

33. THE SEBETO RIVER

Sebeto: a mythical name which takes you back to the first settlements in Naples. It's original name **Sepeithos**, can be found on a few **coins** produced between V and IV centuries B.C. The river must have been quite big for the people of the time, following the tradition and technique of other races, to choose it as their local river god and portray it as a young man next to Parthenope.

The tradition was preserved for centuries. We know this from verses of poetry, an engraved stone and other sources. There is no real proof that the river known as the **Rubeolo** in the Middle Ages was actually the Sebeto. The two rivers definitely had different beds and different mouths. However, if we accept that something may have happened to change the course of the Sebeto river so that it ran into the Rubeolo then it is possible. From the Renaissance period onwards, the river became known by the more famous of the two names.

The Sebeto has acquired **great symbolic significance** over the years, reflecting the history of the city and its lands.

The coins which were found in the Naples area provide the oldest testimony to the existence of the river Sebeto. One coin, which maybe dates back to the second half of V century B.C. shows the head of a **young man with a horn in the middle of his forehead** and hair flowing down to his shoulders. We find the word *Sepeitos* written round the edge of the coin and on the back there is a winged woman sitting on an upside-down hydra with the word *Neapolites* written round the edge. The word *Sepeitos* proved very difficult to translate, but the academic Raffaele Garrucci was able to clarify the matter. The term came from a dialect belonging to a Eubean colony. For them, the letter B was written like a P, and the letters HEI as EI. *Sepeitos*, therefore, would definitely mean that the young man was the river god Sebeto. This interpretation corresponds to what happened in other colonies in Magna Grecia where they deified their rivers and built temples in their honour and represented them on their coins.

Other important evidence as to the existence of the Sebeto is provided by **epigraphs**. During archaeological work near the Porta del Mercato, an Imperial Age marble epigraph was found, showing a small temple to Sebeto which was probably built to confirm the cult of the ancient god Sebeto. The inscription said: *P. Mevius Eufychus aediculam restituit Sebetho* ("P. Mevio Eutico reconsecrated a shrine to Sebeto").

According to ancient myth, Sebeto and the beautiful siren Parthenope had a relationship and they gave birth to **Sebetide**, who along with Telone, generated **Ebalo**, the future King of Paleopolis. When Parthenope died, her body was placed in a tomb at the mouth of the Sebeto, at Paleopolis, which then assumed the name of the beautiful siren.

In his *Silvae*, Stazio describes the Neapolitan landscape declaring that: *Pulchra tumeat Sebethos alumna* (the Sebeto runs strong for the beauty of those he feeds).

Columella, in his unusual work *De re rustica*, which is the continuation of Virgil's Georgics, sings the praises of the famous Cumae cauliflowers and other places in Campania, including Naples: *La dotta Parthenope è bagnata dalla benefica linfa del Sebeto*. (the beautiful Parthenope is bathed in the beneficial lymph of the Sebeto)

These poems are very important because they confirm the fact that a river existed but nobody knows for sure whether the authors of these poems actually saw the river for themselves. The whole saga of the Sebeto is a mystery, as is its source. The first hypotheses were suggested by the academics Villani, Celano and Summonte. Villani and Celano identified the source of the river inside the **Vesuvius crater**. Then Summonte discovered the source of the Sebeto under the Church of **Santa Maria del Pozzo in Somma Vesuviana**.

The river must have been quite big as it flowed down the slope you can still see today between Via Pessina and Via Medina before reaching the sea. The river thus constituted the border between **Parthenope and Neapolis**.

It is difficult to understand why the river got so small over the years. Maybe one of the reasons was the **building of the Bolla acquaduct** but the whole water supply system altered the landscape and caused many rivers to dry up or change their course. However, the major reasons for the river changing its course were volcanic: the 79 A.D. eruption of Vesuvius helped the Sebeto to flow into the Rubeolo

and altered the **mouth**. Celano says that the mouth of the river lay on the outskirts of the city, along the so-called **“Strada della Marina”**.

It was also Celano who claimed that the Sebeto ran **inside the city walls**. This idea, however, seems very unlikely.