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Paestum in a Roman Context

RICHARD E. MITCHELL

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Paestum in a Roman Context

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Biferique rosaria Paesti, Virgil's famous reference to the roses that bloom twice a season, now stands as contemporary metaphor for the revival of interest in the ancient city of Paestum, whose flower is once again in full bloom: *biferum Paestum*.¹ For two decades the archaeological discoveries at Paestum have been making headlines, and the city is rapidly becoming "one of the most important centers for the study of fourth century painting and pottery in Magna Graecia."² For painting, it may well be *the* center.

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The architectural, cultural, and economic richness and grandeur of the Greek city is another story, one filled with mystery and romance, inspired by the late rediscovery of the magnificent temples of Poseidonia in the eighteenth century. The temples, for all their nobility, cannot be fully explained, nor can the city in which they stood be fully depicted as an urban center. Our inability to fit Poseidonia into a clear historical context is the direct result of a limited literary tradition about the city. Mute stones

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may be a marvel, but they seldom speak the same language to all who view them.³

In order to piece together even a dim picture of Paestum's history, we must call upon all available sources of information. The geographic setting of the city and the kinship and association of its citizens with people in neighboring regions can be of some assistance. The isolated, episodic, and brief literary references concerning the city supply a sketch of its role during Rome's rise to empire, and details can be filled in by adding the few reliable conclusions obtained from the archaeological material and by analyzing the legal and technical aspects of the city's position as a Latin colony. Taken together, the information appears as a patchwork quilt, but it is all we have to cover the subject.

Paestum lies in the coastal plain of the Sele River in northern Lucania; Campania lies farther north along the coast, Samnium to the north and west, and Bruttium to the south. The site occupied an obvious strategic location. The flat agricultural area in which it lay contrasted sharply with the surrounding hills and forests of Lucania, which supplied abundant stone and timber from which to build a city and ships. Thus located and supplied, the city became an ideal maritime station of considerable importance, well placed for those who sailed the Tyrrhenian Sea or went along the coast into Magna Graecia and Sicily, and linked by an overland route to the Greek cities of the Ionian Gulf.

The Lucanians who took over the city are not easily distinguished from their Campanian, Samnite, and Bruttian neighbors, and it makes little sense when discussing the early history of the region to attempt fine distinctions. None were monolithic national ethnic units, and frequently their linguistic affinities are as difficult to unravel as their places of residence are to locate. Thus when our earliest sources refer to "Lucanians," "Campanians," or even "Samnites," they tend to lump together the entire range of peoples who inhabited the regions whose names parallel those of their populations.⁴

Moreover, although our sources seldom inform us about the various centers of occupation in the regions, in one breath they do tell us that the Romans made war against Samnites, Lucanians, or Apulians and in the next breath that they made peace with them. Sometimes a city is mentioned, but details are rare. None of these peoples were completely united in purpose or policy, and it was possible for Rome to have both friends and enemies among the same people. This is particularly true when it comes to contrasting behavior in cities with that in the countryside and hills. At times, the people who settled the cities were threatened as much by their rural kinsmen as by the encroachment of foreigners like the Romans.⁵

The literary tradition suggests that Rome may have become aware of

Paestum as a result of the campaign of Alexander of Epirus, the Molossian prince and uncle of Alexander the Great, who came west as a Tarentine mercenary when his nephew went east. At the time (330s B.C.) Rome was threatened by Gallic and Samnite dangers, and Alexander supposedly relieved the pressure by making war upon both the Samnites and Lucanians, whom he defeated after marching up from Paestum. Alexander concluded a peace with Rome, but whether Paestum was actually under his control or was friendly toward Rome is unknown and the specific nature of Roman involvement in the region unreported. Soon after, Alexander was murdered by Lucanians in his court, and then we hear that Rome joined with Lucanians against their common Samnite foes in 326 B.C. The major difficulty in all the aforementioned is the identification of Rome's Lucanian friends and enemies and the precise role Paestum played in these affairs as a Lucanian city.⁶

