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Greek Gymnasia for Non-Greek People. Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence in Pre-Roman Italy

Summary

Literary, epigraphic and archaeological sources testify to the presence of Greek gymnasia in pre-Roman Italy. This paper investigates the political and cultural reasons that led to the adoption of a Greek lifestyle in 'non Greek' contexts, most notably the embracing of the gymnasial ideology. Examining several case studies in two different cultural contexts, namely the Brettian city of Petelia and the Samnite cities of Abella, Pompeii, and Cuma, it is comparatively assessed how the elite of these cities negotiated Greek gymnasial ideology. It is argued that strategies ranged from fully embracing the gymnasium as both an institution and building type to selective emulation of only certain features.

Keywords: Gymnasium; vereiia; Hellenization; Petelia; Abella; Pompeii; Cuma

Literarische, epigraphische und archäologische Quellen bezeugen die Existenz griechischer Gymnasia im vorrömischen Italien. Dieser Beitrag untersucht die politischen und kulturellen Gründe, die zur Übernahme griechischen Lebensstils, allen voran der Gymnasiums-Ideologie, in diesen nicht-griechischen Kontexten geführt haben können. Anhand von Fallstudien in zwei verschiedenen kulturellen Kontexten, der Brettischen Stadt Petelia und den Samnitischen Städte Abella, Pompeji und Cuma, wird analysiert, wie die Elite dieser Städte griechische Gymnasiums-Ideologie ausgehandelt hat. Es wird gezeigt, dass Strategien von der vollständigen Übernahme des Gymnasiums als Institution und Bautyp bis zur selektiven Nachahmung ausgewählter Charakteristika reichte.

Keywords: Gymnasium; vereiia; Hellenisierung; Petelia; Abella; Pompeji; Cuma

The concept of Hellenization, usually referring to the spread of Greek culture and its adoption by non-Greek people, has been often used incorrectly. As Mario Lombardo has recently pointed out, scholars usually have adopted the notion to describe people as a passive object of an external process (we often read that people have been Hellenized), in contrast with the original meaning of the verb ‘ellenizein’. In fact, this verb is intransitive and means firstly ‘to speak Greek’, but in a wider sense to adopt and show Greek practices or cultural elements, as the consequence of a selective reception.¹

Among the most typical features of Hellenic culture, athleticism penetrates the early Etruscan and Italic society. While there are no literary testimonies about the existence of athletic competitions in pre-Roman Italy, a rich series of figurative monuments, the majority from funerary contexts, demonstrates the execution of games during the burial ceremonies of prominent people.² The ideology and the values connected to athleticism were adopted by the Italic aristocracies already during the 6th and 5th century BC, as shown by an extraordinary discovery, notably the tomb of the so-called Warrior of Lanuvium (Fig. 1).³

The tomb, dug into tuff stone, revealed a peperino sarcophagus including a rich panoply and a complete gymnastic set: three *alabastro* (one is missing today), two iron strigils, a leather pouch for sand and a bronze discus finely engraved. The association of these different categories of objects implies a complex ideology based on the Italic military tradition, which is at the same time, however, strongly influenced by Greek cultural models.

Athleticism and sport practice exercised a deep influence on the imagination of the Etruscan and Italic peoples for a long time. Therefore, during the Hellenistic period the number of products for body care increased significantly. For example, the diffusion of strigils reached high levels in funerary contexts.⁴ Often realized in terracotta, they were used for their symbolic meaning rather than their practical function. Similarly,



Fig. 1 Lanuvium, Funerary set of a warrior.

figurative decorations of candelabra, mirrors and fine pottery were inspired by athletic competitions and life in the palaestra.⁵

In conclusion, in ancient Italy the adoption of the Greek gymnasium was one of the most common tools for becoming Greek, in addition to the adoption of the language, the social behaviors and the material culture. In many cases, this phenomenon can also include the appropriation of the typical Greek institution connected with the *paideia*, such as the Gymnasium. The modalities and the aims, both political and cultural, that justified this choice varied and must be evaluated individually, as they depend on the contexts.

This paper examines several case studies in two different cultural contexts, notably the Brettian city of Petelia and the Samnite cities of Abella, Pompeii, and

1 Lombardo 2006.

2 For an overview on the topic, see Thuillier 1985; Thuillier 1995; Guzzo 2006. In addition, see the papers gathered in Thuillier 1993.

