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For most of us, bathing is about being clean; it is a hygienic concern. We normally bathe at home, occasionally enjoying soaking in the bathtub, but more commonly taking a daily shower, which is quicker and, we think, more efficient. Bathing is also a highly private affair; rarely do we share a shower or bath with another person. Of course, there are places and cultures we know or hear about where bathing is more than just washing, such as the Finnish sauna, the Japanese *sento*, and the Turkish *hamam*, where one spends a fairly long time in the bath, often in the company of others, following an elaborate and time-honored ritual – in those situations bathing is a social, cultural experience.

In the Finnish sauna one first spends time sweating in a steam chamber, traditionally constructed of aromatic cedar wood, where temperatures can exceed 80–90°C. Then one plunges into a pool of literally ice-cold water. The Japanese bath, taken in a simple, small tub in the company of one’s family or close friends, is a part of the relaxing social routine of the evening, although the practice has deep religious roots. A similar social setting is sought in the modern American, particularly Californian, ritual of the hot tub or the Jacuzzi. Taking place either outdoors or indoors, and in anything from a simple rustic wooden tub to a high-tech

fiberglass pool with mechanical whirlpools and mood lights, the Jacuzzi experience is about relaxation and socializing more than hygiene. Lately, spas have become very fashionable. Admission to a spa is often offered as a part of a complete package in a vacation resort. The spa experience involves a prescribed routine of immersion in mineral waters (normally created by adding mineral salts to artificially heated water – the sulfurous odor of many natural thermal sources is repulsive to the modern nose), massage, cosmetics, and aromatherapy. It is expensive. A more traditional, and perhaps more authentic, version of the resort-spa is the natural thermal bath, found in sites such as the famous Bath (ancient *Aquae Sulis*), England, the elegant setting of many a Victorian novel. Both the historical and the modern spa, however, combine a culture of relaxation and recreation with hygienic and alleged therapeutic benefits.

Of all past peoples and civilizations, the Romans had the most extraordinary devotion to baths and bathing – and their devotion was the most thoroughly rooted in their life and culture. As a rule, Romans bathed daily, and spent a considerable part of the day in their pleasantly – even sumptuously – appointed public baths. Roman baths went far beyond meeting the normal hygienic functions of washing. They provided facilities for sports and recreation, massage, body culture, and relaxation – and for social intercourse from idle gossip to business discussions, much like a club or community center. Some of the larger baths even included educational spaces, such as libraries and lecture halls, as well as colonnades, galleries, and exedras for the exhibition of works of art, like a museum. Bathing in public was a central event in the daily lives of the Romans. It would not be an exaggeration to say that at the height of their empire, public baths embodied the ideal Roman way of urban living.

The popularity of public baths as social and cultural institutions is reflected in the large numbers of baths known from written sources or actually preserved (and sometimes excavated) in Roman cities and settlements. One could claim that, with the possible exception of temples, there were more baths than all other ancient building types. By the end of the first century B.C.E., just before the establishment of the Empire, Rome had nearly 200 small baths; by the fourth century C.E., two urban census documents

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(*Notitia Urbis Regionum*, c. 334–57, and *Curiosum Urbis Romae Regionum*, 357–403) record their numbers at a staggering 856 plus 10 or 11 *thermae*, which were exceptionally large and luxurious bathing complexes. Of course, there is some variance in the numbers given in these sources; still, it is clear that Rome, a city of a million or more, the empire’s capital and its center of power, offered its denizens an exceptionally wide variety of large and small baths to choose from. The record from other large Roman cities, patchy as it is, supports the news from Rome: Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in the early fifth century had 8 *thermae* and 153 small baths (*Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*). We do not have an official record from Antioch-on-the-Orontes, a large center in the Eastern Mediterranean, but John Malalas, a mid-sixth-century historian, randomly names a dozen or so, though none of them has been identified among the six baths uncovered in the city during the 1932–3 excavations. Even a modest veterans’ colony such as Timgad in North Africa, with a population of no more than five or six thousand, could support seven or eight baths, a few of which were quite large and elaborate.

