

TRAVELLING TO TELL THE TALE: TESTIMONIES OF THREE CHILEANS WHO VISITED POMPEII (NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES)*

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The excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum fascinated the Hispanic American travellers who visited Italy between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and wrote about their journeys. Their accounts provide key sources for a cultural analysis of classical reception in Hispanic America. Here, we shall examine the testimonies published by Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, Pedro del Río Zañartu and Bernardo Gentilini, who all travelled from Chile to Pompeii and produced varying impressions of the ruins at Pompeii that were largely determined by their life experiences, beliefs and social standing. In their accounts, they often compare ancient Pompeii and Chile, casting a critical eye on the moral decadence of the Roman Empire, but they also express admiration for the ruins from a historical and artistic standpoint, thus exemplifying the cultural interest aroused among the elites of Hispanic America by the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Keywords: Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna; Bernardo Gentilini; Herculaneum; Pedro del Río; Pompeii.

VIAJAR PARA CONTARLO: TESTIMONIOS DE TRES CHILENOS QUE VISITARON POMPEYA (SIGLOS XIX Y XX)

Las excavaciones de Pompeya y Herculano fascinaron a los viajeros hispanoamericanos que visitaron Italia y escribieron sobre sus viajes a fines del siglo XIX y principios del siglo XX. Sus narraciones nos proveen de fuentes claves para un análisis cultural de la recepción clásica en Hispanoamérica. En este estudio, analizamos los testimonios publicados por Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, Pedro del Río Zañartu y Bernardo Gentilini, quienes viajaron desde Chile a Pompeya y produjeron variadas impresiones de las ruinas pompeyanas, que estuvieron en gran parte determinadas por sus experiencias de vida, creencias y status social. En sus relatos, comparan a menudo la antigua Pompeya y Chile criticando la decadencia moral del imperio romano, pero también expresando admiración desde un punto de vista artístico e histórico, lo que ejemplifica el interés cultural presente en las élites de Hispanoamérica en torno al descubrimiento de Pompeya y Herculano.

Palabras claves: Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna; Bernardo Gentilini; Herculano; Pedro del Río; Pompeya.

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1. Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, three travellers set out from Chile bound for Europe: the liberal politician, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna; the magnate and philanthropist, Pedro del Río Zañartu; and the Salesian priest, Bernardo Gentilini. Of particular note among the various sites they visited were the ruins of Pompeii. These three travellers all left valuable written testimonies of their personal impressions in the form of press articles and travel books in which they not only gave a detailed account of their experiences, but also drew comparisons and offered a critical analysis of what the ruins had kindled in each of them.

The importance of travel in shaping literature and social class has already been discussed by authors such as James Buzard¹. Studies of the accounts of French, English and German travellers' experiences when visiting the remains of antiquity have yielded important insights, as has a more recent line of research analysing Spanish and American travellers' visits to the best-known sites of Graeco-Roman civilisation².

Within these experiences of exploring antiquity, visits to Pompeii provide a good illustration of how the classical world influenced Chilean elites and also of how the neoclassical movement, which emerged from Enlightenment and liberal thought,

¹Buzard, James, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993.

²On Spanish and Latin American travellers in general: Nunley, Gayle R., *Scripted Geographies. Travel Writings by Nineteenth-Century Spanish Authors*. Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, Lewisburg, 2007; Guzmán Rubio, Federico Augusto, *Los relatos de viaje en la literatura hispanoamericana: Cronología y desarrollo de un género en los siglos XIX y XX*, Doctoral thesis presented at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, 2013 <https://repositorio.uam.es/handle/10486/661755> [accessed on 8 February 2023]; Jenkins Wood, Jennifer, *Spanish Women Travelers at Home and Abroad, 1850-1920. From Tierra del Fuego to the Land of the Midnight Sun*, Bucknell University Press, Plymouth, 2014.

facilitated the rediscovery of Graeco-Roman authors from a perspective centred on the political «discourse of freedom and the notion of the individual as a fundamental civic and social agent»³. However, understanding the phenomenon today requires a revision of the historical and cultural bases «that transcends their connection with aesthetic or literary trends such as the Enlightenment or neoclassicism»⁴. Journeys also constitute forms of appropriation of classical knowledge, and the testimonies they generated represent valuable elements with which to construct a cultural history and build on studies of classical reception in Hispanic America in general and in Chile in particular.

Among the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hispanic American elites analysed here, it was by no means uncommon to visit archaeological sites in Europe. Coinciding with the consolidation of independence in the Southern Cone in the mid-nineteenth century, these privileged groups began travelling to Europe and cementing their identification with Western culture by transforming the classical tradition into a symbol of prestige, progress and good taste, thus shaping the discursive elements that comprised the new ideals of the nation-state.

However, even prior to the consolidation of independence, accounts had appeared of visits to Pompeii and Herculaneum by well-known Americans, who sought to emulate the *Grand Tour*, a journey undertaken around Europe by elite young—and particularly English—men as part of their education, focusing especially on antiquity⁵. Some of the Chilean Creole aristocracy's trips resembled such tours in their focus on artistic and literary heritage. One of the first Chileans to document his trip was Nicolás de la Cruz y Bahamonde, Count of Maule, who arrived in Naples in 1797. As Mirella Romero has noted elsewhere, the Count of Maule praised the perfection of Greek art, and before visiting Pompeii had visited the excavations at Herculaneum and mentioned the possibility of buying the eight-volume *Antichità di Ercolano esposte* [Antiquities of Herculaneum exposed], an extraordinary large-format publication which was intended to showcase the remains found at Pompeii, Herculaneum and Stabiae, but which unfortunately had only a limited distribution as it was given personally by the king to selected recipients and renowned institutions. However, when Nicolás de la Cruz y Bahamonde arrived in Naples, the eight volumes were being sold «in the Royal Palace for twelve Neapolitan ducats» each⁶. In Pompeii, he was particularly impressed by the

³Huidobro, María Gabriela y Cornejo, Maribel, «La recepción de los clásicos durante las independencias hispanoamericanas: propuesta para una aproximación teórica e historiográfica», *Intus-Legere Historia*, vol. 9, n° 1, 2015, p.50.