3 On the tomb see Zevi 1993 with further bibliography.

4 See Thuillier 1989. For the presence of strigils in graves as a sign of Hellenization in Campania see Johannowsky 1976, 269.

5 See, for example, the materials gathered in Bianco 2002; Bruschetti 2002; Moretti 2003.

6 While the terms gymnasium and palaestra are commonly clearly distin-

guished in literature, this differentiation is not important here; therefore, the term gymnasium will be used indiscriminately to refer to the institution and all buildings that may have belonged to the gymnasium (including the palaestra which is usually identified as a building with peristyle courtyard and surrounding rooms).

7 For Sicilian examples, see M. Trümper in this volume.

8 IG XIV, 637; Costabile 1984; Intrieri and Zumbo 1995, 266, n. B4; Cordiano 1997, 63–65, M; Ampolo 2008; Poccetti 2014, 108 n. 7.

9 Poccetti 2014, 84.

Cuma. It will be comparatively assessed how the elite of these cities adopted the concept of the Greek Gymnasium, whether they fully embraced the gymnasium as both an institution and building type, or selectively emulated only certain features.⁶

1 A gymnasium of the Brettii: Petelia

In pre-Roman Italy, the testimonies of gymnasia in non-Greek contexts are few, and they deserve special attention.⁷ The most ancient example was identified in the Brettian center of Petelia, the modern Strongoli on the Ionian coast of Calabria, near Croton. Since the 18th century a Greek inscription has been known, dated to the 3rd/2nd century BC, that records the construction of a stoa pertaining to the local gymnasium under the gymnasiarchy of the brothers Minatos Kritios Matilas and Markos Kritios, both sons of Minatos.⁸ The works were funded by *koina chremata*, public money. The binomial shape of the onomastic formula, typical of the Italic tradition, reveals the Oscan origin of the two brothers.⁹ The presence of the gymnasiarchy, strongly linked to the *ephebeia*, shows that the education of the youths at Petelia followed the model of the Greek *paideia*.¹⁰

At the time of the inscription, the Italic aristocracy of Petelia desired to present their city as a Greek polis. Greek identity was created through a foundation myth that linked the origins of the city to the Greek hero Philoctetes.¹¹ Additionally, the use of Greek in public and private inscriptions provides important evidence.¹²

The Osco-Greek bilingualism of the Bruttii is known also thanks to a gloss by Festus.¹³ The author explains the expression *bilingues Bruttaces*, ascribed to Ennius, and says that the Bruttian people used to speak both Oscan and Greek. Another element that testifies the cultural interactions between Greeks and Bruttii in Petelia is the inclusion of the city in the lists of the *theo-dokoi* of Epidaurus (ca. 350 BC), of Kos (242 BC) and

Delphi (198–194 BC).¹⁴

In spite of this deep Hellenization, the Bruttii were perceived as barbarians by Greek people. According to Livy,¹⁵ during the Second Punic War, the Carthaginian general Hannibal suggested to the Crotonians to repopulate their destroyed city with a Bruttian colony; the Crotonians, however, refused and answered that they would prefer to die, rather than mix with the Bruttii.

2 The Gymnasia of the Samnites

2.1 Abella

Another case study, in a different geographic and cultural context, is Abella, the modern Avella. This Oscan center, located between Hirpinian Samnium and Campania, also provided a gymnasium in the 2nd century BC, as proven by an inscribed base found in 1984 near the Forum.¹⁶ The inscription mentions Maius Vestirikius, a local magistrate already known from other inscriptions (i.e. the Cippus Abellanus¹⁷), as sponsor of some urban ornaments. He offered several objects that belong to a homogeneous group: *segunu perissty* (translated as statues in the peristyle), *batrum tuvffud* (a tuff base), and *bravus* (probably corresponding to Latin *brutus*).¹⁸ Mario Torelli convincingly argued that *bravus* was a stone *Telamon*, the support of a table (*trapeza*) used in award ceremonies.¹⁹

All the objects listed in the inscription fit well with the equipment of a gymnasium. Scholars agree in translating the Oscan term *perissty* with the Greek *peristylon*:²⁰ this grecism has been used to refer to a Greek-type building, such as a gymnasium or *palaestra*.

