

it rises directly to a height of 4020 feet; forming an isolated conical mass nearly thirty miles in circumference at the base, and separated from the Apennines on all sides by a broad intervening plain.

Of old it was noted for the extraordinary fertility of the country around its roots, and of its sloping sides; a fertility mainly due to the enrichment of the soil by ancient deposits of volcanic matter.

"The soil, exhaling clouds of subtle dews,
Is good for olives, and aspiring vines,
Embracing husband-elms in amorous twines!
Such is the soil of fat Campanian fields,
Such large increase the land that joins Vesuvius yields."*

Strabo also describes it as "surrounded by fields of remarkable

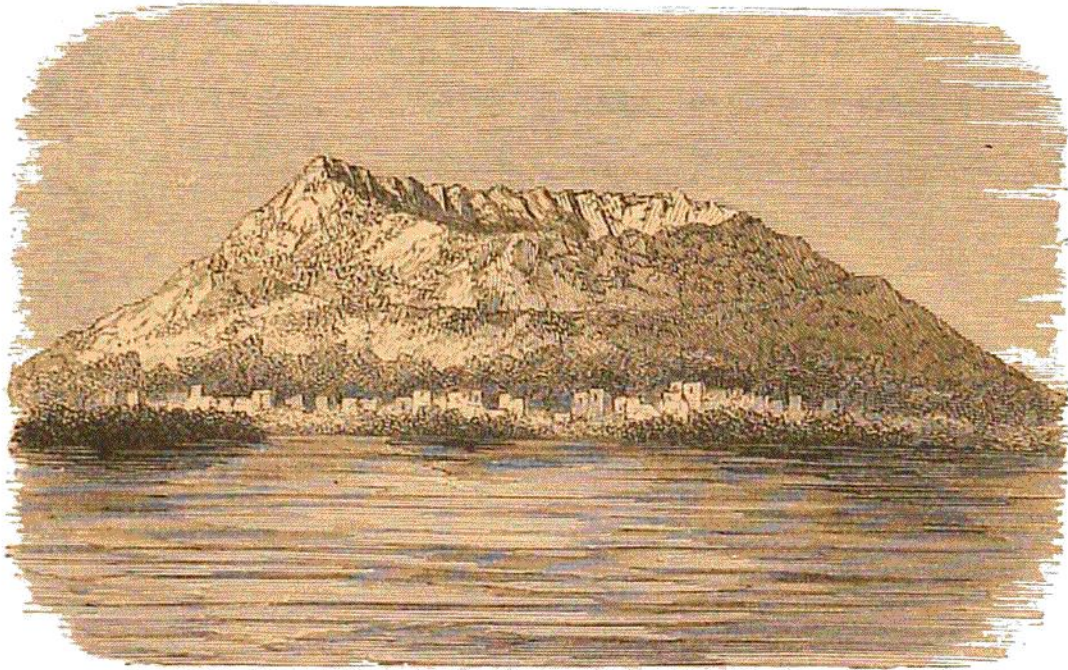


FIG. 141.—VESUVIUS BEFORE THE ERUPTION OF A D. 79.

fertility, with the exception of the summit, which was mostly level, and entirely barren, covered with ashes, and furrowed by clefts and hollows, opening among rocks of a burnt aspect, as if they had been eaten away by fire."†

The name of Vesuvius twice occurs in history before the Christian era. It was at its foot, in B.C. 340, the great battle was fought between the Romans and the Latins, in which Publius Decius devoted himself to death for the sake of his country. And it was in his

* [Virgil, "Georgics," bk. ii. 220-227.]

† [Strabo, "Rerum Geographicarum," lib. v., c. 4.]