⁴*Idem*.

⁵Romero Recio, Mirella, *Ecoss de un descubrimiento. Viajeros españoles en Pompeya (1748-1936)*, Ediciones Polifemo, Madrid, 2012.

⁶De la Cruz y Bahamonde, Nicolás, *Viage a España*, 1807, p. 122. The *Antichità di Ercolano esposte* was published between 1757 and 1792: volumes I (1757), II (1760), III (1762) and IV (1765) were devoted to paintings, V (1767) to bronze busts, VI (1771) to bronze statues, VII (1779) again to paintings and VIII (1792) to chandeliers and candelabras. All but the last volume was dedicated to King Charles of Bourbon, even after he was obliged to leave Naples to assume the Spanish throne in 1759. See: De la Cruz y Bahamonde,

excavations then underway at the theatre, the gladiator's barracks, the Temple of Isis and some houses and shops⁷. This interest in antiquity was generally accompanied by a parallel interest in collecting and art, two important elements that bolstered the high standing of these aristocrats in Chilean society⁸.

On 2 February 1852, the Chilean politician Francisco Echaurren García-Huidobro (1824-1909) went into exile after having formed part of the losing side in the revolution of 1851, and did not return until 31 August 1857 when he disembarked in Valparaíso, the same port from which he had set sail. During this time, he undertook a trip around the world, and his handwritten notebooks recounting this journey have recently been published⁹. As far as we know, his travel diaries constitute «the oldest journal of a trip around the world made by a Chilean»¹⁰. Although there is no record in his notebooks of a visit to Pompeii or Herculaneum, he did sail into the Gulf of Naples:

At two o'clock in the afternoon, we anchored in the port of Naples [...] from there enjoying the beautiful view offered by the magnificent Gulf of Naples [...] its centre dominated by the smoking Vesuvius and graced by the towns encircling it, by the nature [CV1, p. 37] of the terrain, by its plant life, crops, etc.¹¹.

Four days later he recounts:

We passed before Baiae the little island of Miseno, the castle where Pliny was standing when Vesuvius erupted and from which he sailed with his fleet to go [CV1, p. 39] and save his father, the

Nicolás, *Viage a España, Francia e Italia*, vol. I., Imprenta de Sancha, Madrid, 1806; De la Cruz y Bahamonde, Nicolás, *Viage a España, Francia e Italia*, vol. V., Imprenta de Sancha, Madrid, 1807.

⁷Romero Recio, Mirella, «Relatos de un viaje a Italia: aproximación a la experiencia de dos viajeros americanos en Pompeya y Herculano», eds. Del Molino, Ricardo, Parra, Ángela María and Buitrago, Laura, *Ecos pompeyanos: recepción e influjo de Pompeya y Herculano en España y América Latina*, Universidad del Externado, Bogotá, 2023, p. 42.

⁸Valenzuela Matus, Carolina and Silva Jara, Daniela, «Las influencias de las élites chilenas del siglo XIX. Dos casos significativos: Víctor Echaurren Valero y Pedro del Río Zañartu», eds. Del Molino, Ricardo, Parra, Ángela María and Buitrago, Laura, *Ecos pompeyanos: recepción e influjo de Pompeya y Herculano en España y América Latina*, Universidad del Externado, Bogotá, 2023, pp. 71-91.

⁹ «Today we know from his notes that the reason for his departure was primarily political. Defeated rebels were persecuted and opponents of the government hounded, rendering Chile a bleak and dangerous place for a senior member of the Liberal Party, which had so vehemently argued the need to boycott Montt's presidential candidacy, and had then openly supported the coup d'état and participated in the revolutionary uprising. Thus, at the age of 27, he determined to leave Chile and set out with the adventurous ambition of circumnavigating the globe, quite a feat even in the mid-nineteenth century, and not without serious risk to his own life». Díaz, José, Medianero, Francisco Javier; Zavala, José Manuel, *Memorias de Francisco Echaurren. Notas de un viaje alrededor del mundo y su experiencia como intendente de Santiago*, Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Santiago, 2021, p. 37.

¹⁰Díaz, José, Medianero, Francisco Javier; Zavala, José Manuel, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹¹Díaz, José, Medianero, Francisco Javier; Zavala, José Manuel, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

bridge or aqueduct of Caligula, the places where Cicero, Maecenas, Virgil, Horace and so many other celebrated men had their villas, the baths of Nero, further on Cumae and the Grotto of the Sibyl, Lake Avernus and the Elysian Fields, etc.¹²

Another liberal politician, Víctor Echaurren Valero (1862-1917), is said to have travelled to Pompeii at an undetermined date. It is likely that his visit took place in the 1880s, when he served as an attaché to the Chilean legation in Paris and later in Rome. References to this trip come from an indirect source, namely a pamphlet written by an anonymous group of guests at one of the balls he organised at his palace in Santiago (the Echaurren-Herboso palace), as he left no direct testimony of his experience among the ruins. However, thanks to this pamphlet, we know how his antiquities were displayed in his private residence, and also that he collected Pompeian, Greek, Etruscan, Roman and other pieces directly from the places he visited, as this fragment shows:

From among the Egyptian ones, mention should be made of the remains of mummies and funerary statues; from among the Pompeian ones, several pieces of mosaic collected by Mr. Echaurren himself from the House of the Tragic Poet [also known as the Homeric House or the Iliadic House]; from among the Greek, Etruscan and Roman ones, a large variety of vases, amphorae, rubbings and some utensils extracted from the catacombs¹³.

The text reveals Echaurren Valero's facet as a collector and suggests that balls not only comprised important social events but also served to showcase antiquities to other interested parties who might be potential buyers¹⁴. Unfortunately, part of his collection was lost during the Chilean civil war of 1891. As a friend of the deposed president José Manuel Balmaceda, «he took it upon himself to find [Balmaceda] a safe haven, and afterwards went to the Spanish legation, where he learnt that his home had been sacked and his art collection, 'which I had destined for the museum of my homeland', had been destroyed». In 1894, now exiled in Europe, he published «Sketches of Art», a comprehensive treatise on medieval art and life illustrated with sculptures, furniture and precious metalwork that had once belonged to him, as indicated in the legend: «author's collection»¹⁵.

