

3 The Geography and History of Campania and Pompeii

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In what terms to describe the coast of Campania . . . with its blissful and heavenly loveliness, so as to manifest that there is one region where nature has been at work in her joyous mood! And then again all that invigorating healthfulness all the year round, the climate so temperate, the plains so fertile, the hills so sunny, the glades so secure, the groves so shady! Such wealth of various forests, the breezes from so many mountains, the great fertility of its wheat and vines and olives, the glorious fleeces of its sheep, the sturdy necks of its bulls, the many lakes, the rich supply of rivers and springs flowing all over its surface, its many seas and harbors and the bosom of its lands offering on all sides a welcome to commerce, the country itself eagerly running out into the seas as it were to aid mankind. (Pliny *HN* 3.40-41, trans. Rackham 1942, 33)

As Pliny eloquently attests, Campania was an exceptionally fertile region of Italy (fig. 3.1), which provided an abundance of arable land for its inhabitants, as well as numerous natural harbors and ports facilitating trade and transport.¹ Not surprisingly, the region and its fertile soil, rich in the minerals of volcanic eruptions, attracted many conquerors and colonizers in antiquity. From a region inhabited by indigenous peoples to one occupied by a succession of settlers of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the area ultimately fell under Roman rule and was fully incorporated into the Roman state. Like Campania in general, the city of Pompeii was subject to a broad range of ethnic and cultural influences, influences that played an important role in the development of art and architecture in the city. This chapter provides a brief overview of the history of Pompeii in the context of Campanian history as background for other chapters in the volume that address interchanges among the religious and artistic traditions in the region, for these bear on the problem of reading the megalographic frieze in Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries.

There are no boundary stones to define the region the Romans called Campania. References by ancient authors can assist in outlining the approximate extent of the ancient *ager*, but the region cannot be defined with any precision.² In antiquity, all of the cities near the Bay of Naples were considered part of Campania. Polybius (3.91) suggests that Caes marked the northern border of the region and Nola the southern border. The Volturnus River and Mount Tifata formed natural barriers to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and the Samnite Mountains to the east and south.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (FIG. 3.2)

Modern archaeological research has shown that the main settlements of the region were founded in the ninth century BC, probably by peoples from the region historically known as Etruria. Cremation rites similar to those of the Villanovan cultures of central and Northern Italy were practiced in the early Iron Age in Campania.³ One of the major settlements in Campania was Capua, which was inhabited in this period by a people known to modern historians as the Opici or the Ausones.⁴ These

