

Van: <ephost@epnet.com>
Onderwerp: Paestum
Datum: 2 november 2010 11:28:20 GMT+01:00
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6918 pdf
PATEL, S. S.
2010

Comments:
2010

Record: 1

Title: Rediscovering Paestum.
Authors: Patel, Samir S.
Source: Archaeology; Jul/Aug2010, Vol. 63 Issue 4, p44-48, 4p, 7 Color Photographs
Document Type: Article
Subject Terms: *TEMPLES, Greek
*GREEK architecture
*IMAGES, Photographic
*HISTORY
PAESTUM (Extinct city)
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Full Text Word Count: 1063
ISSN: 00038113
Accession Number: 51316859
Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=51316859&site=ehost-live>
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Database: Academic Search Premier

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Rediscovering Paestum

The forgotten Greek temples of Southern Italy

THE PARTHENON IN ATHENS has seen the depredations of war, vandalism, pollution, and well-meaning antiquarians, but it has always been the city's most prominent sight. Elsewhere in the Greek world are temples to rival it that were truly forgotten, isolated from many of the ravages that visited their Athenian counterpart. Fifty miles south of Naples, on the western Italian coast, lie the ruins of the ancient Greek colony of Poseidonia, now known by its Roman name, Paestum. The walled city claims not one but three remarkably intact Greek temples that had been abandoned and ignored--surrounded by a fetid, pestilential, and protective swamp--from medieval times until their "rediscovery" by archaeologists, historians, and architects in the eighteenth century. They "constitute the best-preserved population of temples of any Greek city, save possibly Athens," says Brown University archaeologist R. Ross Holloway. Paestum is perhaps one of the most unjustly overlooked sites of the ancient Mediterranean world. Recent excavations and conservation have revealed new portions of the Roman city, providing a more complete picture of a unique classical town.

According to ancient accounts, Poseidonia was founded by exiles from either the nearby, prosperous colony of Sybaris or the Greek city of Troizen around 600 B.C. It was a successful trading post for the Magna Graecia, or the network of Greek colonies that sprouted up in Italy and Sicily starting in the eighth century B.C. The city's three surviving temples, two dedicated to Zeus's wife Hera and one to Athena, were built in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. However, around 400 B.C., the city was overrun by people from the Italian interior called the Lucanians. Though some sources claim the Lucanians enslaved the Greeks, their "conquest" was more likely an act of cultural fusion (see "Painted Tombs"). Lucanian rule over the city ended in 237 B.C. with the arrival of the Romans. While the Romans kept the temples intact, they all but razed the original Greek city, building their own on top of it. A prosperous Greek colony became a marginal Roman one as overland trade routes shifted away from the city in the second century B.C. "Paestans led lives unencumbered by great possessions in a city declining in importance and becoming a bit of a backwater," writes University of Michigan professor emeritus John Griffiths Pedley in his book on the site. Small communities persisted near the Temple of Athena for a few centuries--it was converted to a basilica around the fifth

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century A.D.--as nearby springs silted up, turning the area into swamp. And with that, Paestum was entirely abandoned: a place of hostile locals, malarial mosquitos, and lurking brigands.

It was not until the excitement surrounding the discovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum in the mid-eighteenth century that scholars "rediscovered" the city. Several of these visitors wondered how a site so impressive could go unappreciated for so long. With their careful alignments and pleasing proportions, the temples sparked a reexamination of ancient architecture that culminated in one of the great architectural debates of the eighteenth century: were Greek temples of the Doric order like these--massive but light on ornamentation--somehow primitive compared with the more ornamented Roman ideal? Using the Paestum temples as evidence, German theorist Johann Joachim Winckelmann posited that later Roman architecture grew from the Greek style. These temples were not primitive, but foundational. He placed Paestum at a pivotal moment in the development of classical architecture, and soon even scholars most resistant to the idea would come to agree with him.

The three temples of Paestum loom large over the rest of the city, both physically and in the architectural imagination, but the city itself also has much to offer visitors. Newly opened areas provide access to a warren of shops and other buildings, and much more still lies under private land in every direction. Each visit brings a chance to discover Paestum anew.

PHOTO (COLOR): The Temple of Hera I is the earliest of Paestum's three Greek temples, built in the middle of the sixth century B.C. An unusual row of columns through the middle suggests it might have been used to worship two dieties, possibly Zeus and Hera. The Temple of Hera II is the newest and largest of the three, built around 450 B.C. This structure is pivotal in the development of the Doric style in Greek architecture.

PHOTO (COLOR): Perched at the city's highest point, the Temple of Athena was built around 500 B.C. In medieval times, it was converted to a Christian church and a small town grew up around it. The temple is visible from a mysterious underground shrine. Excavated in 1954, the shrine was cut into the rock, has no doors, and held nine vases and jars, including two containing a sticky substance resembling honey or molasses. It is thought to relate to a secret cult of Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld, or to have been a symbolic tomb for the founder of Sybaris.

PHOTO (COLOR): The city's other mysterious site is a platform within a large sunken enclosure, shown (with the Temple of Hera II visible in the background). It has been interpreted as a gymnasium, a public bath, a ritual bath, or a shrine to Venus.

PHOTO (COLOR): Newly conserved and opened to the public, areas west and north of the Temple of Hera II provide a glimpse of the city that once surrounded the temples. As recently as a few decades ago, little of the rest of the city was exposed; much more lies under privately owned land within its walls. The colonnade in the foreground above was built around what was once a reservoir that was later filled in with earth and converted to a large atrium.

PHOTO (COLOR): Broken columns from the now-gone Roman Forum temple sit next to the remains of a comitium, where the Romans held public meetings. The site of an earlier Greek agora, which served a similar purpose, has also been found, torn down and full of Roman trash.

PHOTO (COLOR): A warren of small shops recalls the city's prosperous past as a trading post. But by the time the Romans built these shops--ignoring the original Greek city grid--the city's decline was well on its way.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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Text and photographs by Samir S. Patel

Samir S. Patel is a senior editor at ARCHAEOLOGY.

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