As can be seen, the Chilean elite's experience of Mediterranean antiquities during their trips to Europe was diverse; here, we shall analyse the experiences of three

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 144-145.

¹³ *Descripción del Gran Baile de Fantasía dado en el Palacio del Señor don Víctor Echaurren Valero en la noche del 24 de septiembre de 1885*, Imprenta, Calle de La Moneda 33, Santiago de Chile, 1885, no page number.

¹⁴ Bergot, Soléne, «Baile de fantasía ofrecido por don Víctor Echaurren Valero, 24 de septiembre de 1885 en Santiago de Chile», *Boletín de la Academia Chilena de la Historia*, vol. 73, n° 116, 2007 (pp. 350-389).

¹⁵ Rodríguez Villegas, Hernán, «El abuelo de Matta», *El Mercurio*, 4-IX-1990, A3.

individuals who published accounts of their visits to Italy in the press and in travel books. Then, we shall identify the distinctive characteristics of their narratives about Pompeii.

2. Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna's visit to Pompeii

Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna was a politician and intellectual who formed part of the elite of Santiago de Chile and who embodied the liberals' ambition to lead Chile towards modernisation and progress. Born on 25 August 1831, he entered politics at an early age, sparring with the strongly conservative Chilean governments of his time. A lawyer by training, he worked as a journalist, wrote countless historical studies and was an academic at the University of Chile. In the latter role, he spearheaded the debate in favour of abolishing compulsory Latin in Chilean schools, as he believed this language represented a culture and a past better left behind¹⁶.

Political exile had twice obliged Vicuña to visit Europe, but the first time he visited the Old World voluntarily, on a pleasure trip with his wife, he seized the opportunity to see Pompeii. The experience inspired him to write a letter to his cousin and mother-in-law Magdalena Vicuña Subercaseaux, wife of the wealthy Chilean miner Ramón Subercaseaux. The letter was not intended for her alone, however, but was added to the texts that Vicuña Mackenna periodically sent to the *El Mercurio del Vapor* section of the newspaper *El Mercurio de Valparaíso*, in which he shared his travel experiences. In this particular piece, entitled *Cartas del Vesubio. Una visita a Pompeya* [Letters from Vesuvius. A visit to Pompeii]¹⁷, Vicuña Mackenna describes the main highlights of his visit to Pompeii in a cordial, entertaining tone, giving readers an imaginary tour on multiple levels: he guides them along the tourist route through the archaeological site, takes them on a journey into Pompeii's Roman past and draws their attention to its similarities and differences with Chilean society and culture.

His letter constitutes an exercise in comparison possibly intended to evoke the familiar so as to help readers better understand his account. He also deploys multiple sensorial resources, including visual images, aromas, sounds and colours. A particularly striking example of this approach is Vicuña Mackenna's comparison between the eruption of Vesuvius and the tragic fire at the Church of the Company of Jesus in Santiago in 1863 that left around two thousand dead; his juxtaposition of the two events serves to heighten the drama of his account and recreate the suffering endured. This comparison was especially apposite given that Pompeii has repeatedly been associated

¹⁶Silva, Carlos, «Introducción», Vicuña Mackenna, B., *Páginas olvidadas. Vicuña Mackenna. El Mercurio*. Santiago de Chile, 1931 (pp. 7-19). <http://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/645/w3-article-350745.html> (accessed on 8 February 2023).

¹⁷Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, «Cartas del Vesubio. Una visita a Pompeya (correspondencia especial del Mercurio) Señora doña Magdalena Vicuña de Subercaseaux, Nápoles, 9 de marzo de 1871». *El Mercurio del Vapor*, Valparaíso, 16 de mayo de 1871, no page number. See: Huidobro, María Gabriela, «Pompeya en la experiencia de un intelectual chileno: impresiones de Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna (1871)», eds. Romero, Mirella; Salas, Jesús and Buitrago, Laura, *Pompeya y Herculano entre dos mundos. La recepción de un mito en España y América*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma, 2023.

with the idea of tragedy. According to Ricardo del Molino¹⁸, in America, Pompeii has been viewed above all as the paradigmatic catastrophe, and there are references to this notion from the late nineteenth century onwards, in reference, for example, to the volcano on Martinique (1902), the Yungay earthquake in Peru (1970) and the Armero tragedy (1985). At the time, the fire at the Church of the Company of Jesus shocked the people of Santiago and could justifiably be compared to Pompeii and the disaster it epitomised.

Vicuña Mackenna also dwells on aspects of daily life in Pompeii. In his letter, he defines Pompeii as «a beautiful Roman city, prosperous, pleasant, almost aristocratic», noting that the Bay of Naples had once attracted the opulent patricians of Rome: «Pompeii was to Rome what Peñaflores was in its day to Santiago and what Valparaíso still is to Quillota»¹⁹. Vicuña Mackenna's assessment appears accurate in the sense that Pompeii did indeed become an attractive destination for the Romans. After the settlement of the veterans as colonists in 81-80 BCE, the city underwent a profound transformation, with the construction of impressive public buildings including the amphitheatre, the forum baths and an indoor theatre, among many others²⁰.

In his account, Vicuña Mackenna repeatedly evokes Chile and compares the Pompeian houses to those seen in the capital, Santiago, claiming that the Romans' dwellings in Pompeii bore an «extraordinary resemblance to those of the humble inhabitants of Santiago. Their general layout, their courtyards, their corridors, their walls painted with multiple colours, their street shops, everything is exactly like ours, except for the size, as Roman houses are generally miniature versions of our large ones»²¹. He even suggests that the houses of the poorest inhabitants of the capital were comparable to those of the ancient Romans. This was, of course, an exaggerated claim, made by a member of an elite that lived in urban areas replete with palatial homes, at a time when Chile was experiencing an economic boom. Otherwise, it would be highly questionable to draw a comparison between the Pompeian houses of antiquity and the houses of Santiago: it is difficult to imagine that the overcrowded, insalubrious *cités* of Santiago at the time would be much better than the Pompeian houses, and although the houses in the centre of Santiago were indeed bigger, they were also divided up to accommodate the large number of families living there.

