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The Pompeian "Triangular" Forum and Theater Complex

By John Leebens

Abutting the original foundation walls of the Oscan town of Pompeii to the southeast was an open space now called the "Triangular" Forum that was dominated from the beginning by a large 6th century Doric temple. The temple would have buildings built around it ranging from a *gymnasia*, to a Temple, to the conglomerate Egyptian god Isis. While varying widely, this section of Pompeii is called the Theater Complex and was meant to serve the social and educational needs of all the denizens. The successive periods of Oscan, Greek, Etruscan and finally Roman influence changed and molded this section of town over seven to eight centuries until the fateful day of August 24, 79 A.D.

The Triangular Forum and surrounding space evolved over time. The Forum was not the central business area but served the leisure and sport of the city. It consisted of the area that would have been considered either the *arx* or *acropolis*, which jutted out above the surrounding area. Initially, all that stood in the area was a 6th century Doric Greek temple made of regional limestone and brown tufa, with a *podium* that was accessible from all four sides.¹ It was the oldest building in Pompeii in 79 A.D. but had not been refurbished in many years. It is interesting that it had not been converted to a temple for a Roman deity because of its age and grandeur or destroyed outright, but by the time of the eruption, it was in a state of disrepair.

Doric porticoes on the east eventually regularized the open space around the temple and northern sides during the massive building period of the second century B.C., which left a beautiful view far out into the Bay of Naples. Also during this period a monumental Ionic *propylaeum* was built at the pinnacle of the forum to draw

attention, act as a main entrance to the forum itself, and the surround complex.² Also running parallel to the eastern row of portico was a low wall that could have acted as a divider for an undersized stadium.³ The porticoes had not been repaired since the earthquake of 63, leaving a dilapidated look to excavators. While not very impressive, the buildings that worked in corresponding space directly to the east made the Triangular Forum a special social area for people of all statuses.

Off of the Triangular Forum was an eastern staircase east that led into the back of the large or grand theater. This large theater was impressive from its beginning in the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. during the massive Samnite building period that typified this area of town, but experts are unsure of the original size of the *cavea* because of the extensions that the Holconii family dedicated in 3/2 B.C., which made the seating somewhere around 5,000 and made the theater have a Roman air.⁴ Marcus Holconius Rufus was the leading citizen of Pompeii during Augustus' reign and was the main donor for the marble faced *tribunalia* and *crypta* built for the dregs of society so that they could view the plays but be kept separate from the rest of the citizens. He received a seat in the front row because of this.⁵

After seeing a play a citizen could venture to the small theater or *odeum* next door to hear a reading or concert. This was a much smaller theater, but it was covered, begun very early in the city's history and pre-dating any of its type in Rome or the surrounding area. Campania was more cultured at an earlier date than Rome

¹ Carrington p.124

² Westfall

³ Zanker p.48

⁴ Zanker pp.44,45,107

⁵ Zanker p. 113

because of the heavy Greek influence during the 6th through 4th centuries B.C.¹

To the south of the large theater was a large open area with seventy-four Doric columns. This was a sizable *paleastra* made during the 2nd century building of the Samnites. Initially thought to be a walking area during intermissions at the theaters, it seems to be separated by the fact that it is off-center from the theaters and was built at a later date with a different building style. It is now guessed that this area was a Greek style *gymnasia* where young men and boys would go to learn the physical part of their education, which I tend to believe. Zanker states that this was a focal point of the town for the "better" youth because "given these cities' lack of political power... the gymnasium became the cornerstone of these societies' Greek history."² In the Roman period this area had sleeping quarters put in surrounding the columns. These could have served many purposes, but it is suggested that it could have served as a gladiatorial area under the Romans. Gladiator equipment was found in one room, but I am skeptical of this interpretation because of the idea of training would make this just a storeroom.³ Additionally, there was a *palaestra* for gladiatorial training near the amphitheater on the east side of town.

After exercise, the citizen could visit the smaller Samnite *paleastra* north of the large theater passive back into Triangular Forum and then through an open area. This could have been a *gymnasia* for younger boys or as a club hang out area. In comparison, it is very small to the other *palaestra*. I do not understand how any exercise could be had in this small area for more than a small handful at a time, even if short sprints were done in the mini *cursus* in the Forum. This makes me think it would be

more of a social area, possibly for the theater or Forum overspill.⁴

The citizen could have his afternoon bath across the Via dell'Abbondanza at the oldest baths in Pompeii, the Stabian Baths, starting over a hundred years before you could have a public bath in Rome. The Stabian Baths are technically outside the theater complex, but are only a literal jump across the raised walking stones of the Via because it did not have any drains.⁵ The bath was one of the few buildings that was completely repaired after the earthquake of 63, when it was refurbished in more of a Roman style replacing the Greek with a *hypocaust* system and resurfacing the interior with mosaics, marble and tufa.

