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The Athletic Aesthetic in Rome's Imperial Baths

Abstract

The Greek gymnasium was replicated in the architecture, art, and activities of the Imperial Roman *thermae*. This *mimēsis* was rooted in sincere admiration of traditional Greek *paideia* – especially the glory of Athens' Academy and Lyceum – but it did not manage to replicate the gymnasium's educational impact. This article reconstructs the aesthetics of a visit to the Roman baths, explaining how they evoked a glorious Hellenic past, offering the opportunity to Romans to imagine being «Greek». But true Hellenic *paideia* was always kept at arm's length by an assumption of Roman cultural superiority. One may play at being a Greek athlete or philosopher, but one would never dedicate one's life to it. The experience of the Imperial *thermae* celebrated Greek athletic culture, but it remained too superficial – too *spectatorial* – to effect the change of soul demanded by classical gymnastic education.

Keywords: Roman Baths, Greek Gymnasium, *Paideia*, Ancient Athletics, Vitruvius.

Imperial Rome inherited not only the art and architecture of the classical Greek gymnasium, but also its philosophy. And just as the Romans creatively merged the architectural features of the Greek *palaestra* into their baths, so they adapted the art, activities, and ideas of the gymnasium to suit their own tastes and purposes. The distinction between Greeks and Romans here is neither ethnic nor political; by this time most ethnic Greeks *were* Romans and their culture had been absorbed – even embraced – under the Empire. The distinction is rather between the Roman subject of the Empire, whatever his or her language and background, and the idealized Heroic and Classical culture of what was – even for Imperial Romans – *ancient* Greece. Hellenic mythology and classical philosophy were

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ubiquitous in Imperial Rome and central to any elite Roman's education and status. Traditional Greek athletics also found a place in the capital city, though it never rivaled chariot racing or gladiator fights in terms of mass popularity. The Greek gymnasium, meanwhile, was replicated in the architecture, art, and activities of the Imperial *thermae*. This Roman *mimēsis* of the gymnasium was rooted in sincere admiration of traditional Greek *paideia* – especially the glory of Athens' Academy and Lyceum. At the same time, it remained too superficial – too *spectatorial* – to effect the change of soul demanded by classical gymnastic education. Heracles may have presided over the Imperial Roman *thermae* just as he had the Hellenic gymnasium, but despite their many resemblances the aesthetic experience of going to the gym was changed forever by Rome.

Gymnastic Architecture in Rome

Heracles and Greek athletics arrived in Rome well before the Empire. The Republican-era general, Marcus Fulvius Nobilior not only included Greek-style contests in the triumph celebrating his victory over the Aetolian league in 186 BCE, he also built a Temple to Heracles¹. The round temple, still visible in the Foro Boario today, emulated the *tholoi* of Greece that commemorated heroized monarchs, such as the Philippeion at Olympia. By doing this, Fulvius Nobilior aligned himself with the heroes of history and mythology and, in the words of Penelope Davies, «he may also have hoped, like Marcellus before him, to encourage Romans to temper their military *virtus* with a Greek aesthetic sensibility that would act as a civilizing force»². More than 150 years later, Augustus made a similar effort to integrate the athletic aspects of Hellenic culture into mainstream Roman culture. He founded Olympic-style games after his victory at Actium in 31 BCE, he seems to have connected the gymnastic and bathing facilities at the Stabian baths in Pompeii³, and he presided (albeit indirectly) over the building of a gymnasium in Rome, or rather the first of the Imperial *thermae*, the Baths of Agrippa, in 25 BCE.

The ancient writer Dio Cassius refers to Agrippa's baths as a «gymnasium» and «Spartan sweatroom», pointing out that the Spartans had the greatest reputation for exercising in the nude anointed with oil⁴. What probably motivated Dio to refer to the complex as a gymnasium rather than a bath, however, was

¹ The story is told in Livy, *The History of Rome*, 39.22.1 f.

² P. Davies, *Rome and Her Neighbors: Greek Building Practices in Republican Rome*, in Ulrich and Quenemoen, (eds.), *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2014, p. 33.

³ J. Delorme, *Gymnasion: Etude sur les Monuments Consacres a l'Education en Grece*, Editions E. De Boccard, Paris 1960, p. 224.

⁴ D. Cassius, *Roman History*, 53.27 and 53.29.4.

precisely its access to exercise facilities and parkland, including an artificial lake. It is often forgotten that the ancient Greek gymnasium was primarily a park, characterized by walking paths and trees. As Zahra Newby points out, «until Agrippa's Baths, which combined exercise and bathing facilities, physical exercise had been associated with training for warfare, with the Romans showing hostility towards what they saw as the unmanly interest in exercise for its own sake in the Greek gymnasium»⁵. Given this general feeling in Rome, Agrippa's choice to locate his baths on the Campus Martius and to adjoin them to a park-like setting with easy access to water reflects, in Fikret Yegül's words, «a strong desire for transplanting the Greek gymnasium to Rome»⁶. One endorsed, if not originating from, the Emperor Augustus.

Indeed, the gymnastic features of Agrippa's *Thermae* and the ever-more magnificent bath complexes that followed it are uncannily described in Vitruvius' famed book, *On Architecture*, which was dedicated to the Emperor Augustus. Vitruvius writes successive chapters on baths and *palaestrae* in his treatise, admitting that the latter are Greek rather than Italian. Yet the architects of Rome's great Imperial *thermae* seem to have read the two chapters in tandem, because they incorporated not only features of the baths but also of the *palaestrae*. Vitruvius' *palaestra* calls for the familiar peristyle building with a perimeter adding to two *stades*⁷. Inside the building, he says that «spacious *exedrae* should be constructed with seats, so that philosophers, orators, and everyone else who delights in study will be able to sit and hold discussions». The largest of these he calls an *epebeum*⁸, and says it is flanked by a room with a leather punching bag, an oiling room, a dusting area, and a cold-water sink called a *loutron* in Greek. He also calls for a *frigidarium*, steam room, and sweating chamber as well as a hot-water washing room⁹ – features that suggest that he was inspired by contemporary *palaestrae* in the Hellenized East as well as the classical Athenian gymnasia.