2.2 Pompeii

A different example comes from Oscan Pompeii, where we have a gymnasium with its decoration. This building,

10 Near Petelia the gymnasiarchy is attested at Rhegion, see Cordiano 1997, 65–69, N.

11 For a useful collection of literary sources about Petelia, see Attianese 2003, 11–18.

12 On the phenomenon of bilingualism in Petelia see Lazzarini 2011; Poccetti 2014.

13 Paul. *Fest.* 31 L: *Bilingues Bruttaces Ennius dixit quod Bruttii et Osce et Graece loqui soliti sunt.*

14 Medaglia 2015, 28, 30, 33–36. For a basic introduction to this topic, see Manganaro 1964.

15 Livy *Epit.* XXIV, 3, 11.

16 Cinquantaquattro and Pescatori Colucci 2013, 17.

17 Cinquantaquattro and Pescatori Colucci 2013, 20–25 with different translations and a complete bibliography.

18 In Antonini 1996: side a. *maieís.staattieís.p[/ nfm.segúnú.perissty[/ batrum.tavffud.st[/ fsídum.prúfatte[d.¿];* side b. *vestirikiiis.[.f/ m.bravús[] /]-ú.infm[.]*

19 Torelli 1996, 674.

20 MacDonald 2015.

the so-called Samnite Palaestra, is located in the Quarter of the Theaters and is strongly linked with the Sanctuary of Athena at the Foro Triangolare.²¹ The building consists of a central rectangular courtyard, surrounded by porticoes on three sides only (Pl. 1).

Based on archaeological excavations and architectural features, the building has been dated to the second half of the 2nd century BC (Pl. 2. 1).²²

The asymmetric plan results from modifications carried out after the earthquake of AD 62. At this point, the fourth side of the peristyle was removed, reducing the size of the building by a quarter (Pl. 2. 2).

In this last phase, three small rooms opened on the west side: in the northern room, the traces of a staircase prove the existence of a second floor. Thanks to the new drawings by the architect Luigi Tricarico, it is possible to distinguish two different phases.²³ Originally, there was a single room opened on the peristyle. This room looks like an exedra and can be identified with the ephebeum that, according to Vitruvius (Vitr. 11.2), was the largest and most important room of the palaestra,²⁴ intended for meetings and the education of the youth. The current shape of this exedra, subdivided by an L-shape wall, is the result of a Neronian intervention.²⁵

Evidence of sculptural decoration was discovered in the peristyle: a tuff base with a small altar and a staircase, one of the best-preserved copies of the so-called Doryphoros of Polykleitos;²⁶ a marble basin with a support, which has now disappeared. It might also be that a couple of herms in Cipollino marble, walled up in the Sacarium of the adjacent Iseum, belonged to the sculptural decoration of the building.²⁷ According to excavation diaries, several inscriptions, most of them lost, were found in the building,²⁸ among them the famous Oscan inscription Vetter 11.²⁹ This inscription records the will of Vibius Adiranus, who funded the local *vereiia*. With

his bequest, the quaestor (kvaistur) Vibius Vinicius, with the cooperation of the Town Council (kumbennieis), constructed this public building (triibum ekak).

This inscription provides a key element to explaining the word *vereiia*. The term appears only in Oscan epigraphic evidence and, therefore, the *vereiia* seems to have been an entirely Italic institution. Recently, it has been argued that the *vereiia* was the Oscan equivalent of the Greek *ephebeia* and of the Latin *iuventus*.³⁰ *Ephebeia* and *iuventus* were known as institutions presiding over the rites of passages between childhood and adulthood. Previously, this interpretation was neglected in the scholarly debate and, for a long time, scholars preferred the idea that the *vereiia* was the Samnite cavalry, as suggested by A. La Regina.³¹

2.3 Cuma

New evidence to support this hypothesis comes from Cuma, a city of Greek origin but conquered by the Samnites in 421 BC. It is interesting to observe that, after the conquest of the city, the Samnites adopted some Hellenic traditions, such as the education system that followed the model of the Greek *paideia*. Since the 4th century BC, the transformation of the funerary practices reveals that the Cuman society adopted funeral customs with a reference to the Greek gymnasium.³² In the composition of the funeral sets, the *strigil* appeared for the first time in association with *balsamaria* and *unguentaria*.³³ In the 3rd century BC, the weapons disappeared and *strigils* continued to be used, often with suspension rings, symbol of athletic and military training of the dead.³⁴