He also compares Pompeii and Chile in relation to other aspects of daily life, claiming that the appearance and atmosphere of the Italian city «was, therefore, like that which ours usually offer on Sundays». As for the forum, he notes that «it was their

¹⁸Del Molino, Ricardo. «The Latin American Pompeiis: From a Landscape in Ruins to the Image of Tragedy» ed. Romero, Mirella, *Pompeii in the Visual and Performing Arts: Its Reception in Spain and Latin America*, Bloomsbury, London-New York, 2023 (pp. 201-218).

¹⁹Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, «Cartas del Vesubio...», *op. cit.*

²⁰Cooley, Alison E. y Cooley M.G.L. *Pompeii and Herculaneum. A sourcebook*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 28.

²¹Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, *op.cit.*

custom to meet there, just as our grandparents used to gather in the shops in the Portal or in Calle Ahumada after hearing mass in the Cathedral or the Church of the Company of Jesus. As regards the most famous houses in Pompeii, he describes the route taken by guides to show them to visitors: Just as any coachman in Santiago will take you to the house of the Alhambra or to that of Meiggs, so too guides in the Roman city will point out the house of Cicero, that of Sallust, or that of Pansa, the latter being demonstrably one of the most sumptuous²². He also considers Pompeii's barbershops to be similar to those in the Santiago: «Still conserved from the many barber's shops in Pompeii are the lime and brick seats on which the Romans —similar to the parishioners of the Tajamar or San Diego Street— proffered their faces to the razor»²³.

Thus, besides identifying similarities, his 'letter' also establishes a cultural genealogy that explained these parallels in the uses, aspects and practices of one society and the other. Arguing that Santiago «was simply the 'Rome of the Indies', and continues to be so», he underscores his belief in the capital's allegedly immense resemblance to Pompeii.

Another point of interest in Vicuña Mackenna's text is the eruption of Vesuvius, and to introduce the subject, he quotes the testimony of Pliny the Younger, who had personally witnessed the eruption in 79 CE. Pliny the Younger had described the tragedy in two letters to Tacitus²⁴, in which he explained the circumstances of the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder. These letters, together with Bulwer Lytton's novel, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, had become popular reading matter for Spanish and Latin American travellers planning to visit Pompeii²⁵. As mentioned above, Vicuña Mackenna considers the eruption of Vesuvius comparable to the tragic fire at the Church of the Company of Jesus in Santiago. He even suggests that given the number of bodies that had been recorded on the site in the nineteenth century, the great fire at this church must have been worse than the Pompeian catastrophe in terms of the death count: «In what has been unearthed of the city, which is a little more than a third, the skeletons of six hundred victims have been found, and it is possible that their number may reach a

²²The House of Pansa was one of the Pompeian mansions that contemporary constructions had attempted to imitate in various parts of the world, including Chile, the United States and Spain. See Dahl, Curtis, «A Quartet of Pompeian Pastiches». *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 14. N° 3, 1955 (pp. 3-7); Huidobro, María Gabriela, «Una casa pompeyana en Valparaíso: identidad e imaginario burgués a comienzos del siglo XX», *Cuadernos de historia*, vol. 57, 2022 (pp. 213-238); Nichols Marden, «Domestic Interiors, National Concerns: The Pompeian Style in the United States» eds. Von Stackelbert, Katharine and Macaulay-Lewis, Elizabeth, *Housing the New Romans: Architectural Reception and Classical Style in the Modern World*, Oxford University Press, 2017 (pp. 126-295); Romero Recio, Mirella, «The 'Pompeian House' in Spain: A Source of Inspiration between Reality and Utopia», ed. Romero Recio, Mirella, *Pompeii in the Visual and Performing Arts: Its Reception in Spain and Latin America*, Bloomsbury, London-New York, 2023 (pp. 17-34).

²³Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, *op. cit.*, no page number.

²⁴Plin. *Epistulae*, VI, 16 and 20.

²⁵Romero Recio, Mirella. *Ecós de un descubrimiento...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 100, 110, 119, 191 203.

thousand, a figure less than half that of the memorable catastrophe of 8 December 1863, unique in the world»²⁶.

On Herculaneum, which had always aroused less interest among travellers because the location of the remains beneath the city of Resina and the difficulties encountered in carrying out excavations had restricted work on the site and the size of the area open to visitors, he remarked that its destruction was more the work of an earthquake than of the volcanic lava. Herculaneum would have been buried under several layers of debris: «Hence its exploration has been very difficult and it is now considered abandoned and of no interest to the traveller. Meanwhile, in Pompeii, the ash never rose above the roofs of two-storey houses, and even the upper part of the amphitheatre was always uncovered»²⁷. In fact, Herculaneum had collapsed during the earthquakes that accompanied the eruption, and was buried beneath a solidified layer of volcanic lava 26-30 metres deep²⁸.

He also mentions the ascent of Vesuvius, a highly popular activity among travellers of all nationalities²⁹, reporting that: «The current fashion is to visit Vesuvius at midnight, for which purpose they have built a carriage road very close to the crater»³⁰. The tycoon and philanthropist Pedro del Río Zañartu, who will be discussed later, also experienced this in his youth.

Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna's text also engages in the widespread moral questioning of what could be observed in Pompeii, so remote from the Christian morality of the time, noting that: «It was an essentially sensual and unbridled race, as could not be otherwise with a religion in which Venus was not a meretrix but a goddess. Thus, the infamous houses, called *lupanars* by their architects, and which are preserved in sad perfection, offer to the eyes of the curious all that is bestial in the passions»³¹.

