

**A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE
THERMÆ ROMANO-
BRITANNICÆ, OR THE ROMAN
BATHS FOUND IN ITALY, BRITAIN,
FRANCE, SWITZERLAND**

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A short description of the thermæ Romano-Britannicæ, or the Roman baths found in Italy, Britain, France, Switzerland by Robert Wollaston

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ROBERT WOLLASTON

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A
SHORT DESCRIPTION
OF THE
THERMÆ ROMANO-BRITANNICÆ,
OR THE
ROMAN BATHS
FOUND IN
ITALY, BRITAIN, FRANCE, SWITZERLAND, &c. &c.

WITH SOME NOTICES
OF THE MOSAICS AND PAINTINGS WHICH FORMED A PART
OF THEIR DECORATIONS,
ESPECIALLY OF THE THERMÆ OF TITUS AND CONSTANTINE.

BY
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P R E F A C E .

IN endeavouring to give some brief account of the ancient Roman Thermae, I was surprised to find how meagre and scattered were the materials of information. Though much has been written on the construction of the Roman Bath by the learned Cameron, yet the history of the British Baths has never been attempted in a comprehensive manner. Detached works on a few of the British Thermae no doubt exist, but for the most part they are not readily accessible. Lysons' large folios are seldom to be met with, which contain interesting accounts of several Baths, found at Bignor, Woodchester, and other places. I am aware that I have omitted to mention several of the Ruins of ancient Baths, both British and Continental; but my object was rather to show the identity of structure of the Roman Bath found in Britain, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, &c., and I have collected a sufficient number to answer my purpose. My intention, moreover, is to exhibit the Archæological and Decorative features of the Baths, rather than to elucidate their Medical Properties; though I have selected a few pages from professional writers, with a view to explain the advantages of the Hot-Air Bath as a valuable Medical Agent, and to suggest the expediency of building such Baths more extensively throughout the kingdom.

My official position in Turkey as Physician on the Medical Staff of the British Army, enabled me to test the efficacy of the Bath as a Therapeutic agent; while a residence of many months in Rome gave me abundant leisure to examine the ruins of the ancient Thermae of Diocletian, of Caracalla, of Titus, and others.

N.B. I have a large collection of Drawings, with which I could have illustrated my subject, by a series of Lithographical and Chromo-lithographical representations of the Ancient Thermae, and the numerous Mosaics and Fresco-paintings found in them, in Italy, Britain, and other countries. But as the cost would be considerable, I am disposed to wait, to ascertain if there be any demand for such illustrations.

R. W.

THERMÆ ROMANO-BRITANNICÆ.

"Quid sit futurum cras, fuge querere, et
Quem fors dierum cumque dabit, lucro
Appone; nec dulces BALNEAS,*
Sperne, puar, neque tu chorass."

Horatius, lib. I, od. ix.

"Quicquid sub terra est, in aprium proferat astas."—*Horatius.*

In the fascinating historical Novel "The Last Days of Pompeii," by Sir Bulwer Lytton, Glaucus is made to exclaim, Well! let us to the BATHS! blest be he who invented Baths! But tell me, Glaucus, are the Baths at Rome really so magnificent? Glaucus turned and recognized Diomed; and suppressing a smile replied,—“Imagine all Pompeii converted into Baths, and then you will form some notion of the size of the imperial Thermæ of Rome, but a notion of the *size* only. Imagine every entertainment for mind and body, enumerate all the gymnastic games our fathers have invented, repeat all the books that Italy and Greece have produced, suppose places for all these games, admirers for all these works, add to these, Baths of the vastest size, the most complicated construction, intersperse the whole with gardens, theatres, porticos, and schools; suppose in one word a City of the Gods composed but of palaces and public edifices, and you may form some faint idea of the Glories of the great Thermæ of Imperial Rome.”

Such is the grandiloquent description of one of our most refined writers—but his protraiture of the magnificence of the ancient Roman Thermæ is not more gorgeous than faithful, however apparently exaggerated. During the reign of the Cæsars,—from Augustus to Constantine, the world had never seen grander buildings than the wonderful Thermæ of Imperial Rome. The burst of admiration from the lips of Glaucus was a just tribute to national greatness in the construction of these luxurious and favourite Thermæ.

* The author has taken a liberty with Horace in substituting the word "*Balneas*" instead of "*Amores*"—a violation of accuracy, perhaps pardonable, as the quotation seemed applicable to the subject.

The Romans were indebted to the Greeks for their knowledge of this important Therapeutic agent. The graphic description in which Hippocrates the Father of Medicine has recorded the diseases of his time and country, and the means of their alleviation, commands our admiration for the correctness of his observations, and the sagacity of his remarks. In a comparatively simple state of manners, Hippocrates, and the Physicians of his age, resorted to the most obvious means of curing disease; principally in the use of herbs possessing mild powers, and in the use of water. The most natural Hydropathic Establishments were the pellucid stream and the briny sea; while experience soon demonstrated the efficacy of adding warmth, as means, in the cure of painful wounds and disorders. Fomentations of hot water, cataplasms of herbs, warm drinks, warm-water *baths*, and finally *Hot-Air Baths* became successively the chief remedies for the ills of life in the restoration of health.

The *Therma* or *Hot-Baths* were established among the Greeks and Romans as a permanent Institution: a just appreciation of the *Hot-Air Bath* has from that day descended to posterity, even to our own times: though unhappily not in our own country. The application of warmth to wounds and disease, is almost instinctive; and personal experience soon realizes the comfort and amelioration of our feelings from its use. As a medicinal agent, in the healing of many diseases, the sanction of universal testimony has proved its excellence. Surrounding nations, especially those, the climate and geographical position of which somewhat resembled that of Greece, seem to have known early the use of *Baths* of Water and of *Hot-Air*.

