Roman baths as locations of religious practice

Abstract: From a present-day perspective, Roman baths may appear as pure leisure-time environments, dedicated mainly to the cult of the body and only secondarily to activities of other types. In the Eastern part of the empire, however, strong links between thermae and the gymnasion-tradition existed. Thus, we can trace a veneration of the ‘resident gods’ of the palaestra and of divine rulers even within bath-complexes. In these cases, we can suppose also a specific connection with agonistic festivals, and inasmuch as festivals of such a kind were present also in some Western cities, athletes-guilds seem to have transferred similar cult practices. Another field in which bathing-establishments are closely connected to the religious sphere is the cult of sacred springs and waters, especially where the ancients attributed a healing power to the water. This issue of Roman ‘thermalism’, neglected for a long time, has become subject of a whole range of recent studies. My special interest, however, is directed towards evidence that cannot easily be filed into the aforementioned categories: inscriptions dedicating bath-buildings to the gods or to the welfare of the emperor as well as more ‘workaday’-phenomena like votive-altars and statues put up in the thermae (particularly within service areas) or mithraea established in the underground-corridors of the Baths of Caracalla at Rome and the Terme del Mitra at Ostia. A closer examination may shed new light also onto the discomfort that some Jewish and Christian authors felt with regard to the bathing culture of their times.

1 Introduction

The increasing social importance of bathing and bath buildings during the Roman Imperial period has often been noticed and commented upon in archaeological and historical studies. For my purposes, it may suffice to quote Paul Zanker’s article on “changes of public space in Italic cities of the Imperial period”. Zanker describes thermal settings as a “new kind of public sphere” (Zanker 1994, 270–273). Ensuing from Janet DeLaine’s (1992; 1999) and others’ studies on the development of baths and bathing in the Roman world, he states a more and more complex and sumptuous configuration of thermal buildings. Beginning with the Imperial period, these often included secondary, i.e. non-bathing units, dedicated to other kinds of leisure-time activities, among them (at least
in the case of the city of Rome and its great Imperial baths) some elements of
highbrow culture such as libraries or lecture halls. Following Zanker, the grow-
ing relevance of the thermae as locations of an originally casual and alternative
type of social intercourse revealed itself through the interference with more offi-
cial aspects of public life, testified by the presence of emperors, senators or local
dignitaries, be it in person or as honorary statues (Zajac 1999, 103–104; Fagan

Interestingly enough, Zanker at this point does not touch upon religious as-
pects, even if Hubert Manderscheid’s (1981) most comprehensive study of the
sculptural decoration of Roman thermal buildings shows clearly that statues
representing deities and other mythical personae outnumber by far the portrait
statues of emperors and elite-members. Should we consider those, within the
given context, as purely decorative monuments, estimated for their aesthetic
(and sometimes erotic) attraction, but lacking religious functions? At least,
some inscriptions like those mentioning the setting up of statues at (sic!) exorna-
tionem balinei seem to justify such an approach¹. Manderscheid, however, gives
a rather prudent comment on this matter: according to his opinion, the thermae
certainly did not function as art museums, hosting collections of opera nobilía.
Instead, the sculptural endowment would have expressed cultural values of
the Roman society, in correspondence with general expectations of donors
and visitors (Manderscheid 1981, 36–37. 46). More precisely perhaps, Katherine
Dunbabin has interpreted artistic representations of gods and heroes within ther-
mal establishments as expressions of the Roman attitude to bathing as a cultur-
ally distinctive practice. Since bathing was an important element of civilised life,
the highly allusive and sometimes even poetically conceptualised images would
have helped to illustrate the intrinsic qualities of baths, thus evocating a “world
of beauty and luxury which lay at the heart of the bath-aesthetic” (Dunbabin
1989, 24).

2 The gymnasium-tradition

Against this overall background, Manderscheid and others have treated some
phenomena as cases apart. This applies, for example, to the great bath-gymnasia

¹ BCTH 1901, 311 no. 8; CIL VIII 2340; ILS 9259 b, all coming from a bathing annex of a private
house at Thamugadi (Numidia, modern Timgad, Algeria); note that the latter two inscriptions
give the name of the divinity (Aesculapiu[m], Hygiam) in the accusative case. See also Thébert
2003, 244–245. 519 no. 184–186; Riethmüller 2005: 2, 416 no. 532; Benseddik 2010: 2, 162–163
nos. 1–3.
of Western Asia Minor, in particular those of Ephesos. Their *Kaisersäle*, lavishly decorated halls with rich ensembles of sculpture, would have been used as stages for the Imperial cult (Manderscheid 1981, 46). Actually, there has been much debate, also in recent years, on the functions of *Kaisersäle*, so it might be useful to have a closer look at the evidence.

The term *Kaisersaal* was first applied in 1929 to a large exedra which makes part of the bath-building proper, but opens onto the palaestra of the grand gymnasium built by P. Vedius Antoninus (commonly designated as Vedius III) and his wife Flavia Papiane at Ephesos (fig. 1) (cf. Steskal 2001, 181–184). The room’s interior is embellished with a columnar façade-architecture that is articulated in two storeys of recessing niches and projecting aediculae (fig. 2). According to the then head of the Austrian excavation-team, Josef Keil, the central niche, which spans over both storeys, most probably would have hosted the over-life-sized statue of an Roman emperor, presumably Antoninus Pius, whom the building was dedicated to (and with him to the Roman senate, Artemis Ephesia and the city of Ephesos). In front of the niche, an altar remained *in situ*, thus suggesting the practice of religious rituals in connection with the colossal image (Keil 1929, 34–45). A parallel situation was found in the Eastern gymnasium at Ephesos, and thus seemed to underpin the interpretation of the hall as a space designated for Imperial cult. Again, a hall with an architecturally similar inner layout is placed between palaestra and thermal suite. Here a bearded male head was found, belonging to a statue that was placed within the central niche of that hall, which Keil believed to be an image of Septimius Severus (fig. 3). In addition, the statue of a man with a very particular headgear – a crown carrying thirteen busts (all heads unfortunately lost) – once stood in one of the northern niches of the hall (fig. 4a–b). The excavators identified the man as Flavius Damianus, a well-known priest of the Imperial cult at Ephesos during the Antonine and early Severan age, and the bust-crown as an insignia of that priestly function. Accordingly, in this case a function of the hall within the context of Imperial cult seemed firmly attested (Keil 1931, 32. 40–41. 43–44; cf. Alzinger 1970, 1614. 1616).

