

City of Roses

Paestum, the ancient Poseidonia, was renowned in antiquity for the cultivation of roses.

Gardens everywhere and banks of roses, stretching from the outskirts to the edge of the ruined city, with velvety blooms of every shade of red, peaches and cream, and soft pink. Strolling along the paths of Paestum is “like walking through the Elysian fields”. This is the alluring picture of Paestum described by classical poets. Those great lyrical masters did not extol the temples of this important city of Magna Graecia, whose harmonious beauty is still quite breathtaking, but praised instead the soft, entrancing perfume of her roses, to the point that they became a metaphor for gentleness and sweetness. Martial lamented the passing of a six-year-old girl by saying that her mouth had “the fragrance of Paestum’s roses”. At the end of the *Georgics*, Virgil regretted not being able to sing the praises of the “rose gardens of Paestum which blossom twice a year”. During the long sad years of exile, Ovid recalled nostalgically in his *Letters from the Black Sea* that “nothing could surpass the perfume of the roses and the climate of Paestum”. These are only a few among the host of artists who, throughout the centuries, have created the “roses city” myth, for Paestum is one of those magical places whose origins are rooted in legend. In fact, an ancient legend related first by Strabo and then Livy, tell that Jason, the fearless leader of the Argonauts, built a sanctuary for Hera, at the mouth of the Sele River that flows across the Paestum plain. Forgotten for thousands of years, the temple was discovered about twelve kilometers from Paestum around 1934. The ancient city, on which Paestum was built, was originally called Poseidonia. Although it may have been founded by the Phoenicians it is more probable, in the light of recent evidence, that it was built by a colony led by Dorus, who landed at the Sele estuary after the fall of Troy. Of the old traditions upheld by Lycurgus, the new city passed on the custom of giving banquets, but above all renovated the Doric order and built temples in this style. There is also a theory that the city was founded by a colony of the Terentii from Sybari. It would appear certain, however, that Paestum was built on a site previously inhabited by Italic people, close to the Sele river and near the sea rather than in the middle of the plain. The Greek historian and geographer Strabo wrote that Paestum was located on the coastline. For many years, the history of Poseidonia was dominated by alliances among the Greek colonists from Sybari, the Etruscans, and other peoples along the coasts of the Ionian Sea, before it came under the rule of Lucania. And the people of Lucania changed the name of the city to Paestum. Their civilization was as unrefined as their language and unable to pronounce Poseidonia correctly, they gradually transformed it into Poeiston, Poeoston, and finally Paestum. The city only became economically robust again when it was conquered by the Romans in 273 BC. It attracted the wealthy and aristocratic classes, and the art of cultivating roses inherited from the people of Sybaris which had already elicited the praise of Herodotus, caused the economy to flourish. In no time

at all Paestum became a highly civilized, peaceful city, but above all a poetic center whose beauty was recognized throughout the Roman Empire thanks to the great classical poets.

From the first century BC onwards, when luxurious living rapidly became the thing in Rome, Paestum greatly increased its rose growing - the city’s favorite industry. It is a well-known fact that roses were a prevalent feature of social life in ancient times and garlands of roses graced dining rooms, important ceremonies, wedding banquets, and wakes. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Paestum became Christian, had its martyrs in Diocletian’s time, and was an episcopal seat before becoming part of the Duchy of Benevento and, finally, the Principality of Salerno. Destroyed by the Saracens in 930 AD, Paestum was plundered by Roger I and Robert Guiscard who, in 1080, stripped the deserted city of its remaining marble and the granite columns from several Greek tombs, and took them off to Salerno to decorate the Cathedral of S. Matteo. In the centuries that followed, cultivation diminished and the waters of the little river known as the Capodifiume or Salso dried up. The city and its temples were forgotten for almost seven centuries. They came to light in the mid-eighteenth century when work started on the roadway built by the Bourbon king Charles III. This put Paestum well and truly on the map of the Grand Tour.

European travelers who came to Italy were astounded by the city’s architectural splendor. One of Paestum’s first admirers was Goethe who wrote: *“I wandered through the ruins, accompanied by one of the locals, and my first impression was one of astonishment and wonder”*. During the last century, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote admiringly: *“The builders tapered the columns from the bottom to the top and you can see immediately that they could never follow. The grooves indicate that the column is stronger and more resistant at the center as if that’s where all its strength were concentrated; but, at the same time, the columns are slender at the top and create a subtle play of light and shadows”*. At the beginning of this century the French writer Eduard Schneider, remembered his visit to Paestum’s temples with the following words: *“Equilibrium, majesty, imposingly elegant lines, supreme intelligence in the arrangement of details, proportion and the whole; the Greek mind imposes here the simple grandeur of its genius”*.

Paestum is located a few kilometers from the municipality of Capaccio, to which it belongs, and a few kilometers from the sea. The ancient village is enclosed by walls that are roughly shaped like a pentagon. The beauty of the spectacle seems to have improved with time: the Basilica, the temple supposedly built to Neptune but which might have been dedicated to Hera, and the Temple of Peace continue to enthral visitors from all over the world. The Italian writer Riccardo

Bacchelli, who visited the ruins at the beginning of the fifties, noted in his journal, published as *L'Italia per terra e per mare*: "The air has lightened the stone, which has become spongy, and as delicate as a living sponge. This travertine shines without being shiny; appears solid but not oppressive, and stands erect, held together by virtue of the straight line, rather than its weight".

Paestum is constantly renewing the miracle of Greek civilization reborn from the depths of time, the symbol of a civilization that never dies, and remains at a time when nature and art have been praised as a manifestation of the gods.

GOETHE VISITS PAESTUM

"I found a countryman to conduct me round the temples. At first sight, they excited nothing but stupefaction. (...) In their evolution from austerity to charm, the centuries have simultaneously shaped and even created a different man. Our eyes and, through them, our whole sensibility have become so conditioned to a more slender style of architecture that these crowded masses of stumpy conical columns appear offensive and even terrifying. But I pulled myself together, remembered the history of art, the thought of the age with which this architecture was in harmony, called up images in my mind of the austere style of sculpture - and in less than an hour I found myself reconciled to them and even thanking my guardian angel for having allowed me to see these well-preserved remains with my own eyes.

Reproductions give a false impression; architectural designs make them look more elegant and drawings in perspective more ponderous than they really are. It is only by walking through them and around them that one can attune one's life to theirs and experience the emotional effect which the architect intended. I spent the whole day doing this, while Kniep was busy making sketches. I felt happy to know that I had nothing to worry about on that score, but could be certain of obtaining faithful records to assist my memory."

(Extract from *Italian Journey*, by J.W. Goethe, translated by W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer).