

# *The History and Importance of the Roman Bath*

by Haley Mowdy

Despite many common anachronistic assumptions about the bathing habits of the ancient Romans, a large gathering of archaeological and literary evidence suggests that the Romans, during the Republican and early Imperial periods, were actually quite hygienic. The remains of dozens of Roman bathing complexes have been uncovered by archaeologists, and the Roman Regionary Catalogues state that by the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD Rome possessed 856 registered bath-houses.<sup>1</sup> Even though baths were fixtures in Roman life, relatively few primary sources remain with useful details on the baths, which is possibly a testament less to their importance and more to their universality. This has made historical research nearly impossible without the help of archaeologists. Significant archaeological research has been done in an attempt to illuminate the structure and function of the baths through archaeological finds, as well as much historical research and speculation on the societal value of the baths through the few primary sources that speak of them. However, this paper will finally unite the tripartite scholarship of origins, functions, and value of the baths into a review about what is known regarding these vital structures. The Roman bath-houses were the “single most characteristic feature of Roman culture,” and this review will give an inclusive overview of just why this is the case.<sup>2</sup>

The Roman baths are recognizable by several different names. There is some scholarly debate as to whether *Balnea*, which comes from the Greek word βαλανεῖον, meaning “bath,” or its major opponent, *thermae*, was more prevalently used in Republican Rome itself.<sup>3</sup> *Thermae* comes from the Greek word θερμός, meaning “hot.” Two main camps arise regarding *thermae*: Evans’ camp, which argues that *thermae* was used to disambiguate large, imperial baths from private baths, *balnea*, and Claridge’s camp, which maintains that both *balnea* and *thermae* were used to refer to all baths, regardless of size, but that *balnea* was simply more common.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, in modern scholarship both terms are equally as important and largely interchangeable.

Although at any one time there were hundreds of baths in the Roman Empire, “the main problem facing an investigation into the early history of Roman baths is the scarcity of source material, so that a handful of available archaeological sites has

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<sup>1</sup> Amanda Claridge, *Rome: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (Oxford: Oxford U, 1998). This number does not include any baths that were built inside the houses of private citizens for personal use. Research suggests that there were innumerable quantities of private baths among the homes of well-to-do Romans.

<sup>2</sup> Claridge, *Rome*.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Terrentius Varro, *De lingua latina libri XXV*.

<sup>4</sup> Harry B. Evans, *Water Distribution in Ancient Rome* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1994) and Claridge, *Rome*.

tended to be used as a basis for extrapolating general schemes of early development.”<sup>5</sup> As many of these sites are extraordinarily similar to one another in their construction and function, archaeologists must look into the delicate minutia that differs between each individual archaeological site in order to extrapolate a possible linear chronological progression on the bath’s development. One prominent theory is that Sergius Orata, a Greek, was responsible for the development of the baths, and it was only when Rome conquered Magna Graecia that the Romans took the baths as a part of Roman society in response. This suggestion was the only prominent theory until very recently when archaeologists uncovered evidence at other bath sites that complicated the Greek- origin theory. The primary problem with this theory is the existence of the hypocaust in the Stabian Baths, which were likely built in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E under Sulla, before much of Magna Graecia was conquered by the Romans. However, while there is a plentitude of evidence suggesting that the Romans may have in fact absorbed the earlier Greek model, the hypocausts; the Stabian Baths suggest that perhaps the opposite happened.<sup>6</sup> However, it is also possible that perhaps Romans just took over existing bath sites made by the Greeks and improved upon them, allowing for the existence of hypocausts at popular Greek bath sites. This theme is common throughout much of Roman borrowed architecture and could possibly hold true with the baths as well. While this is not entirely impossible, another look at the Stabian Baths shows that due to the construction material discrepancies in the gates of the Stabian Baths, this is not likely, at least there.<sup>7</sup>

