

## Cumae

Matteo D'Acunto

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### Summary

Cumae was an early Greek colony that was established by the Euboeans (c. 750 BCE), conquered by the Campanians (421 BCE), and subjected to the rule of Rome (from 338 BCE), benefitting from an enduring prosperity throughout the Imperial period. An important city of ancient Italy, Cumae's economy was based mainly on agriculture and commerce. During the Campanian and Roman periods, it preserved Greek-rooted cults and traditions even as it adopted first Oscan and then Latin languages and customs.

**Keywords:** Greek colonization, Euboeans, Campania, natives, Rome, Greek myths, agriculture, acropolis, Apollo, Sybil

**Subjects:** Ancient Geography, Roman Material Culture

### Updated in this version

Article rewritten to reflect current scholarship. Figures and digital materials added.

Cumae (Greek *Kymē*; Latin *Cumae*; modern Cuma), Euboean colony, founded c. 750 BCE, 16 km (10 mi.) northwest of Naples (Neapolis). It was an important city of ancient Italy during the Greek, Campanian (Samnite), and Roman periods; in the Medieval period it became a *castrum* (military fortification).

The ancient settlement lies on the coast north of Cape Misenum in the region called the Phlegraean ("Fiery") Fields due to its volcanic activity. The acropolis of Cumae is a rocky spur and in antiquity was a headland protruding into the sea. A north-south ridge, known as Monte Grillo, lies c. 1 km to the east of the acropolis, with a small, lower-lying plain between them which was occupied by the ancient city (Figures 1 and 2). The site was provided with two natural landings, one on the beach on the southern side of the acropolis and another, better protected one in the Licola lagoon just north of the hill. North of the city lies the Campanian plain, one of the most fertile lowlands of ancient Italy.

*Source.* © University of Naples L'Orientale.



**Figure 2.** Cumae from northeast. In the background are Ischia (Pithecusae) on the right and Procida and Vivara on the left.

Source. © University of Naples L'Orientale.

## History of Excavations

Extensive but unsystematic excavations in cemeteries from the prehellenic, Greek, and Roman periods were begun in 1852 and pursued until the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup> Ettore Gabrici's *Cuma* (1913) was a comprehensive collection of the archaeological information then available.<sup>2</sup> Amedeo Maiuri's extensive investigations, begun in 1925, focused on the identification of the Sybil's cave and on the sanctuaries occupying the upper and lower terraces of the acropolis. In 1938 Maiuri's excavations shifted from the acropolis to the Greek and Roman city on the plain below and subsequently brought to light a part of the Roman forum, along with the Capitolium and other sacred, public, and market buildings.<sup>3</sup> A large-scale project focusing on various areas of the ancient city began in 1994 and is still in progress.<sup>4</sup>

