

It seems that from the later Republic on, baths were popular places to meet friends, exercise, and gossip as well as bathe. When his friend Caelius got himself into trouble in the lawcourts, Cicero defended him in a speech which tells us some amusing details about the 'jet-set' of the day. The prosecution claimed that Caelius gave some poison in a box to his friend Licinius to hand over to his mistress Clodia's slaves at the Senian baths, so that they could administer the poison to her. However, her slaves informed Clodia about the plot, so she cunningly decided to send some friends to conceal themselves at the baths, jump out at the crucial moment and catch Licinius redhanded. Cicero threw doubt on the whole concocted story by pointing out that a public bath hardly provided a suitable hiding place for men in their togas and shoes--unless of course Clodia had already bribed the bathkeeper to conceal them! (Pro Caelio 25-28). Cicero doesn't tell us his opinion of the Senian baths, though his tone suggests that he was well aware of the possibilities for petty crime offered by the crowded baths. Seneca described the noise of his lodgings right over a public bath. He heard men exercising, weight-lifters, massage victims, ball-players keeping score, swimmers leaping into the pool with a loud splash, men brawling and thieves being arrested, the barber advertising his trade in a shrill voice (while his client yelled as he had his armpits plucked) and the vendors of drinks, sausages, pastries and other products of the cookshops shouting their wares (Epistles 56, 2). Yet so determined was Seneca to show what a strong-minded Stoic philosopher should feel that he declared peace of mind, not of surroundings, is all that is required for true concentration.

Crowds at the baths were increased by the slaves who came to watch over their masters' clothes, hand them towels, massage or dress them. Petronius' character Trimalchio, the old freedman who is the 'hero' of a large section of the Satiricon, came to the baths escorted by a group of curly-haired slave boys, two eunuchs, three masseurs, four runners, six litter carriers, a small ugly boy (Trimalchio's latest pet) and a flute-player. This entourage was needed to assist Trimalchio to play ball and bathe efficiently and stylishly. Martial too makes it clear that the baths were often overcrowded with people whose chief aim was to display their money, their taste or their handsome persons. Some were desperately tracking down a patron in hopes of a dinner invitation. Silius had run all over town looking for his supper; eventually he went to not one, but seven different baths, and all without success (Epigrams 2, 14). Some baths were too dark, some too draughty (one of these Martial grandly calls the Cave of the Winds). Some were too hot early in the day, while Caecilianus kept his bath so cold it could be used as a refrigerator: "Aestivo serves ubi pisces tempore, quaeris?/in thermis serva, Caeciliane, tuis" (2,78). Nothing could compare, though, in Martial's opinion, with the baths of Etruscus. The marble, the alabaster, the mottled 'snake-stone', even the very daylight was brighter there, while the cold water from the Aqua Virgo or the Marcia aqueducts was so transparently clear that the marble pool seemed to lie empty of water altogether. "You will die unwashed, Oppianus", he declared, "if you don't visit Etruscus' baths!" (6, 42).

Though some people, like Aemilius who snacked on lettuce, eggs and lizardfish at the baths because he had nowhere to eat dinner, or Aper who "sobrius a thermis nescit abire domum" (Mart. 12,19 & 70) ate or drank at the baths, Juvenal's first satire points out the hazards of dining on peacock, and then staggering off to bathe. The results could be quickly fatal. But the glutton's death made the rounds of dinner table gossip, and his angry and cheated 'friends' cheered at his funeral--for he hadn't made a will.

Obviously, though, bathing was an indispensable and pleasant daily activity. Few Romans went home to dinner without a visit to one of the many baths in Rome itself or in the smaller provincial cities and towns.