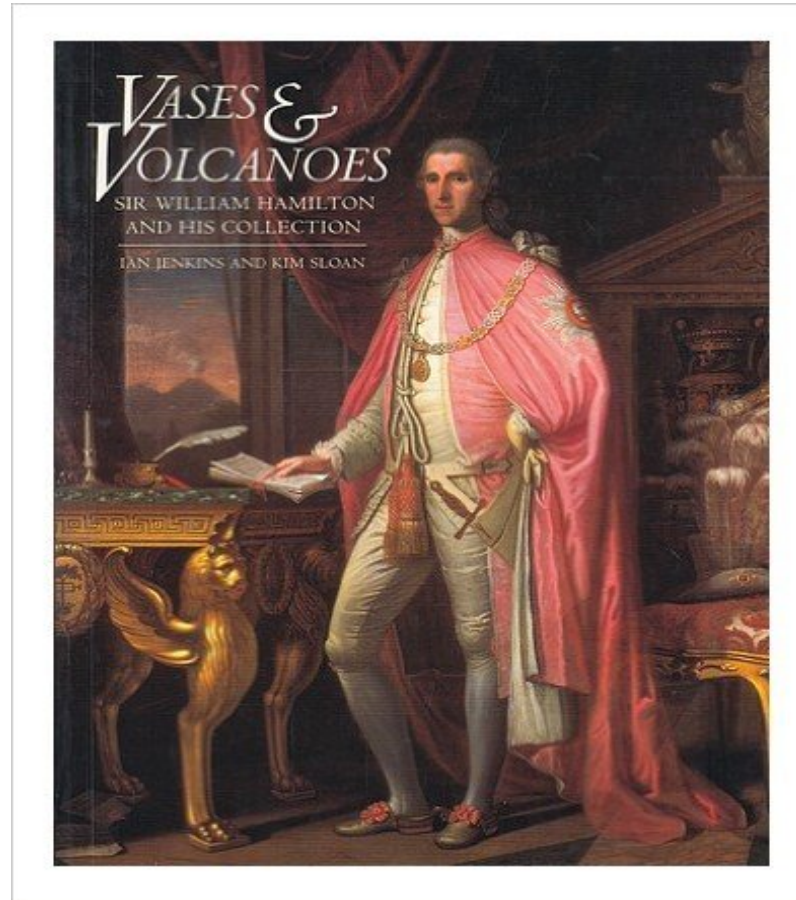


# William Hamilton Archeologist or Scavenger?



## Timeline of Sir William Hamilton

- Born in Scotland December 13<sup>th</sup> 1730 Fourth son of Lord Archibald Hamilton
- 1758 Married Miss Barlow daughter and Heiress of Hugh Balow of Lawrenny Hall, Pembrokeshire – he gained an estate worth 5,000 lire per year.
- 1761 Member of Parliament for Midhurst
- 1764 Appointed British envoy and plenipotentiary at Court of Naples
- 1766 Elected a member of the Royal Society
- 1766-1780 Published observations on volcanoes in Philosophical Transactions
- 1767 Presented to British Museum a collection of volcanic earths and minerals
- 1766 Purchased a collection of Greek vases from Porcinari family
- 1772 Sold this collection to British Museum/ member Knight of the Bath
- 1772 published Observations on Mount Vesuvius with letters to Royal Society
- 1772 – 1784 Presents to British Museum Greek and Roman Antiquities
- 1799 Advises Lord Elgin on marbles, vases, and antiquities
- 1791 Marries Emma Hart his mistress
- 1791 Made a Privy Councillor
- 1798 Accompanies as the King and Queen flee the French to Palermo
- 1800 Superseded as British Envoy and returns to England
- 1803 Hamilton dies in their London residence 23 Piccadilly



# Group Questions

*Assignment: As a group you need to select one of these questions to answer. Looking over the paper provided, each member should find statements that deals with your question. Discuss your statements and arrive at a group answer to your question.*

## **What Do You Think?**

Did Sir William Hamilton abuse his power as British Envoy to obtain antiquities from ancient historic sites?

Did Hamilton's superb methodology in regards to Science seem inconsistent with his desire to acquire and possess ancient Greek and Roman artifacts?

Was his generosity towards the British Museum an honorable thing to do from a member of the Royal Society, in an attempt at preserving scientific knowledge and antiquities from historic sites?

.... Or was this generosity more of an attempt to justify his own obsession, to own the best and the most of what became available in Greek and Roman vases?

Was his audacity in using an etching of his second wife (Emma Hart) and himself in the act of grave-robbing flaunting his disregard for Italian Law, prohibiting such acts, in the face of Italian Government?

Was the fact that all of his most famous finds, including the Portland Vase, made famous in reproduction in Wedgwood China, never remembered in his name the ultimate frustration.

How do you think Hamilton viewed his own actions as compared to his views of the French collectors?