A community’s pride and delight in its baths was often reflected in the boasting of its citizens about the numbers and quality of its baths. Despite its rhetorical tone, the declaration by the sophist Aelius Aristides (a second-century poet and political thinker) that his home town Smyrna, one of the largest Roman ports of the Aegean, “had so many baths that you would be at a loss to know where to bathe,” is typical and probably quite true (*Ael. Arist.*, 15.232). Conversely, the closing down of the public baths by high administrative officers, sometimes by the emperor himself, was considered the severest of the punishments that could be meted out to a city. When the citizens of Antioch rioted in 387 C.E. in reaction to newly imposed taxes, the violence, especially the breaking of the imperial images, started at the baths. The revocation of the city’s official rank as the “metropolis of Syria” (obviously a much coveted honor) and the closing down of its baths were the most humiliating penalties imposed (John Chrysostom, *On the Statues*, 13.2–6, 17.2; Libanius, *Orations*, 22.2–7). Perhaps the best testimony to the importance of public bathing in the lives of Romans is this simple, artless passage describing a daily visit to the baths, taken from a schoolboy’s exercise book: “I must go and have my bath. Yes,

it's time. I leave. I get myself some towels and follow my servant. I run and catch up with the others who are going to the baths and say to them one and all, 'How are you? Have a good bath! Have a good supper!'" ("Hermeneumata Ps. Dositheana," *Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum*, ed. G. Goetz, Leipzig, 1892, 22f.).

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POPULARITY OF ROMAN BATHING CULTURE

Both beginners and specialists in ancient studies often ask why bathing was so important to Roman society – why were there so many baths in town and country? What accounts for the obvious delight Romans had in their baths and the intense popularity of public bathing? There are no easy and definite answers to these deceptively simple questions. Like certain sports that are intensely popular with certain groups and not others (such as American football in the United States and soccer in virtually all the rest of the world), because of their deep roots in a culture, baths were popular with Romans because bathing had become a daily habit – and the more they liked it the more likable it became; the effect fortified the cause. Bathing had become a significant part of their lives, an institution rooted in the rhythm and structure of their day, ensconced in the very concept of time. The Roman day normally reserved the afternoon for leisure. Already, by the end of the Republic, spending the latter part of the afternoon, after a light lunch and siesta, in the public baths had become a tradition, a comforting part of urban life and national identity.

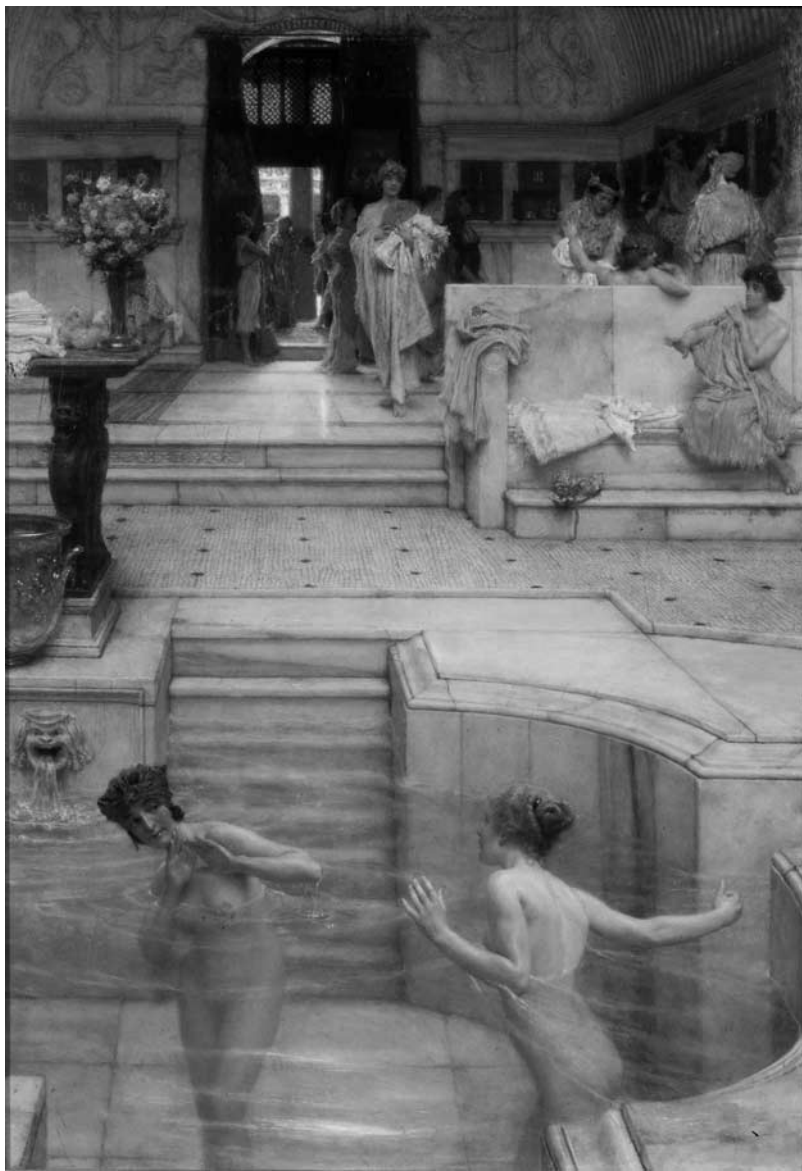
Still, why did bathing become a daily habit in the first place? Roman writers, such as Martial and Seneca, though profuse in their admiration and detailed in their description of the baths, do