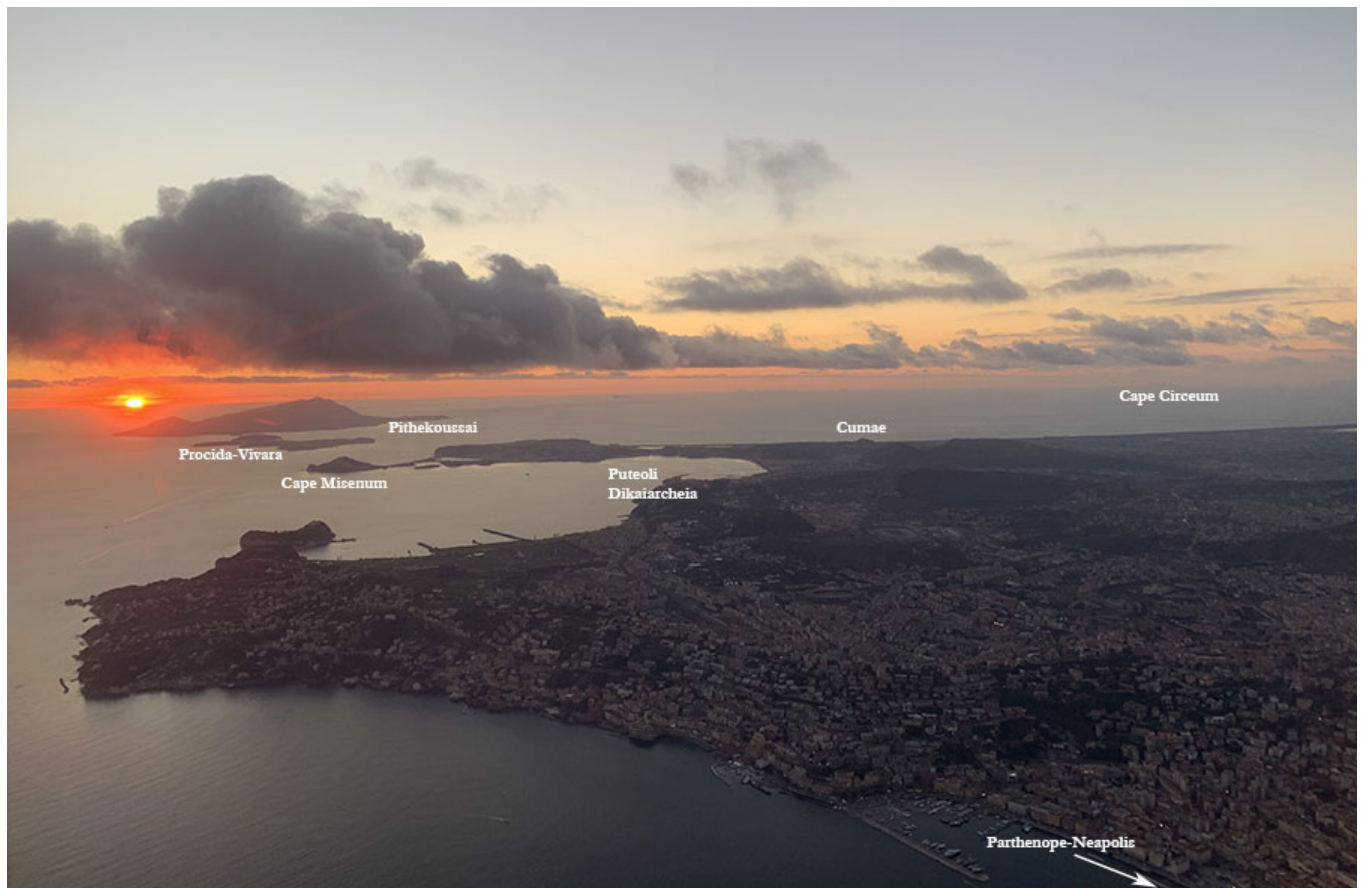
## Political History

Archaeological excavations have shown that before the establishment of the Greek colony the site was inhabited by a native village (the "Opicians": Thuc. 6.4.5) from the Late Bronze Age (late 2nd millennium BCE) until c. 750 BCE. A small number of Geometric Greek vases dating

to c. 780–750 BCE were recovered from this community's latest burials and domestic levels, demonstrating that Greek merchants, probably Euboeans, had established trade exchanges and, presumably, friendly relationships with the native community just prior to the foundation of the Greek colony.<sup>5</sup>

Ancient authors are unanimous in identifying Cumae as a Euboean *apoikia*, specifically one established by Chalcis and hence considered a Chalcidian colony (e.g., Thuc. 6.4.5). However, the literary tradition describes different origins for the colonists: on one hand, they are described as coming from Chalcis in Euboea and from Cumae in Asia Minor (ps.-Scymn. 236–240) and Cumae is identified as the earliest Greek foundation in Italy (Strabo 5.4.4); on the other hand, Eretria (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.3.1–2) and Pithecusae are said to have been involved in its foundation, which would give chronological priority to Pithecusae (Livy 8.22.6; Phlegon of Tralles, *FGrH* 257 F 36XB.53–56). The oikists (founding settlers) were Megasthenes from Chalcis and Hippocles from Cumae (Strabo 5.4.4; Vell. Pat. 1.4.1), which also provided the name of the new colony. An act of violence, clearly directed against the natives, is explicitly said to have taken place during the colonization (Phlegon of Tralles, *FGrH* 257 F 36XB.53–56). As a consequence of the conquest of their territory, the natives may have been subdued and integrated into the Greek community at different social levels. At a very early point in the colony's history, pirates (*lēistai*) from Cumae founded Zancle, later Messina (Thuc. 6.4.5).<sup>6</sup> On archaeological grounds, a foundation date of c. 750 BCE is suggested both by the end of burials at the prehellenic cemetery and by the earliest pottery recovered from the Greek settlement.<sup>7</sup> During the Archaic period (600–480 BCE), the elites of Cumae established close and friendly relationships with those of Etruscan Capua and Rome.<sup>8</sup>

From its earliest phase, Cumae extended its maritime control over the northern part of the Bay of Naples through a series of coastal strongholds (Dion. Hal. 7.3.2), including one at modern Pozzuoli which was founded as Dicaearchia by Samian exiles (531 BCE) and Parthenope in modern Naples on the promontory of Pizzofalcone.<sup>9</sup> During the 7th and 6th centuries BCE, Cumae likely exercised rule over Pithecusae as well (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** The northern part of the Bay of Naples, including Cumae and Pithecusae.

