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Recent research on Roman baths

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Introduction

The study of Roman baths has long been sadly – and strangely – neglected. The standard reference is still Krencker's *Die Trierer Kaiserthermen*, published in 1929 and now many years out of print. Excavations over the ensuing 50 years added hundreds of new examples to Krencker's catalogue of 72 baths, including over 20 at Ostia alone and the important complex at Baiae, but very few of these were published in any detail. The only real addition or amendment to Krencker's system of classification was the work by Stucchi (1957) and Staccioli (1958; 1961) on small, 'half-axial' baths. Fresh attempts were made to explain the mechanics of the hypocaust system, experimentally by Kretschmer (1953) and theoretically by Thatcher (1956), but their conflicting and controversial results were little used. New archaeological material made little impact on the standard accounts of life at the baths, as a comparison between the versions of Carcopino (1939) and Balsdon (1969) makes all too clear. Nor, despite the growing fashion for social and economic history, were there any attempts to ask new questions of the literary and epigraphic material relating to the baths; Meusel's published dissertation (1960) on the organisation and financing of the public baths was a rare exception. Over the last ten years there have been a number of substantial monographs on individual sites, three general accounts of Roman baths, and many short articles on particular buildings. There are, however, very few important contributions of broader significance.

I find this a strange phenomenon. The importance of the baths in the Roman world is beyond dispute. Unlike the theatres, amphitheatres and circuses with which they are usually classed, baths were not just places of occasional entertainment but an integral part of daily life, and their presence in the archaeological record is ubiquitous. For the Romans they were one of the essential elements of the civilised life, one which could be used as a symbol of the romanisation of conquered barbarians (cf. Tacitus, *Agricola* 21). Yet the differences between the military baths of the northern *limes* and the bath-gymnasium complexes of Asia Minor remind us also of their importance as barometers of cultural interaction as well as of cultural domination. In addition, the baths are multi-faceted: they belong to the private, the commercial, and the public worlds; they are designed for cleansing, exercise, health, relaxation, education, for meeting, talking, eating, for ostentation and awe, for actor and spectator; they are showpieces of Roman architecture, decoration, construction and technology. Ancient historians and classical archaeologists alike ought to find them irresistible.

Then why the neglect? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that they are, in both senses of the word, rather common. There are probably more known examples of baths than of any other kind of public building, which seems to lead to the (false) assumption that nothing new can be said about them. As a class, their form, operation and social role are generally believed to be well understood; the main literary sources, as well as the main actual examples, are agonizingly familiar. And familiarity breeds contempt. There is also a more subtle form of discrimination. Baths belong, in almost any civilisation, to 'lower' rather than to 'higher' culture; religion, philosophy and politics have a far greater claim on scholarship than sweaty bodies and sewers. To this we might add a lingering 19th-century belief in the inherent decadence of the baths; a belief prompted, it must be admitted, by the scathing criticisms of some of the Roman moralists – the original Victorians. Altogether, 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 woman really bathed together naked, and what the Romans did for toilet paper. It is worth remembering that these last two questions would have had far more relevance to a much larger and more varied section of the population of the Roman empire than the first.