Turning to the wall paintings, which had always aroused controversy among visitors, he observes: «Some of those paintings are of such an immoral nature that during the reign of the strait-laced Bourbons, they formed a collection in what was famously called the secret museum, but which today is on open display (except to ladies and clergymen) by order of Garibaldi. And it was precisely in the most frequented rooms in their mansions, such as the dining room, that the Romans painted the most seductive images of delight, with no concern for the modesty of their daughters or their guests». The Secret Room in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples housed paintings,

²⁶ Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, «Cartas del Vesubio...», *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Idem.*

²⁸ Scandone, Roberto, Giacomelli, Lisetta and Rosi, Mauro, «Death, Survival and Damage during the 79 AD Eruption of Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum», *J- Reading. Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography*, vol. 2, 2019 (pp. 5-30). DOI: 10.4458/2801-01.

²⁹ Romero Recio, Mirella. *Ecós de un descubrimiento...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 100, 103, 110.

³⁰ Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, «Cartas del Vesubio...», *op. cit.*

³¹ *Idem.*

sculptures and objects depicting sexual scenes and phalluses that were considered lewd and inappropriate for public viewing, especially by women, who were forbidden access³². Men could enter with prior permission, but there was concern that the impact of these images on women, who were infantilised according to the customs of the time, might give rise to scandal and above all, encourage reprehensible practices³³.

Such opinions were relatively common among the visitors to Pompeii who recorded their impressions, and were always mediated by a rigorous Christian morality. Despite knowing beforehand what they would see at the site and the repulsion it might elicit³⁴, those who went to Naples never abstained from visiting it, or from voicing criticism of what they saw, and Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna was no exception, sharing with his readers the widespread idea associated with Pompeii of lust, depravity and rampant sexual activity³⁵.

Also striking is his low opinion of the Bourbon enterprise in Pompeii: «The Bourbons' explorations of Pompeii were more an object of curiosity than of science (...) when the French took possession of Naples at the beginning of the century, Murat gave a more intelligent direction to the work, proposing to excavate the entire city, which is what is now being carried out on a grand scale. We owe this latter to Garibaldi, who with his red shirt did more great things in Naples during the short days of his dictatorship than the Bourbons did in three centuries with their purple»³⁶. This view was probably fostered by the republican ideas of the nineteenth century, and especially by the liberal perspective advocated by Vicuña Mackenna, which tended towards a negative historiographical view of the colonial period and the Bourbon administration, especially with regard to scientific and archaeological endeavours. As has already been discussed by other authors, the excavations carried out during the Bourbon period fell into increasing discredit during the eighteenth century, fuelled by intellectuals of enormous prestige such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann—who was especially critical of the military engineer in charge, the Spaniard Roque Joaquín de Alcubierre—without taking into account that at the time, this work was carried out by a corps of well-trained engineers³⁷. Likewise, the scientific enterprises promoted by the Bourbons are today

³²Levin-Richardson, Sara, «Modern Tourists, Ancient Sexualities: Looking at Looking in Pompeii's Brothel and the Secret Cabinet», eds. Hales, S. and Paul, J., *Pompeii in the Public Imagination from Its Rediscovery to Today*, Oxford University Press, 2011 (pp. 316-330).

³³Romero Recio, Mirella. «Peregrinos españoles en Pompeya y Herculano. La experiencia de José María Fernández Sánchez y Francisco Freire Barreiro en 1875», ed. Benedito Nuez, Josep, *Salve Lucrum. Homenaje al profesor Juan José Ferrer Maestro*, Historia, vol. 4, Calambur Editorial, Valencia, 2021, pp. 136-137.

³⁴Ibidem, p. 127.

³⁵Romero Recio, Mirella, «Los mitos de Pompeya: arqueología y fantasía», ed. Sancho, Laura, *La antigüedad como paradigma. Espejismos, mitos y silencios en el uso de la historia del mundo clásico por los modernos*, Universidad de Zaragoza, 2015, pp. 126-127.

³⁶Vicuña Mackenna, Benjamín, «Cartas del Vesubio...», *op. cit.*

³⁷Alonso, María del Carmen, «Las excavaciones arqueológicas en el siglo XVIII: el descubrimiento de las ciudades de Herculano, Pompeya y Estabia», *Cuadernos De Ilustración y Romanticismo*, vol. 1, n° 3, 2011 (pp. 205-212).

being reassessed from a historiographical point of view, questioning the idea that the Spanish mother country abandoned her former territories in a state of scientific ignorance³⁸, a long-standing and widely held belief that is embodied in Vicuña Mackenna's opinion.

However, these criticisms also reflect Vicuña Mackenna's own underlying ideology. As a politician, Vicuña Mackenna had advocated—and would continue to fight—for a renewal of the principles on which Chilean culture was based. He subscribed to the need to direct his country's aspirations towards the model represented by nations such as France, England and the United States; towards a sense of modernity and progress that meant casting aside the country's Spanish and colonial foundations and legacy, symbolised in part by Latin. In Vicuña Mackenna's eyes, Rome in no way represented a model to follow. Although he found key elements in Pompeii that helped explain Chile's past and present, it was more pressing to look to the future. His criticisms, therefore, not only echo the literary trends of his time, but also acquire greater meaning in the context of this Chilean liberal's ideologies. His experience in Pompeii therefore transcended the bounds of mere tourism to encompass an opportunity for introspection and learning, in dialogue with the readers of his time.

3. Pedro del Río Zañartu's visit to Pompeii and Herculaneum

Born in the city of Concepción, Chile, Pedro del Río Zañartu was a businessman, a whaler, a farmer, a writer and a philanthropist who achieved notoriety by taking four trips around the world between 1880 and 1913. His journey was originally intended as a means to overcome a personal tragedy: the death of his wife and two children. From his own testimonies, it can be inferred that this activity proved a relief for his spirit, over and above the fact that it was usual at the time for members of the Chilean elite to go on extended trips to Europe, as mentioned earlier. Such travellers were also spurred by a desire to broaden their knowledge of literature, art, history and religion, and thanks to the favourable circumstances associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie during the industrial revolution, they were now endowed with sufficient free time to emulate the *Grand Tour* previously reserved for members of the eighteenth-century elite³⁹, just as individuals such as the Count of Maule had done before them.