Cena was then had at a banquet hall in either the Temple of Zeus Meilichios (or Asclepius) or Isis along with the daily rituals. Both were originally from before the refounding of the colony by Sulla, but Isis took over for some other deity during the late Republic soon after Octavian took Egypt. Because of there small physical size they were available to cult members only. The important point about these temples is that they became very popular during Augustus' reign. The Temple of Isis was completely restored after the earthquake and was in the best condition of any of the temples in town found so far. The Temple of Asclepius actually took over as the place of worship for the Capitoline triad while the *Capitolia* was being repaired, which after seventeen years was not finished.⁶

One interesting fact is that the Temple of Isis was dedicated in the name of a six-year-old son of a former slave named N. Popidius Ampliatus, who, because of his magnanimous giving, got his son placed in the senate of Pompeii. This way he already obtained for his son what he could never

¹ Carrington pp. 46,48

² Zanker p. 46

³ Perkins and Claridge p.88,89

⁴ Zanker p.49

⁵ Zanker pp. 68,128

⁶ Perkins and Claridge p.83,84; Zanker p.52

obtain because of his former slave status. The temple was in excellent condition because the cult was popular with the rich. This shows that foreign religions were becoming more important in the Roman Empire during its formative years, almost to the negligence of other temples and cults like *Augusta Fortuna*. It is obvious that Rome did not have authoritarian power over religion, and that the people actually invited foreign religion in with welcome arms.¹

As the Romans consolidated power, especially under Augustus, Pompeii succumbed to Roman influence. The aristocracy started to demand creature comforts in greater supply, and, as political life expanded, ostentatious building helped meet these desires for social areas and buildings. After the Samnite Wars of the third century B.C. when Pompeii and the rest of Campania came under Roman treaty, a building spree occurred. All of the buildings in the theater complex were built between 250 and 80 B.C., except for the ancient Doric temple and the small covered theater that was built in the 70s B.C.

Greek and Oscan influence shaped the buildings in Pompeii during this period. However, the Roman characteristics of buildings became prevalent as the power of Rome grew, demonstrated by the Temple of Isis, the large theater, and the Stabian baths just across the street. The buildings were kept up by individual patronage on a grand scale not seen before. M. Horcotius Rufus became a figure in Pompeii almost like that of Augustus in Rome, earning offices and awards including *patronus coloniae*, through his wealth and donations to buildings. At the time the larger theater near the Triangular Forum was in a sad state because no one had repaired it in years.²

The Triangular Forum and the buildings that were associated with it were

from different time periods and in varied states of repair yet put forth a coherent picture of what social life in Pompeii was like. By ignoring the old Doric temple in the Forum itself, but completely overhauling the Temple of Isis, we see foreign religion imported by the Romans move out older influences in an evolutionary process that occurs in every city. While it was originally outside the city, the Triangular Forum was quickly incorporated and over time built up to be the social center of the city while the main Forum was surrounded by basilicas and markets for business.

Pompeii had been bounced around between the Etruscan, Oscan, and Greek cultures before Rome took hold. Rome's influence and the political system that it promoted made it similar to developments in other cities. However, Pompeii still retained some degree of autonomy culturally. The fact that the royal cult building went into disarray while the Stabian baths were upgraded and the *gymnasia* were fully repaired show how Pompeians and especially the important patrons had more to do with the building projects than anything else. Whoever had the money decided what was built or refinished.

Another aspect was that there were baths and theaters in Pompeii long before there was anything like that Rome. Pompeii had the Stabian baths over a hundred years before Agrippa built his baths in Rome in 19 B.C. The large stone theater was not matched in Rome until Pompey the Great built his complex, but this was also over a hundred years after Pompeii. The Greek culture had infused these buildings as necessary in the Campania area and predated Roman buildings like the *basilicae* of Cosa. A copy of the smaller covered theater also shows up later built by Agrippa in Athens several generations after it appeared in Pompeii.³ This shows the trend that in some

¹ Zanker p. 53

² Zanker p. 109

³ Tomlinson p. 181

cases the colonies and provinces could be ahead of Rome for monumental architecture and culture.

The Triangular Forum and the immediate surrounding area are a perspective of social life in the early *pax Romana*. These buildings show how patronage, culture, and demand worked together to produce unique buildings that filled the societal standards for living in a period of individual building projects.

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