Outside of the *palaestra*, Vitruvius recommends porticoes with running tracks and a raised walking path for clothed observers of the oiled athletes¹⁰. Next to this portico, called a *xystos* by the Greeks, he says there should be open air walks. «The Greeks call these *paradromies* (parallel tracks), but we call them *xysta*; here, throughout the winter, athletes can profitably exercise in good we-

⁵ Z. Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World: Victory and Virtue*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (UK) 2005, p. 28.

⁶ F. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1992, p. 137.

⁷ Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture*, translated by I.D. Rowland with commentary and illustrations by T. Noble Howe, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, 5.11.1.

⁸ Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 5.11.2.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 5.11.3.

ather outside the Greek *xystos*». He explains that these Latin *xysta* should be made «so that between the two porticoes there are woods or groves of plane trees, and in among these trees should be made stopping places of *opus signinum*. Behind the *xystus*», Vitruvius continues, «there should be a stadium, so designed that crowds of people can comfortably watch the competing athletes»¹¹. That the Roman Vitruvius should be so familiar with Greek athletic architecture is not really a surprise since *palaestrae* and *gymnasia* were common in southern Italy and Sicily¹². What is amazing is that the features of his Greek *palaestra* came to be featured in the «quintessentially Roman» baths – or, more precisely, the great public *thermae* of the Imperial period.

The connection between Greek *gymnasia* and Roman *thermae* is obvious to visitors of the ruins of Trajan's, Caracalla's or Diocletian's baths. The spaces are so reminiscent of a modern gymnasium, one can feel the urge to play basketball – and indeed, ball games were a popular activity at the *thermae*. It has to be stressed, however, that Roman baths had not always resembled Greek *gymnasia* – even though it was through their contact with the Greeks of Sicily and Southern Italy that Romans came to appreciate hot-water bathing. Warm baths may well have developed in conjunction with *gymnasia* as an efficient way to remove the sticky mixture of sweat, dirt, and olive oil from athletes' skin¹³. In Republican-era Rome, baths had been small, mostly private structures and *gymnasia* architecture was limited to the mock «Academies» and «Lyceums» to be found in the private villas of wealthy elites like Cicero, whose main purpose was to create an intellectual environment for practicing philosophy, rather than a space for athletic training¹⁴.

Nero's baths, dedicated around 60 CE, are referred to by Suetonius as *thermas atque gymnasion* (baths and gymnasium). Dio Cassius and Tacitus prefer to use the term «gymnasium»¹⁵, perhaps because they regarded it as a synonym

¹¹ *Ibidem*, 5.11.4.

¹² Strabo *Geog.* 5.4.7 refers to an ancient gymnasium in Naples, Plutarch *Timol.* 39.4 reports one in Syracuse, Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, and Delorme, *Gymnasion*, list many more.

¹³ F. Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World*, Cambridge University, New York 2010, p. 43, makes both claims, citing hip baths in the Sicilian town of Gela that date to the late 4th or early 3rd century BCE (p. 41), and pointing out, despite the absence of direct evidence, that «the efficacy of hot water and steam in removing [the athletes'] muddy greasy mixture from the skin should have encouraged the early development of hot-water washing facilities» (p. 43).

¹⁴ According to M. Zarmakoupi, «*Private Villas: Italy and the Provinces*, in Ulrich, Quenemoen (eds.), *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2014, 362-380, Roman Villas were «embedded in the idea of leading a luxurious life *a la greque*, away from the burdens of the city (*otium* as opposed to *negotium*), appreciating the aesthetic qualities of the landscape» (p. 363).

¹⁵ D. Cassius, *Roman History*, cit., 62.21 and Tacitus, *Annals* (14.47).

for «*thermae*»¹⁶, or perhaps to reflect a certain intellectual philhellenism¹⁷. Nero's own philhellenism was notorious and often cited as a cause of his downfall. Martial, unsurprisingly, uses the Latin term in his famous quip, «What is so bad as Nero; what is so good as his *thermae*?»¹⁸. Even more so than Agrippa's baths, Nero's emulate the architecture of Greek gymnasia. Fikret Yegül observes that their *palaestrae* were meticulously sized to recreate famous Hellenistic *palaestrae* at Epidaurus and Priene¹⁹. Nero's baths adjoined the same gardens as Agrippa's, which lacked open *palaestrae*. They also flanked the space where Domitian's Stadium was eventually built, perhaps the original site of the *Neronia*, Greek-style games that were held to celebrate the opening of the *thermae*²⁰. Nero's games were short-lived, but his baths endured the death and infamy of their founder to serve as a model for future *thermae*²¹, and to be extensively renovated under Alexander Severus in 226 CE, receiving thereafter the official title «*Thermae Alexandrae*»²².

The *Thermae* of Trajan (109 CE), Caracalla (216 CE), and Diocletian (306 CE) took architectural emulation of the Greek gymnasium to new heights, incorporating not only *palaestrae* and *apodyteria* into the bath block, but also adding spacious gardens with running tracks, *xysta*, and small stadia, as well as a peripheral ring with *exedrae*, lecture rooms, colonnades, and even libraries. This was an attempt, as Fikret Yegül says, «to establish a physical and social framework in which to re-create elements of the Greek gymnasium: it introduced, perhaps for the first time in Rome, intellectual as well as hygienic, recreational, and athletic concerns into the program of the imperial *thermae*»²³. It perhaps should not be surprising that Trajan's baths incorporated so many elements of the Greek gymnasium. His architect, after all, was Apollodorus of Damascus – a Greek-speaking Syrian no doubt familiar with the palatial gymnasia of the Eastern Empire²⁴. Apollodorus' emphasis on symmetry certainly shows

¹⁶ Delorme, *Gymnasion*, cit., p. 246.

¹⁷ Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., 137.

¹⁸ Martial, *Epigrammata*, 7.34: «Quid Nerone peius? Quid thermis melius Neronianis?» (translation by F. Yegül).

¹⁹ Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., p. 138.

²⁰ The *Neronia* were held in a temporary stadium that didn't survive. But Domitian built the permanent stadium for his Capitoline Games right next to Nero's baths, and it is reported that he regarded his games as a revival of Nero's. See M. Caldelli, *L'Agon Capitolinus: Storia e protagonisti dall'istituzione domiziana al IV secolo*, Istituto Italiano per la Storia Antica, Roma 1993, p. 38-39, who cites Suetonius Nero 12.3.