On each of his trips, Pedro del Río acquired objects with the idea of forming a collection, later complemented with others purchased in antique shops in Santiago de Chile and donations for the subsequent creation of a museum on the land he owned, currently the Parque Museo Pedro del Río Zañartu, located at the mouth of the Biobío River in Hualpén (Biobío Region, Chile)⁴⁰.

³⁸Almagro-Gorbea, Martín, Maier, Jorge (eds.), *De Pompeya al Nuevo Mundo. La corona española y la Arqueología del siglo XVIII*, Real Academia de la Historia-Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid, 2012.

³⁹Díaz-Andreu, Margarita, *A History of Archaeological Tourism, Pursuing leisure and knowledge from the eighteenth century to the World War II*, Springer, 2019.

⁴⁰For more information on this park and museum, see <https://prz.cl/> (accessed 31/03/2023).

Although Pedro del Río made three trips to Pompeii, evidence only remains of two of his visits, as the manuscripts and letters detailing his experiences on the second trip were lost when the steamship *Cotopaxi* capsized in the Strait of Magellan⁴¹. Initially, Pedro del Río's travel experiences were documented in his letters, which were published in a local newspaper in Concepción, *El Sur*, but he subsequently published three books on the subject (1883, 1884 and 1912).

The first of his trips to Pompeii, made in January 1882, began in Naples, where he visited the Museum of Antiquities and described its magnificent collection of artefacts from Pompeii and Herculaneum. The sculpture gallery in particular surprised him: «A superb equestrian statue found at Herculaneum; another of the priestess Eumachia of Pompeii, with a marked expression of virtue and modesty, which is rare in these works. There is found a Greek Psyche, an Aristides posed as if speaking and the Venus Callipyge, a rival to the best in Italy»⁴².

Unlike Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, Pedro del Río makes no criticism of the Bourbon administration and limits himself to observing that: «The excavations did not begin until 1748, and have only continued without interruption since 1863. New discoveries are made every year. I watched the excavators with a kind of fascination, hoping to see something interesting at any moment»⁴³.

Pedro del Río felt a strange impression as he walked through this almost complete, intact city identifying each of the places, but rather than comparing the buried city with Santiago or Concepción, he simply described what he saw, emphasising the facets of daily life revealed by the excavations, as many other travellers had done before and would do again⁴⁴:

with its houses whose walls are still standing, both those of the patricians or rich and those of the poor. Also still standing are its numerous temples, the amphitheatre, tombs, wine cellars, where one can still see the rows of jars in place, bakeries with their mills fully assembled, and their ovens as if the bread had just been taken out; the streets are paved, and even bear the traces of the traffic of horses and vehicles; at the corners, there are one or two high stones placed to cross the streets in the winter⁴⁵.

⁴¹Barros Méndez, Luis, «Los “Nuevos Viajes” de don Pedro del Río», *Revista de Artes y Letras*, vol. XVI, 1889, p. 378.

⁴²Río Zañartu, Pedro del, *Viaje en torno al mundo por un chileno: julio de 1880-julio 1882*: tomo II, Imprenta Cervantes, Santiago, 1884, p. 244.

⁴³*Ibidem*, p. 246.

⁴⁴Huidobro, María Gabriela. «José Toribio Medina y Gabriela Mistral ante Pompeya: experiencia histórica y poética de viaje en dos momentos», eds. Del Molino, Ricardo, María Parra, Ángela and Buitrago, Laura, *Ecós pompeyanos: recepción e influjo de Pompeya y Herculano en España y América Latina*, Universidad del Externado, Bogotá, 2023; Buitrago, Laura, «El mundo que yo vi: viajeras americanas en Pompeya y Herculano (1853-1908)», eds. Romero, Mirella, Salas, Jesús and Buitrago, Laura, *Pompeya y Herculano entre dos mundos. La recepción de un mito en España y América*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma, 2023.

⁴⁵Río Zañartu, Pedro del, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-247.

Emulating the tendency to seek out the most unusual elements that Pompeii contained, he was also fascinated by «The temples of Venus, Eumachia, Mercury, Jupiter, Fortuna, etc.», which he claimed “resemble one another; they are surrounded by large columns, always open in the centre; behind the altar there are statues and nearby, the place for sacrifice, and one can even see the vessels that were used to receive the blood»⁴⁶.

Like Vicuña Mackenna, Pedro del Río also commented on the morality of the ancients from his Catholic Christian perspective, in which erotic representations were intolerable: «Its inhabitants do not appear to have been of good customs or morals, judging by some of their frescoes and decorations»⁴⁷. However, the magnate’s overriding desire was to go on an excursion to Vesuvius, «which for the traveller is as indispensable as climbing Santa Lucia hill in Santiago»⁴⁸, the latter being one of the few comparisons he made between Pompeii and the capital of Chile, in contrast to Vicuña Mackenna, for whom all of Pompeii was suitable for comparison with his country of origin and especially with Santiago.

In 1912, Pedro del Río made his third visit to Pompeii, which later, at an advanced age, he recorded in a book, *Tercer viaje en torno al mundo*. Of this visit he said: «This is the third time I have visited Pompeii and it is always with interest and pleasure. It is a very special sensation to behold it so whole and complete, perhaps due to the hope of seeing it bustling with its former inhabitants at any moment»⁴⁹.

Based on previous experience, he advised visitors to focus on a few selected places to avoid fatigue: «In houses, study the best known that once belonged to wealthy people and which have yielded so many works of art, such as those of Sallust, Diomedes and others. They are all more or less the same: first, a courtyard or “atrium” with a beautiful marble pool in the centre to catch the rainwater, around which are the bedrooms, without windows or communication between one and the other; next, the “peristylum”, the dining room, baths, libraries, shrines to the deities or ancestors, in marble or bronze; mosaic floors and walls with graceful frescoes depicting fruit, fish, birds, flowers, dancing nymphs, the indispensable lovers, Bacchus, Venus and ‘Narcissus’, their deeply mourned favourite»⁵⁰.

On this third trip, Pedro del Río observed that neither in Pompeii nor in the Museum of Naples was entry permitted into places «where the highly depraved customs

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

⁴⁸ *Idem*.