During the last quarter of the fourth century Rome moved steadily into Campania and Samnium and doubtless encountered both friendly and hostile Lucanians in the process. Rome allied with Naples as early as 326 B.C. and soon after began to build the queen of her highways, the Via Appia, southwards. During the same time, Rome established her first colony outside Italy on the island of Pontia (313 B.C.) and commissioned her first two naval squadrons (311 B.C.). Roman commanders sailed into the region of Pompeii, attacked the city of Nuceria (310 B.C.), and, in the course of the Second Samnite War (326-304 B.C.), became thoroughly involved in the territory around Paestum. By the end of the century Rome was militarily active in the far south, and we are specifically told that she came to the defense of Lucanians at the beginning of the Third Samnite War (298-290 B.C.). Although it is impossible to see clearly the role of Lucanians generally or Paestum specifically in any of these events, the circumstantial evidence is suggestive. Velia, together with Herculaneum and the unknown Palumbinum, were taken by the Romans in 293 B.C., and Velia, on the coast about thirty miles south of Paestum, appears to be less strategically important at the time than Paestum. In other words, between 326 and 293 B.C., Rome had been militarily successful along the coast and had become allied with the two coastal maritime cities that bracketed Paestum—Naples about sixty miles north and Velia thirty miles south. Lucanian cohorts supported Rome during the Third Samnite War, but we next find Rome supporting Thurii in a conflict against Lucanians. Thurii was built on the site of Sybaris, the city that originally colonized Poseidonia, and the overland route between the two cities was much travelled. Rome was at war with Tarentum and her mercenary Pyrrhus (283-272 B.C.), and several times we learn that Roman commanders celebrated triumphs over Samnites, Bruttians, and Lucanians during the conflict. It is often assumed that the Romans punished the Lucanians at the end of the Pyrrhic War by

taking Paestum from them and establishing a Latin colony there, which paralleled the colony at Cosa, designed to punish the Etruscans and thwart any future hostility from them in the north. Many have assumed that Cosa and Paestum reflect the same defensive strategy and only gradually, or in a secondary fashion, became important maritime centers.⁷ However, the people of Paestum had certainly never lost their interest in the sea, and it is questionable if Rome had anything to fear from the Paestan region. In 268 B.C., when Rome actually removed thousands of hostile Picentes from their homeland and resettled them in a region immediately north of Paestum in what became known as the *ager Picentinus*, the region must have been securely Roman.⁸ We cannot be certain of the size of the Roman colony sent to the city, and we do not know how many original inhabitants remained, but the city walls enclosed an area more than twice the size of Cosa, which was built *de nova*, and the population of the latter has been placed at about 7,500. It is entirely possible that from the first Paestum was one of those cities that found more advantage in joining the Romans than in opposing them, and we can be certain Rome was not unaware of the city's location and importance.⁹

In fact, Paestum was ever loyal to the Roman cause. The city's role in the First Punic War (264-241 B.C.) is unknown, but Tarentum, Locris, Naples, and Velia supplied ships, and the list may well be incomplete. The city doubtless played an important role in protecting the coast from the ravages of the Carthaginian fleet during the war, but nothing specific is mentioned. However, as a Latin colony, Paestum did supply a quota of ships during the Second Punic War (218-201 B.C.) and may well have contributed soldiers as well: at the time the entire region of Lucania supposedly had a manpower potential totaling 30,000 foot soldiers and 3,000 cavalry, and many must have come from the cities. While a large percentage of these Lucanians and much of Magna Graecia went over to Hannibal during the war, Paestum remained loyal to Rome, and on the eve of the disaster at Cannae (216 B.C.) both Naples and Paestum offered to support Rome's war effort with gifts of gold, which the Romans supposedly refused. On the other hand, extensive military campaigns took place in Lucania, with both Roman victories and defeats reported, and we hear that certain Lucanians treacherously betrayed a Roman commander during the war. Again, however, Paestum is among those cities specifically singled out for their loyalty to Rome. Unquestionably, Hannibal, ill-equipped and even less disposed to attempt a siege operation, would have welcomed Paestum as a supply port, but the city's formidable fortifications and loyalty to Rome kept her safely Roman.¹⁰

We do not hear that Paestum required additional colonists during the second century, as Cosa did, nor are we told specifically that the city was depopulated, as many in the region were; but scholars generally have

assumed that Paestum gradually declined in both population and vitality after the Hannibalic War. In the 190s Rome established a series of colonies along the coast both north (Puteoli and Salernum) and south (Buxentum, Tempa, Vibo Valentia, Croton, and Thurii-Copia) of Paestum. Rome may have felt the need for such colonies after the Second Punic War, but they did not become important cities and, with the exception of Puteoli and Salernum, soon were deserted.¹¹ Since Rhegium and Sicily could be reached from Puteoli in little more than a day's sail, neither commerce nor conflict any longer justified the existence of so many stations, ports, and allied coastal settlements.¹²