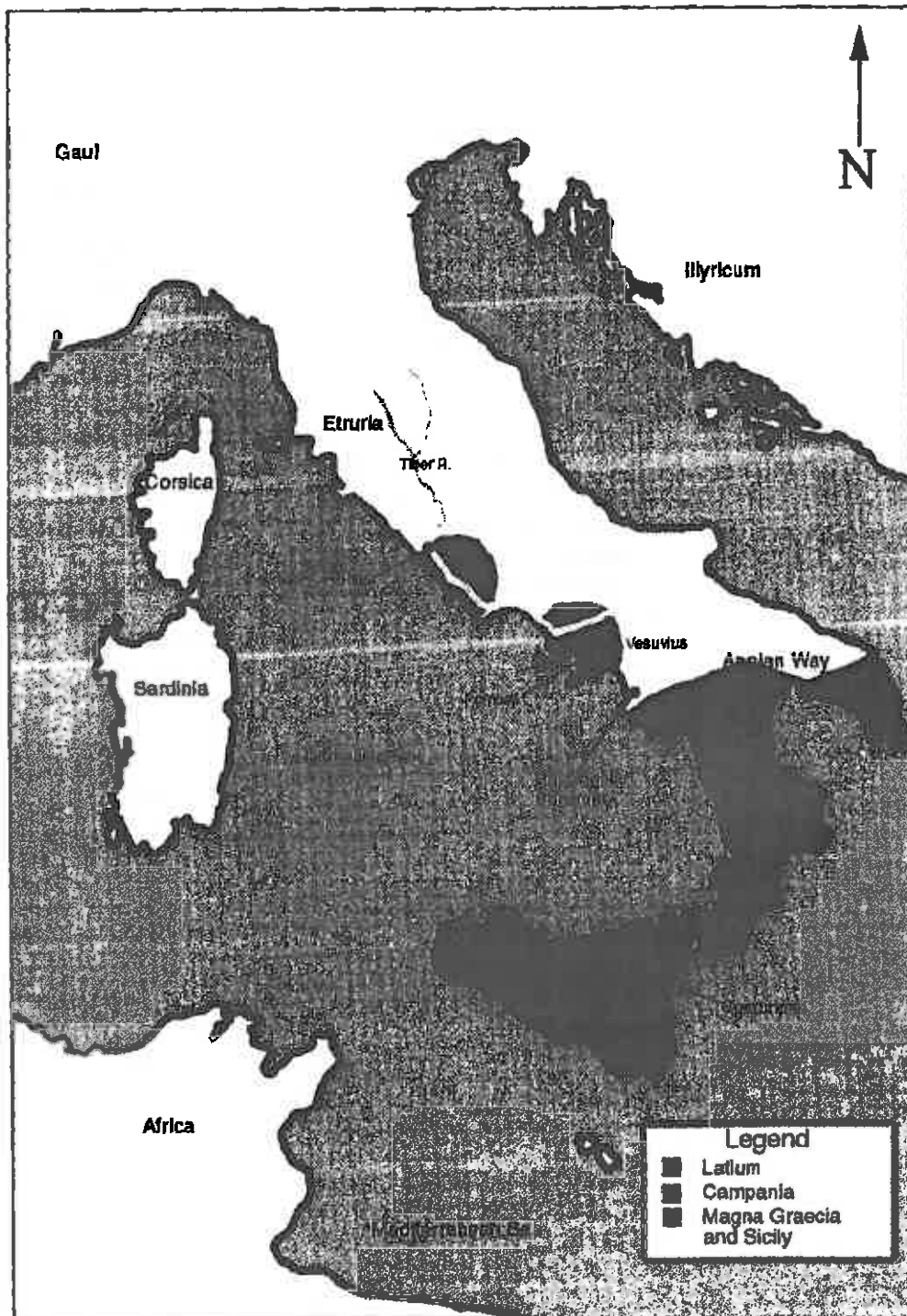


Fig. 3.1. Map of the Italian peninsula showing Latium, Campania, and Magna Graecia.

people traded with the Greek colonists who arrived in Campania. Indeed, Greek products have been found among the grave goods of the Ausones-Opici. But once the Greeks established the colony of Cumae in the seventh century BC (see below), many of the Ausones-Opici and indigenous peoples were displaced from their lands. Most moved inland and established themselves on the western slopes of the Apennine Mountains. They later intermarried with the Samnites resident on the eastern side of the mountains, and the two cultures became fused. On the western coast, the fertile fields of the Campanian plain fell under the sway of the Greek colonizers.

The city of Pompeii may also have been the site of an Iron Age settlement, as has been suggested by recent excavations in the House of Joseph II, located in Regio VIII.⁵ It seems likely, in fact, that many of the later Greek, Etruscan, and Roman cities of Campania were initially, because of their strategic locations, inhabited by indigenous peoples of the region. These sites require further excavation, however, before the full sequence of their early histories can be known.

COLONIAL GREEKS (FIG. 3.2)

Greek presence was established in the area in the first half of the eighth century BC, when Greeks from Euboea founded a trading station at Pithecussae on the island of Ischia. A more permanent settlement, the city of Cumae on the coast of the Italian mainland, was founded around 640 BC.⁶ The population of Cumae grew in the years following, probably through a combination of new settlers and intermarriage with the indigenous peoples of the region. Greek civic expansion continued throughout the seventh century and well into the sixth, so that by 500 BC, the cities of the Campanian coast each controlled substantial agricultural areas within the indigenous territory.⁷ By the end of the sixth century BC, Cumae was an important *polis*, or city-state, in the Campanian region, on a par with the city-states of mainland Greece and other Greek colonies of the region of Southern Italy, known as Magna Graecia.

The swampy basin of the river Sebethus, which lies to the south of Naples, seems to have acted as a natural boundary to Cumae's cultural influence. South of this river basin lies the city of Pompeii, which may or may not have been home to Greek settlers during the period of Greek colonization.⁸ Certainly, the Greeks were influential in the city by the sixth century BC, when a city wall and the first temple of Apollo were built in the Greek style.

