BATHING IN THE ROMAN WORLD

In *Bathing in the Roman World*, Fikret Yegül examines the social and cultural aspects of one of the key Roman institutions. Guiding the reader through the customs, rituals, and activities associated with public bathing, Yegül traces the origins and development of baths and bathing customs and analyzes the sophisticated technology and architecture of bath complexes, which were among the most imposing of all Roman building types. He also examines the reception of bathing throughout the classical world and the transformation of bathing culture across three continents in Byzantine and Christian societies. The volume concludes with an epilogue on bathing and cleanliness in post-classical Europe, revealing the changes and continuities in culture that have made public bathing a viable phenomenon even in the modern era. Richly illustrated and written in an accessible manner, this book is geared to undergraduates and graduate students for use in courses on Roman architecture, archaeology, civilization, and social and cultural history.

Fikret Yegül is professor of history of art and architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A scholar of Roman architecture, he has been a member of the Harvard Sardis Excavations in Turkey and the Ohio State University Isthmia Excavations in Greece. Yegül is the author of articles and books on Roman architecture, notably *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, which received the Alice D. Hitchcock Award from the Society of Architectural Historians in 1994. He is working on a book on Roman architecture and urbanism.
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Within the thick walls of the bathhouse, we were cut off completely from the outside world... Naked and peaceful together, able to be ourselves.

(Lindsey Davis, *A Body in the Bathhouse*, 2001)

When Beatrice Rehl offered me the opportunity to write a broadly conceived book on bathing in the Roman world, the fascination with the subject was too great to refuse. I wanted to abandon baths but baths did not want to abandon me. I think I was also fascinated because contrary to my previous studies this work was not about the archaeological complexities and technical details of baths but intended to be a general and generous approach to the subject. Foremost, it offered me a chance to cast my net wide and present my knowledge in the form of a narrative for the enjoyment of beginners and professionals alike.

In this new work I look back to my previous work on baths and the culture of bathing in the ancient world and I look forward to new examples, ideas, and departures. I am content to re-tread familiar ground (as covered in my *Baths and Bathing in the Classical World* and more than a dozen articles beyond it) but pleased to venture into new horizons. For example, as my core convictions about the origins, nature and development of baths and bathing
remain the same, my views of “women and baths” have been gathered, reconsidered and focused in this study; my conceptions on the democratic nature of Roman baths and their importance as “social levelers” remain unchanged, but the nature and meaning of democracy cast in the context of a public bath have been enlarged and explicated. The Stabian Baths of Pompeii and the Thermae of Caracalla of Rome and a host of others are too important to omit, but the early second century Republican Baths at Fregellae, a Latin colony in Latium, recently excavated under the direction of Filippo Coarelli, promises to open a new chapter in the Italian origins of the hot bath. An equally exciting new discovery is the near-perfectly preserved extensive spa-city at Allionoi in the heart of Anatolia (near Pergamon) that challenges the supremacy of Baiae as the incomparable thermal establishment of the Roman world. These two establishments, in my opinion, are the two most important additions to the archaeology and scholarship on baths in the second half of the twentieth century. Then there are the superb paintings of monumental nude bathing women from an Antonine bath in the Esquiline region in Rome only very recently rescued from deep archaeological storage – a joy to behold handsomely exhibited at Palazzo Massimo.

The title of this book appears to be restricted to bathing in the “Roman” world, but the narrative heeds its own momentum to reach out to the post-classical world in the last two chapters and includes the continuities and transformations of bathing culture of early Christian and Islamic communities and concepts of baths, bathing and cleanliness in European communities from the Medieval-Renaissance era to now. I was as much intrigued to follow the bathing delights and antics of Martial’s characters as I was of Lady Montagu’s fascinating accounts of Turkish baths and women in eighteenth century Constantinople-Istanbul. It is hard to ignore the East versus West controversy in customs of bathing or to hide pure delight at the splendid world of baths created by the Orientalist painters even when their shimmering, settings populated by exotic Muslim bathers tell more about the painter’s fiction than the reality of his subjects.

Although the focus of this study is the social habit of bathing, the connection between the act and its architectural setting is inseparable. Bathing implies baths. Hence the considerable attention accorded to the architecture of individual examples. It is with pity I
realize that some of the close architectural descriptions could not be accompanied with plans and drawings – some of my readers would be familiar with the unfortunate economic restrictions imposed on academic publications. In order to maintain a sense of flowing narrative we decided not to give specific notes except when quotations are included. There is, however, a complete and up-to-date bibliography. I also refrained from giving the customary list of thanks and acknowledgements. Those whom I owe my knowledge and thanks know it: to all of you who encouraged me to proceed with this study and made me perceive what is important and enjoyable from the original conception to the last efforts of editing and improving my words, I owe gratitude. And I send thanks to colleagues and institutions who generously shared their visual material as a matter of friendship and courtesy.

Bathing in public as a cultural expression and personal pleasure becomes meaningful through the opposing tendencies of privacy and intimacy engendered by architecture, and by extension, through the co-existence of contradictory but interdependent worlds of reality and escape, work and play. As Falco and his friend knew, “naked and peaceful... within the thick walls of the bathhouse,” inhaling the steamy air and listening to the murmuring water and whispering vaults, one might seize the chance to be oneself in the baths and perhaps glimpse what is important. This story of baths and bathing was enjoyable to write; I hope it will be enjoyable to read. As the bards of old Anatolia, where I come from, used to conclude their tales, three apples fell from the sky, one for the teller of this story, the other for his listeners (readers), and the third, shall we say, for all those in the future who will take it a step further.

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