Source. Photo by M. D'Acunto.

Until the late 6th century BCE the Greek *polis* of Cumae had an aristocratic-oligarchic government dominated by an elite of “horsemen” whose power was based on landowning and commerce (Dion. Hal. 7.3.2). In 524 BCE the city was attacked by a huge coalition of Etruscans and other Italic peoples (Dion. Hal. 7.3.1–4.5). The Cumaeans defeated the enemy army, and the young aristocrat Aristodemus fought brilliantly among the horsemen and killed the enemy commander. In 504 BCE, upon Aristodemus’s return from a military victory in Aricia (Latium), his supporters killed the other aristocrats and he became tyrant (7.7.1–5).<sup>10</sup> During his tyranny the former king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus, took refuge at Cumae, where he later died (Livy 2.34.3–4; Dion. Hal. 7.2.3–4; 7.12.1–2). In around 485/4 BCE Aristodemus himself was killed by a conspiracy and the previous aristocratic-oligarchic system was restored (Plut. *Mor.* 261e–262d; Dion. Hal. 7.10.1–11.4).

In 474 BCE Cumae, with support from the fleet of Hieron of Syracuse, won a second battle against the Etruscans in the sea before the city (Diod. Sic. 11.51.1–2; Strabo 5.4.9; Pind. *Pyth.* 1.13–28). In the period of the two battles against the Etruscans, Cumae founded Neapolis at the central point on the coastline of the Bay of Naples, very near its earlier foundation of Parthenope, which was then renamed Palaepolis (Strabo 5.4.7; ps.-Scymn. 242–252; Livy 8.22.5–6; Vell. Pat. 1.4.1–2; Lutatius Daphnis fr. 7 Peter).<sup>11</sup>

In 421 BCE the Greek *polis* of Cumae was conquered by the Campanians (Samnite-Oscans) shortly after their conquest of Etruscan Capua in 423 (Diod. Sic. 12.76.4; Strabo 5.4.4). The Campanian conquest induced in Cumae important ethnic, socio-political, cultural, and economic changes, and Oscan was introduced as the primary language (Vell. Pat. 1.4.2).<sup>12</sup> In 338 BCE Cumae became a *municipium* of Rome as part of the *ager Campanus* ("Campanian field") and its citizens received the rights of *cives sine suffragio* ("citizens without voting rights") (Livy 8.14.10). In 215 BCE, during the Second Punic War, Cumae withstood Hannibal's siege. In 210 BCE the *praefectura Capuam Cumas* ("prefecture of Capua and Cumae") was created. In 180 BCE the people of Cumae sent a request to Rome asking that they be allowed to use Latin in public speeches and hence in official activities and commerce (Livy 40.43.1). Cumae received full citizenship, *civitas optimo iure*, either in 180 BCE or, more likely, at the time of the Social War (91–88 BCE).<sup>13</sup>

During the civil wars of the 1st century BCE Cumae sided with Sulla against Marius; after his abdication, Sulla retired to his own estate at Cumae and died there in 78 BCE (App. *B. Civ.* 1.104.1). From 37 BCE the civil wars fought by Octavian created a need for the extensive engineering works on both sea and land under Agrippa's guidance that produced the *Portus Iulius* in Lake Avernus, southeast of Cumae, and a system of galleries beneath the surrounding hills.<sup>14</sup>

Under Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE) the Greek origin of Cumae, Apollo's importance to the colony, the tradition of the Sybil's oracle, and the location of the supposed underworld entrance at Lake Avernus were exploited for the emperor's propaganda: the episodes in Book 6 of Vergil's *Aeneid* offered an opportunity for the poet to emphasize, through the prophecies of the Sybil and Anchises, the Trojan origin of the *gens Iulia* (Julian family) and the arrival of a golden age under Augustus. Under Domitian's rule the *via Domitiana* was built (95 CE), linking the *via Appia* (Appian Way) from Sinuessa (modern Mondragone) to the main harbour of Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli). The *via Domitiana* passed through Cumae by the middle gate in the city's northern walls and the monumental gate then built across the Monte Grillo ridge (the so-called Arco Felice).

