

BATHING IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The civilisations which developed on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea were characterised since the earliest times by the prominence they gave to the art of bathing. Bathing was an important moment in ancient daily life to which were soon devoted buildings both private for the wealthiest and public. The public baths were very popular with men and women alike and were an ideal place to expand the Roman lifestyle and artistic models across the Empire.



Proposed reproduction of the northern baths (at user level) after J.P. Adam and H. Delhumeau

Bathing and Sport

Bathing was originally associated with physical exercise, particularly with athletics. This explained why thermal activity was the most successful in cities of Greece where the Panhellenic Games took place: Corinth, Nemea, Delphi and Olympia. In Greece, the main facility to develop was the gymnasium (*gymnasion*) from the word *gymnos* ("naked") which indicated a venue dedicated to sports. Gymnasia were equipped with heated pools, but according to ancient writers and to the data collected during excavations, aquatic activities were not quite as popular as they were in the Roman world. The practices of Roman bathers were well documented in Latin writings, and anecdotes told by several authors are rather accurate regarding this subject. Once they had left their clothes in a changing room **1**, sportsmen would anoint

their bodies with the oil contained in an aryballos* they carried with them for this purpose along with other small accessories **2**. Anointing was a practice inherited from the Archaic period, when the Greeks who did not know of soap would use plant oil to give the skin more suppleness and prevent the dust from penetrating the pores. We know several examples of small flasks used as body oil containers from the Greek Archaic period (8th 6th century BC for the small Corinth aryballoi) up to the Roman period with items made of glass. After generously anointing their bodies with oil, athletes - from both genders as is proven by a remarkable mosaic from Sicily **3** would exercise in a generally open space called palaestra (*palestra*) **A**. In the Cluny baths, the space of one of the two palaestrae (the western one) can still be seen from the gates of the boulevard Saint-Michel.



1 Pompeii (Italy), Forum Baths, 1st century BC, cavities made for the changing room used by bathers



2 Essentials for bathing : strigils*, patera* (or bowl) and aryballos* 1st or 2nd century AD, from Suèvres (Department of Eure, France), Saint Germain Laye, National Museum of Archaeology



3 Bikini girls, 4th century AD, mosaic, Villa del Casale, Piazza Armerina (Sicily)

776 BC
Date (apocryphal) of the first Games in Olympia

33 BC
Baths of Agrippa in Rome : first Roman public baths in front of which the Apoxyomenos after Lysippos was placed

104109 AD
Baths of Trajan built on the Esquiline Hill with library rooms opening on interior gardens

117138 AD
Reign of Hadrian during which gender mixing is banned in public baths

Early 3rd century AD
Baths of Emperor Caracalla in Rome with palaestrae adorned with sumptuous mosaics made of porphyry tesserae

Entering the roofed building, bathers would progress to the *caldarium* **B** (situated at the angle of the boulevard Saint-Michel and the rue Du Sommerard in the thermae of Cluny), where the heat coupled with the exercise-induced sweat would remove the dirt from the skin pores. It was also quite frequent that the sand from the palaestra remained stuck to the skin. Athletes would therefore go to a dedicated space in the *caldarium* called the *destrictarium*, where they would use a strigil, a small metal tool with which they scraped the surface of their skin in a similar fashion to the Apoxyomenos* (from the Greek verb Apoxuo: to scrape) as made famous by a statue carved by Lysippos, a sculptor at the Court of Alexander the Great. The original bronze version of this famous piece **4** is now lost, but numerous Roman copies were produced to decorate thermal baths, such as the one made for the Baths of Agrippa (the first public baths built in Rome). Bathers less inclined to intensive exercise would remove tenacious dirt by simply sweating in the *caldarium*. The dry hot room, often called *laconicum* (a reference to the room heated with a brasero in use in Sparta during the Archaic period) or *sudatio* was even warmer. Skin cleansing could then be completed with water, the use of a sponge and a pumice. After this very hygienic phase came what was a moment of leisure for most of the bathers. They could either stay longer in the *caldarium* or progress to the *frigidarium* **C** where they could take a cold bath in the generally shallow waters of the pool (*natatio*) as was the case in the museum's *frigidarium* or in a bathtub, like the one in marble found in Rome shown on the eastern wall of the *frigidarium*. If the transition between hot and cold was too sudden, bathers could spend time in the tepidarium, an in-between space providing a mild warmth.

