Did the Romans go to the baths to get clean or be dirty?

Natascha Zajac

> Balnea vina Venus corrumpunt corpora nostra,
> sed vitam faciunt balnea vina Venus.
>
> 'Wine, women and baths corrupt our bodies,
> But wine, women and baths make life itself.'

The trouble with Roman baths is that they are common as muck: they are the most common archaeological remains in the Roman Empire, and they are common in the sense that they are seen as part of low culture and associated with dirt, bodies, and sweat, rather than the high culture of religion, politics, and art. However, far from being simply public conveniences, they were an integral part of daily life and a defining element of Roman culture. Baths, both the archaeological remains and the countless descriptions of them in ancient texts, give us many and varied insights into Roman society. The daily ritual of the bath was an activity in which the Romans took great pride. In addition the technology required for the engineering, construction, hypocaust systems (under-floor heating), and water management of baths was also a great source of civic pride.

During the Republic baths were generally called *balnea.* They were small, privately owned businesses. They were not very lavish in their decoration. Some were reputable establishments offering single-sex bathing. Others were considered at best pick up joints for the youth, at worst sleazy brothels. During the Empire, new and very different kinds of baths were being built by the emperors, called *thermae.* The first *thermae* were built on the Campus Martius during the reign of the emperor Augustus in 25 B.C. Built by Agrippa, they were monumental, famous for their hot rooms and, most importantly, opened free to all Roman citizens after Agrippa's death. From this time on all the *thermae* were public buildings. There were seven monumental *thermae* built in Rome, and many others throughout the Empire. The famous *thermae* in Rome were: Nero's (A.D. 62), about which the poet Martial joked, 'What is worse than the Emperor Nero; what is better than his baths?' The baths of Titus were built in A.D. 80. These were followed by baths built by Trajan in A.D. 109, by Caracalla in A.D. 217, Diocletian in A.D. 298 , and by Constantine in the early fourth century.

Bathing beauties

It is tempting to imagine that the *thermae* were similar to our modern municipal swimming pools. The comparison, though, is misleading. The *thermae* were vast social complexes. Fast food, alcohol, sex, business, and art were all touted and consumed greedily in the *thermae.* The visitor to Rome today cannot fail to feel dwarfed and awed by the vast ruins of the *thermae* of Caracalla (the venue for the Three Tenors concert in 1991). The building, set in grounds of 30 acres, was roughly five times the size of St Paul's Cathedral. The *thermae* in general were incredibly lavish in their decoration and, as their name suggests, were renowned for their heat. They could service up to 3000 bathers at a time. They were surrounded by extensive gardens and athletic grounds. It is difficult for us to imagine the colour and pageant of these buildings from the pock-marked concrete of their remains. An extant equivalent in scale of lavishness might be the Vatican palace, where every surface and vista is decorated with marble, paint, and statuary.

In the nineteenth century painters such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema painted scenes from everyday life in Rome. A favourite subject was the depiction of the Rom an baths, not least as a classical 'ancient' setting made depictions of languid female nudes acceptable to the puritanical Victorians! Alma-Tadema, like many middle-class Europeans of that time, was fascinated by the Romans. He took great pains to study classical ruins and marbles in order to reconstruct them authentically in his oil paintings. His particular expertise was in painting the marble and mosaic decorations of Roman buildings. In fact, the popular magazine *Punch* joked that the famous painter was simply 'Marbellous!' Alma-Tadema's paintings of baths illustrate well the opulence of the decoration in the *thermae.* However, his paintings are not completely accurate, as the majority of his bathers are women. The tantalising question as to whether Roman men and women bathed naked together continues to be hotly (!) debated by historians. It is likely that at certain periods and in certain baths nude mixed bathing was commonplace. At around A.D. 130 the Emperor Hadrian tried to legislate against mixed bathing. A century later the depraved emperor Elagabalus encouraged it, and even made a point of attending all-female baths where he committed outrages, such as dressing as a woman and having his pubis plucked by slaves (*Ouch!).*

The *thermae* were not simply leisure complexes, they were vast museums which displayed the wealth and power of Rome. Monumental works of art found in the baths, such as the Farnese Hercules, hint at the different associations bathing had for the Romans. Hercules was a patron or hot springs and health. The Farnese statue depicts the god in a relaxed pose. This statue has a story. To understand the story one has to move around behind Hercules to look at his hidden right hand. In the god's palm are the apples of the Hesperides. Hercules has just finished one of his labours; and where better to rest than the delightful *thermae?* So the Romans went to the baths not simply for the culture of their bodies, but to share in the high culture of art, myth, and religion.

A bath a day keeps the doctor away

Roman ideas about hygiene and their concept of the way the human body worked were markedly different from our own. Our ideas about hygiene and cleanliness have been greatly influenced by the discovery in the nineteenth century of the existence of bacteria. The Romans, though, had no concept of washing to prevent contagion.

Bathing was, however, considered a practice which could have powerful effects on the body. It was promoted by ancient doctors both as a preventative and a curative treatment of many diseases. The ancients believed that the human body was made up of four humours (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm). A healthy body was one in which all four were in balance with each other. Disease was thought to be the result of imbalance. According to the ailment, doctors would always prescribe certain types of food, drink, purges, activity, and a certain way of bathing to restore the balance of the humours.