This social importance of athletic training is also reflected in the construction of a stadium recently dis-

21 For new considerations about the cults in this sanctuary, see with different positions Osanna 2015; Avagliano 2016.

22 For the chronology of the building see Carandini, Carafa, and D'Alessio 2001, 122, 127; Carafa 2005, 31–35.

23 Tricarico 2013.

24 In Vitruvius, this word refers to the whole gymnasium. Instead, in Greek period palaestra was only a part of the building, including the peristyle with the rooms for athletic training. For the debate on this topic, see Pettenò 1999.

25 Carafa 2005, 31–35.

26 For a reinterpretation of this sculpture with a shield and a sword, respectively carried on the left and right hand, see Franciosi 2004.

27 As suggested in Pesando 2000, 168.

28 On the inscriptions found in the building, see Avagliano 2013, 73–75.

29 Vetter 1953, 49–50 n. 11; Morandi 1982, 123–124 n. 27; Poccetti 1982.

The text is the following: v. aadirans v. etiuvam paam / vereiiaí púmpai-ianaí tristaa- / mentud deded eísak etiuvad / v. viínikiís mr. kvaistur pú- / mpaiians trífbúm ekak kúmben- / nieís tanginud úpsannam / deded ísf- dum prúfatted. Translation: The money, which Vibius Adiranus son of Vibius gave in his will for the *vereiia* of Pompeii, with this money Vibius Vinicius son of Maras, quaestor of Pompeii, commissioned the construction of this building by the decree of the council. He himself approved it.

30 Camodeca 2012, 243–244; Avagliano 2013, 94–101.

31 La Regina 1981.

32 Greco 2015, 354.

33 Valenza Mele 1990, 26–27.

34 Valenza Mele 1990, 26–27.

covered near the Cuman city walls (3rd/2nd century BC).³⁵ Between the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st BC, on one of the bleachers of the building a tribunal composed by two platforms was constructed, probably meant to host the panel of judges and award ceremony of the athletes.³⁶ On the superior platform a base with an inscription was placed, probably supporting a bronze tripod, which has disappeared today.³⁷ The inscription (second half of 2nd century BC) mentions Maius Calovius, whose title *m.v. ínim m. x* is generally read as *meddix vereiias*, the ‘magistrate of the vereiia’, and ‘meddix decem’ a member of a collegium of ten people, whose functions are not clear.³⁸ He dedicated a statue (*segnùm*) to a God, whose name is only partially preserved. According to Giuseppe Camodeca, it is possible to make out *Pid-*, probably for the latin God *Fidius*.³⁹

Another location connected to the vereiia is that of the Central Baths of Cuma, where an inscribed labrum of Pentelic marble dedicated by a *meddix vereiias* was discovered in 1975.⁴⁰ The presence of this kind of furniture in thermal space is relevant. It is not possible to clarify whether the labrum that dates to between the end of 3rd and the 2nd century BC belonged to the original decoration of the baths, which were built at the beginning of the 2nd century BC.⁴¹ In any case, the labrum was included in the baths, when the building was renovated in the Augustan age. In this period, at least, the Central Baths might have also been frequented by members of the vereiia.⁴² It is perhaps of interest to recall that also at Pompeii a connection between the Republican Baths and the Samnite Palaestra, headquarter of the vereiia, has been hypothesized, due to the proximity of the buildings.⁴³

Cuma is the city with the richest epigraphic corpus

of the vereiia. In addition to the cases already discussed, we must mention: firstly, the *cocciopesto* floor of the Forum temple (later the Capitolium) containing an inscription⁴⁴ with the name of the *meddix vereiias* *Minius Heius*, son of *Pacius*, belonging to the gens *Heia* (like the person who donated the *labrum*); secondly, an inscribed base with the dedication of a statue to *Iuppiter Flagius* on behalf of the local vereiia (*pro vereiiad*), by an unknown *meddix vereias*.⁴⁵

