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A History of the Bath

by Marie Gale

The bath as we know it has roots dating back to the beginnings of recorded history. However, earliest records show that bathing was generally part of mystical or religious rites to purify the spirit rather than a source of pleasure or healing. Many belief systems held that water could wash away sins and that submersion in water could bring about regeneration or rejuvenation.

Throughout history there has been a widespread and almost universal belief that water was in some way magical, working on behalf of a supreme deity to enable life and all living things.

The ancient Egyptian civilization dates back to the 3rd millennium B.C. Cleopatra (69 – 30 B.C.) is known for her bathing rituals, but architectural remains from ancient Egypt indicate they had special bathing rooms and enjoyed the bath for both personal and religious reasons as early as 2800 B.C. Excavations from ancient Babylon reveal that a form of soap making was known at that time (ca. 1,000 B.C.).

However, it wasn't until the Greek civilization that bathing for health, personal cleanliness and pleasure was elevated to a fine art. In both the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* Homer (ca. eighth century B.C.) describes scenes of hot-water bathing. Pythagoras (fifth century B.C.) advocated the cold water bath to heal gout, cancer, jaundice and hypochondria. Helen of Troy bathed in the river and then in a hot bath.

Hot water baths are attributed to Heracles (son of Zeus), hence Greek hot baths were called "Baths of Heracles." Bathing occupied an important place in the life of the Greeks, as evidenced by the bathing rooms in the palace of Knossos (ca. 1700 B.C.).

The popularity of hot water bathing in Greece led first to private baths in wealthy homes and then to public baths for the

common people. A dip in the river or exercise in the gymnasium before the hot bath was a general practice. At the pinnacle of classical Greek civilization, it was not uncommon for the wealthy to bathe 5 – 6 times a day.

The Romans were responsible for the rise of bathing to an

unequaled level and, ultimately, the complete decline of bathing in general. As the Roman aqueducts were built, they provided water and solved the problem of having enough water for public bathing. The first cold water public bath, the *piscina publica*, was established in 312 B.C., and others soon followed.

Gaius Maecenas (70 B.C. – 8 B.C.), a Roman diplomat and counselor to Roman emperor Augustus, was credited with bringing the warm water bath to Rome. The success of that endeavor was no doubt assisted by the many thermal springs located on the southern portion of the Italian peninsula. Warm and hot water baths soon replaced the earlier cold water baths. Pompeii, prior to its destruction by Mt. Vesuvius in A.D. 79, had baths scattered throughout the town, including the Stabian Baths, which

predate the Roman period.

In 21 B.C, the first big "*thermae*" (an establishment of all types of baths) was built by Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (63 – 12 B.C.) . Over the next several hundred years, each succeeding Roman Emperor outdid his predecessor in the creation of larger and more ostentatious *thermae*. The bathing facilities built by Nero (A.D. 15 – 68) surpassed those built by Agrippa. The Baths of Caracalla, begun in A.D. 206 by Emperor Septimius Severus and completed in A.D. 216 by his son, Caracalla, covered an amazing 28 acres. It had room for 2000 bathers, marble seats for 1600 onlookers and numerous rooms, baths and services, with water provided by the famous Roman aqueducts.



In A.D. 302 the Baths of Diocletian surpassed all previous bathing facilities with bathing pools enough to accommodate 18,000 men, women and children at the same time. As with earlier *thermae*, the basins were frequently made of precious metals and the walls were of Numidian marble, Egyptian Granite and spectacular mosaics.

A person entering a typical Roman *thermae* would first enter the *apodyteriam* and undress for the bath. Then he would go to the *unctuarium* and be anointed with oil. From there it was to the *calida lavitio*, the hot water bath. As part of the bathing process bathers exfoliated by being scraped with stiles, edged tools made from gold, silver, bronze or iron. Following that was the *laconium* (also called the *calidarium*, *vaporarium* or *sudatorium*), which was essentially a hot air sauna. Adjoining the *laconium* was a *tepidarium*, a room with a tepid bath, and finally a *frigidarium* containing a cold plunge bath. In addition to the bathing rooms, there were also rooms for reading, conversation, gymnastics and exercise, banquet rooms, servants quarters and other activities.

Roman public baths were originally built for the commoners to use for a small fee. On holidays and other special days - or just to boost his popularity - the Emperor occasionally made them free for a day.

