

The Baths of Caracalla

Imagine an October storm in the hills over Rome. The sky darkens. The birds fall silent. A cold wind stirs the aspens. A few tentative raindrops patter on the trees; and then, with a sigh, a steady shower starts to fall. Golden leaves shimmer; gray boulders glisten; and slender streams begin to ribbon their way down the rocky slope. A brook catches the water and whirls it down the mountainside. The current roars against boulders and surges over waterfalls – and then, suddenly, joins a placid pool in a remote valley.

Foam drifts gently across the surface as a gurgling drain becomes audible. Floating leaves and twigs catch on an iron screen; but the water plummets into a dark tunnel. And there, for sixty miles, it remains, joining the fifty million gallons of water that flow daily down the concrete channel of the Marcian Aqueduct.

A few miles from Rome, above a road lined with proud marble tombs, a channel opens on the left. Hundreds of thousands of gallons follow this branch over the Via Appia, down a mile-long tunnel, and into the stillness of a two-million gallon reservoir. Over the following day, the water is drawn through a series of chambers with heated floors and walls. At last, warmed almost to boiling, it funnels down insulated lead pipes, snakes through complicated plumbing, and streams into the marble basin of a fountain. A gilded ceiling, half-hidden by steam, shimmers 150 feet overhead; and glass mosaics twinkle on the walls as the water cascades into the seven heated pools of the Baths of Caracalla.

The Baths of Caracalla were created by two typically Roman pastimes: public bathing and imperial megalomania. We'll begin with the first, and work our way to the second.

For centuries, virtually every Roman who had the leisure to do so spent his or her free afternoons at the baths. To meet this demand, hundreds of bath buildings were constructed, ranging from one-room neighborhood establishments to colossal imperially-funded *thermae* like the Baths of Caracalla. These baths were open from sunrise to sunset. Under some emperors, the morning hours were reserved for the sick; but since Romans tended to do most of their work in the morning, and ate the day's largest meal in early evening, the peak bathing time was always in early and mid-afternoon. During these hours, members of all social classes, from senators to slaves, could be found at the baths. Men and women bathed together in some salacious places and periods; in others, they were separated.

An afternoon at the baths seems to have followed a more or less standard pattern. At the big imperial complexes, entry was free; elsewhere, it usually cost only a *quadran* – the equivalent of an American dime. Once inside, bathers often began with a light snack. Food stalls surrounded the larger baths, selling everything from sausage to cakes. Cheap wine was also available, though it was considered poor form to get visibly drunk. If nature called, bathers could avail themselves of splendidly-decorated latrines – many with 50 or more seats – flushed by wastewater from the pools.

If bathers felt in need of mental stimulation, they might head to the libraries and lecture halls that formed integral parts of large bath complexes. Otherwise, they made straight for the

apodyterium, or changing room, where they removed their clothes and stored them on shelves. Attendants were usually on duty in these rooms to prevent theft; but since many were dishonest, wealthy bathers often stationed a slave or two to watch their belongings.

Now nude or nearly so, bathers proceeded to a warm room, where they were rubbed with olive oil. They continued to the palaestra, or exercise yard, where they lifted weights, played games of handball, or engaged in boxing, wrestling, or fencing matches. Once they had worked up a healthy sweat, they might indulge in a massage from the bath's highly-trained staff. Then, if the bath had one, they walked over to the laconicum, or sauna. There, or in an adjacent hot room, the oil and perspiration was scraped from their skin with a curved bronze strigil. Then, at last, they got into the water.

Although there is some uncertainty over the usual sequence in which Romans used the hot, warm and cold baths, most bathers seem to have begun in the caldarium, or hot room, which contained one or more waist-deep plunge pools heated to about 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Bathers continued to the tepidarium, or warm room. In smaller baths, this room contained no water, but was simply heated to a comfortable temperature as a transition between hot and cold pools. Larger bath complexes had plunge pools of lukewarm water. Finally, bathers reached the frigidarium, or cold room, which – depending on the size of the bath – might contain small basins or an Olympic-size swimming pool of unheated water. Once bathers were finished here, they dried themselves, were again rubbed with olive oil, and returned to the apodyterium to recover their clothes. Often, especially if they had come with or encountered a group of friends, they headed straight to dinner.

The Roman habit of bathing was made possible by Rome's splendid network of aqueducts. Like most of the Italian Peninsula, Rome has a Mediterranean climate: winters are cool and wet, but summers are hot and very dry. The Tiber, one of Italy's few perennial rivers, provided a useful supply of water in Rome's early years; but as the city's population grew and the Tiber became increasingly polluted, the Romans began to search for alternate sources of clean water. They found them in the foothills of the Apennines, where a series of large springs percolated up from the bedrock.

By the third century CE, the Romans had constructed 11 major aqueducts, up to 60 miles long, to bring this spring water into the heart of their city. Each of these aqueducts maintained a very slight downward gradient – sometimes no more than an inch every mile – between their sources and the city. For most of their length, the aqueducts consisted of subterranean channels lined with waterproof concrete; but as they entered the low-lying environs of Rome, they were carried above the landscape on masonry arches to maintain the gradient. Each aqueduct terminated in a tower, where sediment would settle out and subsidiary pipes carried the water to public fountains and the residences of the rich. Together, Rome's aqueducts carried about 300 million gallons every day – a greater amount per capita than most modern cities. There were two reasons for this excess of water. The whole system, first, was continuous flow: water poured constantly through the aqueducts, into the fountains, and down the drains. Second, Rome's hundreds of baths, and especially the gargantuan imperial bath complexes, consumed many millions of gallons every day. The Baths of Caracalla were so massive, in fact, that they had their own aqueduct.

