

## **Baths in Ancient Rome (Parts I and II)**

Erkki Palmén

PhD, University Lecturer Emeritus

Jyväskylä

Public baths in ancient Rome did not become common until the Imperial Era. Before that, people used to wash in dark, tiny cabins next to the kitchen, and proper washing took place very rarely. Water was carried from the kitchen or the well, and the “bathtub” consisted of a barrel half-dug in the earth. In the second century BC, wider and more comfortable bathing accommodations were constructed, according to the model provided by the Greeks. Consequently, many Latin words concerning baths and bathing, such as “balneum” and “thermae”, are loanwords borrowed from the Greek language. The oldest aqueducts ran under the streets, and they provided water only to the basements of buildings situated in low-lying places. From the Augustan Era onward higher aqueducts were built.

The underfloor heating (hypocaustis), however, had been invented before the days of the Emperor Augustus. The two floors built one upon the other were separated by brick pillars fastened to the lower floor. Through the opening in the furnace, burning bundles of brushwood were thrust into the empty space (hypocaustum) between the pillars. The warmth also spread into the walls through pipes placed between the folds of ceramic box tiles of which the walls had been made.

In addition to private bathrooms, public baths with different bathrooms were built by private enterprisers. By and by the number of public baths grew, and in the days of Augustus the state authorities began to support them financially. The Campanian cities of Magna Graecia, “Great Greece”, provided examples for the building of the thermae. The Stabian Baths in Pompei dated back to the fourth century BC and in 80 BC the Forum Baths were built. Neither of them could take more than 30 bathers at a time.

The remnants of the Stabian Baths belong to the favourite tourist attractions in Pompei. There is, among other things, a sports ground for ballgames surrounded by a colonnade. From there one can get straight into men’s department consisting of the waiting room, the dressing room, and separate rooms for cold, warm and hot baths. Women’s department consists of similar rooms but in the opposite order. The rooms for hot baths in these departments were placed side by side so that they could be heated simultaneously.

The following two baths are best preserved in the city of Rome: a) the Baths of Caracalla, built in the years 211–216 AD. These baths took 500 visitors at the same time and, in addition to the rooms mentioned above, they were provided with special sweating rooms. There were also parks, promenades, sports grounds and libraries etc. in the area; b) the Baths of Diocletian, built in 298–306, which took nearly 3000 visitors simultaneously. Since the Renaissance many architects have used these baths as their models for planning buildings for various purposes other than the original one.

Baths also appeared in many places outside the city of Rome. In the baths of Campania (eg. in Baiae and Puteoli) customers suffering from rheumatism could be cured with the iodous and sulphurous waters of the local mineral springs. *Aquae Sextiae* (→ Aix-en-Provence) and *Aquae Aureliae* (→ Baden-Baden) are examples of baths situated in the Roman provinces.

Public baths were also popular recreation centres. Some writers complained that people were leading a life of vice there. In the Imperial Era it became a habit that men and women bathed together but the Emperor Hadrian (117–138) ordered that there should be separate bathing hours for men and women. As far as the later emperors are concerned, Heliogabalus (218–222) overruled Hadrian’s order, whereas Alexander Severus (222–235) restored it. According to some writers, the noise made by the customers of the baths could be a nuisance to the neighbourhood. The Roman bathing culture has been praised as well as criticised. “Baths, wine and sex spoil our bodies; but baths, wine and sex make up life.” (CIL VI 15258)