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What remained of the Roman bathhouse and bathing experience by the end of Late Antiquity?

'What bathing is when thou thinkest of it–oil, sweat, filth, greasy water, everything revolting–such is every part of life and every object we meet with'
(Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8.24)

Only in recent decades have Roman baths been given proper scholarly attention. These institutions were an integral part of daily life, acting as the conduit for social and commercial interaction amongst the hierarchy and lower-classes in both private and public spheres. Justification for such neglect is therefore puzzling. DeLaine made considerable efforts to evaluate this phenomenon, arguing the mistreatment was centred on bathhouses being everywhere, leading academics to believe nothing new could be contributed.[1] What modern scholarship has achieved by examining the social and cultural aspects of the bathhouse, is that our knowledge regarding this single space is applicable to a wider framework concerning society as a whole.[2] In light of the recent decline and fall debates, it is evident that changes to the bathhouse and bathing experience throughout Late Antiquity suggest continuities with the classical model. By determining the changing nature of this concept, foremost I will consider the infringement of Christianity in obstructing the conventional recreational use of baths to evaluate its overall impact in Late Antiquity. Secondly, to account for regional variation, I will consider privatisation and the decline of the imperial *thermae* in which the evidence is plentiful in both the East and West. Finally, considering what remained of the Roman bathing experience towards the end of Late Antiquity against the rise of Islam. Reaching such a conclusion of what remained by the end of this period, however, is predicated on briefly reconstructing the Roman bathing experience.

[1] DeLaine (1988), 11; DeLaine (1999), 7.

[2] Fagan (2002); Yegül (1992); Yegül (2010).

The most fruitful description of public baths in the Roman world is in the work of Seneca, 'Imagine what a variety of noises reverberates about my ears! I have lodgings right over a bathing establishment. So picture to yourself the assortment of sounds, which are strong enough to make me hate my very powers of hearing!' (*Epistles* 56.1). The account details various businesses and activities occurring in the bathhouse's vicinity, exemplifying the infrastructure as a melting pot of different people with different intents. In sum, a visit to the bathhouse entailed more than simply bathing, this is where people ate, drank, and socialised (Martial, *Epigrams* 11. 82; 12. 19). As stressed by Pliny, it was the foci of daily habit, 'am oiled, take exercise, and have a bath.' (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 9. 36).

The bathing routine appears to have been much the same for both wealthy and poor. The typical sequence started with exercise in the *palaestra*, before entering the *apodyterium* to disrobe (Isidorus of Seville, *Etymologies* 15.2.41–42), wash and rid the body of excess dirt with a cleansing *strigil* prior to bathing.[3] Once this was done, bathing commenced in the *tepidarium*, followed by a plunge into the *caldarium*, a hotter bath, before finally cooling off in the *frigidarium*.[4] According to Martial, the best time for this procedure was during the eighth hour, when the temperatures were best (*Epigrams* 10.48). Undoubtedly, an attractive quality when visiting the bathhouse was the absence of a visible class distinction in a society characterised by splendour and disparities in wealth. Although evidence for the attendance of slaves is plentiful (Ammianus Marcellinus even mentions fifty servants accompanying some aristocrats [*History* 28. 4.9]),[5] the bathing experience seems uniform for most. Furthering this, emperors monopolized on its popularity, bathing frequently to win public favour. As Yegul stated, the bathhouse created the 'illusion' of an egalitarian society, 'one where wise man and

[3] Yegül (2010), 12.

[4] Maréchal (2020), *Public Baths and Bathing Habits in Late Antiquity,* 19; Yegul (2010), 16.

[5] See also Clement of Alexandria, *Paedadogos* 3.5; Martial, *Epigrams* 8. 67; Suetonius, *Life of Titus*, 8.2; Yegul (1992), 32; Fagan (1999), 29–34;

fool, rich and poor, privileged and underdog, could rub shoulders and enjoy the benefits afforded by the Roman imperial system'.[6] It is important to note the bathing routine was not standardised. Visitors seem to have had their own definitions of what one could do in the bathhouse, from conversing and bodily care, or partake in promiscuous behaviours which mustered amongst such an amalgamation of people.[7] As emphasised by Sanger, 'In the early Roman baths, darkness, or, at best, a faint twilight reigned…and any immortality short of actual prostitution could take place.'[8]

Studying the development of the bathhouse and bathing experience throughout Late Antiquity is a compound inquiry. Partly because, paradoxically, the literary and archaeological evidence is abundant, and we must remember when examining one structure in a single site, the evidence may not always accentuate broader change. The appropriate inquiry considers Christian and Islamic influences to determine what remained within the milieu of regional variation, yet this makes establishing general patterns to befit the conclusion problematic.