The wide range of interventions reveals that this institution, directed by the local aristocracy, played an important role in civic life between the 3rd and the 2nd century BC. In this period Cuma was already integrated into the Roman political system, raised to the status of *civitas sine suffragio* in 334 BC (Livy VIII 14.11). Therefore, Rome could have played a role in the revival of vereiia. This hypothesis is based on the cases of *Petelia*, *Neapolis*, *Elea-Velia* and many centers in Sicily, where gymnasial institutions were revived under Roman rule.⁴⁶ In the case of *Elea-Velia*, for example, *Cornelius Gemellius* of the *tribus Romilia* was gymnasiarch on three occasions, as recorded in a Latin inscription that dates to the 1st century BC.⁴⁷ In the Roman period gymnasial institutions seems to have been used as instruments to reinforce the loyalty of Italic allies. In this perspective the buildings linked with vereiia (the *Oscan* equivalent of *ephebeia*), both at *Pompeii* and *Cuma*, acquired a special interest, still in Roman period. At *Pompeii*, in spite of the construction of the *Great Palaestra*, a new modern building for the local *iuventus*, the old *Samnite Palaestra* was totally refurbished in the Augustan period.⁴⁸ At a certain point, the *Central Baths of Cuma*, recently renovated, included a *labrum* funded by a member of vereiia.

35 Giglio 2015, on the chronology see in particular 82–83.

36 Giglio 2015.

37 Camodeca 2012. According to the scholar, the text is: *mai(s) kalúvis úf(falleís) m(eddís) v(ereias) ínim m(eddís) x ekík segnúm pid[—]d[—] + ú[-dunúm] deded*. Translation: *Maius Kaluvius*, son of *Offelius*, *meddix* of the *vereiia* and *decemvir*, gave this statue to *Fidius*(?).

38 On this problem see more recently Camodeca 2012, 241–242 with previous debate.

39 Camodeca 2012, 241; see also Giglio 2015, 70. According to Camodeca, probably the *Oscan P* stands for Latin *F*.

40 Sgobbo 1977, 256–257 pl. X–XI; Volpicella 2006–2007, 213–214 fig. 15. The inscription reads as follows: *ma. heíis de(kkieís) m(eddís) v(ereias) ínim m(eddís) x ekak fliteam emmens*. Translation: *Ma(mercus) Heius*, son of *Decius*, *meddix* of the *vereiia* and *decemvir*, bought this *labrum*.

41 For the phases of the building, see Volpicella 2006–2007.

42 See also Gasparri 2008, 300.

43 Pesando 2002, 239–241; viewed critically by M. Trümper in this volume.

44 Sgobbo 1977, 249 pl. IX; Poccetti 1981, 96–97, n. 133. The inscription says: *min(is) heii(s) pak(ieís) m(eddiís) v(ereias) ínim m(eddís) x ekík pavmentúm úpsannúm dedens*. Translation: *Minius Heius*, son of *Pacius*, and the *meddix* of the *vereiia* and *decemvir*, commissioned the construction of this floor. Based on recent excavations (see Petacco–Rescigno 2007, 80–81, 99), this floor has been dated to the first half of 2nd century BC.

45 Poccetti 1981, 95–96 n. 132. The text says: *[— 8/10 —] mr. m(eddís) v(ereias) ínim m(eddís) x ekík se[-]únúm iúvei flagiúf pr. vereiiad duneís dedens*. Translation: (onomastic formula lost) *meddix* of the *vereiia* and *decemvir* gave this statue as a gift to *Jupiter Flagius* on behalf of the *vereiia*. Scholars agree that the inscription date to the 2nd century BC.

