Lost Cities in a Global Perspective (Caserta, 16-17 Oct 25)

University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”, Caserta, Italy, Oct 16–17, 2025
Deadline: Mar 15, 2025

Research Team of PRIN 2022 VeLoCi - The Vesuvian Lost Cities before the ‘Discovery’. Sources, Experience, Imagery in Early Modern Period"

Lost Cities in a Global Perspective: Sources, Experience, Imagery in Early Modern Period (XV-XVIII century).

In 1972 Italo Calvino published the book Invisible Cities, encouraging a reflection on modern megalopolises starting from the reactivation of the imaginary arising from the memory of historical cities. In the paragraph Cities and Memory 3, the writer wrote that “The city does not tell its past, it contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, in the grilles of the windows, in the handrails of the stairs, in the antennas of the lightning rods, in the poles of the flags”, underlining how the knowledge of a city passes through the discovery of material elements (space) and immaterial elements (history).
More recently, Salvatore Settis (Se Venezia muore, 2014) postulated that “Cities die in three ways: when they are destroyed by a ruthless enemy (like Carthage, which was razed to the ground by Rome in 146 BC); when a foreign people settles there by force, driving out the natives and their gods (like Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs that the Spanish conquistadores destroyed in 1521 and then built Mexico City on its ruins); or, finally, when the inhabitants lose their memory of themselves, and without even realizing it become strangers to themselves, enemies of themselves. This was the case of Athens”.

Many cities, all over the world, have disappeared over the centuries, abandoned - but perhaps never forgotten -, destroyed by natural disasters or buried under new urban layers (Teotihuacán, Chichén Itzá, Copàn, Tulum, Angkor, Petra, Rome, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Brescia), re-emerging for different reasons. Fascinating historians, explorers, archaeologists, architects and artists, the ‘lost cities’ - both literally and metaphorically - have continued to exist in literary sources, descriptions, chronicles and sometimes in iconographic representations.
Pompeii and Herculaneum are two of the most famous cities that disappeared due to natural disasters. Although according to historiographical and narrative tradition their ‘discovery’ occurred in conjunction with the start of the Bourbon excavations in the 18th century, the VeLoCi project, however, has demonstrated how even before the start of systematic excavations, material traces of the existence of ancient cities had emerged and, on the other hand, there was no lack of literary, antiquarian and scientific sources dedicated to the history of these disappeared cities. Similarly to the Vesuvian cities, other cities, which disappeared following catastrophes or simple stratification, were not unearthed, despite their historical past being well known.

What was then the perception, the relationship of coexistence and/or study and knowledge with the buried/lost cities in the different cultures of the world in the early modern era? What phenomena or episodes have reactivated their systematic research? What are the operational, scientific and epistemological approaches to the discovery of the past? What are the reasons that suggest seeking and valorising the past?
Starting from the case study of the Vesuvian cities, the international conference Lost Cities in a Global Perspective: Sources, Experience, Imagery in Early Modern Period (XV-XVIII century) is aimed to investigate in an interdisciplinary and comparative way the material and imaginary dimensions assumed by the lost cities in a global perspective, before the birth of archaeology as a science in the 18th-19th century. We invite scholars from a variety of disciplines, including architectural history, art and literary history, history, history of science, archaeology, cultural studies, and other related fields, to submit papers examining cases from any geographical context. Interdisciplinary approaches are particularly welcome, as are contributions that reflect on the exchange of knowledge and cultures at a global level.

Topics may include (but are not limited to):
- Travel Accounts and Exploration: the role of European explorers and missionaries in shaping the narratives of lost cities in Asia, Africa and the Americas.
- Historiographical approaches: the role of early modern historians and intellectuals in constructing and reconstructing the idea of lost cities.
- Myth and Reality: what role did legends and fantastic narratives have in shaping lost cities and how did they intertwine with emerging archaeological or geographical knowledge.
- Visual Culture and cartography: the role of representations of lost cities in art and cartography.
- Colonialism and Cultural Exchange: the impact of colonial expansion on the perception of lost cities and the relationship with native cultures.
- Material Culture and Archaeology: proto-archaeology and antiquarian research in exploring the physical remains of lost cities and ancient civilizations.
- Literature and Lost Cities: the role of literature in constructing of the idea of lost cities, from utopian and dystopian narratives to adventure tales.
- Cultural Memory and Identity: how did the notion of lost cities has served as a tool for constructing cultural memory and national identity, and how did societies have preserved or forgotten this memory.
- Environmental Factors and Natural Disasters: what role has climate change, natural disasters and geographical displacement played in the disappearance of cities.

The two-day conference, organised by Giulia Ceriani Sebregondi, Francesca Mattei and Danila Jacazzi, is promoted by the PRIN 2022 research project “VeLoCi - The Vesuvian Lost Cities before the ‘Discovery’. Sources, Experience, Imagery in Early Modern Period” at the end of its duration and will be hosted at the University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”, in Caserta. VeLoCi will organise and pay for accommodation and reimburse travel costs (economy class) for the speakers. At the end of the conference, the publication of some contributions in a peer-reviewed collective volume will be evaluated. Scientific and organisational secretariat by Giorgia Aureli and Giorgia Pietropaolo.

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE OF THE PROJECT: Candida Carrino, Giulia Ceriani Sebregondi, Kathleen Christian, Bianca de Divitiis, Danila Jacazzi, Francesca Mattei, Tanja Michal-

sky, Massimo Osanna, Francesco Sirano.

ABSTRACT SUBMISSION
- Participation in the conference is free of charge.
- Conference languages are Italian and English.
- Abstracts, in PDF format, of maximum 1500 characters (about 250 words), must be presented in Italian or English, and must include a title and a short biography of maximum 1500 characters (about 250 words) of the contributor.
- To apply, please send the material to ve.lo.ci.prin@gmail.com.
- This CFP is open also to PhD students and independent scholars.

TIMELINE
- CFP closing: March 15, 2025.
- Notification of accepted proposals: April 15, 2025.
- International conference: October 16-17, 2025.

Reference:

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