



The Graeco-Roman city of Paestum

How Poseidonia became Paestum

Together with pro-Roman members of the Lucanians, the settlers were given the rights to trade with Rome, to marry Roman citizens and to vote in Roman elections. The new settlers brought with them new political systems and ideas about the arrangement and buildings of a city. The walls and gates were rebuilt and the area of the city enlarged. From now it is possible to trace how Poseidonia was redeveloped to become the Roman colony of Paestum.

In the following decades the entire area of the Greek agora was gradually swept away and replaced with a Roman forum. This was a large open square at the centre of the city, surrounded by a colonnade with the important public buildings of the city arranged around its sides.

The comitium replaced the ecclesiasterion as the focus of political life. Here the assembly of the people was held and the citizens came here to vote into office their political leaders. Beside the circular comitium, which reproduced the form of the comitium at Rome, was the curia, where the city council met, much like the senate in Rome.

The new structures in Paestum were inspired by those in Rome and reproduced their functions, on a local scale. Along with the built environment the political and social organisations of the colony also both reproduced those of Rome.

Paestum also replicated some minor details of the Forum of Rome. This statue of Marsyas found in the corner of the forum at the centre of Paestum reproduces another set up in the Roman Forum. This was set up to commemorate the abolition of slavery as a punishment for debtors. The resultant achievement of freedom is symbolised by Marsyas wearing the leg irons of a slave, but with the chain between his legs broken indicating his liberty.

The theme of liberty seems to have been important to the settlers in Paestum: votive offerings from a temple near to the forum depict infant boys wearing the liberty cap and a charm necklace worn across one shoulder that was worn by children born either in slavery or to freed ex-slaves. The offerings were presumably made to secure the gift of a free-born child, a future free citizen.

On the north side of the forum was the most important new Roman temple in the city. Usually in a Roman colony the principal forum temple was dedicated Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, but in Paestum the temples of the Greek goddesses Hera and Athena became the temples of the Roman goddesses Juno and Minerva and their cults continued as they had for centuries. In the forum the new Italic temple was built to a different design. It rose above the level of the forum on a high podium and, unlike the Greek temples, could only be approached from the steps at the front. The temple was dedicated to the goddess Bona Mens.

The goddess personified the concepts of 'sound mind', 'wisdom' and 'memory' and particularly the sense of duty felt by a freed slave towards their ex-master. Taken together, all these indications of the significance of freedom to the settlers may suggest that the colonists sent from Rome may have been principally the urban poor, or even freed ex-slaves. The names of the citizens found on inscriptions indicate that that people of Roman, Etruscan and Lucanian origin lived in the city, but there is no further trace of the original Greek founders of the city.

Whatever the status of the first inhabitants, the colonists were each provided with property in the newly laid out city. Straight streets laid out at right angles divided the city into blocks and the blocks were subdivided into individual houses for the colonists.

In addition, a settler will have received a plot of land to farm outside of the city. In this way

Rome created new cities propagating Roman culture and political organization in newly conquered areas of Italy. These cities provided support for the growing power of the Roman republic. During the long war with Hannibal, Paestum remained loyal to Rome, even dutifully offering the gold from its temples at the time of Rome's greatest need.

Gradually, further amenities were built throughout the city. To the north of the forum an area was dedicated to sporting activities and entertainment, with a race track, an amphitheatre, and a pool that probably also had religious functions involving ritual purification.

As the city prospered, several of its leading citizens demonstrated their wealth and status by building monumental structures and gifting them to the city. Towards the end of the first century BCE Minea, daughter of Marcus Mineius, from an equestrian family of Lucanian origin, gave a new basilica located on the forum opposite the temple of Bona Mens, replacing an earlier structure.

Statue of togatus

Within the basilica, the hall of justice of the city, were six statues, identified by inscriptions; on one side, Mineia and her brothers, and on the other, her husband Gaius Cocceius Flaccus, their son and grandson. One of these statues survives; it is either her younger brother, her son or grandson.

The inscriptions found in the basilica record the gift of the basilica and recall for the citizens of Paestum the achievements of their leading citizens.

Here Gaius Cocceius Flaccus, a supporter of Julius Caesar, is commemorated by his wife. The inscriptions record his elevation to the senate, achieving the highest possible political and social status, and his role as a legate, deputy of the governor, in the province of Bithynia, where he founded a city, the colony of Apamea, in modern day Turkey.

Paestum is a remarkable city, with its well-preserved temples and spectacular tombs. But at the same time its history and development conform to a broader pattern of development that can be traced across the central and eastern Mediterranean. City living and Greek culture was brought to the shores of Lucania by Greek settlers, just like in so many other areas. Southern Italy and Sicily even became known as Greater Greece.

Yet the Greeks did not enter into a cultural vacuum, they interacted with indigenous peoples and variously competed and collaborated. At Paestum the Lucanians gained political control of the Greek city, but without rupturing the cultural continuity. Subsequently, the planning of a model Roman city on the remains of the earlier Greek city did cause redevelopment and cultural and political change. But even then, earlier elements, particularly the sacred sites, and also the local ruling families, maintained their influence in a new, changed Roman world.