A healthy mind in a healthy body

In addition to balneotherapy for athletes, the most prominent public baths would offer leisure opportunities in various forms : intellectual in the libraries and art exhibition rooms, contemplative, with cultivated gardens surrounding the thermae, gastronomic in the taverns, and carnal in the 'pleasure rooms', similar to the ones in the Suburban Thermae of Pompeii (next to the Porta Marina) which offered a 'lupanar' (brothel) on the first floor nicknamed the 'Pleasure Palace'. The debate on whether or not the baths accommodated men and women is closely linked to the voluptuous dimension of thermal activity. The recurrence of Imperial edicts from Emperor Hadrian to Alexander Severus forbidding the mixing of genders in baths is telling of the delicate nature of the debate and of the difficulties encountered by political authorities to

curb a few excesses... A strong reminder of the pleasures of the flesh was also to be found in the decorations of the main rooms as well as in the gardens. It is known that sensual representations of the toilet of Venus **5** inherited from Ancient or Hellenistic Greece would adorn sumptuously decorated rooms to please the bathers but also to remind them of the prestige of the Roman civilisation. The unique place occupied by the goddess of love in the decoration of the thermae is a clear indication of the carnal dimension of the baths.

They are however not cited by the illustrious Roman poet Ovid as places of seduction in the *Art of Love*. These establishments rather ought to be regarded as recreational places in a broader sense, made for delight, in a way more fitting to the image used in a famous saying of Roman poet Juvenal (*Satires*, X) : « *Odorum est, ut sit mens sana in corpore sano* » ('Let us pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body'). The widely held custom in ancient times which consisted of placing furniture, small bath-related objects and toiletries in the graves of dead people is a key archaeological evidence of the importance of body care for both men and women in Greece and later in Rome. In Lillebonne, (Department of Seine-Maritime, France) the cremation grave of a young man was discovered by accident in 1864; it contained gambling and bathing objects including a basin, two strigils and one anthropomorphic vase for scented oil **6**. These deceased people probably followed the traditional conception of ideal beauty which linked water to purity, such as Aphrodite rising out of the waters or the divine birth of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus and Penelope, who was bathed by Polycaste: « When she had washed him and anointed him with oil, she brought him a fair mantle and a shirt and he looked like a god as he came from the bath... » *Homer, Odyssey* (Book III).

Isabelle Bardiès-Fronty, Head Curator

List of terms

Apoxyomenos : nude male athlete represented scraping his skin with a strigil.

Aryballos : flask in Ancient Greece which contained scented oil used for body care.

Hypocaust : underfloor heating system used in ancient Roman architecture.

Panhellenic Games : athletic gatherings during which city-states of all Ancient Greece would compete against one another.

Lupanar : an establishment trading in sexual services from prostitutes.

Patera : bowl used for drinking or libations.

Strigil : a curved bronze object with which athletes would scrape their skin after sweating to rid the body of accumulated sand and dirt.

Photos credits :

- 1** Archives Alinari, Florence, Dist. RMN-GP Georges Tatge, **2** RMN-GP / Thierry Le Mage, **3** Wikimedia commons / M. Disdero, **4** Wikimedia commons Jean-Pol GRANDMONT, **5** RMN-GP / Hervé Lewandowski, **6** Musée de Lillebonne / CVS.



4 Apoxyomenos, after Lysippos, Roman copy after a lost original statue from the last third of the 4th century BC, from Trastevere in Rome, marble, Vatican, Pio-Clementino Museum



5 Crouching Venus, Roman copy after a lost original statue from the 2nd century BC, from the Baths of Sainte-Colombe (Department of Rhône, France), marble, Paris, Louvre Museum



6 Oil vase from the grave known as the sepulture of Marcus de Lillebonne (Department of Seine-Maritime, France), 2nd century AD, bronze, Lillebonne main Museum

117138 AD

Reign of Hadrian during which gender mixing is banned in public baths

Early 3rd century AD

Baths of Emperor Caracalla in Rome with palaestrae adorned with sumptuous mosaics made of porphyry tesserae

222-235 AD

Reign of Alexander Severus during which gender mixing is banned in public baths

298-306 AD

Baths of Emperor Diocletian built in Rome

307 AD

Trier becomes capital of Gaul ; building of the last monumental thermae of the Empire during the reign of Constantine