In the second century B.C. urban settlements, even along the coast, tended to give way to estates; urban life gave way to rural, and free labor gave way to slave. Paestum suffered along with the rest, but it is uncertain to what extent the region around Paestum remained populous, vital, productive, and wealthy. In other words, we cannot be certain if there was simply a shift in wealth and population from towns to country estates or whether the large estates were owned by absentee landlords and run by slave labor. Large estates are not as evident around Paestum as they are farther south; some scholars claim that the region was an undesirable place to live and refer to the literary tradition for support. For example, Strabo, writing in the late first century B.C. but perhaps reflecting earlier opinions, mentioned that the environment of Paestum was made unhealthy by the polluted nature of the swamps created by the Silarus River, which many have taken as a reference to the Sele, and he went on to say that much of the region was depopulated, with scarcely a place one could call a city left in the area except for Beneventum to the east. Experts argue that the geographic features of Paestum determined that swamps, salinization, and malaria would naturally obtain in the region and that the devastation brought on by the Hannibalic War, coupled with the tendency toward large estates run by slave labor, set in motion these natural forces that worked against the city's continuation as an important urban center. The physical evidence is inconclusive. We know that Grumentum, about fifty miles southeast, was still important in the mid-first century B.C.; perhaps its location reflects the fact that the overland route from Paestum to the Ionian Gulf was still important for agricultural and communication purposes. Strabo indicated that the Lucanians were important as couriers and for postal service, and the city may have formed an important link in the Roman communication network. However, Cicero, also writing in the middle of the first century, mentioned that he sailed from Puteoli to Velia across the gulf, but he did not mention Paestum. It would appear that too much has been read into these brief notices of Strabo and Cicero, which can do little to resolve the problem of the city's importance—or lack of it—in the first century B.C.¹³

The city was important and able enough to withstand the assaults of the Italian rebels during the Social War (91-88 B.C.), and some believe that a Sullan colony reinforced the city, which again played a minor role as a loyal Roman ally during the conflict with Spartacus (72-71 B.C.). In 71 A.D., the city received two settlements of honored naval veterans, discharged from the station at Misenum,¹⁴ but our sources tell us little about the political, economic, and cultural history of the city under the Empire. From the evidence of extensive rebuilding, Paestum apparently underwent a revival during the first and second centuries A.D., but again much of the urban life of the city must be assumed on the basis of evidence obtained from other cities along the coast. Neither her sister colony Cosa nor her neighbor Velia can supply a context for Paestum, since both ceased to exist as important centers, but we can obtain a glimpse of the political life from her inscriptions, civic buildings, and from what must have been a similar way of life more clearly seen from the information obtained from Puteoli and Pompeii, as well as from similar coastal cities and former Latin colonies.¹⁵ From such information we can postulate a rather lively local political life; a small competitive aristocracy, vying for local positions and imperial favors, who adorned the city with public works, administered the city and domestic affairs, put on and helped pay for public displays and games; and who, as the empire wore on, were gradually weighed down by the very political, economic, and civic functions they once sought. The city continued as an urban center for centuries, but in the fourth century A.D., when the Temple of Ceres became a Christian church devoted to the Virgin Mary, the classical and the Roman period of Paestum's existence came to an end simultaneously.¹⁶

Such a conclusion is arbitrary since Paestum's physical remains show the city's entire history is but a continuous series of changes, of new built upon old. Scholars are wont to label Paestum's stages as archaic, classical, Lucanian, Roman, and even Christian, but these distinctions are not always convincing, particularly during the periods of transition from one to another. At times, even the worship of the Virgin Mary is not as easily and clearly distinguished from that of pagan goddesses as one presumes it to be, and the change from Ceres (Athena or Minerva) to Mary may not have been abrupt. The process of assimilation is lost.¹⁷ The various Hellenic, Etruscan, and Italian influences at work upon one another at Poseidonia in the earliest period are difficult to unravel due to insufficient information, but on the basis of the new discoveries at Paestum, the Lucanian phase, previously considered the product of Greek, Apulian, or Campanian influences, now appears to be more original. The fourth- and third-century tomb paintings of Paestum depict those who lived in the city during the first period of Roman involvement in the region. Whether friend or foe, warriors in their modified Greek panoply of armor, light armored cavalry,

gladiatorial combatants, chariot races, and funeral scenes all show us much more clearly whom the Romans encountered when they moved into the area. Together with the Italiot vase paintings, these tombs are our best information about the nature of the Samnite and Lucanian culture—a culture, including the language spoken, which Strabo tells us was indistinguishable from the Roman by the end of the first century B.C. Indeed, the aristocracy of Paestum may always have been more favorably disposed toward their Roman counterparts, just as throughout much of Italy urban cultures generally show a certain correspondence.¹⁸

