... die.’ as a full response, and you might well accept it as being valid, as this sentence is frequently expressed in this way. Neapolitans have always improved the quotation a little, in their own dialect: ‘Vedi Napoli, poi muori.’ (See Naples, then die.’). The author of this pithy proverb is unknown, but it is thought to have been popularised during the period when Naples was one of the two capitals of The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (1815–1860). Goethe quoted it, from the Neapolitan form, in the English translation of his journal, *Italian Journey*, 3 March 1787.

Two problems arise. The first is easily answered, in the negative, for no city can ever justify death on its own, although Naples can reasonably be considered to have suffered more problems than most other cities in the world. The second missing element here is that it is not just the city of Naples which is lauded by its admirers, but the whole of The Bay, or Gulf, of Naples. From the summit of Vesuvius, we can view the sentinels of The Gulf, through Herculaneum, Pompeii, Sorrento, Capri, Ischia, Procida, Cape Miseno, Bagnoli, Pozzuoli, Posilipo and Naples. The major sea exit from the Gulf is the wide gap between Capri and Ischia, into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

## **The Mighty Mount Vesuvio**

We cannot possibly proceed further without discussing the feature which dominates the whole Gulf area: Mount Vesuvius. It has a history all of its own, and it is a long story. Everyone knows at least one fact about Vesuvius: the famous eruption that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum. This occurrence, in 79 CE, ultimately released one hundred thousand times the thermal energy released by the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings. Vesuvius has erupted many scores of times, including 6 in the 18th Century and 8 in the 19th. When John and Constance Maltravers arrived in Naples, there would have been many people still alive who had witnessed the 1822 eruption, a mere two decades before. (i)

The most recent explosion was in 1944, and the Volcano is described as still being active. Some optimistic specialists suggest that because there have been no eruptions for 75 years, there will probably never be any more. Some pessimistic specialists point out that the years 1500 - 1631 saw no eruptions! The 'Avellino' Vesuvian eruption, about 3,800 years ago, was some two and a half times as powerful as the 79 CE eruption. It destroyed some Bronze Age settlements and left some footprints baked into the ash. If the same eruption occurred now it would affect more than 3 million people. Plans for evasion have been organised, but it is difficult to accept the possibility of 3 million Neapolitans agreeing to follow complex traffic evacuation directions!

## **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

What we will do here is attempt to determine whether The Gulf justifies the admiration which it has received from residents and visitors over the centuries and today. There are many ways in which this might be attempted, but to simplify the process we will call upon the assistance of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in recognising events which were not worth dying for. As an avid

collector of Medieval Manuscripts and Missals, Falkner would have seen many illuminations depicting the scenes from The Book of Revelation. (ii)

To represent our first Equestrian, “Pestilence”, we have the introduction of The Black Death to mainland Europe through Naples, in 1347. Statistics have gradually improved over recent years, especially with DNA researches, and it has now been suggested that, in the first wave of The Black Death, between 1347 and 1349, between 75% to 80% of the population of the Bay of Naples died from this cruel horror. More died in each returning invasion of the Plague in the Gulf area, and it took more than 250 years for the population of Europe to regain its 1347 levels. Halfway through the 18th Century, outbreaks were still occurring. Certainly, the Temple family thought that this was the fate of their wicked ancestor, Adrian Temple. “He was last heard of in Naples, and it is believed that he succumbed during a violent outbreak of the plague which took place in Italy in the autumn of 1752.” (TLS, pp. 65-66). The Gulf area also suffered from four major visitations of another pestilential horror, Cholera, in the 19th Century, with outbreaks of Typhoid adding to the misery.

We switch, now, to the Second Horseman, “War”, with a more-recent situation, with the prolonged bombing of Neapolitan civilian targets, including hospitals and civilian air raid shelters, by British and US Air Forces, towards the end of World War II. To give some perspective, the 79 CE eruption of Vesuvius caused the deaths of less than 2,000 people, whilst the later act of war greatly surpassed that with more than 20,000 Italian deaths, even though Italy was one of the Allies for a good part of that time.

We now call upon the Third Horseman, “Famine”, with references to the prolonged failure of crops and the loss of animal foods, due to extremely bad weather conditions, in the early 14th Century. It might be claimed that there was a benefit for some members of the

populations throughout the world, in that many of the survivors began to be able to demand higher wages for their services, because of the general lack of labourers, but at what a cost for those who were already weakened when the Plague arrived.