Archaeological evidence indicates that the decline of the city began in the 3rd century CE and continued during the 4th and 5th centuries CE. Cumae played an important role in the Greek-Gothic war (535–553 CE) as a result of its fortified and well-defended acropolis, to which the city had by this time been reduced (Procop. *Goth.* 1.14, 3.6, 4.34; Agathias, *Histories* 1.8.3–10).

During the Medieval period, Cumae was a fortified stronghold (*castrum*) on the acropolis hill, which was occupied by dwellings and by several Christian churches: the temple on the hill's upper terrace was transformed into a cathedral dedicated to the martyr St. Maximus (*Ecclesia Beati Maximi*).<sup>15</sup> In 1207 Cumae was abandoned as a result of its destruction by the army of the Duchy of Naples led by Goffredo of Montefusco.

## Sanctuaries and Cults

In the Greek and Roman periods, the acropolis was occupied by two main sanctuaries. The sanctuary on the upper terrace (the so-called Temple of Jupiter) was probably dedicated to Apollo. The sanctuary of this god, who bore the epithet *zōstērios* (“belted”), dominated the hill (Lycoph. *Alex.* 1271–1280; cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.9, 41). Apollo was said to have guided the Euboean colonists (Vell. Pat. 1.4.1), and was associated with the oracle of the local Sibyl, said to be in a cave of the acropolis (Lycoph. *Alex.* 1279–1280; Verg. *Aen.* 6.42–44; ps.-Arist. *De audib.* 838a; ps.-Justin, *Cohortatio ad Graecos* 35A–B; Procop. *Goth.* 1.14) whose location remains obscure. The earliest archaeological indications of cult activity in the sanctuary are found 750–700 BCE and the earliest evidence for sacred buildings is dated to the late 7th–6th century BCE. The main temple was rebuilt several times, including a major reconstruction in the early Imperial period which resulted in a structure with five aisles and a cella divided into three rooms.<sup>16</sup>

A second major sanctuary (the so-called Temple of Apollo) occupied the lower terrace of the acropolis. Archaeological evidence suggests cult activity from the late 8th century BCE and sacred architecture from the first half of the 6th century BCE. In the late Archaic period a major reconstruction of the sanctuary took place, probably as part of Aristodemus’s building program. Finds include a number of Roman dedications to Jupiter with the Oscan/Latin epithet of *Flazus/Fulgurator*: this prompted the suggestion that this god was the primary recipient of worship at the sanctuary.<sup>17</sup>