²¹ Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World*, cit., p. 122.

²² *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, «Alexander Severus», 25.

²³ Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., p. 142.

²⁴ Dio Cassius identifies Apollodorus of Damascus as the architect of Trajan's forum, odeum and «gymnasium» (*Roman History*, 69.4.1). It is his design that marks the maturity of baths.

the influence of Greek aesthetics²⁵. The great public spaces of the imperial *thermae* may well be seen as Greek *paideia*, once confined to the private replicas of Academies and Lyceums in the villas of the social elite, reproduced on a grand public scale.

The Undressing Room

To understand how the philosophy of the gymnasium was merged into the Imperial *thermae*, let us imagine how third century Roman bathers might experience the Baths of Caracalla²⁶. Even if they no longer called the complex a gymnasium, they would surely be aware of its connection to Greek culture. The word «*gymnasion*», after all, derives from the Greek word for nudity, and the first place that bathers went when visiting the *thermae* was the *apodyterion* (undressing room). There, they would remove their clothes and become nude – or nearly nude. Not only was exercising in the nude a distinctive – one may even say notorious – characteristic of Greek athletics, the term *apodyterion* was philosophically loaded since Plato had set some of his important gymnastic dialogues in the *apodyteria* of Athenian *palaestrae* and *gymnasia*²⁷. Certainly not every bather knew Greek or was familiar with the intricacies of Plato's dialogues, but Hellenic language and *paideia* were widely esteemed and studied in Imperial Rome²⁸. It is at least plausible that many Roman bathers experienced their visit to the «undressing room» as putting on a costume of nudity and thereby becoming Greek – or at least pretending to be Greek on some level²⁹.

²⁵ «The overall architectural characteristics of the new type of *thermae* established by Apollodorus are entirely in keeping with some of this master architect's other creations [they] make general use of exedral, semi-circular, circular, and oval elements. Both share the principle of strict cross-axial symmetry superposed over a variety of major and minor symmetry centers...» (Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., p. 142).

²⁶ I use the example of the *thermae* of Caracalla, since these are the most completely preserved, but I will take the experience to be similar to that of the *thermae* of Trajan and Diocletian, which have similar layouts and characteristics.

²⁷ For example, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Theaetetus*. For a detailed account see H. Reid, *Plato the Gymnasiarch*, in *ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝ: Essays for Stephen G. Miller*, eds. D. Katsonopoulou, E. Partida, Helike Society, Athens 2016, 171-186.

²⁸ See, for example, R.J. Penella, *The Progymnasmata and Progymnasmatic Theory in Imperial Greek Education*, in *A Companion to Ancient Education*, ed. by W.M. Bloomer, Wiley, Sussex 2015, ch. 10.

²⁹ For the concept of nudity as a costume, see L. Bonfante, *Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art*, in «*American Journal of Archaeology*», 93, 4/1989, pp. 543-570.

There is debate as to whether Romans went completely nude in the baths or wore some kind of loincloth or tunic, at least while exercising³⁰. The first century writer Martial implies complete nudity and his near contemporary Plutarch suggests that the practice of nudity derived from the Greek gymnasium³¹. Customs probably changed over time, but nudity in the baths was unquestionably at odds with the general Roman disdain for public nudity of any kind. The Republican-era writer Ennius summarized this view pithily when he said, «Shame's beginning is the stripping of men's bodies openly»³². Indeed Romans saw gymnastic nudity as contributing to the eventual downfall of the Hellenes. Plutarch says,

The Romans used to be particularly suspicious of rubbing down with oil, and even today believe that nothing has been so responsible for the enslavement and effeminacy of the Greeks as their gymnasia and wrestling schools, which engender for the cities much indolence, wasting of time, and pederasty³³.

Although increasing immigration to Rome from the Hellenic East along with greater multicultural awareness may have softened attitudes somewhat by the 2nd-4th century CE, nudity could not have been considered thoroughly Roman. Rather, it would have been seen as an Eastern import to be tolerated as part of the distinctively Hellenic practice of visiting the gymnasium-baths.

These concerns about public nudity were no-doubt exacerbated by the moral importance of the public gaze. As Shadi Bartsch has shown, Romans understood their most authentic self to be the one seen by others and reflected back in mirror of their gaze³⁴. At the baths, the experience of self-reflection (another distinctively Greek philosophical exercise) was initiated even before bathers arrived at the *apodyterion* as they saw their reflections in the water of the large *natatio* (swimming pool) on their way there. Unlike a modern health club, the ancient baths wouldn't have had mirrors on the walls, but bathers must have repeatedly come into contact with their reflections in the myriad vessels of water. Add to that the self-consciousness of being naked (or nearly so) in a public place that likely included not only members of different classes but also of the opposite sex, and the sense that one's self was being explored and evaluated must have been powerful. The presence of apotropaic images designed to ward off the evil eye in the undressing rooms of baths in Pompeii reinforces the idea that the

³⁰ G.G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1999, p. 25, n. 33.

³¹ Fagan (*ibidem*, p. 25) concludes this from Martial's comments at 7.82, which suggest that using the baths while clothed would draw attention. Plutarch's comments are in *Cat. Maj.* 20.8.

³² Ennius quoted in Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 4.70.

³³ Plutarch, *Quaestiones Romanae* 40, 274de.

³⁴ S. Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2006, p. 3.

disrobed bather felt especially vulnerable to prying eyes³⁵. Yet the Roman baths were quintessentially public places where diverse people were expected to mix.

It is possible that the move from private baths to public *thermae* under the Empire was also connected with Greek ideals. Gymnasia such as Athens' Academy were emphatically public, and the tradition of Greek athletic nudity can be connected with democratic principles. Since clothes are the main indicators of class difference, nudity symbolically strips the individual of socially-constructed distinctions and advantages, leaving them to compete in a more equal state³⁶. It has been pointed out that public baths were perhaps the only place in Rome where the social classes – and maybe even the sexes – mixed together³⁷. This exception, like nudity, may well have been part of the bathers' pretending to be Greek. It is questionable, however, whether the practice actually promoted democratic ideals. As Fikret Yegül observes, nudity only conceals class to a certain extent because class could be indicated by other things, such as poor manners. Indeed, the baths seem to have made an excellent stage for class display³⁸. Boorish and immature behavior among the *nouveaux riches* at the baths was a staple of Roman satire. Even the stoic philosopher Seneca claims that tell-tale signs of character are revealed in public through visible characteristics like a person's gait, the movement of their hands, or the shifting of their eyes³⁹.