Finally, in this section, we turn to the Fourth and final Horseman, "Death", which has already been partially dealt with in all of the above, but our equestrian approach artificially enables us to look more closely at a problem which dominates the whole of the Gulf area: caring for the dead. We will cover this topic at length, as it is extremely relevant to TLS.

### **Skulls and Crossbones**

There are many wonderful palaces and open areas in Naples, but most of the other areas are cramped and multi-storied. You can still see bakers delivering fresh bread, by rope, pulley and basket, to the occupants of multi-storeyed, two-roomed apartments in the heart of the old city! Funerals were expensive, and yet the indigent had a religious conviction that they should be buried in the grounds of their local church. Grave robbers were sometimes paid to dig up bodies and dump them in waste areas to the North of the walls of the city, for someone else to occupy the robbed grave. This sort of solution could not cope with the numbers involved during times of plague, cholera and typhoid, which required drastic measures. Initially, bodies were stored in fields and caves, such as those at Fontanelle in the Sanita district, outside of the Northern city walls.

Fortunately, there was a partial solution, in that with the volcanic base of the Vesuvio area there came a general bedrock of the local, honeycombed rock, called Tufa. Its greatest advantage is that it can easily be cut using saws, and when steam machinery became available it was possible to produce huge storage areas at minimal cost. This is what happened with the Cimitero delle Fontanelle (actually an Ossuary), one of the most incredible institutions in

Naples. There was a storm in the Northern area which swept tons of skulls and bones into the open areas. It was decided that the Cimitero delle Fontanelle should be extended and improved, with details of the dead when available. There were some 10 million bones! Citizens started visiting these cave areas regularly, and some families 'adopted' skulls and bones, often giving them ornamented wooden storage boxes, and naming the skeletons, with women claiming that they had been given the names of the inhabitants in dreams. Some skeletons were claimed to have foresight, and the most popular were those who could predict winning Lotto ticket numbers! The Catholic Church banned these activities, condemning them as being sacrilegious, but ladies continued to care for their charges, and new residents were sneaked in. It is suggested that, given Falkner's immense interest in exotic and esoteric religious concepts, the remains of Adrian Temple might, secretly, have been deposited in the Cimitero delle Fontanelle! There is, however, a far more likely and practical explanation of the secondary location of Temple's remains.



**Fontanelle Cemetery, Naples (iii)**

## The 'English Cemetery' in Naples

Like many of the cities in Italy, Naples had a church and graveyard which catered for the burial of foreigners or non-Catholics, with the cemetery usually being located outside of the city walls. The so-called 'English Cemetery' (more correctly, Il Cimitero acattolico di Santa Maria delle Fede) in Naples accepted burials from all faiths and all nationalities, and it was located outside of the Great North Gate of the city walls, close to the Piazza Garibaldi. It was opened in 1826, with the land being bought by the British Consul, Sir Henry Lushington, with the Cemetery being within the gardens of the nearby Church. The Cemetery was closed for burials in 1893, being full to overflowing by that time, with it having been fed by several waves of Cholera in Naples. By 1950 the Cemetery had long been used as a rubbish dump, and many of the graves had been damaged or stolen. At the end of the 1950s the Cemetery was handed over to the Commune of Naples, and it was cleaned up and converted into a park, with a few of the monuments being retained. The park has, once again, been wrecked, and it has become the haunt of drug dealers, with needles scattered everywhere. There are rumours that agents of the Camorra have encouraged this destruction, as these agents are attempting to have a gambling centre set up in the area.

The records of the occupants of 'The English Cemetery' are scattered or missing. I have, however, found one which has a link with both Falkner and TLS. This is with the burial monument of Agnes Jane Ross Foley, who died on 25th January 1890. She was the first wife of Nelson Foley, owner of the Villa Bechi, and of the adjacent islet of La Gaiola in Posilipo. Falkner would almost certainly have met Nelson Foley, the marine Engineer, through their mutual acquaintance, George Rendel. More pertinently, the Villa Bechi appears in TLS, disguised as the "Villa de Angelis".