In the meantime, these former assumptions have been harshly criticised in detail and in general. To start with, the bearded head from the Eastern gymnasium is not considered a portrait of Septimius Severus any more, but probably represents a *Vatergottheit*, possibly Asklepios (Manderscheid 1981, 36. 93 no. 206; Aurenhammer 1990, 137–138 no. 115). Furthermore, the other aforementioned statue is no longer identified as T. Flavius Damianus; it rather appears to be a portrait of Vedius III (Auinger 2011, 121). Still more relevant is the new interpretation of the bust-crown, proposed by Jutta Rumscheid in her fundamental study on wreaths and crowns; thus, this insignia does not necessarily and exclu-
sively refers to a function as Imperial priest, but rather to an editor of agonistic festivals (Rumscheid 2000, 34–36. 143–144 no. 19). With regard to the Kaisersaal of the gymnasium of Vedius, renewed archaeological investigation in the early 2000’s detected fragments of a gigantic statue of Herakles that might have occupied the central niche (fig. 5a–b), but unquestionable evidence for an Imperial portrait is still missing². Closer inspection of the altar in front of the central niche revealed its unimposing patchwork character. Actually, it is pieced together from apparently reused and reworked marble blocks (fig. 6). It may not even belong to the original state of the hall (Steskal and La Torre 2008:1, 295–296). Partly based on these insights, Barbara Burrell has concluded that “as yet there is absolutely no evidence that the emperor was honoured as a god there. The term ‘Kaisersaal’

² Auinger 2011, 122–125, but see ibidem fig. 8.7: as Hans Rupprecht Goette has rightly pointed out to me (oral communication), a fragment of a foot wearing a *muleus* does not fit the normal iconography of Herakles, but could have belonged to the representation of an emperor (in the guise of Herakles?); cf. Goette 1988, esp. p. 422–423.
is both misleading and anachronistic, and should no longer be used” (Burell 2006, 459; cf. Price 1984, 144 n. 34; Rumscheid 2000, 444–45).

In my opinion, there is just as little need to throw the baby out with the bath water. Even if one cannot ascertain beyond doubt a veneration of the emperor within the Kaisersäle, the latter nevertheless might well have been settings for a religious practice, involving, among others, the traditional gods of the palaestra. Fikret Yegül, against whose line of interpretation Burrell is arguing, has rightly exposed many aspects by which the Roman bath-gymnasia seem connected to the institution of the Hellenistic gymnasium. Thus, as a close parallel to the Kaisersäle, Yegül recalls the central hall (so-called room H) on the Northern side of the Upper Gymnasium’s peristyle at Pergamon where statues of Attalid rulers were set up together with those of deities such as Herakles³. Moreover, the bust-

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crown of Damianus/Vedius III points, as we have seen, to agonistic festivals with their all-to-well known religious background. One even can imagine that victors of single contests (which might have took place within the bath-gymnasium proper) would have placed their prizes on altars like the one in the gymnasium of Vedius (Burrell 2006, 444–446; Auinger 2011, 127).

The specific Eastern-Hellenistic tradition, which transferred certain religious practices as a kind of legacy into the bath-gymnasia of Imperial times, had an impact also on the West, inasmuch Greek athletics and agonistic festivals had

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4 A case apart, not pertinent to the question of the Kaisersäle and the gymnasion tradition, and thus omitted here, is the Temple of Hadrian within the Varius-Baths at Ephesos. On the one hand, it forms an integral component of the whole architectural complex, on the other hand it has no direct connection to the inner rooms of the bath, but is oriented toward the so-called Curetes Street, a main street and processional route of Ephesos, see Quatember 2017: 1, esp. 125–135.
been introduced to Rome and Italy since the 2nd century BC. For the 2nd to 4th century AD, the presence of athletes’ guilds within the thermae of the urbs is attested epigraphically as well as through museal representations. Among the famous mosaics coming from the palaestrae of the baths of Caracalla is at least one depiction of a man wearing a bust-crown, thus he might be considered a guild principal who fulfilled also priestly functions as archiereus (Werner 1998, 217–251, esp. 226. 239). Comparable is a set of mosaics of the mid-4th-century AD from the Grandi Terme at Aquileia, with images of athletes and of a bearded man with a bust-crown (fig. 7), furthermore a representation of a prize-crown, related

Fig. 4a–b: İzmir, Arkeoloji Müzesi 648: Statue of a priest with bust crown from the Eastern Gymnasion at Ephesos. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Istanbul, D-DAI-IST-R28220/22 (D. Johannes)