Although there are many other prominent theories surrounding the development of the Roman bath, perhaps the most promising theory comes from Nielsen on the origin of the baths at Campania. Nielsen proposes that perhaps the cultural development was not from one culture to another, but from one sector in the same society to another. Nielsen suggests that perhaps private individuals began building baths in their own homes in order to accommodate personal hygiene and pleasure desires. As these grew in popularity and as time went on, the Romans wanted everyone to have access to them—not simply for the entertainment value, but for the public hygienic value as well. Many of the largest public bath complexes in the Roman Empire were paid for by private citizens looking to court favor with the public; emperors, senators, triumphant generals and wealthy political hopefuls all poured their money into the public entertainment, hopefully in order to sway the fickle public opinion to their side. Nielsen suggests that the first public baths were modeled off individuals’ private baths and then developed as necessary to accommodate the needs of the

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<sup>5</sup> Garrett G. Fagan, “The Genesis of the Roman Public Bath: Recent Approaches and Future Directions,” *American Journal of Archaeology* (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

growing public patronage.<sup>8</sup>

In stand-alone bathing houses, all patrons were required to enter through the front entrance into an initial area called the *atrium*. This is the initial meeting space for visitors for the baths and also served as an entryway into the main complex. Just like the average public pool today, an attendant or *balneator* sat in the atrium in order to extract payment from Romans for the use of the baths. Bathing was not just a privilege reserved for the wealthy, however. Literary accounts detail the progressive fees associated with higher classes—those who could afford to pay more were asked to and those who could not paid less, or often, nothing at all.<sup>9</sup> Next, the bather would proceed into the *apodyterium* or changing room.<sup>10</sup> This room served the sole purpose of allowing the patrons a place to change out of and into their clothing in relative privacy. During the bathing cycle the clothing would be monitored by slaves whose sole job was to look after the clothing.<sup>11</sup> The walls of the room were filled with cubbies for storing items as well as holes that held pegs for clothes to be hung upon. This room held the entry into the complex's pools.

The first of the pools used by the Romans was the *frigidarium*. This pool was completely unheated and had water pumped in from the outside using the Romans' famously complex system of aqueducts. This fresh water was often extremely frigid, lending to the pool's apt name.<sup>12</sup> Although most *frigidaria* contained only a small cold plunge-bath, the cavernous remains found at several large bath complexes suggest that some larger imperial bath complexes may have contained vast cold swimming pools that could accommodate many patrons simultaneously as a part of the *frigidarium*.<sup>13</sup> The *frigidarium* was used much like modern swimming pools during the summer months, allowing patrons a place to escape from the heat of the Mediterranean climate, get a little exercise in, and cool off in the frigid waters.

The second pool used by the patrons of Roman bath houses is the *tepidarium*. Like the *frigidarium*, the *tepidarium* is aptly named for its tepid temperatures.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the *frigidarium*, however, the *tepidarium* did possess some heating capabilities and was the separation between the complex's cold and hot baths. In some bath complexes, however, the *tepidarium* is not a pool at all, but a heated room to provide comfort during the transition from the hot to cold pools. This room was usually heated by steam created through the use of a large bronze brazier burning coal.<sup>15</sup> Often, vents connected the *tepidarium* with the last bath of the complex, the *caldarium*, in order to pipe hot air from

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Thurston Peck, *The Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* (New York: Harpers, 1898).

<sup>10</sup> Claridge, *Rome*.

<sup>11</sup> Peck, *The Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.

<sup>12</sup> Claridge, *Rome*.

<sup>13</sup> Peck, *The Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.

<sup>14</sup> Claridge, *Rome*.

<sup>15</sup> Peck, *The Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.

this room, which used a unique and powerful heating system. This tepid resting spot was absolutely vital as even before modern cardiovascular research the Romans knew the perils of jumping too quickly from a cold bath into a hot one.

The final pool of the bathing complex, the *caldarium*, can be likened to a modern hot tub. This pool was intentionally maintained at a nearly scalding temperature in order to purge impurities from the skin by sweating.<sup>16</sup> The *caldarium* also had a large *labrum* or basin placed at the exit of the room for bathers to pour over their heads before leaving. It was important for the patrons to do this after spending any length of time in the *caldarium* in order to avoid overheating.<sup>17</sup>