But Seneca's point is the philosophical one that a person's *true* character is revealed in public, over and against his social standing, which held no value in Stoic philosophy. This idea of stripping a person for moral examination was precisely the metaphor that motivated Plato to set dialogues like *Lysis*, *Charmides*, and *Theaetetus* in *apodyteria* or gymnasia. When Chaerephon informs Socrates that he would be more impressed with Charmides if he could see the young man naked, Socrates replies that they should instead undress his soul and see if that is well formed⁴⁰. In *Theaetetus* likewise, Socratic examination is compared to stripping and wrestling in a gymnasium. That the soul should be

³⁵ Bartsch p. 159, following John Clarke, «Hypersexual black men in Augustan myths: ideal somatypes and apotropaic magic», in *Sexuality in ancient art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy*, edited by N.B. Kampen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) 1996.

³⁶ See Stephen Miller, «Naked Democracy» in *Polis and Politics*, edited by P. Flensted-Jensen, T.H. Nielsen. Festschrift, Copenhagen 2000. 277-296.

³⁷ Says Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World*, p. 30: «Quintilian, who lived during the late Republic, referred to the questionable habit of women bathing with men (*lavari cum virilis*) in order to make the point that such intimate behavior is not necessarily an indication of adultery (*Inst. Orat.* 59.14)». Pliny cites women bathing with men as evidence of lax morality (*H.H.* 33.153; also 36.121). Meanwhile, an inscription from Hadrianic times suggests that baths were open for women from dawn until noon, and then for men until evening (*C.I.L.*, 2.5.181).

³⁸ Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World*, cit., p. 37.

³⁹ Seneca, *Epistles* 52.12.

⁴⁰ Plato, *Charmides* 154d.

judged once it is stripped naked of the body is a repeated theme in Plato's dialogues⁴¹. In *Republic*, furthermore, the prospect of females stripping and working out in the gymnasium is defended on the basis that they will wear *aretē* instead of clothes⁴². Not all bathers would be aware of these specific philosophical connections, but familiarity with Plato's dialogues and other classical Greek texts was expected by Philostratus and other writers of the Second Sophistic, and it is likely that the people who decided on the layout of the *thermae* were aware of it, too. Greek philosophers were closely connected with gymnasia in the ancient Roman mind, certainly more closely than they are in modern minds. By donning the Greek costume of nudity in the *apodyterion*, bathers were becoming not just athletes but also philosophers.

Palaestrae

From the *apodyterion*, bathers were expected to head for the *palaestra*, an open air exercise area built to resemble the peristyle *palaestrae* buildings of Greek gymnasia. The *palaestrae* in the imperial *thermae* were built into the bath block, but they imitated the Greek model by providing a large courtyard, probably of simple beaten earth, surrounded by a colonnade and rooms for oiling, dusting, massage, and other kinds of exercise-preparation. The *palaestrae* at Trajan's, Caracalla's and Diocletian's baths all feature rooms with *exedrae* or apses that emulate the *ephebeia* rooms mentioned in Vitruvius' description of *palaestrae*, though it is difficult to know whether any philosophers or *ephebes* actually gathered to talk and study there. The Roman version of the *ephebeia*, known as the *Juventus*, seems to have met in special quarters separate from the public bath complexes⁴³. It is likewise difficult to know whether any serious athletes worked out in the Imperial *thermae* at all. By most accounts, Roman bathers preferred light ball-games and even playing with hoops to serious wrestling, boxing, or *pankration*. Their goal seems to have been working up a healthy sweat before bathing, not training for competition.

Champion wrestlers and boxers do appear in Caracalla's *thermae*, however, in the form of polychrome mosaics that decorated the large *exedrae* just off the *palaestra* on the way toward the central *frigidarium* – a palatial, art-filled room at the center of the baths. The athlete mosaics, now visible in the Vatican's *Museo Gregoriano Profano*, depict naked athletes and robed figures thought to be

⁴¹ Id., *Cratylus* 403b, *Gorgias* 523e, 524d.

⁴² Id., *Republic* 457a.

⁴³ H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, translated by G. Lamb, Sheed and Ward, London 1956, p. 300.

trainers (or perhaps philosophers and orators), many holding tokens of victory such as palm branches and leafy crowns. At least one athlete is holding a discus, a token which singles him out as a pentathlete since discus was not an individual event in antiquity. Several other athletes wear the long Roman-style boxing gloves (*caestus*). The full-length figures, at least two of which are named, are interspersed with busts of athletes, whose distinctive and realistic features suggest that these are portraits of famous or at least locally famous athletes. There is also a portrait mosaic in Ostia Antica depicting the 3rd century athletes Aurelius Alexander and Aurelius Helix, the latter a victor in the Capitoline games of AD 218⁴⁴. Perhaps the Caracalla figures with victory tokens are also winners from the Capitoline games (which included contests in oratory)⁴⁵. Perhaps the athletes and trainer/intellectuals depicted even plied their trade at the baths.

We know from epigraphic evidence that there was a guild or club of professional athletes that had its headquarters in or adjacent to Trajan's *thermae*. The inscription from Antoninus Pius says

greetings to the Guild of the Heracleian Sacred Crown Athletic Victors. I have given orders for land to be handed over to you in which you can store your sacred prizes and records, next to the Baths which were built by my deified grandfather, where you come together for the Capitoline Games⁴⁶.

The inscription does not imply that the athletes train at the baths regularly, or even that they use the athletic facilities of the *thermae* during the quadrennial games in Rome. But it does establish a connection between at least one of the imperial *thermae* and an organization of athletes who most likely all hailed from the Hellenized East. It is plausible that the Caracalla mosaics represent a similar guild headquartered at those baths. And it is not out of the question that some of those athletes trained and even competed there.