5 For the epigraphic evidence see IGUR 235–263; Caldelli 1992; Newby 2005, 34–36. – The hiera xystike synodos, the athletes’ guild of the city of Rome, had its seat, including archive and sanctuary (temenos), within the complex of the thermae Traiani. The chairmen (archiereis and xystarchoi) at the same time were, by Imperial appointment, “overseers of the baths” (a balnearibus, epi balanetôn Sebastou).
by a Greek inscription to a contest named *Olympeia*⁶ (fig. 8). More representations of athletes and athletic contests are known from thermal buildings at Ostia. Most interesting is a mosaic floor from the *Terme di Porta Marina* (ancient name: *thermae maritimae*), of late Traianic or Hadrianic date, depicting different types of athletes (Newby 2002, 189 – 192). These are grouped around a table, on which a radiate *corona gemmata* and a palm-branch are lying, obviously representing the prizes for victors of athletic contests. Standing beside the table, a bearded herm is represented; a garland twines around the head and another palm-branch is fixed to its shaft (fig. 9). Most probably, it is an image of Herakles, which functioned also as divine patron of the athletes’ guild at Rome⁷. Another

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⁷ Cf. above n. 3 and esp. Newby 2005, 35; the official name of the Roman guild was ή ἱερά ξυστική σύνοδος τῶν περὶ τὸν Ἦρακλέα ἰθλητῶν (IGUR 235 – 237. 243 – 244).
kind of evidence for the religious aspects of athletes’ guilds is possibly extant near the *Terme del Foro* at Ostia. Within the area immediately south of the thermal building, which is supposed to have served as the appropriate sports ground, an aedicula and a small temple building were constructed during the 2nd century AD (fig. 10: A–B; fig. 11). Both are more or less unpublished up to date. A building complex seaming the southern border of the area might have been a guild’s seat⁸.

It remains to add that Christians in late antiquity seem to have still felt the religious aspects of athletics within the context of Roman baths. As but one example, Sidonius Apollinaris may be cited, who in a description of his private bath explicitly states that there are no indecent decorations, amongst others no pictorial representations of wrestlers (*palaestritae*)⁹.

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Fig. 7: Aquileia, Museo Archeologico Nazionale: mosaic panel from the ‘Salone Nord’ of the ‘Grandi Terme’ at Aquileia, representing a priest with bust crown. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, D-DAI-Rom_Neg. 82.156 (H. Schwanke)

Fig. 8: Aquileia, ‘Salone Nord’ of the ‘Grandi Terme’: mosaic panel representing a price crown with Greek inscription OLYMPEIA. Aquileia, Museo Nazionale Archeologico, archivio, 377 N
Fig. 9: Ostia, ‘Terme di Porta Marina’: mosaic with representation of athletic contests (detail). K. Heese (reproduction authorised by photographer and Archivio Fotografico del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica)

Fig. 10: Ostia: plan of ‘Terme del Foro’ and surroundings. adapted from: Guido Calza, Scavi di Ostia, 1. Topografia generale (Roma: Libreria dello Stato, 1952), fogli 8 and 13
3 Not only healing gods: a survey of the North-African material

Besides the Hellenistic tradition of athletics, other customary ties existed between the conduct and use of Roman baths on the one hand and the field of ancient religion on the other. Most relevant is the relation to sacred springs and to bodies of water to which healing powers were ascribed. Well known and most impressive for the extraordinarily close association of thermal spring, temple and bath basins is the complex at Bath (England) (Cunliffe and Davenport 1985; Cunliffe, Tomlin and Walker 1988). Many more constellations of similar type exist. Being a neglected area of research for a long time, the Roman ‘thermalism’ is object of a whole series of more recent studies10. These have demonstrated, however, that in more than one case a distinction is perceptible between the cultic site proper and the bathing facilities. Still more important for my topic is an observation made by Marie Guérin-Beauvois: “La dédicace à un dieu au sein d’un édifice thermal y compris curative, ne fait pas de ce bâtiment un lieu sacré ni de la divinité une divinité guérisseuse, et qui plus est, guérisseuse

10 e.g. Chevalier 1992; Dvorjetski 2007; Schäfer 2009; Bassani, Bressan and Ghedini 2013; Guérin-Beauvois 2015.
au moyen des eaux” (2015, 366; cf. Scheid 1991, 205; Aupert 1991, 192). So how should we interpret the not small number of different votive inscriptions found within bath-buildings? Is it possible to draw a division line between water and healing cults and other religious phenomena? Can we distinguish “Kultanlagen in Bädern” from “Bäder in Kultanlagen” as proposed by Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser (2000, 382–388)? Quite revealing in this regard appears the rich evidence from Roman North-Africa, which is now easily accessible by way of the extensive compilations that Yvon Thébert (2003), Jürgen W. Riethmüller (2005) and Nacéra Benseddik (2010) have assembled.

The sanctuary of Aesculapius at Lambaesis (Numidia, modern Tazoult, Algeria) offers a good example for the sometimes hardly perceptible connections between healing cults and bathing establishments. Admittedly, it is not an urban sanctuary in the proper sense, as it appears related principally to a military camp¹¹. It is located in the so-called Upper City, in the immediate forefield of the older camp that had been founded under Titus. Actually, this is an area dominated by public architecture, hosting no or only few domestic buildings. The temple of Aesculapius was constructed by the legio III Augusta on behalf of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus during their joint rulership (161–169 AD) (CIL VIII 18089a–c; Horster 2001, 424 no. 1; Benseddik 2010: 2, 121 no. 2). Two smaller chapels, dedicated to Iuppiter Valens and Silvanus, are immediately linked to the temple of Aesculapius; together they form the Eastern limit of a wide street or esplanade. Some decades later, a propylon was erected at the Western end of the esplanade, and more small temples to a variety of divinities line up on its Northern border. On the Southern side, excavations during the early 20th century have uncovered a series of extensive building complexes. Even if publications are insufficient, the characteristic layout helps to identify some of those buildings with certainty as thermae¹² (fig. 12). Interestingly enough, these thermae were detached from the esplanade by means of walls and, at a later stage, by a monumental hypostyle building. Moreover, the orientation of the bath buildings differ from that of the esplanade. Thus, at a first glance and although passageways did exist, it appears questionable if we should consider the bathing facilities as an integral part of the sanctuary. On the other hand, an under life-size statue of Aesculapius stood in an aedicule that was part of a building

with several piscinae. More imagines sacrae might have existed\textsuperscript{13}. Furthermore, a rather early inscription, dating back to the time before the main temple was built, mentions the dedication of a piscina to Aesculapius and Hygia (AE 1915, 26; Benseddik 2010: 2, 120 no. 1: 144 – 146 AD). As a result, an inclusion of thermae into certain practices of the healing cult gains probability\textsuperscript{14}.