**Some of the monuments still in the old 'English Cemetery'.  
(Photo courtesy of Enzo Mazzeo)**

### **The Cemetery of Santa Bibiana**

“...and he told me that he had taken measures before leaving Naples to ensure that the remains of Adrian Temple should be decently interred in the cemetery of Santa Bibiana.” (TLS pg 126)

Like my illustrious predecessor, Edward Wilson, (iv) I have been unable to identify a Santa Bibiana Cemetery in the Gulf of Naples, but I offer an alternative which may be relevant to Falkner. We know that he visited Rome on many occasions, and it is suggested here that he may have visited the small but interesting Santa Bibiana church, located close to the Termini Station in Central Rome. This small church (originally 5th Century, largely rebuilt in the 17th Century) is extremely popular, since the current church façade was designed and built by the great Gian Lorenzo Bernini (the ‘Shakespeare of the sculpting world’), and there is a wonderful statue of Santa Bibiana, by Bernini, in the church. There are numerous references to a local cemetery, and one very old reference to a wall adjacent to the church, bearing the word ‘Cemetery’.



**Santa Bibiana, Rome (v)**

### **The ‘Small Graveyard’**

There is one further reference to an Italian cemetery in TLS, made during the final carriage journey back to England. Sophia Maltravers records that John Maltravers made no further comments about what had happened in Italy. During the journey home to England, however, she records: “His only reference occurred one Sunday evening as we were passing a small graveyard near Genoa.” (TLS – p. 126). Genoa was on one of the most direct routes from Naples to England, but there is a problem in identifying “... a small graveyard ...” on the approach road to Genoa from the South. There was just such a graveyard in that area, but it did not open until 1851, when it had only four graves, whilst Sophia and John Maltravers passed that way in the 1840s. Perhaps Falkner passed that way performing commercial duties, with Genoa having Italy’s most important military and civil shipyards. The originally small cemetery is now known as the Monumental Cemetery, as it has been hugely enlarged, especially after it became a military cemetery for many nations during WW1 and WW2. The only well-known occupant of



the old part of the cemetery, with a literary connection, is Constance, the wife of Oscar Wilde.

## **Conclusion**

Some Italian historians consider that the Gulf of Naples reached its prime during the relatively short period when Naples and Palermo were the two capitals of The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, when Naples was the mainland capital of the whole of Southern Italy. The unification of Italy in 1861 was welcomed by almost everyone in Italy, but the benefits increasingly moved northward. One result of this was that the more adventurous Neapolitans migrated to other countries. I have never met a Neapolitan in Italy who did not have family in the USA or Canada!

The Gulf is now suffering from a new form of plague, with the Camorra illegally dumping tons of toxic materials (including nuclear waste), in the Gulf area. This is not just local waste, since other cities and other nations have, effectively, paid the Camorra to dispose of their dangerous waste in or near Naples. Cancer rates are accelerating rapidly. US Navy personnel residing at the Sixth Fleet HQ have been warned to avoid drinking local water and eating many local foods. The Gulf also suffers from immigration problems (legal and illegal) from Africa, leading to the existence of some of the worst slums in Europe. Unemployment in Naples is more than double that in the North of Italy, leading to increased crime. Hundreds of children, some of them aged under 10, have been withdrawn from schools by their parents, to act as door-to-door pedestrian delivery boys/girls, where they are paid one Euro per hour, with some of those children being the main breadwinners for their families. The cultural and recreational treasures of the Gulf are still there, but even so there have been decreases in funding for some of these, resulting in poor services.

This brief study through the Falknerian timeline of TLS, has demonstrated some of the dramatic changes which have affected the Gulf of Naples over the centuries. Let us hope that those who have responsibility for the future of the Region will find solutions to the current problems. Otherwise, it seems that the old proverb should be changed to:

“See Naples .... and cry.”

### **End notes**

(i). There is a superb painting by Antoine Jean-Baptiste Thomas dated 1822, showing that particular Vesuvian eruption. Procession des reliques de Saint Janvier en 1822 (available on Wikimedia Commons)

(ii). A.S.G. Edwards, 'Medieval Manuscripts Owned by J. Meade Falkner', in *The Medieval Book*, 2010

(iii). Creative Commons. Dominik Matus. (Cimitero delle Fontanelle - DM - 016.jpg)

(iv). Edward Wilson: '*Falkner All' Ombra del Vesuvio*', JMF Society Journal, Vol 1, No 3, July 2002.

(v). By Lalupa - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11820667>

**The final episode of this series will concentrate on the Villa de Angelis.**