Although the archaeological evidence is not securely dated, the physical remains of the Latin colony tell the same story of the city's close affinity to Rome. Presumably, the foundation of the colony in 273 B.C. ushered in an elaborate building and rebuilding program. The city's walls were rebuilt, strengthened, and fortified with new towers, reflecting the city's strategic importance. Existing buildings and streets were converted into Roman types and the entire city divided by intersecting north-south (*decumani*) and east-west (*cardines*) streets, with the major ones leading to the city's four gates located at the cardinal points. This grid system, known as centuriation, was the original basis for laying out the specific lots for colonists, but the pattern, as at Cosa, appears to be irregular, and we cannot be certain how far it extended into the agricultural countryside. Some even doubt it is Roman in origin. However, there is no doubt that between the third and second centuries B.C., the colonists transformed the city within the walls into a modified version of the typical Roman autonomous Latin settlement. A forum, with a portico made of reused Doric columns, replaced the agora, and markets, shops, and public and sacred buildings surrounded the area and attested to the city's vitality. Among the earliest structures was the Temple of Peace, perhaps built in the second century to commemorate Rome's victory over Hannibal (and Paestum's role). The temple mirrors the Capitoline Temple of Rome in its north-south orientation and tripartite cella division. The autonomous political life of the city is reflected in the semicircular, stepped Comitium, where public business was undertaken. Such structures were familiar features in other Latin colonies and testify to their domestic political liveliness. However, Paestum's earliest structures associated with the Latin colonists were so greatly changed and modified in subsequent periods that it is difficult to see clearly the stages of the city's building program and thereby to obtain a clear picture of the vitality of the city at various stages in her history. The gymnasium and swimming pool, for example, may be Republican in origin, but if so they were extensively modified and changed in the first century A.D. Here contests and games took place, often partly paid for by local officials, whose accounts of their public service and philanthropic endeavors were recorded on stone, including their staging of gladiatorial combats and presenting of

gifts to the public. The city also possessed the familiar bath and an amphitheater. The latter, dated to the first or second century A.D., was uncharacteristically in the center of town, within the walls, rather than outside. Perhaps the city was not built up in the east region where the amphitheater was built, or perhaps the city was more of a center where people gathered than the residence of a large urban population. In other words, Paestum was thoroughly Roman by the beginning of the Empire, and although the same generally could be said about virtually all of Italy, it appears Paestum's identification with Rome has a longer history.¹⁹

In fact, the colonists sent to Paestum in 273 B.C. were drawn from many peoples, including Romans; but regardless of their previous status, they were now considered Latins, and as such they occupied a privileged position within the Roman system. Latin colonies were locally autonomous, although they were obligated to supply Rome with a certain number of men (or ships). Paestum, together with Cosa, was one of the few colonies to issue, or be permitted to issue, coins, and Paestum was unique in sustaining the practice until the early Empire. Since some of the original colonists were Roman in origin, it was natural that they would remain loyal to Rome. It was also natural that Latin colonists frequently copied the Roman form of government, with a dual chief magistracy (*duoviri* at Paestum), *quaestors*, and *aediles*, together with Roman-style assemblies and senates. Moreover, Latin status carried with it the privilege of intermarriage and of doing business with Romans, and it was possible for Latins to immigrate to Rome and take up Roman citizenship or, when they were just visiting the city, to vote in the Roman assemblies. It also appears that local magistrates, like those at Paestum, were entitled to Roman citizenship by virtue of their local position. The aforementioned rights and privileges meant that Latin colonies like Paestum were the "real instrument in the Romanization of Italy."²⁰

NOTES

1. Virgil, *Georgics*, 4.119. Mario Mello, *Paestum Romana: Ricerche Storiche. Studi, Istituto Italiano per la Storia Antica*, vol. 24 (Rome, 1974), in addition to being the best introduction to the history of Paestum generally, contains the best analysis of the references to the Paestan roses, their value as poetic metaphor and possible economic importance to the city (pp. 175-79).

The notes are intended as a guide to the nonspecialist and, where possible, are confined to works in English which contain references to both the ancient material and the modern scholarship. Space does not permit discussion of controversial points, and a citation does not mean agreement, but only indicates where the reader will find discussed the larger context into which Paestum is placed. Common knowledge and uncontroversial facts are frequently not cited, except when the reader will benefit from a reference to a work which deals with important larger issues.

