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Valparaíso and Late-Sixteenth-Century Morisco Ecologies

In the spring of 1595, a series of archeological discoveries on a hillside near the Spanish city of Granada initiated the first formal investigation into Iberian sacred antiquities explicitly modeled after a judicial inquiry. Strikingly, a considerable portion of the Sacromonte inquest file revolves around a particular environmental question: had the then-barren hill in which the supposedly ancient relics were found—a land long known as Valparaíso, “Vale of Paradise”—always been dry, as the testimony of elderly Morisco witnesses suggested? Or had the hill once been fertile, as antiquarian theories about sacred landscapes dictated instead? This essay focuses on the visual and material evidence produced in the course of the inquiry as Granadan officials overwhelmingly steered towards the theory of long-term barrenness. This remarkable archive comprises not only a collection of maps that visualize key aspects of the hill’s ecology, but also a series of documents that have been less amenable to historical interpretation: depositions of local *conocedores* (“knowers”), that is, Morisco experts in land and water management, as well as records of material tests performed directly on the relics by local metalworkers, meant to prove the presence of ancient bitumen, a well-known preservative. By closely reading these sources, the essay suggests that there is more to them than their obvious interest to Iberian histories of archeology, science, and forensics. Placing both maps and tests in the context of a larger environmental history of the Valparaíso hill—fraught as this was with matters of political ecology—I offer a new reading of the famous forgeries and their investigation that emphasizes the crucial role of Morisco forms of natural knowledge, placemaking, and territorial praxis—what I call Morisco ecologies.