⁴⁹ Río Zañartu, Pedro del, *Tercer viaje en torno al mundo* (febrero 1904-diciembre 1905), Litografía e Imprenta Concepción, 1912, p. 145.

⁵⁰ *Idem*.

of those pagan times were evident»⁵¹, possibly alluding to frescoes that he seems to have visited on his previous trips. With regard to archaeology, he remarked that after more than a hundred years of excavations “there cannot be much left to discover. What one sees in the small museum is a repetition of what one had earlier admired in the National Museum, with the exception of some human and animal bodies, splendidly preserved despite being almost incinerated. There are many remains of temples, the most notable being those dedicated to Jupiter, Apollo and Mercury»⁵². In his book he reports that: «However, the majority of the excavated objects, especially the bronzes, were found at ‘Herculaneum’, not only because more wealthy people lived there, but also because they were found in perfect condition due to the fact that the city was buried in mud»⁵³.

His advanced age prevented Pedro del Río from climbing Vesuvius again, an experience that had entranced him on his first trip, but he attempted to compensate for this by adding an account of his previous ascent, described in his first book.

Although the sources provide detailed information about two of his three trips to the excavations, they give no clue as to the pieces he removed from them that would later form part of the Hualpén Museum alongside a series of other artefacts that included an Egyptian mummy with its grave goods, remains of the Roman coliseum and a fragment of the ceiling from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, to name but a few.

Drawn up by the naturalist and historian Carlos Oliver Schneider, the *ad honorem* administrator of the Hualpén Museum, the inventory indicates that this was acquired on his first trip, but Pedro del Río does not generally provide any further information about his part in the purchase or removal of antiquities, preferring instead to describe works of art, everyday objects and his experience on Vesuvius, among other things. Consequently, it remains impossible to determine when and under what circumstances he acquired these objects.

4. Bernardino Gentilini’s visit to Pompeii

Bernardo Gentilini was a Salesian priest of Italian origin who arrived in Chile at the age of twenty to begin his studies at the Salesian seminary in Santiago, obtaining his priesthood in 1899. He devoted himself to the Catholic publishing world, evangelising through the press. Very little is known of his life, but in his pamphlets he counselled religious morality, especially in the newspaper *La Espiga*⁵⁴. Before publishing his impressions of his journey, Gentilini published *El Diario del Alma* [The Diary of the Soul] in 1904, a compilation of notes on eternal truths, patience, mortification, chastity, religious life and devotion. At the end of the same year, *La Espiga* reported the blessings that it and its readers had received from Pope Pius X, following the first of Gentilini’s trips

⁵¹*Ibidem*, p.146.

⁵²*Idem*.

⁵³*Idem*.

⁵⁴Loyola Tapia, Manuel, «El Apostolado de la Prensa. La actuación del salesiano Bernardo Gentilini», *Universum*, nº 27, vol. 1, 2012 (pp. 85-109).

to Europe. In 1908 he set out on this long journey from Chile, and more specifically from the city of Concepción where he was working at the Salesian Technical College.

In his travel book, Gentilini says that he is only writing because those close to him have asked him to record his impressions on his travels. He notes that this led him, against his wishes, to describe in detail the myriad impressions he had accumulated during his temporary absence from the country, starting with his crossing of the Andes to Buenos Aires and Montevideo, his sojourn on the ship that took him to the Canary Islands, Gibraltar and Spain, and his journey through France, Germany and Italy⁵⁵.

From Rome, he travelled on to Naples and Pompeii. Gentilini was greatly taken aback by the excavations at Pompeii, and he alternated between fascination and repulsion, echoing the reactions of other priests and pilgrims (to Rome or the Holy Land) who had visited the site and the remains housed in the Naples Museum, such as the Spaniards José María León y Domínguez, Urbano Ferreriroa, José María Fernández Sánchez and Francisco Freire Barreiro⁵⁶:

On entering Pompeii, we felt the weight of centuries crushing down on the rows of shattered columns, on the worn tops of the ash-covered walls, and on the entire city that lies crumbling and dead (...) All this we have seen, visiting some of the main houses in this disinterred city; we have seen the walls still covered in fragments of paintings: floating figures in pale shades, aerial dancers, cupids, Nereids... Corruption has left its loathsome mark there; Pompeii is a rotting, pus-filled skeleton: *putredo ossium*, as the Holy Bible says⁵⁷.

As with Vicuña Mackenna and Pedro del Río, Gentilini tackles moral and religious themes, and this mention of corruption is probably related to the sight of an erotic painting or is a reference to the ancient gods, whom he also deplored. Previously, on a trip to Turin for example, the Salesian priest had visited the Egyptian Museum and had been particularly struck by the mummies, which gave him «food for thought about man's inconsequence»⁵⁸, while the statues of Egyptian divinities led him to conclude that failing to worship the true God had been «one of the greatest aberrations of human reason of all time»⁵⁹. Rome also prompted him to ponder the Romans' beliefs about the ancient gods: like Pompeii, classical Rome had decayed because it had not embraced the Bible's message: «I beheld the anguished contortions of a world in agony, laden with crime and stained

⁵⁵*Idem*.

⁵⁶Romero Recio, Mirella, «Peregrinos españoles...», *op. cit.*, pp. 127-149.

⁵⁷Gentilini, Bernardo, *Hojas de un diario de viaje a través de Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brasil, Islas Canarias, Italia, Francia, España*, Litografía e Imprenta Concepción, 1908, p. 190.

⁵⁸*Ibidem*, p. 72.

⁵⁹*Ibidem*, p. 73.

with blood, and turned my eyes away from the spectres of Tiberius, Nero, Caligula and Domitian...I beheld a degenerate people tumultuously demanding *panem et circenses*, bread and games, and rushing en masse towards the amphitheatre shouting: *Christianos ad feras*, [throw the] Christians to the wild beasts»⁶⁰.