Concerning the literary record, we can establish an understanding of the architectural developments to these infrastructures from the work of John Malalas, as Zytka highlighted, his *Chronicle* reflects widespread values associated with the construction of baths at the time of its composition in the 6th century.[9] His work is primarily concerned with Antioch, a valuable case study in this context. As a centre of Christianity, the bathhouses transformed from pagan to Christian establishments. For Malalas, an indicator of a good emperor is how their philanthropy benefited urban infrastructures. He gives numerous references to emperors financing bathhouses, and they sometimes urged even senators to fund construction (*Chronicle* 10.19; 11.14; 11.15; 18. 147). During the reign of Constantine, there is mention of structural

6 Yegul (1992), 32.
7 Maréchal (2020), *Public Baths and Bathing Habits…* 20.
8 Sanger (1858), 73.
9 Zytka (2019), 33.

repurposing when a large bath was destroyed to facilitate the construction of a church (*Chronicle* 13.13), demonstrating the Christian overhaul of disused Roman baths in the fourth century.

Yet, the most relative occurrence in Antioch is the Riot of Statues in A.D. 387 which validates how vital baths and bathing were in maintaining social stability in Late Antiquity. Disputes over taxation instigated riotous outbreaks, which, according to Libanius, had started inside a bathhouse (*Orations* 22.7). John Chrysostom's account, however, is more detailed, stating, 'The Emperor has shut up the baths of the city and had given orders that no one shall bathe' (*Ad populum Antiochenum* 14.15). Although emperors used their munificence and power to provide public baths, they also used this patronage against the population through their closure.[10] Further, we are told civilians resorted to bathing in a river to oppose imperial punishment. From this event, we gather the importance of bathhouses in Late Antiquity was significant enough for the imperial power to prohibit use as a form of severe punishment, simultaneously highlighting their intrinsic value in providing normality as people resorted to new, and immoral means of bathing.[11] As Schoolman noted, 'While the description may include some rhetorical hyperbole, it underscores that for Chrysostom, the simple act of bathing for pleasure, even in a river, provokes a sinful response.'[12]

However, what is most striking in Chrysostom's account is his sympathy towards the sick, pregnant, and elderly; people who *needed* bathhouses: 'to be denied the use of the bath is certainly a grievous matter' (*Ad populum Antiochenum* 14.15). This idea resonates with Church Fathers throughout Late Antiquity who didn't necessarily detest using baths but disapproved of recreational use, instead advocating medicinal purposes. According to John, it is acceptable

[10] Zytka (2019), 37; Maréchal (2020), 'Washing the Body, Cleansing the Soul', 174.
[11] Schoolman (2017), 234; Zytka (2019), 37–38.
[12] Schoolman (2017), 236.

for pious Christians to use baths, '"He ought not to frequent the bath." And where is this forbidden? There is nothing honorable in being unclean' (Joh. Chrys. *Homilies on Titus* 1.4). In stark contrast is Saint Antony and his practice of *alousia*, 'He never bathed his body in water to remove filth, nor did he as much as wash his feet or even allow himself to put them in water without necessity' (Athanasus, *Life of Saint Antony* 47). Clement of Alexandria also voiced his attitudes towards pleasurable bathing, declaring their primary use should be for cleanliness, 'we ought not to indulge in it' (*Paedadogus* 3.5). We also learn from Clement that mixed bathing seems to have been a common occurrence in which Christian men and women would partake (*Paed* 3.5). Ultimately, mixed bathing was begrudgingly accepted by the church, which led to certain limitations.[13]

In many Christian sources, it is clear bathing is not enough to rid the body of sin and should not be equated with baptism. Gregory the Great refers to an incident where a man molested his god-daughter and visited the baths, hoping that his sin could be washed away, 'yet he went and washed himself' (*Dialogues* 4.32).[14] Preservation of baptism is common in Christian sources and appears to have been the only issue they made serious efforts to separate from bathhouses which used much of the same technology as baptistries.[15] Jerome's statement on this is most famous: 'He who has once washed in Christ needs not to wash again' (*Epistles* 14.10).