Whether or not they actually encountered professional athletes, I think the Roman bathers' move from the *apodyterion* to the *palaestra* involved a shift of the conscious gaze from reflecting on oneself, to observing real and/or portrayed champion athletes. The fact that there were a series of mosaic-paved roof terraces overlooking the *palaestra*, easily accessed by a convenient staircase, reinforces this idea of athletics as display in the Imperial *thermae*⁴⁷. Zahra Newby thinks that the champion athlete mosaics, placed as they were between the exercise area and the museum-like *frigidarium* full of colossal statues of idealized mythological figures, allowed bathers to imagine their exercises as part

⁴⁴ Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, cit., p. 59.

⁴⁵ This possibility is proposed by Newby, *ibidem*, p. 68.

⁴⁶ IG xiv, 1055b=IGUR 236b, quoted and translated by Jason König in *Athletics and Literature in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 223.

⁴⁷ Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., p. 162.

of an athletic continuum reaching through contemporary athletes back to the glories of Greek mythology⁴⁸. This idea is completely consistent with the gymnastic function of *mimēsis* as a way of reviving and connecting with an idealized past⁴⁹, but there is also an important difference between the ancient Greek athlete channeling Achilles at a moment of peak competitive performance and the Roman bather connecting his game of dodge-ball with the feats of professional athletes, much less the labors of Heracles.

This weakening – some might say trivializing – of gymnastic *mimēsis* is a symptom of the distinction between the participatory ethos of the classical Greek gymnasium, and the spectator ethos of Imperial Roman athletic culture. Romans traditionally disdained gymnastic culture, not just for its association with homoeroticism and pederasty – which remained anathema in Rome even as Hellenic culture became a hallmark of the elite – but also for its perceived uselessness, especially as military training. The attitude is artfully illustrated in the first-century writer Lucan's account of Caesar inspiring his troops before the battle of Pharsalus by telling them that the fight would not be difficult because Pompey's army was full of soldiers from Greek gymnasia, trained in athletics, but barely able to carry their arms⁵⁰. The fact that Greece had long since been conquered by Rome and was now subject to the Emperor allowed Romans to simultaneously insert themselves into her glorious history, while affirming the superiority of their own more efficacious culture. It was perfectly acceptable to observe Greek athletes, or even to associate oneself with their glory – but to dedicate oneself to athletic excellence was clearly beneath a serious Roman's station.

Stadia and Xysta

After looking at the athletes and/or pretending for a moment to be one, Roman bathers might have gone out into the gardens for a walk, a run, or even to watch an athletic competition. Vitruvius had specified that outside the *palaestra* there should be open and covered tracks, as well as a stadium at the back so people can sit comfortably and watch the athletes compete. The outlines of all three of

⁴⁸ Says Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, cit., p. 76, «The past is used to give validity to the present, to set contemporary athletics into a history going back to the classical and mythological past, in much the same way that the decorative ensemble of the Baths of Caracalla links together the victors of the present day with their classical predecessors in the *frigidarium*».

⁴⁹ A phenomenon explained in H. Reid, *Performing Virtue: Athletic Mimēsis in Platonic Education*, in *Politics and Performance in Western Greece*, eds. H. Reid, D. Tanasi, S. Kimbell, Parnassos Press, Sioux City 2017, p. 265-277.

⁵⁰ Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, 7.269.

the grand imperial *thermae* conform to that plan. In fact, Trajan's baths seem to be flanked by rectangular open spaces reminiscent of Olympia's roughly 200 by 30 meter track⁵¹. It seems unlikely that those spaces were kept completely open as an athletic track, however. More likely, the gardens of all the *thermae* were planted with shady trees and fitted with narrower tracks suitable for walking or running – the famous *xysta* of the ancient Greek gymnasium. There was no Olympic-sized stadium at the Academy or Lyceum, either. The *stadia* in the Imperial *thermae* were actually hemicycles with stepped seats for a relatively limited number of spectators – the size and shape of the one at Diocletian's baths is preserved today as the *Piazza della Repubblica*. Caracalla's stadium is oblong and exactly half an ancient stadium's length⁵².

If athletic games actually took place in these *stadia*, we have no record of them. We do know that semi-formal games were staged in the gymnasia of the Hellenized East, usually by the local *ephebeia*. Just as track-meets and high school stadiums attract relatively little journalistic interest today, we should not take the absence of records as proof that the *thermae*'s *stadia* were merely decorative. Indeed, one possible use for the rounder hemicycles, which resemble the *odeons* where orators competed, was intellectual declamation, recitation, or even lectures. In fact, we have to remind ourselves that the Greek gymnasium was famous for its intellectuals – especially its philosophers – at least as much as its athletes. Insofar as the architecture and landscaping of the Imperial *thermae* seek to emulate the Greek gymnasium, they must include spaces for intellectuals, or, as we saw with the *palaestrae*, spaces for Romans who wanted to imagine themselves to be Greek intellectuals; who sought to place themselves in that tradition.

We know that Roman elites, including Cicero, constructed «gymnasia» at their private villas complete with *xysta*, and it is likely that this emulation included the iconic vegetation of Plato's Academy, the plane tree. The presence of plane trees at the Villa San Marco in Stabiae has been confirmed by root casts⁵³. According to Patrick Bowe, the oriental plane tree was imported to Italy by sophisticated Romans who were adherents of classical Greek culture⁵⁴. Indeed, Pliny's criticism of the plane tree in his *Natural History* mirrors the traditional Roman critique of the Greek gymnasium. He condemns the tree as a luxurious eastern import which fails to produce fruit or any other practical benefit other

⁵¹ The overall dimensions of Trajan's baths were about 330 by 215 meters, which would make the dual tracks about 200 meters long.

⁵² Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., p. 146.

⁵³ Katharine T. von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden: Space, Sense, and Society*, Routledge, Oxon 2009, p. 43. Zarmakoupi (p. 365) adds that the peristyle gardens of elite Roman city houses were also inspired by the architecture of the Hellenistic gymnasium.

⁵⁴ P. Bowe, *Gardens of the Roman World*, Getty Publications, Malibu 2004, p. 46.

than shade⁵⁵. Pliny saw the plane tree as the «the botanical embodiment of the decline in Roman values brought about through contact with the Hellenistic and eastern world»⁵⁶. The whole culture of the gymnasium – both its athletic and philosophical activities – was seen through traditional Roman eyes as unproductive, luxurious, self-indulgent. Of course, the Greeks didn't see it that way. In their cultural tradition, the idea of doing something for its own sake, with no practical benefit, was associated with divinity. Philosophical and athletic activity were indeed directed away from practical concerns, but they were worthy of effort because they were ways of pursuing the excellence (*aretē*) that made human beings more like gods. Even philhellenic Romans like Cicero and Seneca avoided identifying themselves as philosophers. As Paul Zanker, observes «they wished to be seen as active statesmen, not as distracted thinkers»⁵⁷.

