



## ANCIENT FOREIGN VISITORS ON MT. ETNA

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### Abstract

This contribution reports and comments witness by some significant XVIII and XIX century travellers who wished to complete their *Grand Tour* of Italy by an adventurous ascension to Mt. Etna. Their experience was often preceded or followed by a gloomy descent *ad inferos* (to Hell), by visiting some volcanic cave (all visitors' teams usually made a stop at *Grotta delle Capre* [Goats Cave], for a brief night rest before the final climb for observing the dawn from top of Etna. Almost every visitor described this cave, though very often the various descriptions largely differ from one another). Besides this mandatory stop, the cave visits were generally unimportant fantasy trips, suggested by the unending cycle of tales related to Etna caves, rather than actual explorations

Only few travellers, induced by a great recklessness and an actual scientific concern, like Hamilton and Dolomieu, ventured inside lava caves and made scientific observations and measurements. Hamilton's annotations were still inadequate and cluttered, whereas Dolomieu's ones were accurate and skilful. Dolomieu also succeeded, during his tour, to recognize and describe some mechanisms of cave formation.

The final part of the lecture reports some original passages by some travellers, describing the preservation and commerce of Etna snow: the historical significance of these reports is evident, as snow was a very important good for the population at that times. Houel carefully described the operation of a snow-cave, the *Grotte à la Neige* (today's *Grotta dei Ladri*, Thieves' Cave), though his passage was never translated into Italian.