46 Ampolo 2008, 27. For Sicilian cases, see Prag 2007, 87–96.

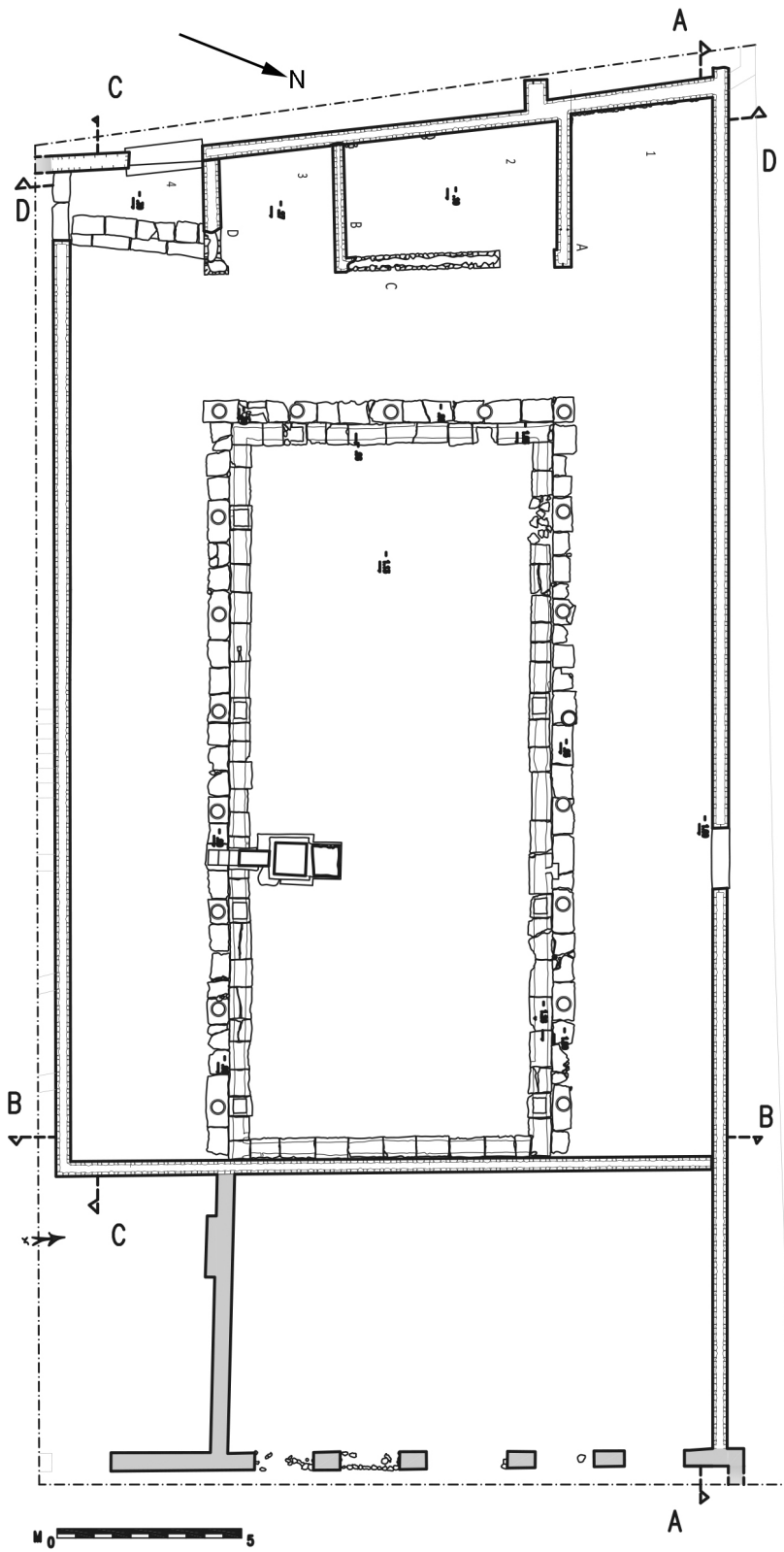
47 Greco 2011–2013, 358.