Herculaneum, located to the northwest of Mount Vesuvius, was probably founded by the Greeks prior to the fifth century BC. The rigidly orthogonal plan of Herculaneum is a hallmark of Greek city planning.⁹ Both cities probably acted as independent city-states during the early period of their existence.

ETRUSCANS (FIG. 3.3)

As early as the eighth century BC, Greeks resident in Campania were active trading partners with the Etruscans. By the middle of the seventh century BC, according to Polybius and Strabo, Etruscan control extended over the entire Campanian plain but did not include the territory

Fig. 3.2. Map of Campania and Rome showing positions of earlier indigenous settlements and the area of Greek colonial control, seventh/sixth centuries BC.

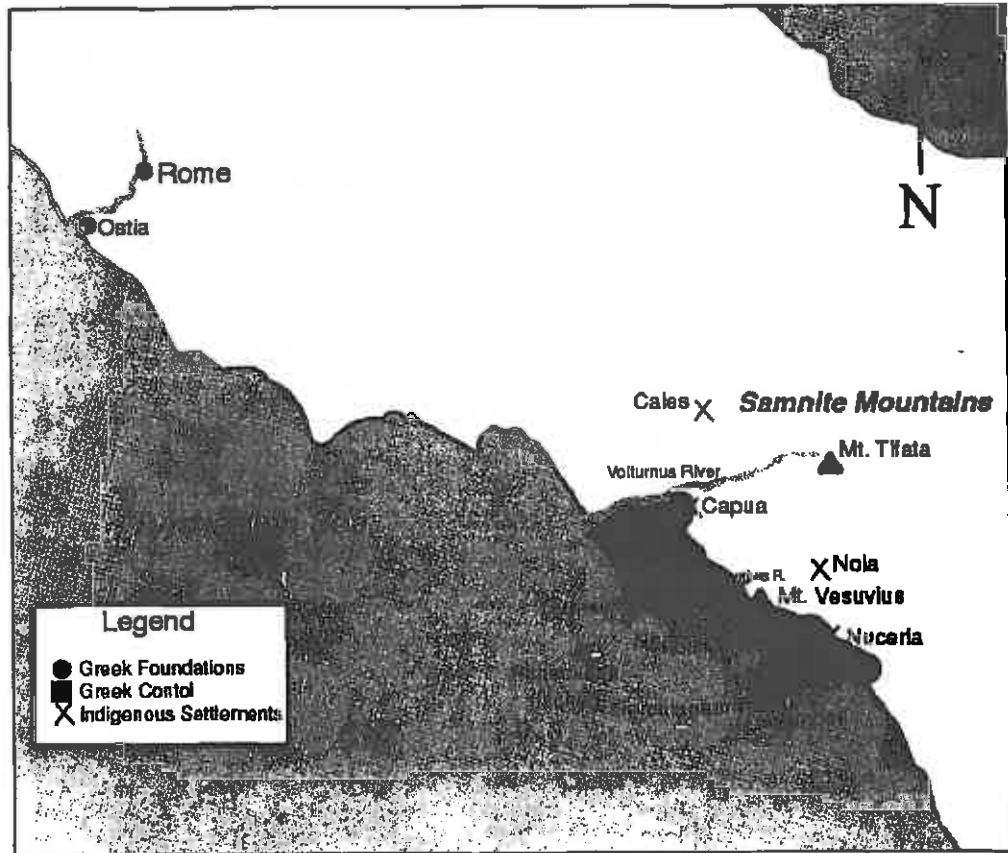


Fig. 3.3. Map of Campania and Rome showing the Etruscan presence in the area, sixth century BC.

