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### **120 YEARS OF ITALIAN AND VESUVIUS HISTORY IN THE LAVA MEDALS COLLECTION OF THE OSSERVATORIO VESUVIANO**

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Lava medals constitute a unique example that links Vesuvian eruptions to history, politics and science. Medals coined in the Vesuvius lava date back to the period in which the state of the volcano was characterized by an open conduit, so that warm lava was still used. This state of activity lasted from 1631 to 1944, a period of time during which effusive or effusive-explosive eruptions frequently occurred, followed by very short periods of rest. The medals were realized through metal molds or punches pinching a small amount of a still molten lava, extracted from lava flows or from the lava lake in the crater, and then dipping it into cold water. This unique industry expanded when volcanic eruptions with significant lava emissions occurred, for the increased availability of material.

Furthermore, in periods of intense volcanic activity there was an increasing number of curious and visitors who bought lava medals. Especially for scientific purposes, in the early Nineteenth century collectors and scientists began to gather these unique objects, which were considered as geological specimens, as the medals coined in 1819 and 1820 by Nicola Filomarino duca della Torre, amateur volcanologist. However, he started an intense production of these objects, contributing to make them quite popular at the time.

Over time, lava medals were specifically made by craftsman and used as souvenirs; then, in the first half of the Twentieth century, they assumed a commemorative and in some cases propagandistic value. In addition to medals, vesuvian guides used to make lava objects putting a coin, a medal, a stone or a button in a piece of lava.

The Osservatorio Vesuviano has a unique collection of lava medals coined in Vesuvian lava. It consists of 78 items, dated from 1819 to 1939. Most of them belong to the period between 1920 and 1939, with a peak between 1933 and 1936.

Subjects were extremely varied: emperors, popes, kings, generals, scientists, celebrities, souvenir subjects such as Vesuvius and Italy, mythological, religious and literary characters.

During the Thirties, the purpose for which the medals were made was mostly the celebration of significant events in the history of Italy, as the birth of a king's son, the proclamation of the empire, military conquests and victories and sometimes, the exaltation of dictators like Benito Mussolini or Adolf Hitler. On the back of these medallions the names of the "artists" who had created them were sometimes engraved, such as Giovanni Preti and Salvatore Madonna.

Thirty-eight lava medals of the Osservatorio Vesuviano collection had belonged to Alessandro Malladra, who made a donation of his geological specimens to the institute where he worked for many years. In fact, he was Director at the Osservatorio Vesuviano from 1927 to 1935.

He came from Turin and was a teacher of natural sciences, well-known because he followed the construction of the Sempione tunnel as consultant geologist of the company. The encounter in Milan in 1910 with Giuseppe Mercalli was crucial for the progress of his career and changed his life. In 1911 Malladra left his homeland and followed Mercalli, becoming his assistant at the Osservatorio Vesuviano, where he studied the Vesuvius with the same passion he had for the Alps.

Meticulous and precise, Malladra systematically collected geological samples and minerals produced by Vesuvius, making them available to other scholars. He kept an extensive correspondence with scientists from all over the world and was secretary of several prestigious scientific academies.

He can be regarded as an example of that kind of scientists who have contributed greatly to the geological knowledge of the Italian territory and the dissemination of this knowledge among non-experts.