Fig. 12: Lambaesis/Tazoult: aerial view of sanctuary of Aesculapius and surroundings.
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, RAK-00743 (Nachlass F. Rakob)

There are more bath-buildings in the neighbourhood of sanctuaries, where a relationship obviously did exist though in these cases not amidst immediate (spatial and functional) incorporation. Instructive is the situation of the Thermes du Sud at Thamugadi (Numidia, modern Timgad in Algeria). These are located immediately off the city walls. About 250 m further south lies one of the largest sanctuaries of the Western Roman world, extending over an area of about 7000 m\textsuperscript{2}, today for the most part covered by a Byzantine fortress (Leschi 1947; Le Glay 1991; Benseddik 2010: 2, 155–156). The focus of the cult was a holy spring, called Aqua Septimiana Felix, with its water being collected in a basin

\textsuperscript{13} BCTH 1915, 112; 1917, 271; Cagnat 1923, 85; Benseddik 2010: 2, 118 no. 6; the statue of Aesculapius is missing since long. – For the imagines sacrae see also Groslambert, 2010, 33 n. 5, referring to CIL VIII 2586.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Janon 1985, 96 : “... l’ampleur des annexes thermales démontre assez l’importance de l’hydrothérapie dans le sanctuaire.”
that is still extant today. On the Southern side of the basin, three temples (or cellae) stood upon a common podium; the one in the centre was dedicated to Dea Africa, the others to Serapis and Aesculapius respectively. The water of the spring, however, supplied also the South thermae. Besides, an inscription from 213 AD mentions a street leading to the thermae within the context of renovation and extension of the sanctuary (AE 1948, 111). Images of Dea Africa and Aesculapius were found in the frigidarium (fig. 13: H), the latter represented by a statue (Benseddik 2010: 2, 157 no. 2), the former in a relief on a limestone vase, as part of a scene of sacrifice (fig. 14). On the left, a victimarius leads a bull to an altar. To the right of the altar, one recognises a fragmented anthropomorphic figure, which can be interpreted as Dea Africa by means of her attributes: vexillum, cornucopiae and the accompanying animal, presumably representing a lion (Le Glay 1964; Domes 2007, 186 Re 7; Hamdoune 2008, 159 – 160).

Despite the manifold interrelations, the distance between sanctuary and thermae suggests not considering the one as a part of the other. Moreover, there is a wider spectrum of sculptures on display in the bath building, and this does not speak in favour of an exclusive connection with the divinities of the sanctuary. To start with, the aforementioned stone vase, placed in the centre of the frigidarium, not only bears an image of Dea Africa, but also images of Hercules, Venus and Amor and Psyche; these figures seem not related to the sanctuary, but they are generally frequent within the context of bath buildings. Furthermore, within the scene of sacrifice described above appears a symbol pointing to an (for us) anonymous association, the presence of which is documented also elsewhere in the Thermes du Sud as well as in other places (zu Löwenstein 2011, 230 – 231). In the frigidarium (fig. 13: H) were set up other statues, too. Still in situ, resp. in the Northwest and in the Southwest corner were, at the time of the excavation, two bases for statues of Fortuna Augusta and Victoria Augusta, the latter being dedicated ob honorem IIvir(atus). Situated in a niche that was created in a subsequent building phase, in the middle between the two former bases, was a base for a statue of the Genius Thamugadensis. No exact location is identifiable for the already cited Aesculapius, a male nude (maybe Mercurius) and a small female draped statue (Hygia?)¹⁵ Yet, there is a remarkable preference for dedications and deities in connection to imperial, provincial and local authorities. Correspondingly, in the 260s AD statues of Valerianus, Gallienus and their relatives were erected in the great anteroom of the frigidarium.

(fig. 13: B)\textsuperscript{16}. At a still later date, statues for the *Concordia populi et ordinis* flanked the main entrance of the bath-building (fig. 13: R) (CIL VIII 2380 – 2383; Thébert 2003, 517–518 nos. 176–180; zu Löwenstein 2011, 227–229).

The overall impression given by the endowment of the *Thermes du Sud* at Thamugadi points to a mixture of, on the one hand, quasi intrinsically related cult practices, which derive from the vicinity of the sacred spring, and, on the other hand, more diversified phenomena, which might have attached themselves to the original religious core. Still, we need to be prudent in order to prevent premature conclusions. As other examples demonstrate, the relation between ther-

mae and near-by sanctuaries could also be a conflicting one. This appears to be the case at Thuburbo Maius (Africa proconsularis, modern Henchir Kasbat, Tunisia), with regard to the *Thermes de l’Été*. Here, archaeology does not proof the existence of a sanctuary in the neighbourhood, but such is attested through an inscribed stele that was reused as a threshold in the bath building. The text runs as follows:

Modern commentators have puzzled over the interdiction to use the baths prior to a visit to the sanctuary of Aesculapius. Most probably, the emphasis on bali-neum commune hints to mixed bathes of men and women and thus correlates bathing with the threat of sexual pollution, which is evident also in the admonition to abstain from intercourse with one’s wife (mulier) (Kleijwegt 1994, 215–216; cf. Vattioni 1978, 19). Nevertheless, the evidence discourages from interpreting spatial contiguity alone as a general clue for functional linkage. Thus, I agree with Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser’s scepticism towards approaches proposed by John Scheid and Janet DeLaine, which tend to explain the distribution of thermae within the urban space from the necessity for visitors to sanctuaries to purify themselves ritually

We now turn to thermal establishments that do not have any recognisable relation with sanctuaries. In these cases, our observations start from the localisation and contextualisation of single divine images within the buildings. Famous for their rich and manifold sculptural decoration are, for example, the ‘Thermae of Hadrian’ at Lepcis Magna (Africa proconsularis, modern Lebda, Libya) (Manderscheid 1981, 40–43. 104–109 nos. 292–341). Many of the statues found there represent the outcome of a process of embellishment and aggrandisement, which went on over several decades between the 2nd and 3rd century AD. Thus, we need not to take all-too literally the mentioning of a reconstruction a fundamentis in an inscription from the age of Septimius Severus.

17 AE 1916, 112; Benzina Ben Abdallah 1986, 122–123 no. 325; Rietmuller 2005: 2, 414 no. 520; Benseddik 2010: 2, 85–86 no. 1; text according to Clauss-Slaby, EDCS-10300552.
less, it is reasonable that some damaged parts of the building, namely the frigidarium and the adjacent corridor (crypta), needed thorough repair at the time. In the course of these works, “a new statue of Aesculapius” (statuam Aesculapii novam) was set up. The wording of the inscription conveys an outstanding importance of this statue in relation to others, which were only restored (ceteras refecit). This might include a special religious significance of the “new” image²⁰. In any case, already the relatively high number of statues of Aesculapius found in the ‘Thermae of Hadrian’ (five, four of them within the frigidarium; fig. 15) stresses the particular relevance of the god for the overall context²¹. It is thus not surprising that one statue base, from the edge of the natatio, bears a votive inscription in the proper sense, which once again refers to a building measure²².

Sculptural monuments combined with votive inscriptions are known also from other thermae of Roman North-Africa. Most frequent are dedications to Aesculapius. Obviously, the salutiferous qualities ascribed to bathing favoured the veneration of the god within the thermal complexes even if the latter neither formed part of a sanctuary nor were considered sanctuaries themselves. Reasons and aims of the dedications, however, not uncommonly fall outside the immediate realm of health and hygiene. By way of example, we may consider two oblong statue bases found in the Grand Thermes de l’Est of Mactaris (Africa proconsularis, modern Maktar, Tunisia), at the Northern exit of the central frigidarium. They belonged to statues of Apollo and Aesculapius respectively, which were dedicated pro salute victori(is)que et incolumentate of Septimius Severus and his

²⁰ Considering the connection between the statue and the (re-)building process, one could recall a passage from a Talmudic tractate, the Avodah Zarah (I Mishna 7), which permits Jews to participate in the construction of bath buildings while advising them to quit work when it comes to the niche where the idol would be placed, cf. Eliav 2010, 613. Based on cases like the one of the ‘Hadranic thermae’ at Lepcis, we may assume that some thermae could be named after divinities, which enjoyed particular attention or even veneration within the baths. Examples are quite numerous and have already been collected by others, see e.g. Fagan 2002, 242 nos. 32–33; 245 no. 43; Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 383 with ns. 178–179 (thermae Herculis, thermae Silvani, balneum Veneris etc.).

²¹ Bartoccini 1929, 124–129, nos. 1–5; Manderscheid 1981, 43. 104 nos. 293–297; Riethmüller 2005: 2, 412 no. 509; Benseddik 2010: 2, 54–57 nos. 1–5; Finocchi 2012, 80–89 nos. 38–42. – Most promising candidate for the statua Aesculapii nova at Lepcis Magna is an over life-sized marble image of Severan date that probably was located on the main axis of the frigidarium, in the passageway leading to the tepidarium and in line with a bronze statue of the emperor Septimius Severus (here figure 15); see Finocchi 2012, 87–89 no. 42 (with references); 146.

²² Bartoccini 1929, 80–81; Reynolds 1952, no. 263; Benseddik 2010: 2, 59 no. 1; Finocchi 2012, 145; text according to Clauss – Slaby (EDCS.06000268): P(ublius) Cornelius Attax / Marcianus / L(ucius) Appius Amicus / Rufinianus / curr(atores) refectionis / thermarum tert(ium) / deo Aesculapio / v(otum) s(olverunt).
family in 198–199 or 203–204 AD. The formula is stereotypical and appears in many military dedications of the time, but it might have had, as Nacéra Bensed-

Fig. 15: Homs, Leptis-Magna-Museum 25: statue of Aesculapius from frigidarium of 'Hadrianic Thermae' at Leptis Magna. Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Rom, D-DAI-Rom Neg. 76.2230R

23 BCTH 1952–1952 (1954) 196; 1953, 46; AE 1955, 49. 54; Cadotte 2002. While Cadotte speaks of
dik suggests, a more concrete sense here, inasmuch it addresses gods of health and salvation (Benseddik 2010: 2, 65–66 no. 1; cf. Le Bohec 1989, 563–565). For our concerns, suffice it to note that a public bath obviously had been rated as an appropriate place for a dedication regarding survival and success of the ruling dynasty.²⁴