not furnish a specific answer – nor should we expect them to state what to them was obvious. Instead of seeking for specific reasons for such complex cultural phenomena, it may be more profitable to consider a multitude of factors all together.

The first and most important is the pleasure factor. At its most basic, bathing is a physically and psychologically satisfying, pleasurable activity. Warm, moist air and water relax the body and mollify the mind. The experience itself – warm, clean water, shiny, smooth marble surfaces, steamy, cossetting atmosphere, the aroma of perfumed unguents, the intimacy of massage – invoked the awakening of the senses, a state of enjoyment Romans called *voluptas*. Nowhere do we sense the sheer enjoyment and material delight of bathing more than in the historical re-creations of the world of Roman baths of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) – here depicting, for example, playful young women in the gleaming marble pool of an imaginary women’s bath (see Figure 1). The sense of warmth alone must have been an extremely powerful stimulant to the creation of a feeling of relaxation, comfort, and well-being. A freshly bathed person felt light and optimistic. Suetonius, a first-century C.E. writer and chronicler of emperors’ lives, reports that the best time to ask Vespasian for favors was immediately after his bath (Suet., *Vesp.*, 21). A dedicatory inscription from a late fifth-century C.E. bath in Syria is typical in announcing that the bath could bring “pleasure and happiness” to the entire community. Indeed, there are a group of inscriptions and epigrams, especially from the late Roman period, that allude to the strange and wondrous ability of baths to deliver the bather from pain and worry and create a sense of delight. Along with the natural springs, the baths are considered as the dwelling places of Nymphs and Graces (in Greek, *χαρίτες*).

If bathing could confer pleasure and happiness on a whole community, it was naturally a socially satisfying experience. The cozy warmth of the baths and their apparent world of classless nudity encouraged friendship and intimacy. For several hours a day, at least, baths took the individual out of his shell and gave him a place among others. Sharing a sensory experience with others, especially in a situation in which men and women were mixed (which was the case during significant portions of Roman history, it appears; see the following discussion), contributed to a larger sense of well-being and belonging to a group.

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1. Sir Lawrence
Alma-Tadema, *A
Favorite Custom*.
Opus CCCXCI, 1909.
Photo: Tate Gallery,
London/Art Resource,
New York.

Enhancing this sense of delight and pleasure was, of course, the sumptuous material world created by public baths. Roman baths, especially the imperial *thermae*, were well known for the luxury of their interiors. Glowing descriptions of their interiors – fine polychromatic marbles, intricate mosaics, stucco ornament, gleaming bronze hardware, and decorative statuary, all under lofty, well-lighted vaults and domes – constitute almost an independent

genre in ancient literature. Martial, a first-century C.E. poet and master of social satire, referred a friend to the Baths of Etruscus, a small luxury establishment in Rome, in glowing terms: “If you do not bathe in the *thermulae* (small baths) of Etruscus, you will die unbathed, Oppianus!” (Martial, 6.42). He admired the mildness of its waters and the serenity of its interiors, but most of all the richness of its multicolored marbles originating from distant lands. Statius, a contemporary poet, was more florid in his praise of the same baths: “Toil and care, depart! I sing of the baths that sparkle with bright marbles! . . . Come, then, ye nymphs of the waters, turn your clean faces and bind up your glass-green hair with tender wine shoots, your naked bodies as you emerge from the deep springs, and torture your satyr-lovers with the sight!” (Statius, *Silvae*, 1.5). The nymphs Statius was admiring were not the usual sexual sirens of Roman society; they were mythic creatures of natural springs that dwelt on the Seven Hills of Rome and mingled in the waters of its famous aqueducts, especially the two that served the Baths of Etruscus – the pure Aqua Virgo, excellent for swimming in, and the chilly Aqua Marcia, born in the snowy hills north of the city.

