

Roman Baths: Two Views

Every Roman city had several bathhouses which were large and beautiful buildings. The baths were important centers of community and social life, as well as places of hygiene. The authors of the following two documents had quite different opinions about the virtues of the baths, yet both demonstrate that the baths were used for other activities, such as reading and exercising.

On entering [a bathhouse], one is received into a public hall of good size, with ample accommodations for servants and attendants. On the left are the lounging rooms, also of just the right sort for a bath, attractive, brightly lighted retreats. Then, besides them, a hall, larger than need be for the purposes of a bath, but necessary for the reception of richer persons. Next, capacious locker rooms to undress in, on each side, with a very high and brilliantly lighted hall between them, in which are three swimming pools of cold water; it is finished in Laconian marble, and has two statues of white marble in the ancient style, one of Hygeia [goddess of health], the other of Aesculapius [god of healing]. . . .

Then near this is another hall, the most beautiful in the world, in which one can stand or sit with comfort, linger without danger, and stroll about with profit. It also is refulgent with Phrygian marble clear to the roof. Next comes the hot corridor, faced with Numidian marble. The hall beyond it is very beautiful, full of abundant light and aglow with color like that of purple hangings. It contains three hot tubs. . . . Why should I go on to tell you of the exercising floor and the cloak rooms? . . . Moreover, it is beautified with all other marks of thoughtfulness—with two toilets, many exits, and two devices for telling time, a water clock that makes a bellowing sound and a sundial.

(Lucian, *Hippias, or the Bath*)

I live over a bathing establishment. Picture to yourself now the assortment of voices, the sound of which is enough to sicken one. When the stronger fellows are exercising and swinging

heavy leaden weights in their hands, when they are working hard or pretending to be working hard, I hear their groans; and whenever they release their pent-up breath, I hear their hissing and jarring breathing. When I have to do with a lazy fellow who is content with a cheap rub-down, I hear the slap of the hand pummeling his shoulders, changing its sound according as the hand is laid flat or curved. If now a professional ball player comes along and begins to keep score, I am done for. Add to this the arrest of a brawler or a thief, and the fellow who always likes to hear his own voice in the bath, and those who jump into the pool with a mighty splash as they strike the water. . . . It disgusts me to enumerate the varied cries of the sausage dealer and confectioner and of all the peddlers of the cook shops, hawking their wares, each with his own peculiar intonation.

(Seneca, *Moral Epistles*)

Questions

1. List as many things as you can that the Roman baths were used for other than bathing. (See the excerpts above as well as pp. 125, 127 of your text.)
2. Why do you think the Romans spent so much effort on making the bathhouses beautiful?
3. Today swimming pools serve many of the same purposes for us that baths did for Romans: we meet friends there, eat snacks there, and some have exercise clubs next to them. How does thinking about the baths this way help you to understand what Seneca is complaining about?
4. Why do Lucian and Seneca have such different views of the baths?

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Pronunciation Guide: Hygeia [hī jē'ə]; Aesculapius [es' kyə lā'pē əs]; Phrygian [frij'ē ən]