Although the wealthy of Rome attended public baths, they often had private baths in their own homes. Private baths could be more elaborate, often scented with rare essences or prepared with special additives to the bath. Nero's wife, Empress Poppaea Sabina, bathed every day in asses' milk (for which she kept 500 asses on hand).

In the beginning, there were strict moral regulations. Men and women bathed separately and eunuchs were used as attendants for female bathers. Forcible entry by a man into the women's bath was a capital offense. Mixed bathing is recorded in the first century, and by the beginning of the fourth century, men and women were regularly bathing together. According to one historian, they "drank, gambled and, in addition to every ordinary form of vulgarity and obscenity, they practiced immoralities that can only be hinted at." Prostitution was rampant and it was not uncommon for degenerates to spend many hours, even all day, basking in the delights both in and out of the bath.

As the Roman Empire expanded, so did the acceptance of the public bath. As the Roman armies conquered other countries, where hot springs were found they were adapted for the Roman tradition of public bathing. The springs in Bath, England were first used by the Romans. So were the famous baths in Baden (Germany), Aix (Provence, France), Bagneres (Pyrenees), Caldas (Spain) and many others.

Moral outrage gradually became an issue. For the next several hundred years the status of the bath was dictated by

the opinion and whim of the prevailing Emperor. Some encouraged and participated in the baths in all their degenerate glory; others banned the bath altogether. Gradually the fall of paganism in Rome (as well as the fall of the Roman Empire) and rise of Christianity resulted in the denouncement of the public bath and its final abandonment around the beginning of the sixth century.

For the next three centuries, at least in the European Christian culture, bathing was out of favor. Ecclesiastical dictates forbade bathing, especially public bathing, for any use other than for cleansing or in purely religious rites. Bathing and cleanliness became private rather than public activities. The public baths of Rome were destroyed or put to other uses. The infamous Baths of Diocletian, which had been originally built by forced labor of Christian soldiers, were made into a Christian Church under the direction of Michelangelo.

Meanwhile, around that same time the many natural thermal baths of Japan encouraged the tradition of public bathing in that region. As far back as the third century A.D., Chinese historians commented on the cleanliness of the Japanese.

Public bathing in Japan dates to at least A.D. 553 and flourished after that time. Many of their baths were connected to Buddhist Monasteries, as part of the Buddhist belief that such hygiene not only purified the body of sin, but also brought luck.

Ritual cleansing baths (*mikvot*) were also part of the Jewish culture. Rules for the construction of a mikveh were very exact and archaeologists have uncovered mikveh ruins in Bristol, England dated to 1150 and Cologne, Germany dated to 1170.

In the Middle East, Islam was developing. As Arabic forces invaded the fallen Roman Empire, they found the remnants of Greek and Roman hot baths. When they entered Alexandria, they found over 4,000 public baths, which they heated for 6 months by burning books from the famous Library of Alexandria. With the blessing and encouragement of Muhammad, by the mid-seventh century holy men had adopted the hot bath and tailored it to their own beliefs. The bath, or *hammam*, gained religious significance and became an annex to the mosque, used to comply with Islamic laws of hygiene and purification. The *hammam* also became a center of town social life.

In the late eighth century, the pendulum started swinging back the other way within Christendom. During his reign as King of the Franks and then Roman Emperor, Charlemagne (747 – 814), discovered the benefits of the hot bath at Aix-la-Chapelle. He then built hot baths on the grounds of his own palace to which he invited relatives and friends, and even common soldiers. As a result, the old

baths of Aix-la-Chapelle were reopened and again became fashionable.

With the blessing of the Emperor and the relaxation of ecclesiastical doctrine, the fame of the hot bath spread to other countries. The hot bath, as a center of socialization as well as cleansing and hygiene, was again acceptable. Gradually bath houses were built throughout Europe. The public baths in Bath, England were reopened in the twelfth century and public steam baths became a fixture in Bohemia, Poland and Germany. For the next several hundred years, the aristocratic and wealthy of civilized Europe bathed luxuriously.

In 1416, Poggio Bracciolini (1380 – 1459) wrote about the baths in Baden, Germany:

The baths are altogether thirty in number. Of these, two only are public baths, which are exposed to view on every side, and are frequented by the lower orders of people, of all ages and of each sex. Here the males and females, entertaining no hostile dispositions towards each other, are separated by only a simple railing. It is a droll sight to see decrepit old women and blooming maidens, stepping into the water, and exposing their charms to the profane eyes of the men.