Naturally, there is some exaggeration in these poetic architectural encomia. Among the hundreds of small urban baths of Rome, especially those located in poorer neighborhood, some no doubt were ill-designed and ill-kept and offered few luxuries of the kind sung by poets. Still, ample archaeological evidence bears out that praises of bath luxuries, in general, were well founded. After all, the taste for private and public luxury and extravagant display of wealth (and the critical concern with it) was a growing characteristic in late Republican and Imperial Roman culture. This was the period when rich Romans were intent on decorating their theaters, basilicas, and homes with rare, imported marble columns, and on acquiring, sometimes plundering if they could, priceless objects of art and sculpture from Greece to display in their dwellings as symbols of social exclusivity and power. Public baths, dubbed “people’s palaces” by modern critics, were only a particular reflection of this general trend.

But there was also a significant difference. The wealth of private life was for the eyes of a few; public baths brought this bounty to the masses. The luxurious and pleasurable world of baths afforded the greater urban populations a welcome opportunity to escape their overcrowded and cramped living conditions and the dusty

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streets for a few hours a day and bathe in style; moreover, for many, it was their only opportunity to bathe at all. Except for the houses and villas of the very wealthy, accommodations for ordinary Romans had surprisingly sparse bathing facilities – often a small chamber next to the kitchen, sharing the kitchen stove – or none at all. This was especially true for the multistory tenements (*insulae*) that housed the greater portions of urban populations in the larger cities. Thus, we should remember that along with their variety of social niceties, an important factor in baths' popularity was that they served the functional and hygienic needs of washing for many and made available for them an urban luxury most could not privately afford.

Another factor that helps account for the popularity of baths is the well-entrenched belief in the ancient world that baths were good for health. Bathing, from its earliest history, was considered a serious therapeutic measure and received full support and authority from ancient medicine. A fairly detailed regimen of bathing in hot, cold, and lukewarm waters for the treatment of a variety of ailments had been worked out by Greek and Roman doctors and health specialists. Taking a cure at natural hot springs or thermo-mineral baths was considered particularly efficacious. Some of the most popular resorts in the Roman world centered on such thermal sources. In a world where effective ways of combating disease were still limited and primitive and the average life expectancy was rarely more than 30–35 years, the remedial and preventive potential of baths was highly regarded. Furthermore, light forms of physical exercise, rooted in ancient Greek gymnastics but almost always accompanying bathing, were a simple and effective daily method of keeping fit and healthy for all age groups.

Finally, there is also a hard economic explanation. Baths were built in such large numbers because running a public bath was a sensible and lucrative business proposition. Advances in building technology (as well as water supply systems), especially the widespread use of Roman concrete, the primary material for the typically vaulted construction of baths, made building even large and complex bath structures relatively easy and cheap. These advantages, economic and technical, encouraged the popular establishment of small, neighborhood baths (*balneae*) across the dense fabric of cities, or even in far away rural contexts (see the following chapter for a discussion of *balneae* versus *thermae*). And all this made it

extremely convenient for bathers to choose a bath (unless it was vexing because there were so many to choose from, as Aristides comments about his Smyrna). Like a convenient corner grocery store, wherever one happened to be in a city, there was a bath nearby, although some might have preferred to walk farther to patronize their favorite establishments. Furthermore, even though baths mainly operated for profit, entrance fees were so low that even the poorest were not deterred; and there were always some establishments subsidized by wealthy community leaders, such as government and imperial officials seeking popularity, that were free of charge.

The civilized setting of the Roman city was essentially one in which physical, social, and mental pleasures – the sensual awareness that forms the very core of our existence – were sought after, welcomed, savored, and shared. Although conservative writers and philosophers, such as Seneca (who lived during the first century C.E.), disapproved of the soft and sensuous world of baths and the growing taste for luxury in all aspects of life, most Romans appreciated the privileges of their material culture; and the dream world created by public baths was primary among these enjoyments and entitlements. In the sumptuous setting of the imperial *thermae*, even the poorest could share the Empire's wealth and, perhaps, ideology. Baths gave the Romans the world they wanted, a world in which it was pleasant to linger.