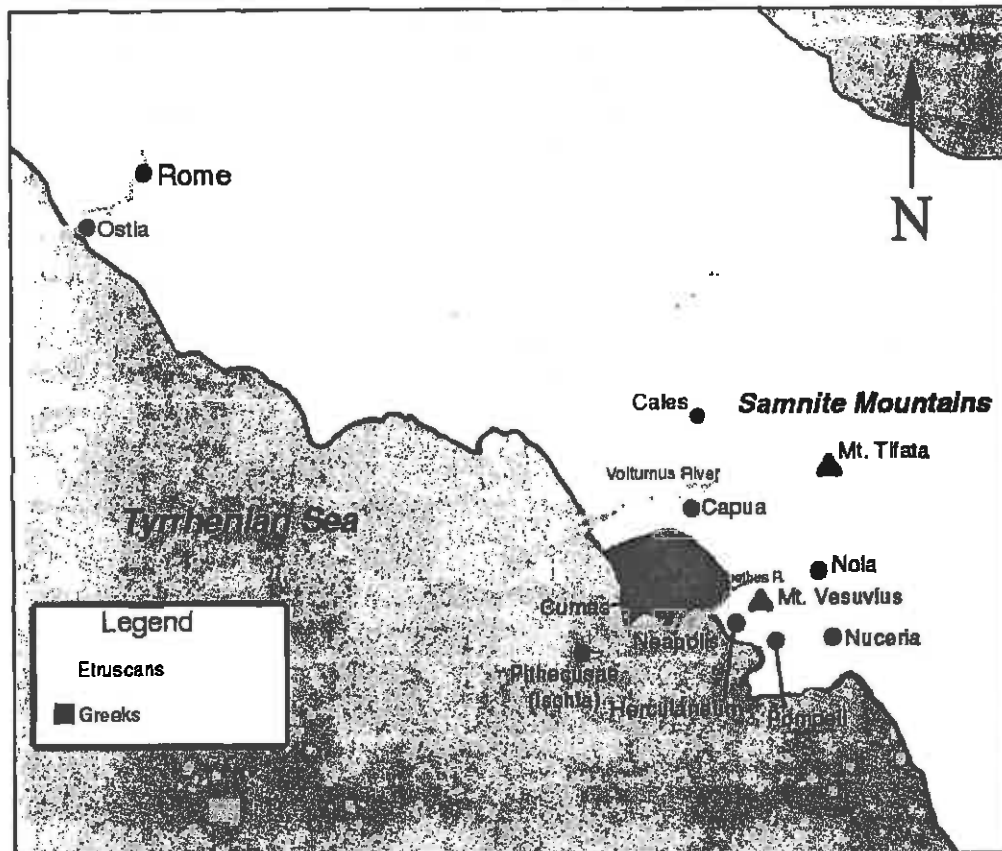


Fig. 3.4. Map of Campania and Rome showing Roman territory and Samnite and Oscan settlements, fifth/fourth centuries BC.

