



Lake of the Avernus

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

The Greek geographer Strabo speculated that the Campanian region of Italy had once been afire, but the fire was quenched because the fuel source was exhausted. Although Greek and Roman understanding of earth science was limited, the peculiar, igneous geomorphology of the Mediterranean region was duly noted. In addition to being highly seismic, one could find volcanos, thermal springs, and mysterious vapors that seeped from the ground, some of which burned as fire. Most of those mysterious happenings were explained through “geomythologies” connected to the Underworld, for which at least four major entrances are noted by ancient authors. One in particular, on the shores of Lake Avernus in Italy, became the most well-known because of its accessibility to western travelers.*

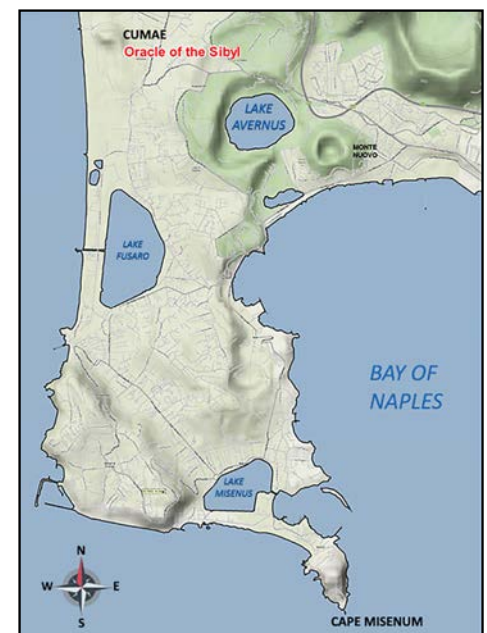
The northwest corner of the Bay of Naples is known today as the Phlegraean Fields (*Campi Flegrei*), literally the “flaming fields.” Geologists recognize this area as a volatile “supervolcano,” the main caldera of which is now at ground level. The surrounding landscape is scarred by steaming fissures, over 100 boiling pools of mud, and several craters, one of which is filled by the infamous Lake Avernus (*Lago d’Averno*). Ancient Romans knew the area well, but Greeks had founded the nearby town of Cumae, where one of the famed priestesses of Apollo, or *Sibyls*, delivered her fitful prophecies from a sacred grotto. Moreover, the Roman name for the lake had been adapted from the Greek *Aornos*, or “birdless,” since noxious fumes arising from the lake’s depths were said to stop birds dead in their flights. It thus comes as no surprise that this ominous landscape was thought to contain an entrance to the Underworld, accessed through a cave on the shores of Lake Avernus. It was here that the hero Aeneas descended into the Underworld, guided by the Cumaean Sibyl.

*Others were in Greece (the Necromanteion on the Acheron River, Cape Taenarum or Matapan) and Asia Minor (Heraclea Pontica), but numerous entrances are cited in various sources. Another was investigated in 2013 by the University of Salento at ancient Hierapolis in modern day Turkey.



Lake Avernus today, looking south to Cape Misenum.

Photo website: <https://communionblog.wordpress.com/tag/lake-avernus/>



Map showing locations of Lake Avernus, Cumae, and Cape Misenum.

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But Vergil's description of toxic vapors and the otherworldly Avernian forests was surely literary embellishment. By the time he wrote the *Aeneid* (ca. 25 BCE), the area around Lake Avernus had been denuded of its forests and connected through a manmade channel to Misenum on the Bay of Naples, the lake forming a hidden port for the Roman fleet. Built under the direction of Marcus Agrippa in 37/6 BCE, the "Portus Julius" also included a tunnel (*Grotta di Cocceio*) from the shore of Lake Avernus to Cumae, which was often mistaken by Grand Tourists as the Sibyl's grotto. A nearby ruin, misidentified as the Temple of Apollo, was actually a Roman bathhouse, which undoubtedly took advantage of thermal springs. The new Lake Avernus port was abandoned soon after its inception because its channel to the bay silted up, but the landscape



Samuel Lancaster Gerry (American, 1813–1891)

Lake of the Avernus, 1851

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase (75.85)

was irreversibly altered, and scholars are convinced that escalating salinity in the lake killed vast amounts of vegetation. Vergil's description therefore does not reflect the region in his own time period, and is certainly literary aggrandizement. Similarly, Samuel Lancaster Gerry's version of Lake Avernus is romanticized. A self-trained artist who embraced the Hudson River School's mantra of painting from nature, Gerry was apparently not content to paint Lake Avernus as he saw it in the early 1850s. In fact, his *Lake of the Avernus* is a romantic pastiche, one heavily embellished with the addition of ruins and allegorical figures. The ruins at the upper left are "lifted" from the site of Tivoli, and represent the Sanctuary of Hercules Victor and the round "Temple of Vesta." The ruined temple at right, with its disjointed inscription conflating two time periods, is likely to be sheer fantasy. The monk, seated on a fallen architrave block in the foreground, and the young shepherd standing next to the tree, may be allegories of youth and old age and, by extension, tranquility and hope, respectively. Finally, the smoldering peak on the horizon must be Vesuvius, but the volcano is not visible from the painting's viewpoint to the south, out to the bay. In reality, we should see the silhouette of Cape Misenum, clearly evident in other paintings and modern photographs of Lake Avernus. ■