This is not an isolated case. Also at Madauros (Africa proconsularis, modern Mdaourouch, Algeria), a certain number of pedestals for statues have been found in and in the proximity of the Grands Thermes. These are likewise dedicated for the salvation of Septimius Severus, his family and his immediate successors (Caracalla, Severus Alexander). The dedicators always indicate the honos aedilitatis as occasion on which the dedication was made. Unfortunately, the inscriptions describe the object of the dedication only vaguely as statua.²⁵ Nevertheless, moulded top frames were found, which seem to fit the square bases and bear inscriptions for Aesculapius Augustus, Hygia Augusta, Venus Augusta, Liber Augustus, Fortuna Augusta²⁶. Even corresponding statues are preserved (fig. 16)²⁷. Again, we deal with healing gods and others seem to come in addition. In this respect, the situation is similar to the one we have seen at Thamugadi.²⁸

Another example for the inclusion of deities that have no particular relation to healing is given by statues and inscriptions coming from the Thermes de l’Ouest at Thubursicu Numidarum (Numidia, modern Khamissa, Algeria). The exact number of statues found within the bath-building is not known. It may well be higher than sometimes is supposed (Kleinwächter 2001, 298. 302–303). Undisputed is the provenance of two statues of Aesculapius from the frigidarium, of different dimensions (height 1,42 m and 2,60 m respectively)²⁹. A third statue

one base with two inscriptions, older publications mention two bases, and also the photographs accessible through publications and online databases seem to refer to two bases. – For the architectural context see Charles-Picard 1974, 9–24; Thébert 2003, 144–146.

²⁴ Cf., e.g., CIL VIII 17726 (Aquae Flavianae).
²⁵ ILAlg 2087–2089. 2092. 2095; Thébert 2003, 511–512 nos. 139–144.
²⁷ The statue reproduced by the photograph may represent Venus or Fortuna Augusta; for the whole group see Gsell and Joly 1922, 112–114 pl. 12–13. 13 bis; Manderscheid 1981, 119–120 nos. 446–454 pl. 46; Rietmüller 2005; 2, 413 no. 512; Benseddik 2010: 2, 66–68 nos. 1. 3 pl. 28.
²⁸ There also we have noticed an honorary appointment (ob honorem Ilvirates) as occasion on which a dedication was made: BCTH 1893, 162 no. 42; above n. 43; cf. also ILAlg 7635; Benseddik 2010: 2, 147–148 no. 1 (dedication to Aesculapius Augustus from the frigidarium of the Grands Thermes at Cuicul/Djemila, ob honorem aedilitatis).
²⁹ BCTH 1919–1920, 63 nos. 2. 4; Manderscheid 1981, 120 nos. 456–457; Benseddik 2010: 2, 89–90 nos. 1–2.
coming from the frigidarium represents a female deity (BCTH 1919–1920, 62 no. 1; Benseddik 2010: 90 no. 3). It has been interpreted variously, as Hygia/Salus as well as Fortuna. The former seems more probable, not least because the sculpture corresponds by size and stylistic features with the larger one of the Aesculapius-statues\(^{30}\). On the other hand, two (apparently lost) votive inscriptions to Aesculapius Augustus and Fortuna Augusta are mentioned among the findings from the Thermes de l’Ouest (BCTH 1919–1920, 61 nos. 1–2; ILAlg 1220. 1222). The reported measurements of the inscribed objects are too small that these could have carried monumental statues, but they well could have served as votive altars related to the statues.

From the background of the dedication of single statues – not uncommonly, as we have seen, on behalf of the emperors – maybe we can understand also the dedications of entire thermal buildings pro salute. A prominent example are the ‘Antonine baths’ at Carthago, which were enlarged and embellished during the reign of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. On this occasion, the building was re-dedicated to the well-being of the emperors (fig. 17)\(^{31}\). Similar dedications are known from Siga (Mauretania Caesariensis, modern Takembrt, Algeria: AE 1934, 80) and Thagora (Numidia, modern Taoura, Algeria: CIL VIII 4645)\(^{32}\). To the Thermes de l’Ouest at Mactaris, also called Thermes du Soffite capitolin belongs an epistle with an inscription pro restituta salute of Marcus Aurelius (169 AD)\(^{33}\). The soffit of the same ashlar shows a relief representing a divine triad, explained as Capitoline triad by Gilbert Charles-Picard (BCTH 1955–1956, 178; Charles-Picard 1957, 151–152). Claudia Kleinwächter (2001, 159) has convincingly demonstrated, though, that this cannot be the case, inasmuch only one female and two male deities are depicted, one bearded, the other juve-

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\(^{30}\) Uncommon with regard to Hygia may seem the drapery which exposes the right shoulder of the goddess; it is, though, not without parallels, see Böhm 2004, 121–125 fig. 77 (votive relief, middle of the 2\(^{nd}\) century AD).


\(^{32}\) Other provinces (Balkans, Asia Minor) offer epigraphic evidence for bath buildings dedicated to the numen domus Augustae, the numen deorum Augustorum and to divinities whose relation with the emperors is expressed by the epitheton Augustus/Augusta: CIL III 1006. 3047. 6992. 7380; Fagan 2002, 256 no. 81; 287 no. 161; 294–295 no. 180; cf. Aupert 1991, 190; Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 384 n. 182.

\(^{33}\) CIL VIII 11799 (text according to Clauss – Slaby, EDCS-23200445): [Pro] restituta sa[lute] Imp(eratoris) Caes(aris) M(arii) Antonini Augusti Armeniaci Medici Parthici Medici / [pontificis] maximpi p(atris) p(atriae) trib(unicia) pot(estate) XXIII co(n)s(uli) III / [imp(eratoris) V--- c(ivilis) M(acr)itaritanor[um ---] / [extruxit(?)] a[nno Sexti Laterani proco(n)s(uli)s(ulis) c(larissimi) v(iri) L(ucius) Rupilius Au[---] / l[--] leg(atus) eius dedicavit.
nile. They thus could well be identified as Hygia, Aesculapius and Apollo (or one of Aesculapius’ sons), invoked in connection with the dedication of the whole building for the recovery of the emperor.