# Hamilton Facts

- One of the most influential figures in the development of Neo-Classical taste in the second half of the 18th century was Sir William Hamilton, British envoy to the Court of Naples.
- Although Hamilton pursued his studies of geology as a hobby, there was nothing amateurish about his methods in geology. The accusations levelled at the more metaphysical philosophers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries could certainly not apply to Hamilton. His work was thorough and meticulous
- Much of Hamilton's merit, too, lies in the fact that although he was not a chemist, a metallurgist or a mineralogist himself he recognized the great need for the opinions of such men upon the constitution of the rock specimens that he found. Indeed he sent home to England many thousands of rock specimens for analysis. Hamilton was fully aware of his own limitations in this sphere but was only too ready in the interest of science and natural philosophy to encourage every pursuit of knowledge to be made.
- Hamilton's observations upon the volcanoes of Vesuvius and Etna were a masterpiece, for every small and relevant detail was accurately recorded. He even hired an artist to sketch those findings which he had found most pertinent.



## Greek and Roman Antiquities

- "I am sure that the mine of these vases lately discovered must fail soon, & therefore I have not let one essential vase escape me, tho' the price is much higher than it was formerly. The King of Naples has now began to purchase them, but my harvest luckily was in first."
- Hamilton had requested permission (in French) from the Secretary of State, Bernardo Tanucci, to export some antique coins from the region. He explained that he had a commission from someone in England, and that, as a boat was leaving the next day for London, he would like to request an export permit for these items: ..... The reply came back the same day from the king (in Spanish), saying that it was prohibited by the laws of the kingdom to export any antiquities, and that he was sorry to say that Hamilton could export neither coins nor any other antiquities from the Sicilies:
- Indeed, a law had been passed in 1755, under Charles III, expressly forbidding the export of antiquities; and this law was to be reenacted in 1766 and 1769, under Ferdinand himself. Given these facts, and the king's letter to Hamilton, we must ask how it was that Sir William felt he could ignore the law and do so much trafficking in ancient objects.



- ' This same writer, who clearly held a grudge against Hamilton, continued, "He was jealous of all other amateurs, and was rather displeased that I would not let him have a superb vase (which I had picked up accidentally) at his own price."
- Other evidence for the questionable manner in which Hamilton sometimes acquired his antiquities is found in a description of the ambassador's clandestine excavations in the untracked countryside a few miles north of Capua, at Trebbia. He is reported to have spent a few days there living with a peasant, so as to excavate some tombs incognito.
- Hamilton himself had allowed an engraving of one of the tombs to be used at a chapter heading in his first vase collection, and he reported on this excavation 25 years later in the publication of his second vase collection. The frontispiece of this later work shows a quite different excavation, where an elegantly dressed gentleman and lady, surely the ambassador and his second wife Emma, are present at the opening of a grave at Nola.



- The following figures are quoted for his collection, when it was sold to the British Museum on 20 March 1772 for 8,410 lire: 730 vases; 175 terracottas; about 300 specimens of ancient glass; 627 bronzes; more than 200 specimens of sacrificial, domestic, and architectonic instruments and implements; 14 bas-reliefs, busts, masks, and inscribed tablets; about 150 miscellaneous pieces of ancient ivory; 149 gems; 143 personal ornaments in gold; 152 fibulae; and more than 6000 coins and medals.
- The most famous piece that was brought to England by Hamilton, but was not destined to be remembered by his name, is the Portland Vase. He had acquired this masterpiece of cameo glass in Rome from James Byres and had brought it back with him when he was on leave in 1783.
- In 1789, he again wrote his nephew, saying that he had two or three extraordinary pieces, but that he would keep them himself rather than give them to the British Museum; and the following year he wrote again to say he had bought "a treasure of Greek, commonly called Etruscan, Vases," but that he would not be "such a fool as to give or leave them to the British Museum," but would instead have them published.



- Eventually the need for money, his advancing age, and the gloomy political outlook in Naples convinced Sir William that he should try to sell his second collection of vases. The arrangements had to be handled carefully, as he had confessed on one occasion that "I am delicate as to the manner of selling, as I shou'd hate to be looked upon as a dealer."
- I must own to you that I think that Italy is in great danger of being completely plunder'd and ruin'd unless some unforeseen accident shou'd operate in its favour, and that very soon . . . What a pity that Italy shou'd be robb'd of its finest marbles, pictures & bronzes, which you see by what had happen'd at Parma will certainly be the case shou'd the French marauders advance ... I mean to sell my collection of vases, & have an excellent project for that purpose in a good way if the cursed French do not disturb it.





# The Portland Vase Project



# Josiah Wedgwood

- I wish you may soon come to town to see William Hamilton's Vase, it is the finest production of Art that has been brought to England and seems to be the very apex of perfection to which you are endeavoring to bring your bisque & jasper.



Wedgwood bust of  
Sir William Hamilton

- Three days later Josiah Wedgwood took it on loan for a year so that he could model it for reproduction in his jasper ware: it has incorrectly been inferred that the loan was a reward for not bidding against the Duke's agent at the auction



# Future Employment



As a close personal friend of Josiah Wedgwood I have arranged for future employment for all of you in his new pottery factory.

Your first project will be to duplicate in Bas Relief the finest piece of art work to come out of Greece or Rome! I have supreme confidence in you but Josiah would like to see a small sample of your artistic ability.

Each group is to take one sheet of cardboard, two different colors of clay, your sculpting tools, and a picture of the Portland Vase which is on loan to this company.

Remember the original vase is approximately 9 ½ inches tall and 6 ½ inches wide.





# MONUMENTS OF ROME IN ENGLISH CULTURE

A National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute

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Lesson Plan Author: Warren Soper