To accept the widespread belief that Christianity had the biggest impact on bathhouses during Late Antiquity seems somewhat a mistreatment of the sources considering the dissimilarities within Christian literature. The Church's attitudes toward bathing contradict one another in their extremities, and rarely do the sources find common ground. Therefore, it seems

[13] Bowen Ward (1992), 143.

[14] Maréchal (2020), *Public Baths and Bathing Habits…*, 50.

[15] Maréchal (2020), 'Washing the Body, Cleansing the Soul', 172–173.

unreasonable to attribute such a decisive factor to complex changes when the evidence itself is inconclusive. Nevertheless, considering the veracity of Christianity's rise and the end of paganism, the new widespread religion altered every aspect of daily life. Whilst Christianity changed bathhouses and the preconceptions of bathing, deterrence never led to prohibition. [16] the institution was forced to come to terms with an infrastructure firmly at the heart of daily life, unparalleled to any other institution. Whilst Christianity's impact was substantial, the bathhouse's popularity prohibited anything more than a change in ideas, remaining the most important urban infrastructure.

Further exemplifying the changing attitudes of bathing culture is privatisation. Focusing on the archaeological record, once again Antioch proves effective. Excavations during the 1930s unveiled six baths, one of which was still in use during the sixth century. Bath C is significantly larger than the other structures, resembling traditional Roman form and function, suggesting it was imperially or privately owned.[17] The ways in which baths were financially supported was in decline by the fourth century. Privately owned bathing establishments enter the archaeological record as manifestations of grand public infrastructures seized after the crisis of the third century.[18]

With the decline of imperial *thermae,* the upper echelons of society invested in urban complexes, and bathing, which once formed collective identity, had now transpired into an activity with the potential to both symbolically and practically advance class distinction. However, establishing the decay of *Romanitas* becomes complicated with evidence from North Africa, when in the fourth century we have what Maréchal labels 'semi-private/semi-public'

[16] A law of AD 415 attacking paganism: 'if anything has ever been constructed to sacrifices and thus served as a means of deception for men, it shall be removed from use in the baths and from the favorite haunts of the public' (*Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.20.3). Considering this was addressed to Carthage, its value in determining changes on a wider scale is limited. Nevertheless, it shows changes within bathhouses motivated by Christianity; Yegül (2010), 202.

[17] Schoolman (2017), 247–248; Morey (1936), 640.

[18] Schoolman (2017), 246; Wilkes (1999), 17–18.

baths. What makes these structures significant is that they belong to private complexes but have separate street entrances, indicating the public could use the facility without having to pass through the property.[19]

In Italy, we see the establishment of baths for clergymen and bishops with charitable purposes to accommodate the poor.[20] Whilst this represents continuity with the Roman period through patronage, it simultaneously shows differences between classical and Christian traditions.[21] Baths of the classical period catered for entire communities, whilst these institutions were limited to two distinct classes, furthering the Late Antique notion of more privatised methods of bathing.[22] The Roman bathhouse and bathing habit had clearly been redefined. In regions such as North Africa, privately owned bathing complexes challenge notions of decline by continuing the Roman tradition of elites providing baths in the form of private euergetism.

Furthering this phenomenon into the East to consider what remained of the Roman bathing experience in Late Antiquity, Yegül argues that continuity depended on early Islamic aristocrats whose baths and bathing practises was reminiscent of Roman culture, 'as agents of cultural continuity.'[23] Though his examination of eastern bathhouses makes claims to continuity, he is aware of significant changes to the bathhouse's architecture. Economically, they become smaller to handle resource shortages. Ideologically, they abandon the *palaestra* for its Hellenistic associations. The shrinking of baths in the East seems economically motivated, whereas Christianity in the West makes up a plausible case for this architectural transformation, as Christians feared close bodily contact and wished to bathe piously.[24]

[19] Maréchal (2016), 128.
[20] Yegül (2010), 203.
[21] Ward-Perkins (1984), 135.
[22] Ward-Perkins (1984), 140.
[23] Yegül (2010), 198.
[24] Maréchal (2016), 134.

