

## PAESTUM

### Introduction

On the shore of the Tyrrhenian Sea where Jason, with his Argonauts, supposedly built the sanctuary of Hera, at the mouth of the Sele river, the Sybarites founded, around 600 BC, a colony dedicated to Poseidon, in the middle of the extremely fertile agricultural land of the Sele plain. *Poseidonia* reached its maximum splendour between 560 and 440 BC. At the beginning of the 5th century BC, the Lucanians took control of the city, gradually merging with the Greeks, thus contributing to the creation of a deeply original culture. The city maintained its independence until the Roman conquest in 273 BC, when a colony was established there under Latin law; its prosperity during the end of the Roman Republic is testified by the public and private buildings revealed by the excavations. The city was still sufficiently important in the 5th century to become an Episcopal seat. However, the progressive swamping of the settlement, which generated an unhealthy air, and the incursions of Saracen pirates, drove its inhabitants to permanently abandon the site during the 10th century.

### History

The area of the city, divided by two orthogonal main roads into four districts, was enclosed by a city wall about 4.75 km long, with 28 towers. To the south, a bridge crossed the defensive moat and gave access to "Porta Giustizia", which takes its name from the "basilica" located nearby, actually a temple initially considered a courthouse. The western part of the city is occupied by three Doric style temples, which today continue to be commonly referred to by the erroneous name given to them in the past. To the south-west, we first come across the "basilica", so named at the time because of its unique architectural features - unequal number of columns on the façade, longitudinal division of the interior into two distinct spaces, apparent absence of decorative friezes -, which seemed to rule out the possibility that it was a temple. However, this distinctive plan could be explained by the joint presence in the building of two gods: Hera certainly, possibly accompanied by Zeus. Dating just after the middle of the 6th century BC, this temple is the oldest in the city. The "temple of Neptune", or "of Poseidon", just north of the previous one, built a little less than one century later, has been identified as such because it is the largest in the city, but it was probably also dedicated to Hera. It is one of the most accomplished examples of Western Greek architecture, and one of those whose form was conceived more carefully. To the northwest of the city, the temple "of Ceres", or "of Vesta", actually dedicated to the goddess Athena, is much smaller than its predecessors. It was built around 500 BC, following extremely strict geometrical principles, and shows a number of bold architectural innovations for the time of its construction. In Roman times, the agora of the city was replaced by a Forum around which several public buildings were constructed: a Capitolium, a temple dedicated to the virile Fortune, connected with a large swimming pool, an amphitheatre, while the houses of Greek tradition were replaced by rich private *domus*. The necropolis of Paestum has returned numerous funerary painted slabs from the Greek and Lucanian periods, including the famous "Diver's Tomb".

### **Rediscovery and restoration**

The site was looted in the 11th century for the recovery of building materials by Roger the Norman, and later by Robert Guiscard, for the construction of the cathedral of Salerno. During the Renaissance it was no longer known where the city was, although it was mentioned in Latin sources, in particular in the poems of Virgil, Ovid and Propertius. Rediscovered in the 18th century, during the great road works ordered by the king of Naples Charles VII, the city, struck by malaria, was still surrounded by a vast forest infested by bandits when the French archaeologist François Lenormand visited it in 1880. It was then a landmark stop along the Grand Tour. The city remained untouched by any digging, at least officially, until 1907, but since then the site has been the subject of several excavation campaigns; the last major restorations took place between 2003 and 2013. The *Heraion del Sele*, about 8 km north of Paestum, was discovered and excavated between 1934 and 1940, leading to the discovery of about seventy spectacular archaic figurative metopes, now on display in the museum of Paestum, which was built in 1952 to present them in a suggestive way. In modern times, the temples of Paestum had a great influence on the development of the Neo-Doric style, which was intended to oppose the excesses of the Baroque. Although the landscape around them today has changed a great deal, it is not difficult to recognise the monuments on the drawings left for us Hubert Robert, Giambattista Piranesi, William Turner or Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. Paestum was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1989, as part of a vast area - 159,110 hectares - covering the whole of the Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park, and includes, to the south, the site of the colony of Elea/Velia, founded by the Phocceans in the second half of the 6th century BC. The temples of Paestum offer exceptional evidence of Doric architecture and of the colonisation process carried out by the Greeks in southern Italy, as well as being an example of harmonious fusion between the Greek and Italic populations.