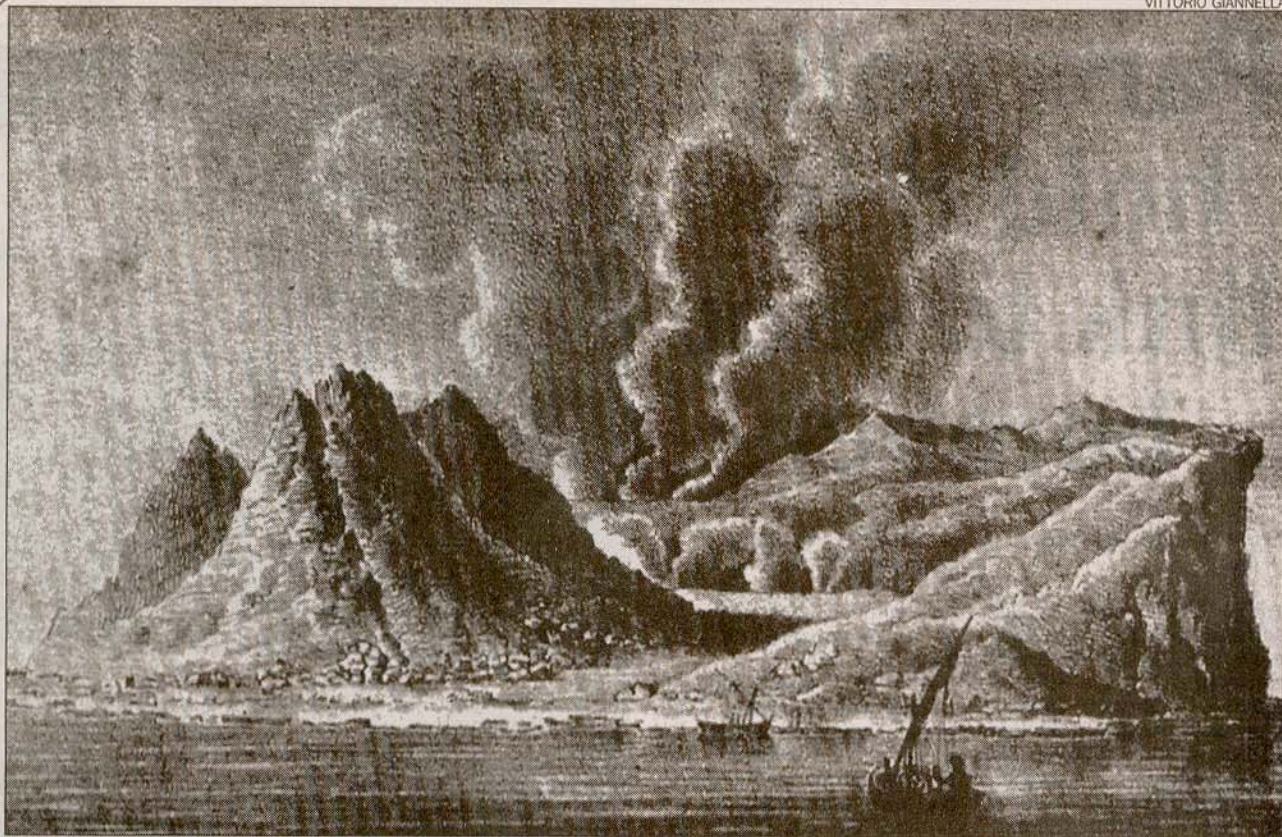


VITTORIO GIANNELLA



Now you see it: a print of the island, which rose from the sea for six months in 1831

Italy stakes early claim to submerged island

From Richard Owen in Rome

A BIZARRE diplomatic row is brewing over the ownership of a submerged volcanic island that may be about to reappear after 170 years in the seas off Sicily because of seismic activity around Mount Etna.

Italy's official maritime organisation demanded yesterday that Rome lay claim to the island before Britain, France,

Libya or any other state does so. A British claim could be based on the fact that a British admiral planted a flag when the island emerged from the sea for six months in 1831.

The Italian Naval League, founded in 1897 to promote Italy's maritime traditions and subordinate to both the Defence Ministry and the Transport Ministry, said that Italy must carry out a "preventive strike" and declare the island "a contiguous maritime zone, otherwise it could be claimed by other countries, including Arab states such as Libya".

The submerged island is known as Ferdinandea to the Italians, after King Ferdinand II, the Bourbon King of Naples and Sicily until 1859.

On British maps, however, it is marked as Graham Island or Graham Bank, after Sir James Robert George Graham, First Lord of the Admiralty, who claimed it for Britain. France also made a claim.

Enzo Boschi, head of the Institute of Geophysics and Vulcanology, said that intense seismic activity beneath Mount Etna and around the Aeolian Islands was also affect-

ing volcanos submerged in the sea around Sicily.

"We are monitoring the situation closely," he said. The re-emergence of the island would be "a beautiful and fascinating event".

Scientists first noted "bubbling waters" above Graham Island — which lies 30 miles from Sciacca on the Sicilian coast — nearly three years ago. Weather satellites spotted concentric wave patterns, and fishermen reported spouts of hot water, shoals of dead fish and the smell of sulphur.

Government scientists on an exploration vessel, the *San Giorgio*, yesterday reported similar phenomena, and Sicilian divers have planted an Italian flag on the island as a precautionary measure.

When the island last appeared in August 1831, rising 200ft above the water, Britain sent naval vessels from Malta, with a landing party led by Captain Humphrey Le Fleming Senhouse, and the flag was planted "despite the nauseous gas".

Etna, which is Europe's most active volcano, re-awakened a month ago, sending spectacular fountains of



molten rock into the air and unleashing streams of lava. It has not, so far, threatened centres of population such as Catania, which lies below.

Residents are, however, braced for a major eruption and earth tremors beneath Mount Etna continue to cause alarm.

Graham Island was climbed by Sir Walter Scott, the writer, as it was becoming the subject of a fierce dispute; a party of French adventurers landed to stake a claim for France. Then it sank as swiftly as it had risen.

It last featured in an international incident when US warplanes patrolling during the US-Libyan confrontation in 1987 mistook the island for a Libyan submarine and dropped depth charges on it.

In September last year Prince Charles and Princess Camilla of Bourbon, who live in exile in the South of France, arranged for divers to plant a plaque on the island declaring that the claim to it had passed from the former Bourbon dynasty to the Italian state.

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