It is certainly contradictory that despite knowing beforehand that they would encounter shocking sights, these pilgrims—who frequently visited holy sites such as Rome and in some cases Jerusalem—nevertheless did not refuse on principle to see them. Either because of the joy or the disgust entailed in their sight, such travellers reaffirmed their beliefs with the same conviction whether contemplating the scandalous Pompeian remains or visiting these holy sites⁶¹. In the same vein, Gentilini's account indicates that religion was one of his main reasons for travelling, in order to demonstrate that the ancient civilisations had declined because of their polytheism and ignorance of the Bible's message, which led inexorably to their demise. Gentilini's thinking on this subject recalls that of the first Christian authors. In Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, the evils experienced by the Jews and Romans of antiquity were occasioned by their rejection of Jesus as the true Messiah. In his *History against the Pagans*, Orosius cites the signs of decadence that give way to a new era, among which were the calamities of war, the ravages of pestilence, famine, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and storms⁶². For his part, in *The City of God* St. Augustine roundly criticises the Romans' ancient beliefs, describing their deities as defeated gods⁶³. Such influences are especially evident in a religious person who, like other travellers visiting Pompeii, felt a mixture of rejection and fascination when confronted by an experience that left no one indifferent.

However, although Gentilini reiterated the principle of attributing ruins and decay to ignorance of the Gospel message, he was also capable of recognising that the discovery of Pompeii was an important event for the advancement of archaeology:

Among the white ruins of Pompeii, I sought the sensation of the great catastrophes, I sought the imprint of the centuries on piles of rubble [...] The discovery of this city was a very happy event for history and is a treasure trove for archaeology [...] A wide open space contains the ruins of the Forum. Amid the rubble stand columns that look like giants watching over the shattered remains

⁶⁰*Ibidem*, p. 159.

⁶¹Romero Recio, Mirella, «Peregrinos españoles...», op. cit., pp. 129-130. Gentilini adheres to the basic, most conservative interpretation of Pompeii's demise: «The city was justly punished by God for its many vices», p. 132.

⁶²Orosio, *Historia adversus paganus*, book V.

⁶³«To worship the vanquished gods as protectors and defenders, what else is this but to have not good gods, but bad paymasters?» St. Augustine, *Civ. Dei*, I, 6-7.

of other giants who succumbed in the titanic struggle against time⁶⁴.

The Salesian priest toured the entire site, observing each of the buildings with amazement, astounded by the length of time that the city had remained hidden:

Further away, the temples of Venus, Jupiter, Augustus and Isis. In this one, secret staircases led inside and one could stand behind the statue of the goddess to speak through her mouth and look through her eyes.

And still further away yet, the amphitheatre, the odeon, the school of gladiators... Everything passes before the eye like an immense ashen, flayed skeleton, sprawling and scattered, of a monstrous body that once felt the pulsations of life.

We reached the current limit of the excavations. It is surprising and inconceivable how the shallow layer of ash and lava and earth that covers the city could have hidden the mystery of Pompeii from the world for so many centuries⁶⁵.

In the case of Pompeii, as in each of the major cities he visited, Gentilini provided the reader with details of the history and geography of the site, as well as discussing art and painting. He also included photographs in his book of some of the places he visited, such as the Metropolitan Church of Montevideo, the cathedral of San Lorenzo in Genoa, a view of the city of Turin and the Grand Canal in Venice.

Conclusions

The nineteenth-century Hispanic American elites demonstrated a clear interest in the classical tradition, reinterpreted as a symbol of freedom associated with the progressive, pro-independence ideals that permeated the discourse of the nascent Spanish-American states⁶⁶. As cultural expressions of the classical tradition, Pompeii and Herculaneum beckoned various religious, political and public individuals, some of whom published accounts of their journeys that have subsequently facilitated research on this subject.

Here, we have discussed the journeys of Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna, Pedro del Río and Bernardo Gentilini. Each of these travellers recorded different perceptions: according to Vicuña Mackenna, ancient Pompeii was comparable to Chile, and the Vesuvius disaster, to the fire at the Church of the Company of Jesus in Santiago, thus

⁶⁴Gentilini, Bernardo, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

⁶⁵*Idem.*

⁶⁶For a general introduction to the new American nations' reception of the Graeco-Roman world as a means to distance themselves from the colonial past, see: Romero Recio, Mirella, «Introduction: The Reception of Pompeii in Spain and Latin America», ed. Romero Recio, Mirella, *Pompeii in the Visual and Performing Arts: Its Reception in Spain and Latin America*, Bloomsbury, London-New York (pp. 1-15).

associating Pompeii with the idea of tragedy. He was also critical of the Bourbons' management of the sites and of Roman morality, best left behind. Meanwhile, Pedro del Río gave greater weight to the archaeological discoveries, art and antiquities he saw, while also attempting to recreate the landscape, in which his ascent of the volcano Vesuvius takes pride of place. Bernardo Gentilini's account is predominated by his religious perspective, highlighting the decadence of classical civilisation as the Christian faith emerged: art and archaeology take a back seat in his narrative.

With regard to the export of antiquities, it should be noted that in the case of Pedro del Río, documents exist that prove the transfer of Pompeian artefacts to Chile, which he would have gathered at the excavation sites. These pieces are recorded in the Hualpén Museum inventory; however, the paucity of references to these acquisitions in his travel accounts renders it very difficult to determine with any certainty when they entered the country. There are, therefore, major gaps in our information that hinder attempts to trace the arrival of these Pompeian antiquities in Chile, but which offer a very interesting and open field for reassessing the educational and heritage value of these artefacts in a regional museum such as the Hualpén Museum.

The mobility of individuals such as Vicuña Mackenna, Pedro del Río Zañartu and Bernardo Gentilini reveals Chilean society's openness to the outside world and the elite's political and cultural project, reinforced by a classical model that was strengthened by these travel stories, and reflects Hispanic America's connection with the most important European cultural sites of the time. Pompeii and Herculaneum acquired meaning and significance in these discourses of appropriation of the classical past, forming part of an incessant comparative exercise contrasting ancient Rome's past and Chile's present and generating a singular past-present dialogue through time and space, which renders Pompeii and Herculaneum important sites for the study of classical reception in Hispanic America.

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