The Roman baths remain archaeologically famous because of their incredibly sophisticated heating elements. The first and typically most touted of all of the heating elements of the *caldarium* was the *hypocaust* system.<sup>18</sup> In a *hypocaust* system, the floor is raised up by a series of stilts or platforms in order to create an empty space between the floor of the room and the foundation.<sup>19</sup> A furnace would be placed in this empty space and the walls and floors would be covered in tiles. The furnace burned coal or wood to produce energy to heat the ceramic tiles, which served the double feature of holding heat and preventing heat loss through insulation.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the *hypocausts*, another important heating feature was hollow walls—it may seem a little contradictory, but hollow walls were extremely important to the heating systems of the *caldarium*. The hollow walls allowed smoke from the brazier in the *hypocaust* below to escape through carefully placed vents. This prevented the smoke from getting backed up in the *caldarium*, and allowed fresh, heated air to recirculate throughout the room. Additionally, these hollow walls allowed for an even distribution of temperature throughout the room. As air moved from one side of the wall to the other, the whole room was eventually heated. Finally, these hollow walls allowed accessible transportation in order for the heated air to be piped into other portions of the complex, which saved energy and was more efficient than individually heating each room.<sup>21</sup>

The most important heating element in the Roman public bath would have been the extensive network of windows bordering the room. Although writing out of spite for the new system, Seneca writes honestly about the relationship between Romans and their bathing windows:

Nowadays... people regard baths as fit only for moths if they have not been so arranged that they receive the sun all day long through

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<sup>16</sup> James W. Ring, "Windows, Baths, and Solar Energy in the Roman Empire," *American Journal of Archaeology* (1996).

<sup>17</sup> Peck, *The Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.

<sup>18</sup> Claridge, *Rome*.

<sup>19</sup> Vitruvius, *De architectura*.

<sup>20</sup> Ring, "Windows, Baths, and Solar Energy in the Roman Empire."

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

the widest of windows, if men cannot bathe and get a coat of tan at the same time, and if they cannot look out from their bath-tubs over stretches of land and sea.<sup>22</sup>

Far from simply being good for the purpose of getting a tan and seeing the countryside while bathing, these windows offered immense heating capabilities. This was especially due to the new technology of window glaze, which allowed the windows to conduct and trap far more heat energy than traditional, un-glazed windows could. Many baths were even situated so that the biggest windows faced the south in order to soak up as much light as possible to keep the bathers warm.

One final feature that some of the larger baths had was a room called a *laconium*. Laconiums are the modern day sauna to the caldarium's hot tub. This room was heated even more highly than the caldarium, using the same system of windows, hollowed walls and hypocausts. In contrast to the caldarium however, a laconium had no bath. It was simply a highly heated room with no water that was heated to a high enough temperature to cause the patron to sweat profusely.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, as if the massive heating system mentioned above was not enough, the *preafurnium* added a final heating dimension. In this room was a tripartite boiler system with one copper pot stacked on top of another and so on for a total of three stacked bronze pots atop a furnace. Copper is an excellent conduit of heat, and each basin would correspond to a different room, ranging from the caldarium closest to the furnace and the frigidarium farthest away. The water from these basins would be pumped into the rest of the complex. So, not only was the air temperature in each room controlled to the desired level, so was the water temperature as well.<sup>24</sup>

Bathing complexes were valuable to the Romans for a multitude of reasons beyond their hygienic and leisure benefits. Many large bathing complexes had other amenities that contributed to the public. A very common addition to the baths was a centrally located *gymnasium*, an outdoor courtyard area for the purpose of exercising. Men would meet in these gymnasiums naked and exercise—they would wrestle, throw or lift weights and run to keep themselves in shape. After the long ritual of exercising, the bath's patrons would undergo their final, vital hygienic undertaking. The Romans would lather themselves up from head to toe with scented olive oil that had been gathered from the surrounding area. Then they would use a razor-like tool called a *stridgel* to systematically scrape all of the olive oil off the body, flinging it to the ground as they did so. This served the double purpose to moisturize the skin as well as to remove impurities that had become lodged inside the pores.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*.

<sup>23</sup> Chisolm, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (New York, 1922).