As with the athletes, it is an open question whether philosophers and other serious intellectuals actually roamed the *xysta* of the imperial *thermae* the way they traditionally had and probably continued to do in the gymnasia of the Hellenized East. Horace complains about “unwanted erudition” at the baths, people who recite their writings as the vaulted ceilings echo their voice; he doesn't mention worthwhile speakers⁵⁸. Fikret Yegül says that «the shady promenades and tree-lined parks that typically encircled the *thermae* attracted poets, philosophers, and rhetors, who probably met their students in the *exedrae* and lecture rooms», but he also admits that «even though *thermae* might have offered space and facilities for culture, learning, and athletics, they never were the official seat of Roman education or sports»⁵⁹. The most elite philosophers and sophists in Rome were generally confined to private households – including the Imperial court, in cases like Seneca's – or to schools housed in private estates, as in the case of Plotinus⁶⁰. Even in Athens, the philosophical academies had more or less faded into obscurity by Imperial times and most educators had to operate freelance, plying their trade wherever they could – including in the baths or even on street corners⁶¹. The English word «trivia» actually descends from the low-quality knowledge to be gotten from the intersection of roads (*tre-vie*). Aulus Gellius, for one, describes the Academic philosopher Favorinus debating the

⁵⁵ Pliny, *Natural History*, XII.iii.VI, 1.

⁵⁶ E. McCaulay-Lewis, *Imported Exotica: Approaches to the Study of the Ancient Plant Trade*, in «Bollettino di Archeologia Online», I/2010, 16. Contrast Seneca, *Ep.*, XII.II when he bemoans the treatment of the plane trees on his estate.

⁵⁷ P. Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, translated by Alan Shapiro. University of California Press, Berkeley 1995, p. 199.

⁵⁸ Horace, *Satires* 1.476-80.

⁵⁹ Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World*, cit., p. 126.

⁶⁰ K. Eshleman, *The Social World of Intellectuals in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2012, p. 25-26.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

effects of avarice at the baths of Titus while walking along an *ambulacro* (walk planted with trees)⁶². It seems logical that intellectuals were found in Roman baths, but our evidence is thin.

Libraries and *Exedrae*

There was one architectural feature of the Imperial *thermae* that unequivocally attests its connection with intellectuals and education: the libraries. Dual libraries, usually interpreted as housing Greek and Latin manuscripts respectively, are attested at Trajan's, Caracalla's and Diocletian's baths. Inge Nielsen says that libraries in Imperial *thermae* are «undoubtedly a reflection of the libraries found in Greek gymnasia and of the celebrated Hellenistic libraries associated with the palaces of contemporary rulers»⁶³. Libraries are thought to have emerged in Greek gymnasia, but the evidence is scanty. The oldest attested may be that of Rhodes, deduced from an inscription of the 2nd century BCE recording donations to a library and confirmed by a catalog⁶⁴. The library at the Ptolemaion of Athens was founded in 116/5 BCE, as a gift from the ephebes of the previous year, with the caveat that future classes enrich the collection⁶⁵. There is also evidence of a library at the gymnasium in Taormina, Sicily⁶⁶. The library at the Ptolemaic palace of Alexandria, meanwhile, was said to include a *mouseion*, a *peripatos*, and an *exedra* for studies, as well as a great *oikos* used for dining by the scholars there⁶⁷.

At the *thermae*, the libraries were adjacent to the park area, with its probable *xysta*, and detached from the bath block. This may be for practical reasons, to keep the dampness of the baths from harming the books, but it may also suggest that the park and attached libraries constituted a kind of intellectual sector at the *thermae*. The other rooms and *exedrae* adjoining the libraries along the garden perimeter are likely to be additional facilities for study and lectures. Yegül interprets the grand external *exedrae* at the baths of Caracalla as *musea*⁶⁸; it should be remembered that the *mouseion* at the Academy was one of the

⁶² Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 3.1.

⁶³ I. Nielsen, *Creating Imperial Architecture*, in Ulrich and Quenemoen (eds.), *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2014, p. 59. F. Yegül, *Roman Imperial Baths and Thermae*, in the same volume, p. 310, agrees.

⁶⁴ Delorme, *Gymnasion*, p. 331.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ G. Manganaro, *Una biblioteca storica nel ginnasio di Tauromenion e il P. Oxy. 1241*, in «La Parola del Passato», 29, September 1974, pp. 384-409.

⁶⁷ Strabo, *Geography*, cit., 17.1.8.

⁶⁸ Yegül, *Bathing in the Roman World*, cit., p. 112.

earliest structures and that the muses' connection to knowledge, along with its semi-circular arrangement had led to an enduring association with the philosophers who gathered there for discussion⁶⁹. Even if the *thermae* never served as official seats of study or schooling, they certainly would have been convenient places to engage in these things. My own interpretation of the evidence is that the *kind* of education available at the baths was viewed as distinctively Greek, as in classically Greek. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that the books there were mostly classical Greek literature. A visit to the *thermae* would be intellectually, as well as gymnastically, an educational exercise in emulating idealized ancient Greeks, but it wouldn't be regarded as practical enough to count as an official Roman education.

As with the champion athletes, stronger evidence exists for philosophers' presence at the baths in artistic form. Cicero wrote a series of letters seeking statues «fit for a gymnasium» to decorate his villa in Tusculum⁷⁰. What he probably had in mind were statues of philosophers, not athletes, since his goal was to emulate the intellectual rather than the athletic pursuits of the gymnasium⁷¹. This seems confirmed by the *Brutus*, where Cicero invites his friends to gather around a statue of Plato at his villa and engage in learned conversation⁷². Busts of philosophers and orators from Aeschines to Zeno were extremely popular in Imperial Rome, as a visit to almost any ancient sculpture museum will attest. The fact that a large hoard of philosopher busts (now in the *Museo Archeologico di Napoli*) was found near Diocletian's baths suggests furthermore that these sculptures decorated not just private villas and libraries but also the *xysta* of Imperial *thermae*. The fact that these were busts rather than the full-body statues preferred by Greek sculptors reflects the Roman transition to thinking about philosophy in terms of ideas rather than behaviors⁷³.