Even for those in good health, bathing was considered an important part of the daily routine. As well as immersing himself or herself in the various waters, the bather would take some exercise in the gymnasia which were available in the *thermae.* There was much more to bathing than just warming, oiling, and scraping away the grime of Rome. Bathing was, in fact, a preparation for that other great Roman institution, the *cena* or evening meal. By bathing the Roman prepared his body for a meal, and at the baths there was often the possibility or an invitation to dine with patrons or clients. Some Romans bathed before, during, and after meals. The emperor Commodus bathed eight times a day, and would gourmandise in the bath. The Romans believed that the process of digestion was a matter of the stomach 'cooking' the food. Immersion in a hot bath was thought to speed up the cooking process. The poet Persius satirised gluttons who, having downed a whole roast peacock, risked their lives by going into a boiling bath. The moralist Seneca was a vehement critic of what he perceived to be the increasing perversions of bathing habits. He was outraged by the habit of sitting in dry steam baths in order to build up a huge thirst, which the bather would quench with huge amounts of alcohol.

'Palaces of water'

Like the forums, theatres, and circuses, the baths were used regularly by the people. However, the baths, nicknamed the 'palaces of water', were particularly cherished. The Romans loved the baths because they were absolutely wonderful to be in. Baths were warm, tactile, refreshing, and comforting to the body. In fact, the baths were a feast for all the senses. The lofty halls echoed the babbling people and waters. The moist atmosphere, whether fragrant with perfumes or foul with sweat, must have been heady and redolent of lazy pleasures. The bathers padded with bare feet along warmed floors of the balmy and

soporific *caldaria* (hot rooms), to the cold and energising waters of the *natatio* (swimming pool).

The many activities available in the *thermae* ranged from high culture to low decadence. The Romans went to the baths to shop, to visit their dentist, lawyer, or prostitute; to have their armpits plucked, have a massage, consult a library book, keep fit, or just take in the beauty of naked marble and flesh. Baths provided nonstop distraction, and rather like some television soap operas today, the *thermae* made the proverbial glamour of the imperial lifestyle accessible to all. By visiting the *thermae* it was possible to play at being emperor or V.I.P. for a few hours. The baths were used as much for escape and fantasy as cleanliness and sport.

Seeing and being seen in the baths

Immensely popular venues, the baths were ideal areas for lavish display. For the Romans, bathing was a performance and the *thermae* were popular spots for poseurs, who maintained their affectations in or out of their togas. Of course, the use of clothes, whether to veil lovely sights or to hide a multitude of sins, was not available in the baths. Having shed their togas, the bathers competed with each other as to who had the best jewellery, physical attributes, and slaves. They could become as much the objects of ridicule as admiration. In one of his several poems on the baths Martial mocks Charinus, who, Liberace style, wore six rings on each finger of his hand, and did not take them off when he went bathing. In another poem, Martial jokes that in whatever baths you hear applause, that is where Maron's huge penis will be found. Elsewhere, Martial describes Aper, whose changing financial status is reflected in his bathing arrangements. Before coming into a large inheritance, his slaves were of such poor quality that they actually detracted from his image. His towels were carried by a knock-kneed slave, and, patently ill-equipped for the job, a one-eyed crone guarded his toga; finally, adding shame to decrepitude, his oil was carried by a ruptured masseur. Bathing is brief and without pleasure. Aper does not prolong his time in the baths, and censures the other boozing, dallying bathers. Yet when he can afford five sleek, long-haired slaves, he lingers and not only condones the carousing, but joins in. His slaves, like the proverbial smart car and luscious blonde of today, are a boost to his status. To expand the modern metaphor: since Aper is no longer driving a 'P' Reg. Skoda, his exposure in the baths is now worth prolonging.

The triumph of baths

As well as being a place for health, leisure, and socialising, baths were a conscious expression by the Romans of their power over the physical and natural world. One of the characteristics of the baths was the fact that they exerted influence over the fundamental,

yet wild and unpredictable element, water. From the looming aqueducts to the invisible network of underground conduits, the Roman city was permeated with water. The *thermae,* where huge volumes of water were channelled, filtered, contained, and heated, embodied the Romans' spectacular achievement in controlling this element. In the baths the Romans expressed their capacity to harness, and to some extent tame, nature.

The baths symbolised other Roman victories – victories over their conquered provinces. The building of baths and the adoption of Roman bathing habits by conquered peoples were part of the mechanism of romanisation. Tacitus describes how his father-in-law, Agricola. subdued the barbarian inhabitants of Britain, who were 'a people as disparate and boorish as they were skilled in war'. Bathing is listed as one of the alluring habits to which Britons became accustomed. In Roman eyes, the successful introduction of the habit of bathing was evidence of Agricola's victory over the damp backwater of Britain.

In Rome itself baths symbolised the emperors' supremacy. By spending huge sums of money on the *thermae,* as they did on bread and circuses, the emperors became associated with (and recognised as the source of) everything powerful and everything pleasurable. With baths the emperors could gratify, entertain, and therefore to some extent control their subject citizens. In the *thermae,* named after the emperors who built them, the Romans enjoyed both bodily and spiritual refreshment, while the emperors enjoyed the acclaim, praise, and lasting glory which resulted from providing these monumental pleasure palaces.

Natascha Zajac is a Junior Research Fellow at St Edmund's College, Cambridge where she immerses herself in research on Roman baths.