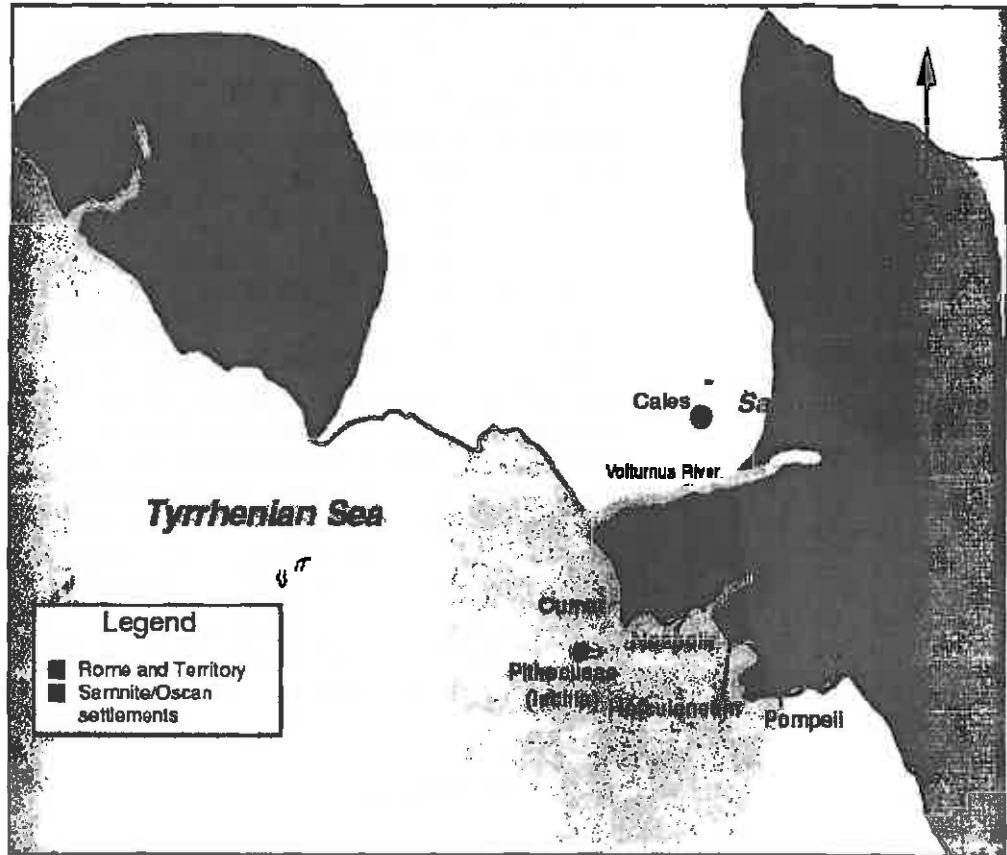
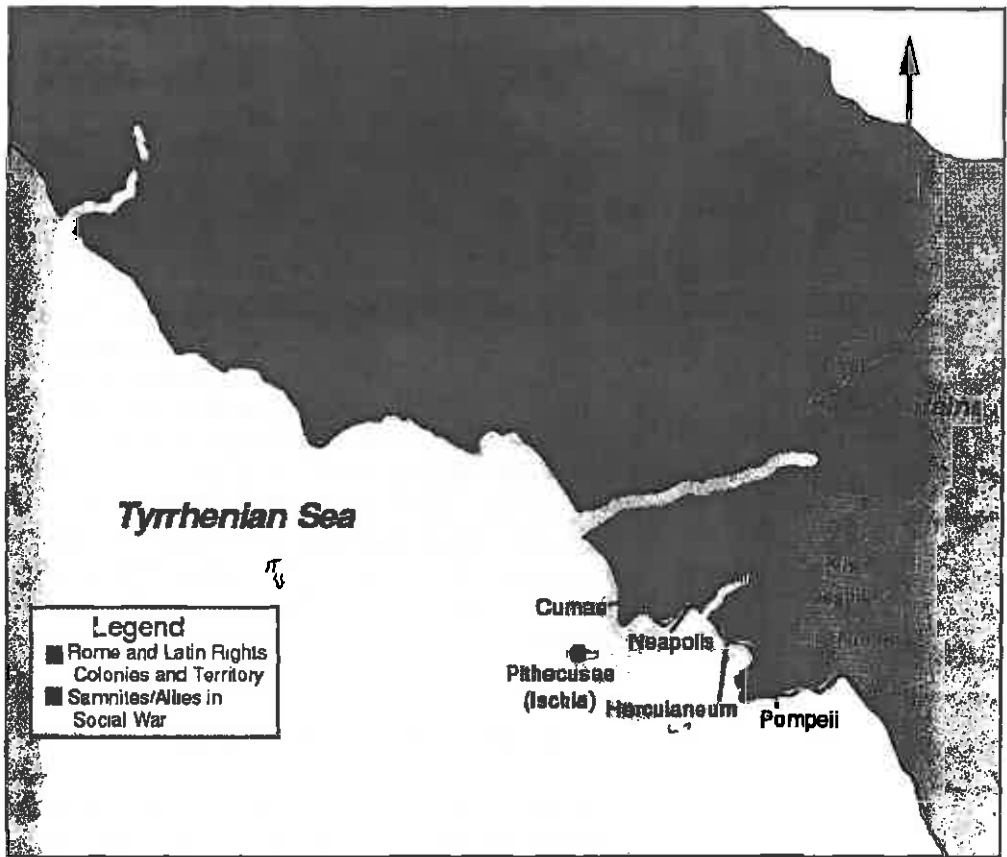


Fig. 3.5. Map of Campania and Rome showing Rome and its allies and the rebellious Italian cities of the Social War, 91-89 BC.



adjacent to Cumae.¹⁰ The bulk of the archaeological evidence for Etruscan domination comes from mortuary remains. A number of very wealthy late seventh-century graves are similar in contents to burials in Etruria proper. The prevalence of Etruscan material, especially black-slipped pottery known as bucchero, in both Greek and indigenous graves from this period onward suggests trade between the Greek colonists and Etruscans. It seems probable that Etruscans and Greeks were living side by side in Campania during the eighth through the sixth centuries BC, and various local communities, including Pompeii, could have been subject to Etruscan rule at this time. Evidence on Etruscan presence in the city of Pompeii in this period is limited. Although Etruscan bucchero pottery has been found at the site, the town plan and architecture remained essentially Greek.¹¹ Likewise, ancient literary sources do not document any changes. Nonetheless, the presence of both Greeks and Etruscans in the region of Campania suggests that the cultural influences of both groups are likely to have been felt at Pompeii.¹²