48 Pesando 2000.

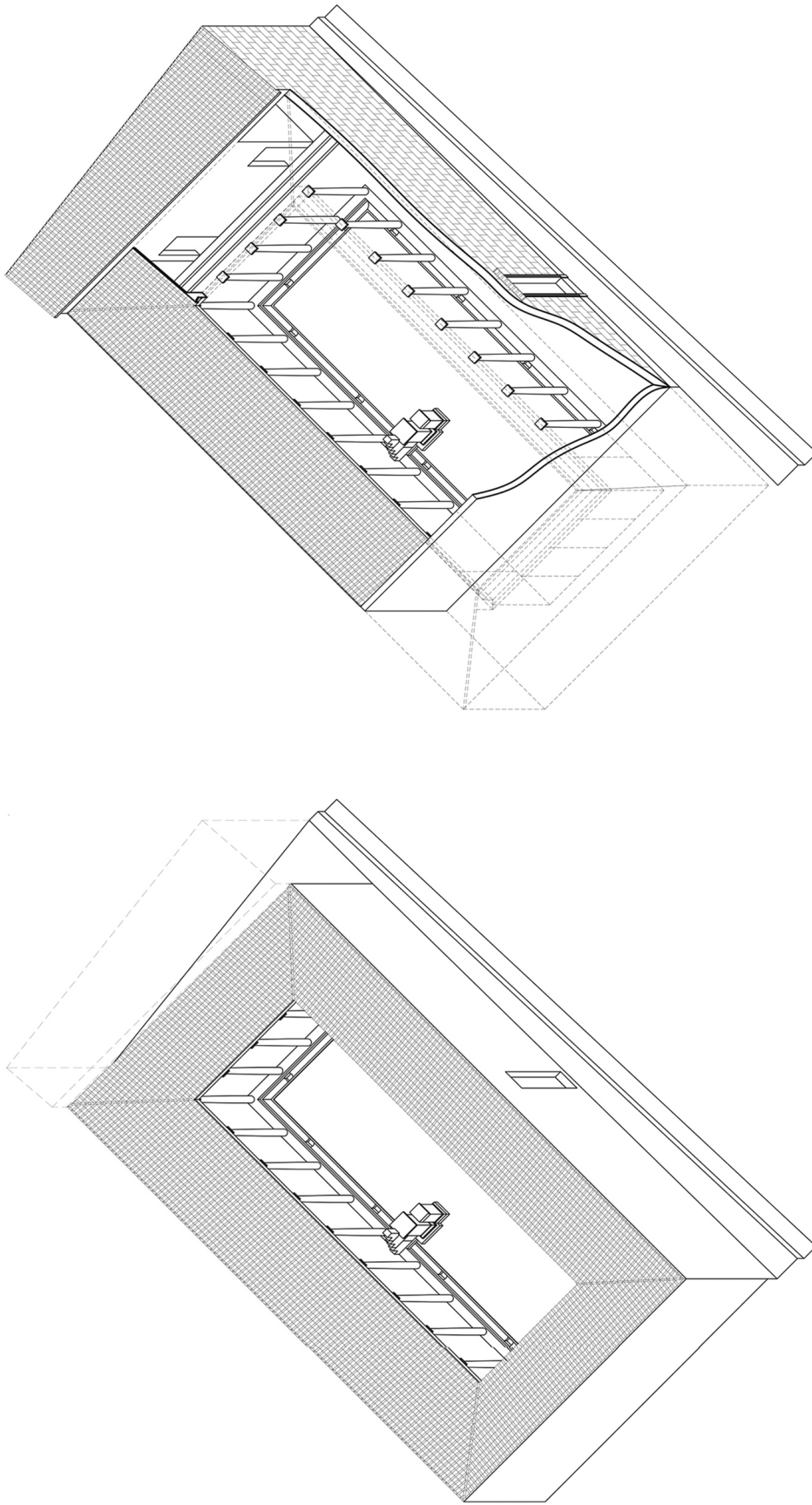
3 Conclusion

In conclusion, although in pre-Roman Italy only few gymnasia can be identified in non-Greek contexts, these are very significant. The spread of the gymnasial institution took place within a specific time span (3rd–2nd century BC), characterized by a global process of Hellenization in the Western Mediterranean. It is not surprising that the phenomenon is parallel to the success of an aristocratic ideology that recognized the value of ath-

letics as a status symbol. However, the approach to this foreign model took different forms. On the one hand, there is Petelia, for a long time in the Crotonian orbit that fully absorbed the gymnasial institution. On the other hand, there is the Samnite world, where, despite a certain degree of Hellenization, the traditional institution of *vereiia* was maintained and the adoption of Greek elements was limited to the types of building and their sculptural decoration.



Pl. 1 Pompeii, Samnite Palaestra, plan.



1

2

Pl. 2 1 Pompeii, Samnite Palaestra, axonometric reconstruction of building in the Samnite period; 2 Pompeii, Samnite Palaestra, axonometric reconstruction of the building after AD 62.

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