



The Graeco-Roman city of Paestum

The Greek city of Poseidonia

Paestum, on the coast of Italy 250 kilometres to the south east of Rome, became a colony of Rome in 273 BCE. Long before that, Greek-speaking settlers came to this fertile coastline and established a city called Poseidonia and a Sanctuary of Hera. According to legend, the sanctuary was founded by Jason, at the mouth of the the River Sele, eight kilometres from Paestum. The facts are uncertain, but the earliest artefacts discovered at the site date between 625 and 600 BCE.

This is the story of the transformation of the city over six hundred years from its Greek origins to its Roman status as a colony, told through its buildings and some of its people.

The most striking evidence for the first Greek city are impressive remains of three temples. The earliest was dedicated to Hera, queen of the gods. It was built in about 530 BCE at the southern end of the city and was the focal point of a sanctuary that occupied a large area between the centre of the city and its southern gate.

North of the city centre, a second sanctuary provided another centre for religious activity. Here a second monumental stone temple was built at the end of the sixth century and dedicated to Athena, and so provided for further religious needs of the Greek-speaking people of Poseidonia.

Between these two impressive sanctuaries lay the civic heart of the city, the Agora, a large open square, the heart of public and commercial life.

Towards its northern side lay the assembly place for the people of the city, the ecclesiasterion, a building with a theatre-like bank of seats forming a circle. Here the politics of the city would be debated and voted upon. It has been estimated that the building could have seated an assembly of up to 1,000 people.

Also in the Agora a monument in the form of an empty tomb was set up, perhaps as a shrine to the founder of the city.

The city, like other Greek colonies in Southern Italy, was a major focus of religious activity, and a third large temple was built in the mid-fifth century and dedicated, either like the first, to Hera, or possibly to Apollo.

We can be sure that the first was dedicated to Hera because dedications inscribed with her name and terracotta figurines have been found around the altar. And finds of terracotta statues of Athena, goddess of warfare, indicate that the second was dedicated to Athena.

But the third is more difficult. Previously it was assumed that since the city was called Poseidonia there must have been a temple dedicated to the sea god. Yet among the wide variety of ex-votos – prayer offerings – found in the area of the temple some, consisting of models of body parts and lyres, suggest that there was a cult of Apollo Medicus, Apollo the healer, in the area.

The situation is complicated by the fact that many smaller shrines, dedicated to a variety of divinities, were established in the sanctuary and it is not clear which identifiable cults were associated with which buildings. This situation is not helped by the haste with which the area was excavated in the middle years of the twentieth century.

Culturally the citizens of Poseidonia, along with the other colonial cities of southern Italy, were Greek: traces of their writing are in Greek, the artefacts they used and the temples they built reflect their cultural identity. This does not mean that their material culture, including their temples, was identical or mechanically copied from original models in a Greek homeland. For a start there was no single monolithic Greek culture. What is more, areas that can be described as Greek are spread from Asia Minor, across Greece proper, to Southern Italy.

Within this area culture and society was very varied: there were different political systems, social organisations and local variations in material culture; for example the temple of Apollo has none of the normal sculptural decoration typically found on a Greek temple. And although it is built using the Greek Doric order it has twenty four flutes on the column rather than the canonical twenty found elsewhere in the Greek world. Such variations may be considered as manifestations of a local Greek culture