An Etruscan presence in the area came to an end with the defeat of the combined forces of the Etruscans and Carthaginians by the Greeks off the coast of Cumae in 496 BC, but nonetheless it seems likely that the inhabitants of the region continued to interact with their northern Etruscan neighbors through trade. Indeed, Etruscan materials are found at numerous archaeological sites during this and later periods.¹³

SAMNITES (FIG. 3.4)

At the end of the fifth century BC, the Samnites, who lived in the eastern part of the Italian peninsula, began to encroach upon Campania. Ethnically and linguistically Oscan, they were Sabine in origin. In 423 BC, the Samnites, who had taken the name Campani, seized the Etruscan city of Capua. Two years later, Greek Cumae fell to the Samnites (421 BC), and soon many other cities came under Samnite control.¹⁴ By the time of the second Samnite War with Rome (343–341 BC), Pompeii was also a Samnite city, apparently in the sphere of influence of nearby Nuceria.¹⁵ During their control of the region, the Samnites were apparently concerned not with destruction of earlier occupied areas but rather with the acquisition of agricultural territories. They controlled Pompeii throughout the Hellenistic period, and many Pompeians seem to have adopted the Hellenistic style in private and public construction, most notably the gymnasium and theater, both built during this period.¹⁶ The city experienced considerable growth at this time, mostly through profitable trade in wine and oil from the region.¹⁷

Historical sources for the Samnites provide little information about their culture. The most abundant material is archaeological and derives from sites such as Saepinum, which had a long period of Samnite occupation. Often, scholars have relied on epigraphic evidence and cultural analogy with other Italic peoples for constructing models of Samnite culture.¹⁸

ROME AND CAMPANIA (FIG. 3.5)

Interaction between the areas of Rome and Campania had been long-standing. In the fourth century BC, Campania became involved in

territorial struggles between the Romans and the Samnites. In 326 BC, Rome concluded a treaty with Campania promising military aid and, in doing so, became further embroiled in the conflict. Over the course of the three Samnite Wars, fought for control over the eastern portion of the Italian peninsula, Romans slowly encroached upon Samnite territory in Campania and achieved complete political domination with their victory over the Samnites in 290 BC. The cities of Campania were incorporated into the Roman state as nominally free *municipia*, each city managing its own affairs separately from its Roman conquerors but obligated to provide troops to the Roman state.

Toward the beginning of the second century BC, Livy records that a crisis arose in Campania that required action by the Senate. This was known as the Bacchanalian Conspiracy, which was perceived as a threat by the Roman Senate to Rome's traditional morals.¹⁹ In vigorously suppressing what the Senate judged to be immoral cultic activities, Rome was able to bring the cities of Campania even more firmly under its control and to monitor the local magistrates of the nominally free city-states of Italy. After the suppression of the Bacchic cult, the Campanian region was drawn further and further into the orbit of Rome.

In 91 BC, during what is termed the Social War, a number of Italian cities revolted and demanded the right of Roman citizenship for Italians who met the legal property requirements. Pompeii was among the first to side with those in rebellion.²⁰ The Roman general Sulla laid siege to Pompeii and after the conflict settled a large number of his veterans in the city.²¹ By the end of the Social Wars in 89 BC, Pompeii had become a Roman city, and its citizens were able to vote in Roman affairs. Two years later, in 87 BC, Roman citizenship was extended throughout Campania.

The Roman colonists altered the urban landscape of Pompeii in a number of ways. One of the most significant changes was within the area of the forum, where the Samnite temple of Jupiter was refurbished as a Capitolium, with its three *cellae* dedicated to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, analogous to the temple of these deities on the Capitoline Hill in Rome and symbolic of Pompeii's status as a Roman colony.²² An altar, dedicated to Apollo and installed in his temple, was inscribed in Latin, providing a clear signal of reorientation away from the Samnite past of the city.²³ At this time, a number of other civic structures were completed or constructed in other parts of the town, including the *comitium*, or meeting place, a temple to Venus, the patron goddess of the city, an odeon, or recital hall, and an amphitheater.