... Above the baths are a kind of galleries, on which the people stand who wish to see and converse with the bathers; for every one has free access to all the baths, to see the company, to talk and joke with them. As ladies go in and out of the water, they expose to view a considerable portion of their persons.

... The men wear only a pair of drawers. The women are clad in linen vests, which are however slashed in the sides, so that they neither cover the neck, the breast, nor the arms of the wearer.

... In some of the private baths, the men mix promiscuously with their female relatives and friends. They go into the water three or four times every day; and they spend the greater part of their time in the baths where they amuse themselves with singing, drinking and dancing.

Thus the seemingly inevitable happened. The baths throughout every country in Europe again started becoming centers of vice and immorality. Ultimately, the practice of mixed bathing raised the ire of so many critics and the ecclesiastical authorities protested so strongly, that it was gradually discontinued. By 1814, both men and women were allowed in the baths in Bath, England, but only on different days.

It must be noted that the public and private baths of this era were primarily in the province of the wealthy and the aristocracy. Where natural hot springs were unavailable, the fuel necessary to heat water for baths was far outside the economy of the common citizen. Bathing was a social activity, subject to the whim of fashion and available to those

who could afford it. With the restrictions on communal bathing, it gradually went out of fashion.

With the research of Louis Pasteur (1822 – 1865), Joseph Lister (1827 – 1912) and others, the “germ theory of contagion” became an accepted scientific principle. A new understanding of the necessity for sanitation, hygiene and cleanliness resulted in a resurgence of the bath and bathing, this time not so much for pleasure, but for health.

In England, in the first half of the nineteenth century there were two major cholera epidemics (1832 and 1849). The need to provide the working class with a means to keep their clothes and bodies clean became paramount. The first Public Baths and Wash Houses Act was passed in 1846 and gave local authorities the power to raise money to provide public washing facilities. This led to the creation of public bath houses (called “Slipper Baths”) in almost every major town in England by the end of the nineteenth century.

France passed a measure similar to the Public Baths and Wash Houses Act in 1850 and other European countries followed suit. In America a similar movement was started towards the end of the nineteenth century and facilities were erected in the larger cities. One historian attributed the lack of attention to public baths in America to the fact that the housing was generally newer and more modern than that in Europe and provided better facilities in personal residences on a general basis.

With the implementation of better septic and sewer systems and municipal water systems starting in the late 1800’s, there was a gradual movement toward indoor plumbing. In the US, the first written account of indoor plumbing is documented to the 1840’s but for the next 20 years it was a luxury for the affluent. By the 1870’s the “bath-room” was coming into its own; new high-end home designs included a tub, sink and toilet. The porcelain/cast iron clawfoot tub is typical of that era.

By 1900 nearly all new homes had indoor bathrooms and many older homes were being refitted. Hot water bathing, albeit in private not public, was back in fashion.

Over the last 100 years, the indoor, private, hot-water bath has gone from a luxury to a necessity. Very few westerners would consider a house complete without a bath or shower. What is considered luxury now is not just having a bath, but having a spectacular and beautiful bath where one can indulge relatively privately in the bathing ritual. The multi-billion dollar personal care industry has blossomed out of the general acceptance of the bath as a regular part of daily life.

In the last part of the 20th century the “hot tub” and the home swimming pool became new venues for social bathing and interaction. Public baths still exist, but generally in the form of public swimming pools or therapeutic hot springs

intended for exercise or health. While most are mixed-gender, they tend to follow the morals of our current time concerning clothing, facilities and general interaction between the guests. Any vestiges of the decadence of the public baths of Roman times are done in private venues, away from prying eyes.

History, through 5000 years, shows us that we have a desire to submerge ourselves in water, preferably hot water.

It seems that the bath, whether for religious rites, cleanliness, hygiene or just plain personal pleasure, is here to stay. ~*

Authors note: Other cultures that have bathing practices not covered within the scope of this article include Russian Steam Baths, Turkish baths (a form of the Islamic hammam), Scandinavian sauna and cold plunge, American Indian sweat lodges and others. It is also important to note that personal washing, as opposed to bathing, is not addressed; throughout history most cultures had dictates and etiquette for washing at least parts of the body on a regular basis.

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