The disembodied busts also reflect the relative detachment of the depicted figures from the reality of modern life. They were images from a distant, idea-

⁶⁹ A. Caruso, *Akademia: Archeologia di una scuola filosofica ad Atene da Platone a Proclo (387 a.C.-485 d.C.)*. SATAA, Atene 2013, p. 39.

⁷⁰ Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, 1.6.2.; he departs from the Latin to use the Greek term (*gymnasiōdē*).

⁷¹ Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, p. 90. Zarmakoupi (p. 372) adds: «Representations of kings and philosophers [in Roman villas] addressed the role of Hellenistic philosophers as tutors and advisors of Hellenistic kings and associated the owners to an elevated status».

⁷² *Brut.* 24, cited in Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates*, p. 205.

⁷³ See Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates*, p. 10: «Greek artists produced only full portrait statues, late into the Hellenistic period, and for the Greeks, from the Archaic times on, the true meaning of a figure was contained in the body. It was the body that expressed a man's physical and ethical qualities, that celebrated his physical and spiritual perfection and beauty, the *kalokagathia* of which we will presently have more to say. The most important qualities transcended the individual person, for the function of the portrait statue was to put on display society's accepted values, through the example of worthy individuals, for a didactic purpose. Personal and biographical details were of lesser importance».

lized, classical past. Paul Zanker argues that under the Empire, classical Greek culture became the common culture of the entire *imperium Romanum* and preoccupation with it «evolved into various kinds of intense devotion reminiscent of religious ritual»⁷⁴. One has to wonder, as with the athletes, how watered-down the Roman bather's *mimēsis* of philosophical discourse was, however. For every Favorinus debating serious topics among the *xysta*, how many regular Romans walked by the busts of the philosophers discussing the weather, or practical matters of business and politics – neither of which were part of the original philosophy of the gymnasium? How many bathers simply took practical advantage of the quiet and shady walks to escape from the chaos of the city? We know that Pompey's Portico, adjacent to his theater, replicated the gymnasia's *xysta* – including their characteristic plane trees – without any athletic association at all⁷⁵.

Laconium, Caldarium, Tepidarium, Frigidarium

It is perhaps upon their return to the bath block from the gardens that the bathers' real Imperial education begins. The first stop was usually the *laconium* or dry sauna, named Hellenically after the Spartans, but also a way to work up a sweat without engaging in exercise. From there, bathers went into the *caldarium*, which featured heated rooms with hot-water tubs and cold-water sinks. The dome of the *caldarium* at the baths of Caracalla was 44 meters high, just 9 meters short of the Pantheon, and it also had huge windows to capture the light. From there, bathers passed through the *tepidarium*, another heated room with tepid baths, then finally into the palatial *frigidarium*, where they would freeze – not from cold, the room was simply unheated – but from the sheer aesthetic grandeur of this cavernous, art-filled, palace of light. To get a feeling for what the *frigidarium* was like, one should visit the *Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli*, the church that now occupies the *frigidarium* of Diocletian's baths. Even the impressive amount of artistic decoration in the modern church, however, pales in comparison with the decoration of the ancient *thermae*.

Agrippa's baths were apparently the first to feature monumental sculpture,⁷⁶ but Caracalla took the art museum aspects of the baths to a new level. According to Edmund Thomas, the artistic and architectural style of these *thermae* «suggests not just the continuation of an established style, but the result of new

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 202.

⁷⁵ Bowe, *Gardens of the Roman World*, cit., p. 108.

⁷⁶ According to Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, p. 210, «Pliny the elder refers to them several times as a point of departure in artistic endeavor, implying that the building was perceived as groundbreaking in certain respects».

thinking about structure and planning in which visual impact was the principal consideration»⁷⁷. Not only did Caracalla's baths include multicolor marble and columns of stone from throughout the empire, there were paintings, mosaics, and sculptures everywhere: at least 100 statues in niches plus several others free-standing. Many of these statues are still famous today, including the *Farnese Heracles*, *Achilles and Troilus*, the *Punishment of Dirce* (also known as the Farnese Bull), a colossal Athena, a Victory, a Maenad, and a heroic male nude – all now housed at the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli*. There are also reports of an equestrian group, a head of Antoninus Pius, and the head from a full-size statue of Caracalla himself⁷⁸. In addition, a statue of Polycleitus' *Doryphorus* derives from the north-west exedra, and herms of Apollo and Hermes were found in the perimeter area between the library and stadium structures. The *frigidarium* hosted another representation of the *Doryphorus*, a copy of Myron's *Discobolus*, a naked pubescent *ephebe*, another naked male statue, a torso of the Andros-Hermes type, and a Polycleitan Heracles type⁷⁹.

Some of this art was probably plunder from the sanctuaries of captured Greek cities, and therefore may have reinforced the paradoxical notion of cultural kinship and superiority discussed above. Much of it was Roman copies of Greek originals. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret the copies according to Plato's conception of artistic *mimēsis* as being derivative and therefore farther away from the truth. The *mimēsis* of Greek statues was an emulation that sought to revive and make present the ideals of Greek culture⁸⁰. Again, the statues emulate classical era models, especially the work of Myron, Polycleitus, Praxiteles, and Lysippus⁸¹. For Imperial Romans, furthermore, these statues represented ideals such as modesty and virtue (Polycleitus) or truth and beauty (Lysippus)⁸². The *Doryphorus* was connected with Polycleitus' famed *canon* of beauty through symmetry and balance. The *Discobolus* evoked Aristotle's praise of the pentathlete as representing a moderate, ethical ideal of beauty⁸³. The artistic promotion of these ancient Hellenic ideals must have been overwhelmed,

⁷⁷ E.V. Thomas, *The Severan Period* in Ulrich and Quenemoen, eds., *A Companion to Roman Architecture*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2014, p. 85.

⁷⁸ Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*, cit., p. 154.

⁷⁹ Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, ch. 3. The famed statue *Lacoon* was found at Trajan's baths.