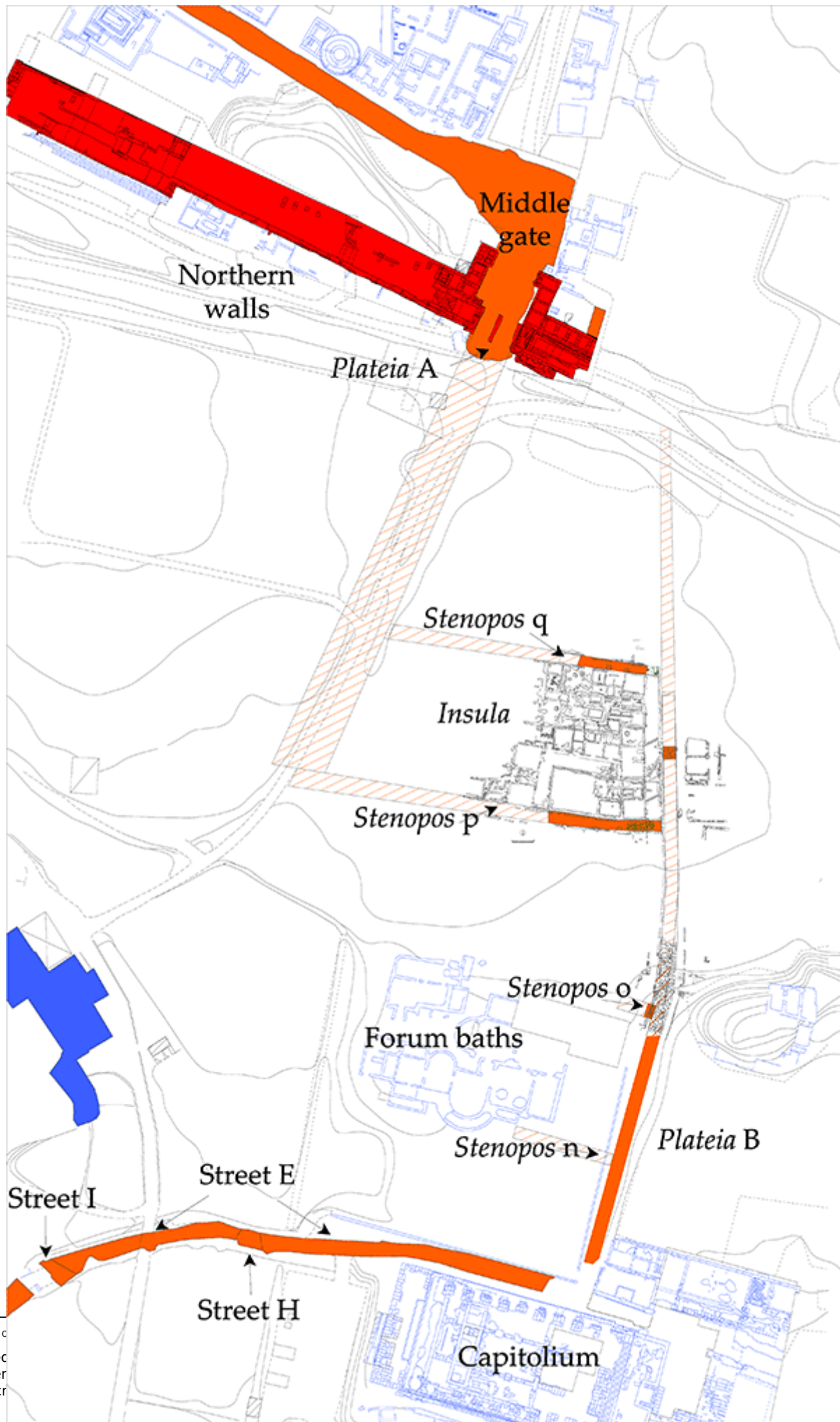
Tradition associated the cult of Hera with the colonists’ domination the natives and the establishment of the *apoikia* (Phlegon of Tralles, *FGrH* 257 F 36XB.53–56). Hera’s main sanctuary is located on the southern hill of the acropolis. An oracle of Hera is seemingly reported by a 7th–6th century BCE inscription on a bronze disc that is probably from Cumae.<sup>18</sup> Demeter was also assigned a major role as a leader of the colonial expedition (Vell. Pat. 1.4.1; Stat. *Silv.* 4.8.45–54).

## Defensive Walls, Agora/Forum, Urban Areas

The defensive walls consisted of an inner and outer circuit. The inner circuit comprised the retaining walls that ran around the acropolis hill, and the outer circuit joined the acropolis circuit and turned east at the northern and southern ends of the acropolis and southern hill, respectively, ran across the plain to the east and then north–south along Monte Grillo. Systematic archaeological investigations have focused on the northern walls and their middle gate. Their earliest phase dates to as early as c. 600 BCE and they were reconstructed many times until late antiquity. Around 500 BCE, probably during Aristodemus’s tyranny, the fortifications were rebuilt on a monumental scale and also included an outer moat and a wide two-channel sewer west of the middle gate.<sup>19</sup>

From the second half of the 6th century BCE at the latest, the *agora* occupied the same area as the later Roman forum. On the western side of the public square a temple, decorated by a series of painted metopes depicting a centauromachy, was built c. 340–320 BCE. An extensive reconstruction of the Roman forum was undertaken during the 1st century BCE through the construction of two *portici* (colonnades), one with a parapet on the second floor adorned with reliefs of theatrical masks and the other decorated with a frieze showing stacks of weapons (also in relief): the *portici* have been temptingly associated, respectively, with Sulla's stay in Cumae (80–78 BCE) and the propaganda that followed the end of Octavian's civil wars. During the Augustan age, polychrome marbles and mosaics decorated the newly built edifices as well as the older ones; on the southern side of the forum, a temple (the so-called Temple of the Portico), a probable basilica (the so-called Aula Sillana), and a fountain receiving water from the new Serino aqueduct were built. Under the Flavian emperors (69–96 CE), monumental temples were erected: the former Hellenistic temple, occupying the western side of the Forum, was rebuilt as the city's Capitolium, with colossal cult statues of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva.<sup>20</sup>

