

Exoticizing Vesuvius? Formations and Representations of Naples, ca 1500-present  
Workshop 2: Topography and Piety: Naples Afflicted  
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### **Reading De Dominici topographically: Mental maps and the places of piety**

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The founding of the journal *Napoli nobilissima* in 1891 marked the beginning of an ambitious attempt to realize Francesco De Sanctis' dream of uniting politically fractious Neapolitan elites on the grounds of a common cultural heritage. The product of this effort 'to revive the past' as an object of shared civic feeling was envisioned as a book: a history of the art and topography of the city of Naples for the general reader. It is clear from the research agenda outlined by Benedetto Croce and Salvatore Di Giacomo that this book was intended to displace entirely Bernardo De Dominici's *Lives* of the Neapolitan artists (1742-1745), by far the most elaborate history of the material culture of Naples yet written. Although Croce and his colleagues placed the *Lives* beyond the reach of any serious historical inquiry—branding its author 'il falsario'—the stubborn popularity of the book was due precisely to its patriotic weaving of incidents of past and contemporary life into the places and spaces of the urban fabric of Naples.

This paper will suggest an approach to reading De Dominici's *Lives* that attends particularly to the way its biographical narratives infuse places and things with communal meanings that transcend private or proprietary interests. Such meanings tend to be religious in character, although it is evident as well that the *Lives* projects aspects of the civic reform agendas of republican political theorists, including Paolo Mattia Doria's analysis of the erosion of *fede pubblica* during the years of Spanish *malgoverno*. A handful of case studies will suffice to indicate the range of narrative strategies employed in bringing piazzas, churches, chapels and altarpieces into view as features of a communal urban landscape. An example to be considered is the story of a disastrous competition set by the monks at the Certosa di San Martino between the Spanish painter Ribera and the Neapolitan Massimo Stanzione. The anecdote is meant to explain the famously ruined condition of Stanzione's painting, and thus to make generally known what was known only to artists, but like many of De Dominici's stories it is also an occasion for staging a conflict between Neapolitan virtue and Spanish vice. In a different sort of example, the story of a popular miracle is grafted onto a description of the decoration of a chapel at San Lorenzo Maggiore. The miracle occurred long before and is unrelated to the life of the artist in question, but the effect is to connect the modern site and its new appearance to an event rooted in pious memory that might otherwise have lost hold on a physical place. Yet another kind of story involves the linkage of pious anecdotes in the life of an artist to particular works by that artist to be seen in the churches, such as those of the painter who always took holy communion before attempting to depict the face of the Virgin Mary. In this case and others De Dominici's lifewriting tends to sacralize works of art while linking together their locations through the narrative of history.