2. A. D. Trendall, "Archaeology in South Italy and Sicily, 1970-72," *Archaeological Reports for 1972-73* (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1973), p. 33 (cf. 34-6). Additional numbers of the *Archaeological Reports* (1963-64, p. 38; 1966-67, p. 32; 1969-70, pp. 33-37; and 1967-77, pp. 47-48) contain brief descriptions of recent finds in and around Paestum, excavation reports, and recent publications dealing with the city.
3. For archaeological details about Paestum and other sites referred to, consult Margaret Guido, *Southern Italy: An Archaeological Guide* (Park Ridge, N.J.: Noyes Press, 1973), pp. 193-203; Sabatino Moscati, *Italia Archeologia*, vol. 1 (Novara: Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1973), pp. 31-43; and R. Stillwell et al., eds., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 663-64, which are the most up-to-date guidebooks and reference works for the city, its environs, and related archaeological details.
4. E. T. Salmon, *Samnium and the Samnites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 40-49, is the only full-scale treatment of any of these central Italian peoples, and he draws upon the material at Paestum (pp. 141-42) as evidence for Samnite culture.
5. For the view that Rome's friends and foes broke along class lines, see William V. Harris, *Rome in Etruria and Umbria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), esp. pp. 143-44, where the Lucanian information is deemed analogous to his primary concern, and G. E. M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 519-21, where, on the basis of the Lucanian evidence, he concludes that "the tendency of upper classes to incline toward Rome is a very general phenomenon."
6. Livy, *History*, 8.17, 8.24, presented the story of Alexander and told of the Lucanian alliance (8.25). Henceforth, for dated Roman Republican events, consult T. Robert S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, 2 vols. (New York: American Philological Association, 1951). Under the year in question complete ancient references are given.
7. As examples of the defensive military view, see E. T. Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 62-63; William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327-70 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 183; but cf. Frank Brown, "Cosa I, History and Topography," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 20 (1951):17, who (correctly) maintains that both Paestum and Cosa show Rome's "new concern for the sea."
8. See Salmon, *Samnium and Samnites*, pp. 288-89.
9. Detailed information about colonization is found in Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic*, who discusses the purposes and consequences of colonization and presents detailed descriptions of important sites.
10. Polybius, *History*, 1.20, mentioned the cities that supplied ships in 264 B.C., and also the Lucanian manpower (2.24). Livy, *History*, 26.39, mentioned Paestum's maritime obligation (and Velia's and Tarentum's), the offer of gold (22.36), and the campaigns in Lucania (23.37; 25.16).
11. Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic*, pp. 95-100, discusses the colonization, and in E. T. Salmon, *The Making of Roman Italy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 90-127, the context and consequences of their establishment are treated.
12. Lionel Casson, *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 284, 281-99, on the question of sailing speed generally.
13. Strabo, *Geography*, 5.4.13; and Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, 16.6. Cicero spent considerable time at Velia, with friends, to judge from his correspondence. For depopulation see Livy, *History*, 39.23., and the following bibliography which reflects the conflict of opinion: Ulrich Kahrstedt, "Die wirtschaftliche Lage Grossgriechenlands in der Kaiserzeit," *Historia*, Einzelschrift 4 (1960):3-15;

- Arnold J. Toynbee, *Hannibal's Legacy: The Hannibalic War's Effects on Roman Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), esp. vol. 12, pp. 228-52; P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 B.C.-A.D. 14* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 358-62, who also discusses malaria extensively (pp. 611-24); Mello, *Paestum Romana*, pp. 135-71, is the best general summary.
14. See Chester G. Starr, *The Roman Imperial Navy (31 B.C.-A.D. 324)* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1941), pp. 94, 185, 203.
15. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 412-32; and vol. 2, pp. 319-60, presents the context in which to place Paestum.
16. See Mello, *Paestum Romana*, pp. 165-71.
17. John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 14, 237-39; and R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), pp. 272-82, present brief accounts of this phenomenon at work.
18. Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, pp. 519-21.
19. Guido, *Southern Italy*, pp. 193-203, presents the important archaeological and architectural details, with plans; and Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic*, pp. 13-28, has an excellent introduction, together with a treatment of Cosa as the "typical Latin colony" (pp. 29-39).
20. Salmon, *Roman Colonization under the Republic*, p. 54; but also indispensable to an understanding of the political and constitutional characteristics of the Latin colonies are Salmon, *The Making of Roman Italy*, pp. 40-72, 177-81; and, especially, A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Roman Citizenship*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 96-118. For students interested in Paestan numismatics, see Michael Crawford, "Paestum and Rome—The Form and Function of the Subsidiary Coinage," *Annali, Istituto Italiano di Numismatica*, Supplement to vols. 18-19 (1973):47-109.