Warming all of this water for the baths was equally labor-intensive. Large bath complexes were equipped with furnaces that heated the walls and floors of brick-built reservoirs; smaller baths had bronze or copper boilers. The rooms of the baths were heated by separate furnaces, which pumped hot air through cavities in the floors and walls. Keeping all the rooms and the water hot was a serious operation: the furnaces in the Baths of Caracalla consumed an estimated ten tons of firewood daily.

The hundreds of baths that punctuated Rome's neighborhoods varied considerably in layout. But the massive complexes funded by second- and third-century emperors followed a more or less standard design, centered on three large rooms – a frigidarium, a tepidarium, and a caldarium – crowned by concrete vaults.

The Baths of Caracalla were the most opulent example of this design, and one of the most impressive testaments to the Roman knack for large-scale construction projects. Caracalla's builders created a colossal platform, twenty feet high and more than 60 acres in area. On this platform, which was honeycombed with concrete service corridors, the main building block rose with astonishing speed. In only four years, a workforce estimated at 9000 men completed a building covering more than 6 acres, whose main rooms were nearly 150 feet tall. The decoration of the Baths was even more impressive: floors, walls, and ceiling were paneled in marble or surfaced with glittering mosaic, and hundreds of statues were positioned in niches and poised on pedestals throughout the main rooms.

The Baths of Caracalla were a gargantuan PR gesture – a public amenity designed to advertise the generosity of a new dynasty, the Severans. The dynasty's founder, Septimius Severus, was a native of North Africa who rose to power in the civil war that followed the assassination of Commodus. Septimius governed harshly but effectively for nearly twenty years; and upon his death in 211, he was succeeded by his sons Caracalla and Geta, both in their early twenties.

This proved to be an impossible arrangement. The brothers bickered constantly, to the point that they began to maintain separate courts. Their mother, the intelligent and cultivated Julia Domna, repeatedly attempted to reconcile her sons – but after a few months of joint rule, Caracalla arranged for members of the Praetorian Guard to murder Geta. In the aftermath, Caracalla went on a paranoid rampage, killing hundreds of prominent Romans whom he suspected of favoring his brother. As might be imagined, this was not a popular policy.

The great baths that bear Caracalla's name were probably planned by his father. The speed with which they were completed, however, may reflect Caracalla's need to regain the goodwill he had lost by murdering half the Roman aristocracy.

Widespread unpopularity supplied one of the reasons Caracalla spent most of reign far from Rome. Fantasies of military glory provided the other. From 213 until his death four years later, Caracalla campaigned continuously on the frontiers – first against Germanic tribes on the Upper Rhine, and then against the Parthians. Though partly inspired by genuine threats, these expeditions chiefly were motivated by Caracalla's obsession with Alexander the Great. In preparation for the Parthian campaign, we are told, he created a 15,000 man military unit on the model of Alexander's phalanx; later, when he visited Alexandria, he had Alexander's crystal

coffin opened, and stole the great conqueror's signet ring and cloak. Before Caracalla could live out his fantasies, however, he was assassinated while relieving himself by the roadside.

At the time of his death, the main building of the baths seems to have been virtually complete. The construction of the lavish precinct around the baths, however, was left to Caracalla's cousin and successor, the half-mad fanatic Elagabalus.

Caracalla's mother Julia Domna had been born in the Syrian city of Emesa, where her family held the hereditary high priesthood of the sun god Elagabal. At the time of Caracalla's death, the high priest was Julia's great-nephew, a boy known as Elagabalus after the god he served. Thanks largely to the machinations of his grandmother, Julia Domna's sister, this unlikely candidate was proclaimed emperor by the legions in the spring of 218. And thus, a fourteen year old boy, raised to serve as the priest-king of an orgiastic cult, was suddenly made the powerful person in the world. The results, predictably, were disastrous.

Elagabalus always regarded himself as a priest of Elagabal first and emperor second. Almost as soon as he entered Rome, he began constructing a colossal temple for his god, in which he installed Elagabal's emblem, the black stone of Emesa. There, he forced the Senate to watch as he performed the sacred rites, which seem to have involved wild drumming, ecstatic dancing, and a great deal of sex. The Roman aristocracy was equally scandalized by the new emperor's private conduct. He took dozens of lovers, both male and female, and had the habit of promoting them to high government offices. He staged riotous banquets in which his tame leopards wandered freely among the guests, and rose petals rained from the ceiling. Finally, in the ultimate insult to Roman tradition, he married a vestal virgin, insisting that their union would create "divine children."

Elagabalus was, in short, an extremely unconventional emperor – but even he understood the necessity of completing his cousin's popular bath complex. He was probably responsible for some or all of the stadium, libraries, and monumental exedras in the precinct. To the dismay of absolutely no one, however, he was assassinated before he could finish the job. It was left to Elagabalus' cousin, the amiable Alexander Severus, to add the final touches.

Alexander himself, we are told, often used the baths, mixing freely with the other bathers. This must have made for splendid political theater, as the emperor, head bare, processed through the echoing halls of the palace his family had built for the people.