To sum up, the North-African evidence clearly demonstrates that bath buildings or at least parts of them (primarily the frigidaria) were used as locations for some kind of religious practice during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The character of this practice can be described as a public and almost as an official one. Public-office holders had made most of the dedications mentioned before. The context often was one of public cults (sometimes in connection to public sanctuaries). Many votive monuments were donated on occasion of honorary appointments or on behalf of the well-being of emperors. Others remain anonymous for us, but the overall-sensation is that individual dedications by inconspicuous persons are rather rare. Most notably, although healing deities as Aesculapius and Hygia play an important role, personal thank offerings seem not to be attested, regardless of whether a sanctuary of these gods is nearby or not. Thus, from the kind of and reasons for votive donations, we also cannot distinguish between the thermae with connection to sanctuaries and those without. It may well be that thermae were used as locations for votive monuments because, displayed there, these had wide appeal with large sections of the cities’ populations.
Another point is important: As far as I can see, there are never any altars reported in connection with divine images. The only exception could have been the votive monuments for Aesculapius and Fortuna at Thubursicu Numidarum, which unfortunately are missing today. The apparent absence of altars might be explained by casualties of conservation or even of unwary excavation practice, particularly as Augustine mentions sacrifices before idols in bath buildings. Still, other authors, from other regions, are rating the immediate religious impact or appeal of such images rather lowly⁴, and judging by the North-African evidence, it appears safer not to postulate an actual sacrificial cult within the bathing suites proper.

### 4 Workaday religion?

Few are the cases I have noticed that convey insight into the religious practice of operators of bathing establishments. The ‘Thermes du Nord’ at Lugdunum Convenarum (Galla Aquitania, modern S. Bertrand-de-Comminges, France) offer one of the rare examples: two votive altars, of which only the bases without inscriptions were preserved at the moment of the excavation in 1936/37, stood in the heating room (praefurnium) that served the caldarium. In addition, two de-contextualised altars with inscriptions (dedications to Fortuna) have been found within the area of the thermae (Lizop 1947, 91. 108; cf. AE 1933, 238; AE 1951, 152). In the course of more recent fieldwork activities, two inscribed fragments have been found, which fit perfectly one of the praefurnium-altars. Thus, it is now certain this altar was dedicated by one M. Mansuetus Titullinus to Fortuna Augusta (Aupert and Monturet 1997; Schenck-David 2001; AE 2001, 1375).

Roughly comparable with the practice at Lugdunum Convenarum appears the setting up a statue of Vulcanus in a niche of the underground-praefurnium of the Terme del Mitra at Ostia (Manderscheid 1981, 79–80 no. 103; Steuernagel 2004, 105 n. 510) (fig. 18). While this room most probably was accessible only for the bath’s operators, immediately north of and connected to it lies a Mithraic speleum from which the bath building received its modern name. Contemporar-

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neously with the installation of the mithraeum, a flight of steps was constructed that connected the entrance of the cult room, which is located on underground level, with a corridor on the ground-floor level. Thus, the mithraeum had two entrances, one from the service-area, the other one from the public part of the building. Thus, we may assume that both, workers and visitors, participated in the cult. Similar is the situation at the ‘Thermae of Caracalla’ at Rome (fig. 19). Also in this case, the mithraeum seems immediately connected with an extended system of corridors which served the thermae’s staff. Nevertheless, there too is an entrance-stair leading downwards from the ground level, while it was possible to bar the passage to the service corridors by a door or railing. These circumstances and the exceptional size of the complex – it is among the largest mithraeum of the ancient world – lead to assume that bathers and personnel joined in the veneration of the Roman-Persian god.

Fig. 18: Ostia, ‘Terme del Mitra’: underground service room with wall niche. D. Steuernagel (reproduction authorised by Archivio Fotografico del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica)

35 Becatti 1954, 29–38, part. 29; Steuernagel 2004, 108 (with further references). – For the double entrance see also White 2012, 479.
36 Ghislanzoni 1912, 317–319; LTUR 3 (1996), s. v. Mithra, spelunca (thermae Antoninianae; Reg. XII), 267–268 (M. Piranomonte); Piranomonte 1998, 29–33; see here fig. 19, plan of excavations undertaken in 1912, showing part of the underground corridor-system of the *Terme di Caracalla* with the rooms adapted as mithraeum (shaded) and the way to the mithraeum leading down from the ground level (dotted line).
5 Baths as locations for religious discourse or as “lieux de propaganda”?

As we already have seen, religion in thermae is a manifold phenomenon. Some of its aspects seem quasi intrinsically related to main functions of the bath buildings, which for their part result from connections to athletics, healing and water cults; other aspects appear to attach themselves. More fundamentally, baths are important stages of social encounter, as streets, inns and workshops are; therefore, it is not surprising to find mithraea in baths, since the locations of this cult usually are established in places with a certain degree of ‘traffic density’ (Steuernagel 2004, 108). Consequently, and considering the archaeological and epi-

37 Quotation from Thébert 2003, 446.
graphic material we have scrutinised, it is possible and probable that people also talked about religion during their stay at the thermae. We can deduce this also from the many references Jewish and Christian authors make. Visiting the bath was equivalent to participating in urban life. It is in this sense that Tertullian mentions the baths among other locations that Christians are frequenting as well as all others do. On the other hand, he is sensible of the problems that arise from cross connections between baths and pagan cults; thus, he avoids bathing on holidays like the *Saturnalía*\(^{38}\). A similar attitude other authors demonstrate when they too rate bathing in public as a normal practice for Christians or Jews while discussing possibly compromising situations; some examples have already been quoted\(^{39}\).

