



## Strabo on the Plutonium

Near Cumae is Cape Misenum, and between them is the Acherusian Lake, a kind of shoal-water estuary of the sea. After you double Cape Misenum you immediately come to a harbour, at the base of the cape, and, after the harbour, to a stretch of coast which runs inland and forms a deeply indented gulf — the coast on which is situated Baiae, and those hot springs that are suited both to the taste of the fastidious and to the cure of disease. Contiguous to Baiae is Gulf Lucrinus, and also, behind this gulf, Gulf Avernus, which forms a peninsula of the land that is cut off as far as Misenum, beginning from the transverse line which runs between Cumae and Avernus, for there remains an isthmus only a few stadia broad, that is, reckoning straight through the tunnel to Cumae itself and to the sea next to Cumae. The people prior to my time were wont to make Avernus the setting of the fabulous story of the Homeric "Necyia"; and, what is more, writers tell us that there actually was an oracle of the dead here and that Odysseus visited it. Now Gulf Avernus is deep up to the very shore and has a clear outlet; and it has both the size and character of a harbour, although it is useless as a harbour because of the fact that Gulf Lucrinus lies before it and is somewhat shallow as well as considerable in extent. Again, Avernus is enclosed round about by steep hill-brows that rise above it on all sides except where you sail into it (at the present time they have been brought by the toil of man into cultivation, though in former times they were thickly covered with a wild and untrodden forest of large trees); and these hill-brows, because of the superstition of man, used to make the gulf a shadowy place. And the natives used to add the further fable that all birds that fly over it fall down into the water, being killed by the vapours that rise from it, as in the case of all the Plutonia. And people used to suppose that this too was a Plutonian place and that the Cimmerians had actually been there. At any rate, only those who had

sacrificed beforehand and propitiated the nether deities could sail into Avernus, and priests who held the locality on lease it were there to give directions in all such matters; and there is a fountain of potable water at this place, on the sea, but people used to abstain from it because they regarded it as the water of the Styx; and the oracle, too, is situated somewhere near it; and further, the hot springs near by and Lake Acherusia betokened the River Pyriphlegethon. Again, Ephorus, in the passage where he claims the locality in question for the Cimmerians, says: They live in underground houses, which they call "argillae," and it is through tunnels that they visit one another, back and forth, and also admit strangers to the oracle, which is situated far beneath the earth; and they live on what they get from mining, and from those who consult the oracle, and from the king of the country, who has appointed them fixed allowances; and those who live about the oracle have an ancestral custom, that no one should see the sun, but should go outside the caverns only during the night; and it is for this reason that the poet speaks of them as follows: "And never does the shining sun look upon them"; but later on the Cimmerians were destroyed by a certain king, because the response of the oracle did not turn out in his favour; the seat of the oracle, however, still endures, although it has been removed to another place. Such, then, are the stories the people before my time used to tell, but now that the forest round about Avernus has been cut down by Agrippa, and the tracts of land have been built up with houses, and the tunnel has been cut from Avernus to Cumae, all those stories have proven be mere myths; and yet the Cocceius who made, not only this tunnel, but also the one from Dicaearchia (near Baiae) to Neapolis, was pretty well acquainted with the story just now related about the Cimmerians, and it may very well be that he also deemed it an ancestral custom, for this region, that its roads should run through tunnels.

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