The layout of the streets of the Greek-Roman city is characterized by significant irregularities in several areas. Systematic archaeological investigation in the urban area between the forum baths and the northern walls has shown that in this quarter the irregular layout of the *plateia* (north–south street) and of the *stenōpoi* (east–west streets) was established in the early 7th century BCE and respected through the Imperial period (Figure 4). Such irregularities in the street grid recall similar cases in the urban plans of other early Greek *apoikiai* (such as the initial layouts of Naxos in Sicily and Megara Hyblaea) and in the specific case of Cumae can be seen as a response to the geomorphology of the site and the need to provide drainage for rainwater and wastewater north of the city. This urban sector was occupied by houses from the late 8th century BCE through the Imperial period. Metallurgical activities (700–500 BCE and in the Roman period) and potters' workshops (1st century BCE–1st century CE) were concentrated in the strip close to the northern walls.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 4.** The northern part of Cumae: the Roman forum, urban area, northern walls and middle gate, and the cemetery.

*Source.* © University of Naples L'Orientale.

## Cemeteries

The cemeteries of the Greek, Campanian, and Roman periods extend over a continuous area north of the city. Six outstanding tombs of both males and females from the late 8th century BCE consist of secondary cremations in cauldrons which in turn are contained by stone receptacles. The remains were buried with silver and electrum fibulae, silver vases, other silver and gold ornaments, and weapons. These graves recall the burial customs of both Homeric funerals and the Euboean elite, thus illustrating the direct involvement of the highest Euboean social class in the foundation of the colony. Another grave of the early 7th century BCE (T. 104 Fondo Artiaco) shows the same burial customs, but the organization of the tomb space is more complex and the grave offerings are richer, including weapons, horse bits, metal vessels, and jewels: this tomb shows that the colonial community had established close relationships with Etruscan and Italic princes. In the second half of the 6th century BCE, a new tendency for elites to use secondary cremation is illustrated by a group of graves each of which consists of a stone receptacle within which the ashes were deposited in either a bronze cauldron or a ceramic vase (cf. similar tombs in Capua).<sup>22</sup> From the late 4th to the early 1st century BCE, the iconographies of painted chamber tombs (e.g., depictions of the funeral banquet) illustrate how the local elite's social behaviours were influenced by Romanization. From the second half of the 1st century BCE to the early 3rd century CE, mausoleums of eminent individuals were erected outside the middle and eastern gates in the northern walls: some of them were decorated by reliefs or paintings characterized by death-related themes and symbolism.<sup>23</sup>

## Epigraphy, Language, Coinage, Myths

The Greek inscriptions of Cumae from the 8th to the 5th century BCE are in the "western" or "red" alphabet of the colonists' Euboean homeland. Cumae's close relationships with the communities of Campania, as well as with those of Southern Etruria and Latium, played a key role in the transmission of the alphabet to the Etruscan and Latin peoples from the beginning of 7th century BCE.<sup>24</sup> After the Campanian conquest of 421 BCE and until the early 1st century BCE, inscriptions in the Oscan language and with Oscan onomastics relate to both public and private life. Latin inscriptions coexist with Oscan ones during the 2nd century BCE. From the early 1st century BCE Latin definitively replaces Oscan.<sup>25</sup>

Cumae began minting coins around 480 BCE. In the iconography of the city's coins, a mussel shell (clearly reflecting Cumae's proximity to the sea and location on a lagoon) was typically associated with various other images connected to the local cults and myths of the Greek colony. The last coinage from Cumae dates to 410–380 BCE, when Cumae began to use the coins minted by the other Campanian/Samnite cities of the region.<sup>26</sup>

An ancient version of the myth of the gigantomachy situated the battle north of Cumae on the plain around Liternum: Heracles and his companions, aided by the Olympian gods, had defeated the giants there, and the blasting of their fallen bodies by Zeus's thunderbolts had resulted in the "fiery" character of the Phlegraeon Fields (Timaeus, *FGrH* 566 F 89 = Diod. Sic. 4.21; Polyb. 3.91.2–7; Strabo 5.4.4–6, 6.3.5). Heracles was also said to have built the Heraclea/Herculaneum road along the Lucrine Lake in order to transport Geryon's cows (Lycoph. *Alex.* 697–698; Diod. Sic. 4.22.1–2; Strabo 5.4.6). Such tales may reflect the early myth-making of the Euboean colonists, serving, through the heroic figure of Heracles, as paradigms of their conquest of the Phlegraeon territory.