Taking account of these general dispositions, we can also imagine some Christian teachers visiting the baths with the intention to use them as places of schooling and proselytising. H. Gregory Snyder has I think rightly emphasised this point in his article on “Justin Martyr’s ‘School’ in the City of Rome” (Snyder 2007). Grown up within the Greek-Hellenistic tradition, Justin had already used a gymnasion-setting at Ephesos for the dialogue on questions of faith with his Jewish counterpart Tryphon\(^{40}\). Therefore, it probably was not by pure coincidence that Justin’s apartment in the city of Rome was located – according to an indication given within the *Acts* – above the “bath of Myrtinus”\(^{41}\). He might have chosen this apartment to be in close contact with wide circles of the urban population, drawing on the function of public thermae as spots and vehicles for spreading news – be they official bulletins or ordinary gossip. Later on, within an already widely Christianised world, Augustine held at least once a religious dispute within a bath building\(^{42}\).

At this point even the transformation of bath buildings into churches comes into play. The need for spacious and solidly built structures was certainly high in late antiquity. It was tempting to convert bath buildings – and primarily the largest rooms, the *frigidaria* – into churches, particularly when the supply with water

\(^{38}\) Tert., *apol.* 42, 2 (*itaque non sine foro, non sine macello, non sine balneis tabernis officinis stabulis nundinis vestris ceterisque commerciis cohabitamus in hoc saeculo*). 4.

\(^{39}\) see above, ns.9, 18, 20, 34; cf. Zellinger 1928, 8–9; Eliav 2000; Eliav 2010, 612–614.

\(^{40}\) Justin., *dial.* 1, 1 (*xystos of a bath gymnasium*); cf. Euseb., *Hist. eccl.* 4, 18, 6 (in the city of Ephesos).

\(^{41}\) *Acts of Justin (III)* 3; the indication ἐπάνω τοῦ Μυρτίνου βαλανείου is given only in recension A (corrupted text), recension B at the same place mentions “baths of a certain Martinus, son of Timotinus”, see Musurillo 1972, 44, 49.

\(^{42}\) The *disputatio contra Fortunatum manichaeum* took place in urbe Hipponensium regionum, in *Balneis Sossii, sub praesentia populi*; cf. Thébert 2003, 444–446.
and fuel had become difficult. We thus can explain the installation of churches into thermae, e.g. in North Africa (Petit Thermes of Madauros, Thermes de l’Ouest of Mactaris) and at Ostia (Terme del Mitra, fig. 20), from purely pragmatic reasons\textsuperscript{43}. Still, it is imaginable (though not proofed), that at least in some cases the churches used the former thermal structures because they had a certain renown as places of activity or even martyrdom of early Christians\textsuperscript{44}.

Fig. 20: Ostia, ‘Terme del Mitra’: frigidarium adapted as Christian cult-room. D. Steuernagel (reproduction authorised by Archivio Fotografico del Parco Archeologico di Ostia Antica)

6 Conclusions

We come to some succinct conclusions. Returning to the starting point of my survey – the social relevance of bath and bathing in Roman cities – it seems to me that a plurality of modes, levels and agents of (religious) communication were present in thermal settings, and not few of the expressions were of long-since established types and exhibited relations with firmly rooted traditions such as

\textsuperscript{43} For North-Africa see Duval 1971 [1973]; Sears 2007, 20 (“Some parts of baths were also converted into churches but given the negative connotations associated with baths and bathing this seems to be more an opportunistic [sic!] use of a solid, un-used, structure than an ideological statement.”). – For Ostia see Steuernagel 2004, 116 (with references).

\textsuperscript{44} For a (private) bath building beneath the church of S. Cecilia in Trastevere (supposed place of Caecilia’s martyrdom) see Stasolla 2002, 43–44.
healing cults or (Greek) athletics. Garrett G. Fagan rightly assumes that the “general function of Roman public baths” were one of “reproducers of the social order in Roman communities” (Fagan 2002, 189 – 222, quotation 218). It is important to pinpoint, however, that going to the baths was no substitute for visiting forum and temples, and never became one. Rather, it was a supplementary, though during the course of the Imperial period increasingly important and so to say constitutive element of communal life in Roman cities. A quotation from Ulpianus in Digesta makes the point very clear. To determine the place of residence (domicilium) of a subject, Ulpian suggests checking where the person uses “forum, bath and public spectacles”, where he “celebrates the public holidays” and “uses all the other municipal amenities” (Dig. 50, 1, 27, 1; cf. Fagan 2002, 194). Thus, in my view and trivial as it may seem, baths were locations of religious practice since they were locations where people frequently met; they were permeated by religion since the urban life during Roman Imperial and late antique times generally was. Thermae offered themselves for the exercise of certain religious rites inasmuch they were prominent parts of the public urban sphere; thus we find mostly quasi-official dedications, while individual donations for private reasons are almost absent. But the buildings not only offered themselves as locations, they were also shaped by religious practices. The installation of mithraea into the fabric of bath buildings is particularly instructive in this regard. Even if the installation of Christian sanctuaries can only with some uncertainties be interpreted in a similar way, it is certain that religiously dissident factions in Roman cities availed themselves of opportunities offered by the bathing establishments, not only for private hygiene, but also for religious discourses. Conflicts with the ‘mainstream’ religious practices were inevitable, but obviously no reason to refrain from visiting the thermae.

Abbreviations

AE: Année épigraphique  
BCTH: Bulletin archéologique du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques  
CIL: Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum  
Clauss – Slaby: Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss – Slaby (www.manfredclauss.de)  
IGUR: Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae  
ILAig: Inscriptions latines d’Algérie  
LTUR: Lexicon topographicum urbis Romae  
RE: Pauly’s Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft
Bibliography


Roman baths as locations of religious practice