⁸⁰ Says Zanker, p. 10: «These copies [of Greek originals] served specific purposes for the Romans that had nothing to do with their original function as honorific statues in the agora or dedications in the sanctuaries. For the Romans, they functioned as the icons in a particular cult of Greek culture and learning».

⁸¹ Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, cit., p. 93.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 93-95.

⁸³ See H. Reid, *Aristotle's Pentathlete in Athletics and Philosophy in the Ancient World: Contests of Virtue*, Taylor & Francis, London 2011, ch. 6.

however, by the sheer grandeur of the space. The prevailing impression would have been awe at the wealth and power of the Empire, which had captured and tamed ancient Hellenic culture for the pleasure and benefit of its people.

Heracles, the traditional deity of Greek athletes and gymnasia, dominated the decorative sculpture Rome's imperial *thermae* as well. In this environment, however, he seems to take on a different meaning. From the late 2nd century CE onward, Heracles was increasingly presented as the chief Imperial deity⁸⁴. He was especially popular with the Severan emperors (193-235 CE), the first of whom, Septimius Severus, had initiated the construction of Caracalla's *thermae*, and the last of whom, Alexander Severus, was responsible for «completing and decorating» them as part of an enthusiastic promotion of Greek-style athletics that also included the restoration of Nero's baths and the adjacent stadium of Domitian, as well as the founding of an *Agon Herculeus* – games dedicated to Heracles in the heart of Rome⁸⁵. In Caracalla's baths alone, there was a colossal head of Heracles crowned with Ivy, a giant statue of him holding the Apples of the Hesperides, and myriad capitals with miniature Heracles figures carved in to them⁸⁶. Whereas the Heracles of the Greek gymnasium had represented what was achievable through the virtuous application of individual strength, the Heracles of the Imperial *thermae* seems to represent the protective strength of the Emperor and the Empire. He seems less an inducement to training and toil, and more the potent protector that removes any obligation to sweat.

Conclusion: *Natatio*

And so we take a final plunge into the large, ornately decorated *natatio*, and paddle blithely back to the *apodyterion*, this time to put our clothes back on, to remove the costume of nudity, and to end the fantasy of being an ancient Greek. The philosophical question posed by our initial Platonic undressing has, in a way, been answered by the opulence and grandeur of the complex. We are Roman, part of powerful Empire that encompasses Greece and therefore we are connected to and included in its great mythological, philosophical, and athletic heritage. We use the Hellenic past to give meaning and validity to our present activities⁸⁷. We are reviving – or better – living that glorious tradition of the Greek gymnasium by attending the Imperial *thermae* and immersing ourselves

⁸⁴ Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*, cit., p. 121.

⁸⁵ Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, cit., p. 75, citing *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, «Severus Alexander» 25-35.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 71-73.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

in gymnastic art, architecture, and activities⁸⁸. And we do all of this without allowing our *Romanitas* to be corrupted by the effeminacy and indolence of traditional gymnastic culture that led it to be conquered by us. For we have merged the best of the Greek gymnasium with the practical Roman habit of taking a bath. We wash off the oil and dust in the end, put our clothes back on and become Roman again.

In the Roman annexation of gymnastic facilities in the baths, Jean Delorme sees nothing less than the demise «of one of the most original aspects of Greek culture»⁸⁹. Zahra Newby, in contrast, sees a continuation of the gymnastic spirit in the imaginations of Roman bathers⁹⁰. The two claims are not logically incompatible, but they point toward something lost. In the more visual, superficial, spectatorial experience of the gymnasium as replicated in the imperial *thermae*, ones Greekness never gets beyond the costume state. Hellenic *paideia* is always kept at arm's length by an assumption of Roman cultural superiority. One may play at being a Greek athlete or philosopher, but one would never dedicate one's life to it, and this severely limits the gymnasium's educational impact. Seeing and imagining seem to have taken the place of doing... but is it enough?

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⁸⁸ Says Zanker, p. 248: «The notion of a “Renaissance” often used of this period [imperial/second sophistic] carries the wrong connotations. It was not a matter of trying to bring back to life something long dead, but rather of claiming that this glorious past was not really past at all but lived on in the present».

⁸⁹ Delorme, *Gymnasion*, p. 250.

⁹⁰ Newby, *Greek Athletics in the Roman World*, cit., p. 6.

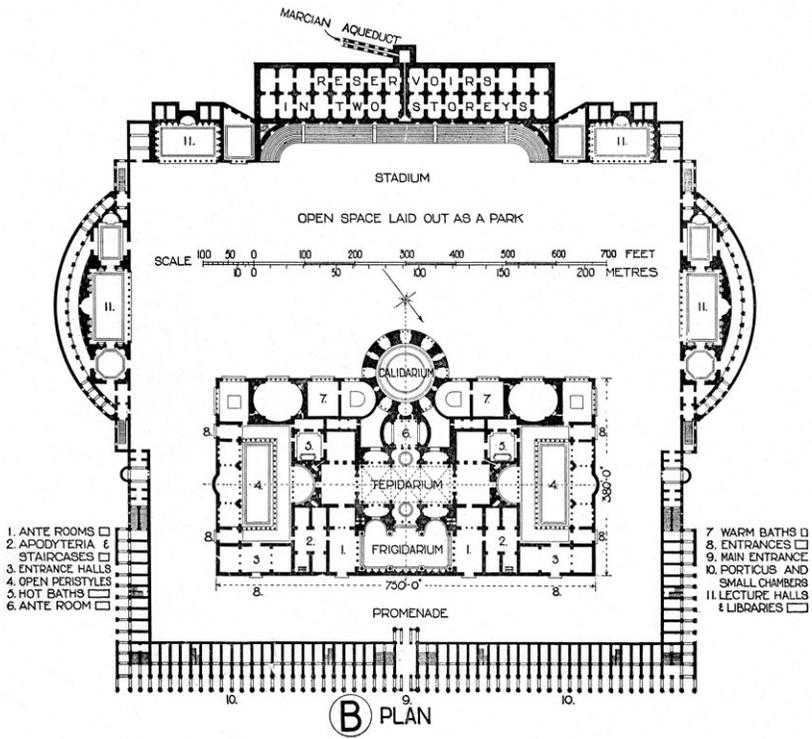


Fig. 1. Floor plan of the Baths of Caracalla by B. Fletcher.