According to another early tradition, Lake Avernus was the site of Odysseus's descent to the underworld (*nekylia*) in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. The gates of Hades were supposedly located there, as was an oracle of the Cimmerians where one might consult the souls of the dead; nearby were the infernal river Styx and the swamp of the Acheron (ps.-Scymn. 236–243; Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70 F 134 = Strabo 5.4.5). Such associations may have been suggested by the volcanic character of the Phlegraeon Fields, but they also reflect the fact that Cumae was seen, at the time of the Greek colonization, as lying at the boundary of the known world—for the Greeks, the site of the entrance to Hades.

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## Notes

1. On the history of the archaeological research in Cumae see: Laura Burelli and Nazarena Valenza Mele, "Cuma," in *Bibliografia topografica della colonizzazione greca in Italia e nelle isole tirreniche*, vol. 7, *Siti: Cuccuvà-Garagusa*, ed. Giuseppe Nenci and Georges Vallet (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1989), 7-42; and Matteo D'Acunto, "Pithecusae and Cumae," in *The Oxford History of the Archaic Greek World*, ed. Paul Cartledge and Paul Christesen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), with references. On the old excavations in the cemeteries, see Giuseppe Pellegrini, "Tombe greche arcaiche e tomba greco-sannitica a tholos della necropoli di Cuma," *Monumenti Antichi* 13 (1903): cols. 201-294; Valentino Nizzo, "Nuove acquisizioni sulla fase preellenica di Cuma e sugli scavi di E. Osta," *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 119 (2007): 483-502; and Carlo Rescigno and Nazarena Valenza Mele, eds., *Cuma: Studi sulla necropoli; Scavi Stevens, 1878-1896* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2010), with references.

2. Ettore Gabrici, *Cuma*, Monumenti Antichi 22 (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1913).

3. See references in Burelli and Valenza Mele, "Cuma," 17-22, 29-33.

4. See Fabio Pagano and Marzia Del Villano, eds., *Terra. La scultura di un paesaggio* (Rome: Gangemi, forthcoming). References will be given in the relevant sections.

5. On preellenic Cumae, see Lorena Jannelli, "La frequentazione dell'acropoli di Cuma in età pre-protostorica: I dati dello scavo Buchner," *AION Annali di Archeologia e Storia Antica* 6 (1999): 73-90; Pia Criscuolo and Marco Pacciarelli, "La facies cumana della prima Età del Ferro nell'ambito dei processi di sviluppo medio-tirrenici," in *Cuma: Atti del quarantottesimo convegno di studi sulla Magna Grecia, Taranto, 27 settembre-1 ottobre 2008*, ed. Arcangelo Alessio, Mario Lombardo, and Aldo Siciliano (Taranto: Istituto per la Storia e l'Archeologia della Magna Grecia, 2009), 323-351; and Patrizia Gastaldi, "Cuma: Prima della polis," *AION: Annali di Archeologia e Storia Antica*, n.s., 25 (2018): 161-206.

6. On literary sources on the foundation of Cumae, see Alfonso Mele, "Cuma in Opicia tra Greci e Romani," in Alessio, Lombardo, and Siciliano, *Cuma*, 75-167, esp. 77-109; and Maurizio Giangiulio, "Euboean Colonial Memories: Mediterranean Mobility, Literary Traditions and Social Memory," in *Euboica II: Pithekoussai and Euboea between East and West; Acts of the International Conference, Lacco Ameno, Ischia, 14-17 May 2018*, ed. Teresa E. Cinquantaquattro and Matteo D'Acunto, vol. 2 [= *AION Annali di Archeologia e Storia Antica*, n.s., 28] (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo, forthcoming). Recently, Albio C. Cassio and Bruno d'Agostino have advanced new arguments for the hypothesis that Kyme in Euboea (and not Kyme in Asia Minor)

participated to the foundation of Cumae in Campania: Albio C. Cassio, “Κύμη, Κούμη, Cumae and the Euboeans in the Bay of Naples,” in *Euboica II: Pithekoussai and Euboea between East and West; Acts of the International Conference, Lacco Ameno (Ischia, Naples), 14–17 May 2018*, ed. Teresa E.

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