Although no study has been undertaken to isolate the houses owned by the new colonists, the new residents do not seem to have made dramatic changes in the placement of residential areas.²⁴ Decorative motifs used in architecture drew from the Hellenistic repertoire common throughout the Mediterranean, and aesthetic trends built upon those established earlier. About three decades after the Pompeians were enfranchised, Room 5 of the Villa of the Mysteries received its monumental painted décor. The citizens of Pompeii, both the older families and the new Roman colonists, the hellenized Samnites and the veterans of the Roman army, adjusted to a newer way of life within the framework of the recently established Roman colony. A central goal of the present exhibition is to promote readings of the paintings that take into account this diverse background and cosmopolitan cultural milieu.

- 1 The author would like extend thanks to Catherine Hammer and Brenda Longfellow for their comments on a draft of the text, and special thanks to Molly Swetnam-Burland and Elizabeth de Grummond for their comments, suggestions, additional research, and editing.
- 2 Pliny the Elder and Polybius each provide geographic markers for the region, but their circumscriptions of Campania seem more based on the amorphous territories of Campanian cities than any lines that can be drawn by modern surveyors. See esp. Pliny *HN* 3.44.41, Pliny *HN* 3.60, and Polybius 3.91.
- 3 Frederiksen 1984, 135. I follow Frederiksen in referring to these people by the joined term Ausones-Opici.
- 4 D'Agonisto 1996, 533.
- 5 Carafa 1997, 16.
- 6 Coldstream 1994, 54.
- 7 Frederiksen 1984, 69.
- 8 Fulford and Wallace-Hadrill 1998, 129. Fulford and Wallace-Hadrill suggest that the settlement of the city was patchy at best, interspersed with a number of periods of abandonment. The entire chronology of the city has been undergoing substantial revision in recent years, based on excavations of structures previously dated to the fifth and sixth centuries BC. These buildings may instead have belonged to the second or third century BC. In addition, excavations undertaken at the edges of the supposed earliest area of the city have traced urbanization in those areas down only to the second or third century BC. Fulford and Wallace-Hadrill 1998, 143.
- 9 Frederiksen 1984, 88–89. The grid plan, however, was also used by the Etruscans at Marzabotto and other sites, so it is possible that the Etruscans provided the inspiration for the form of this city. On Marzabotto and Etruscan town planning, cf. Mansuelli 1979, 359 ff. and Sassatelli 1992, 38 ff.
- 10 Frederiksen 1984, 117.
- 11 The “Greekness” apparent in Pompeii and other cities of this period may reflect a Hellenistic aesthetic. See Pollitt 1986, esp. ch. 7, “Rome as a Center of Hellenistic Art,” for the Roman use of Hellenistic formulas.
- 12 In the settlement of Pompeii in this period, Etruscan bucchero has been excavated in lower levels of I.9.10. Fulford and Wallace-Hadrill 1998, 143.
- 13 Cf. Brendel 1995.
- 14 Based on evidence from Paestum, L. Richardson (1988, 4) suggests that there are no architectural forms at Pompeii that can be securely identified as Lucanian (Samnite).
- 15 Livy is the first historian to mention Pompeii, in the context of his discussion of the Second Samnite War (9.38.2)
- 16 Zanker 1998, 37–38, 44.
- 17 Zanker 1998, 32.
- 18 For recent work on Samnite towns, see Bispham, Bradley, and Hawthorne 2000, 23–24.
- 19 I discuss the Bacchanalian Conspiracy and its repercussions in ch. 6 of this volume.
- 20 For a treatment of the theoretical issues involved in the processes of assimilation and resistance, see Woolf 1998 and Barrett 1997.
- 21 Zanker (1998, 62) suggests that the colonists numbered at least 2,000 former soldiers and their families. Proscriptions and the seizure of land from residents of the town probably preceded the creation of the colony, although there is no concrete evidence for this supposition.
- 22 Zanker 1998, 63–64.
- 23 A number of texts in Latin seem to predate the foundation of the colony (Conway 1967, 1:54–55), but the Latin inscription in the temple of Apollo seems to act as an appropriation of a local shrine. Zanker 1998, 65.
- 24 Zanker 1998, 74.