An inscription from Scythopolis dating to the mid-sixth century reveals the construction of separate baths to facilitate those suffering from leprosy. From the middle of the fourth century, this concept seems to have developed alongside decreasing hygiene in Late Antiquity.[25] What makes this interesting is the growing awareness of sanitation in Late Antiquity is shown to be reflected in the bathhouse, in contrast to the Roman baths where this never appears to have been a concern. In fact, there is no evidence of the water ever being changed.

Blanke's study of Gerasa's Central Baths, active from the fourth to the eighth century, demonstrates what activities took place at the bathhouse, whilst considering the architectural developments to exemplify changing attitudes toward bathing. Dismantling seems to have been initially systematic before the complete demolition of areas to facilitate the construction of a mosque using *spolia*, a process complimenting what has been noted to have occurred during the reign of Constantine.[26] Finds retrieved from the sewers suggest eating and drinking was common, whilst gaming parts show various forms of entertainment found in the bathhouse, reflecting the multipurpose use of baths in the Roman period. Further, the different jewellery that was retrieved suggest both men and women frequented the Central Baths.[27] Mixed bathing (*balnea mixta*) was greatly discouraged in the West, condemned by Church fathers as moral abuse. However, archaeological evidence shows that single baths were only in use until the fourth century, suggesting that mixed bathing was still very much characteristic of non-Christian Roman life, and the Church's concerns regarding temptation were over ridden.[28]

[25] Avi-Yonah (1963), 325–326.
[26] Blanke (2015), 97.
[27] Blanke (2015), 103.
[28] Ward (1992), 144–147.

We can safely assert that Late Antique sources still mention bathhouses, implying they were at least relevant enough to talk about.[29] Furthermore, bathhouses are a quintessential Roman building, evidence of construction throughout this period is plentiful, and their position as the nucleus of urban topography remained unaltered. The rise of Islam demonstrated cultural continuity, as it embodied late Roman baths stylistically and functionally. However, the fate of the Roman baths in the Early Middle Ages is marked by their absence from the literary record, and continuities with the Roman past emerge in different forms.[30]

By way of concluding this study, what has been a question of the social and cultural history concerning how bathhouses affirm continuities with the classical period in Late Antiquity, DeLaine's remarks resonate best:

> The baths are something of an embarrassment to those who take their ancient world seriously. A visit to the Roman Forum might provoke a serious undergraduate to ask about the political implications of Augustus' building of the Temple of Divus Julius; a visit to a Roman bath usually has him asking if men and women really bathed together naked, and what the romans did for toilet paper. It is worth remembering that these last two questions would have had for more relevance to a much larger and more varied section of the population of the Roman empire than the first.[31]

Bathing indisputably remained one of the most crucial aspects of daily life throughout Late Antiquity. Exemplified in an epitaph from the sixth century, the concept survived as

[29] Maréchal (2020), *Public Baths and Bathing Habits…*, 68.
[30] Schoolman (2017), 250.
[31] DeLaine (1988), 11.

habitual, 'Baths, wine, and sex ruin our bodies, but they are the essence of life-*baths, wine, and sex*' (*ILS* 8157).[32] As we have seen, changes to the bathhouse and bathing experience signify changes economically, politically, and socially, whilst new and impeding religious values sought to redefine what it meant to be part of the institution that defined what it meant to be part of society. On a final note, one thing this study has alluded to throughout is the gloomy nature of the Late Antique bathhouse.[33] From imperial villainy such as King Theodahad's murder of his cousin and co-ruler (Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 3.31), or Constantine's execution of his wife (Greg. Tur. *Hist.* 1.36), to more unassuming accounts of depravity in the martyrdom of St. Gelasinos in Helioupolis (John Malalas, *Chronicle* 12.50), a sense of vulnerability lingered within the Late Antique bathhouse and bathing experience.

[32] Adapted from Fagan (1999), 319 (emphasis mine).

[33] Law of Theodosius II and Valentinian III, dated AD 432, prohibited arms inside public buildings, including baths (*Cod. Theod.* 9.54.4); Smith and Kahila (1992), 667–675: Nearly one hundred infant remains were found at Ashkelon, in a late Roman-early Byzantine sewer beneath a bathhouse. A survey of bone fragments suggested the infants were thrown into the drain soon after birth. They identified many as male, highlighting the possibility that boys were victims of infanticide whilst females were raised to work in a brothel within the bathhouse.

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