

Sir William Hamilton Encyclopedia Article

Sir William Hamilton

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Sir William Hamilton

1730-1803

English Archaeologist and Geologist

During his many years as British envoy to the court of Naples (1764-1800), Sir William Hamilton conducted extensive archaeological investigations of Roman antiquities. Among the sites of his greatest activity were the volcanic remains around Vesuvius in Italy and Etna in Sicily.

Grandson to the third duke of Hamilton and son of Lord Archibald Hamilton, governor of Jamaica, young William Hamilton came from a distinguished line. He entered into military service at age 17, in 1747, but left the army after marrying a Welsh heiress in 1758.

Sent to Naples in 1764, Hamilton soon took an interest in archaeology and the natural sciences. He studied Vesuvius and Etna, and between 1772 and 1783 published several studies on earthquakes and volcanoes. Also significant were his excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii, towns devastated by the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Hamilton amassed an extensive collection of antiquities, which he sold to the British Museum in 1772; he was knighted during the same year.

Hamilton lost his wife a decade later, at which point he inherited her estate in Swansea. During the 1780s he continued his studies in Italy, but he was about to become embroiled in a set of personal intrigues as perplexing as anything in the archaeological record.

Hamilton was appointed privy councillor in 1791, the same year he married Lady Emma Hamilton. He was 61 years old, his new bride 26, and unbeknownst to him, Emma had been mistress to his nephew Charles Greville since 1786.

The couple spent a few relatively peaceful years, then in 1800 they went on a trip to Palermo, Sicily, with Lord Horatio Nelson. A year later, Emma gave birth to a daughter named Horatia, acknowledged by Nelson as his child. Hamilton himself had been recalled from his position at Naples in 1800, and died on April 6, 1803, in London.