<sup>24</sup> Peck, *The Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Additionally, public bath houses were places of business. Many complexes had large waiting areas in the atrium that were made for wealthy Roman patrons to do business with their clients. The public bath houses quickly became a meeting space for Romans to conduct business transactions, socialize and gossip. Some of the biggest imperial bath-houses even had libraries for patrons to visit, as well as food and drink vendors and purveyors of many other goods in order to entertain the Roman guest. It was not uncommon for a Roman to spend his whole day at the baths, shopping, exercising, conducting business with clients, and finally, bathing.<sup>26</sup>

Rome was an equally-opportunity bathing community, and women were expected and encouraged to attend the bath-houses just as well as men. As far as using the frigidarium, tepidarium and caldarium, larger baths would have separate pools for the men and women, in addition to separate apodyteria, so that women and men could bathe simultaneously while still preserving their chastity. In the smaller complexes where the bath did not have separate complexes for men and women, a schedule was created in order to allow men to bathe at certain times of the day, while women could bathe at others. In cases such as this it was all the more important that the complexes should have waiting areas for business to be conducted. The members of one sex would gossip and do business while waiting their turn for the baths.<sup>27</sup>

The baths also transcended the typically strict Roman boundaries of social class. While the discrepancy between society's wealthiest and poorest citizens was great, at the end of the day all members of society were expected to practice adequate hygiene. Because of the differing entry rates for members of society the poor were often allowed to use the baths at no charge. While it was sometimes difficult for the working poor to bathe regularly due to their hard schedule, it was assumed that the lower class would also bathe regularly. However, some baths were owned by private "donor's clubs" where only wealthy club members could attend, but even in locations with these types of private baths there was usually an alternative public bath open to the entire city.<sup>28</sup> Often times to court political favor, wealthy senators or tribunes and consular hopefuls would finance a day at the baths in order to win the people over. Typically on a birthday or another important circumstance (such as immediately before an election) a wealthy candidate would donate enough to the bath that all patrons would attend the baths for free that day. Thus the Roman baths became the "single most characteristic feature of Roman culture."<sup>29</sup> Especially in small Roman towns with no forum or waypoints along the Roman roads, the baths became an important political and social center. People arranged meetings to take place during the day at the baths, and patron-client relationships could be built. Money would change hands and the well-to-do could hire

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<sup>26</sup> Fagan, *Bathing in the Roman Public World*.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> Cath Andrews, *Ancient Roman Baths: Cleanliness and Godliness Under One Roof*.

<sup>29</sup> Claridge, *Rome*.

artisans and service professionals, purchase slaves or make investments. There was also political propaganda and campaigning for office that took place there. Women were infrequently seen outside the home for non-religious reasons during the Roman Republic, and the bath-houses were one area in which women could meet publicly, gossip, catch up and plan social events.

This high propensity for bathing made the Romans unique among their historical counterparts. In ancient history there are no such accounts of another culture that valued bathing, cleanliness and hygiene just as much as the Romans did, gave maybe the Greeks who gave the Romans the idea of the public bath. Although the development of the baths is somewhat of a mystery due to the lack of ancient evidence about their evolution, Garrett Fagan, a major party responsible for the body of knowledge we have regarding the baths, points to six different theories that work in conjunction with one another to explain the true history of the bath's origins. This major player in the archaeological argument for the history of the baths helps to give more information about the baths' development.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the lack of clarity in modern knowledge of the baths' historical development, it is impossible to ignore the social importance that these complexes held in the Roman Republic and Empire. Not only were they left as monumental archaeological encyclopedias for the history of the Roman Empire, they were preserved through the literary and artistic tradition as the central place for social and political life to the Romans. Far more than a place to scrub up, these bathing houses were the centers for gossip, trade, commerce and politics. They were the predecessors to our modern malls—there was always shopping to be done, food and drink to partake in and even sometimes a massage booth to rest one's weary muscles. Regardless of a person's gender, age or social status, all were welcome to enjoy the benefits of the baths' social scene. Perhaps because of their prevalence within all major towns of the Empire, perhaps because of their equal-opportunity outlook on patronage or perhaps because of the vast entertainment possibilities awaiting a patron at the baths, these locations became the center of social life within the Republic. It is through the careful archaeological study of these important cultural centers that we can delve deeper into what exactly it meant to be a Roman citizen at the time of the Empire.

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<sup>30</sup> Fagan, *The Genesis of the Roman Public Bath*.