In India, Phœnicia, and Egypt, the *Bath*, under various modifications, was employed as a remedial agent, as well as a mode of cleansing the body. Even barbarous nations have resorted to *Heated Air* as means of cure: the aboriginal Peruvians, Mexicans, North American Indians, New Zealanders, Patagonians, and Laplanders, are said to have been well acquainted with the properties of Vapour and Heated Air. The restorative virtues of the *Hot-Air Bath*, as well as that of warm water, were well known to the combatants of the Greek Games after violent exertions in the Olympic Games, of charioteering, wrestling, boxing, running, and other martial exercises. When exertion caused exhaustion, the balmy influence of the *Bath* soothed the wearied muscles, calmed the excitement of the brain, lulled the passions stimulated by rivalry, and afforded repose to the agitated warriors. We have no very distinct account of the progress of the *Baths* during the Regal and Republican periods of Roman History; but it is evident that the Carthaginians two or three centuries before their conquest had built *Baths*, and that they were copied from those of the Greeks. When the city of Carthage was destroyed, the public buildings, the Temples, Palaces, Theatres, and *Baths*, were of the same style and character as those built in Rome. Dr. Davis in his recent instructive work

on Carthage has described the ruins of *Baths* in that city; the construction, size, and appearance of the chambers—the hypocausts and ornaments indicate the same style as those of the *Roman* and *Pompeian Thermae*.

The full development of the *Thermae* was reserved for the Augustan and succeeding ages. Augustus Cæsar was the patron of Art, and brought the treasures of Greece and Egypt to adorn the city of Rome: a saying of his is recorded, that "he found Rome made of bricks, and left it adorned with stone and marble." In his reign the *Consul Agrippa* built the most magnificent *Thermae*, which he dedicated to the Roman people; the present *Pantheon* formed a part of them. In the centre is a grand and lofty dome 120 feet in diameter at its base; its walls were lined with marbles of every variety of colour, brought from the eastern dominions, beautiful specimens of the most costly and rare kinds, the rose-antique, the giallo-antique and verd-antique. Porphyry cut into different patterns formed the floor which remains imperishable to this day. The eight lofty Corinthian Columns of Egyptian granite which support the Pediment are proofs of the grandeur and durability of this splendid monument of the genius and taste of the Roman Consul. In the reign of Augustus Cæsar, hundreds of minor baths were built at the public expense, as well as by the private liberality of enlightened and generous Patricians. All these have perished or are in ruins, save only that one great glorious structure the *Bath of Agrippa*, which continues to attest the value set on *Public Health* by the munificent Consul.

The structure now called *The Pantheon* is one of the most beautiful and most perfect of the ancient buildings in Rome. When Roman greatness reached its summit, successive Emperors vied with each other in the construction of *Thermae* for the public use. The city of Rome was enriched by such stupendous structures, adorned with such precious marbles and statuary, that they were the grandest monuments and the glory of the age, and constituted an epoch conspicuous for the development of *Sanitary measures* for the promotion of public health, of no mean importance in the estimation of the Romans: while a public officer of high dignity was appointed over the management of the *Baths*. Hygeia, the goddess of health, and Esculapius, the god of medicine, were invoked as the presiding deities of those buildings; and their statues were invariably placed in the atrium or entrance hall of the edifices. These same deities were discovered also in the Baths of Carthage, an evidence of the importance attached to the supposed guardians of the public health.

It is a very remarkable circumstance, that the splendid ruins at Rome which continue to interest the traveller, the archaeologist and historian, the *Thermae* of Titus, of Hadrian, of Caracalla, Diocletian, and Constantine were built by those very Emperors who had once trodden the land of Britain. The fact of their temporary residence in this kingdom may tend

to explain the circumstance why the Roman and Anglo-Roman *Thermæ* were identical in structure and similar in embellishment. Wherever the Romans carried their victorious arms, they established their Laws, Religion, and Customs. The British inhabitants were little better than savages, and their conquerors had no difficulty in subjugating the whole country, making fine broad roads, from one end of the kingdom to the other, keeping a line of communication from town to town, and camp to camp. Along these great high roads, Military Stations were fixed; the tessellated pavements found in the direction of the roads indicate the existence of those Villas where Generals and Prefects resided: attached to these Villas, were the ever accompanying and essential adjuncts of Roman life, the *Thermæ*, both public and private.

Before I narrate the history and characteristics of the British *Thermæ*, it may be, perhaps, proper to mention something of their prototypes in Italy, as to their mode of construction and adornment. Whenever the traveller bends his steps into the arena of ancient Rome, few ruins appear so imposing as those of the *Thermæ*. The gigantic Colosseum first arrests his attention, as well as the Forum, and the Arches of Constantine, Severus, and Titus; but these latter are comparatively small buildings. As he advances into the gardens of Diocletian and Caracalla, and sees the enormous ruins of these majestic *Thermæ*, and the extensive area of ground which encloses them, he becomes sensibly and profoundly impressed with the sentiment that the Roman mind was imbued with grand conceptions; and that it deemed the *Bath*, with its games and exercises, worthy of a National dignity. Standing in the midst of these ruins, he feels the emotions of his mind more seriously impressed, when he surveys the stupendous masses, and reflects on the wisdom of a Great People, who regarded sanitary institutions in the true Spirit of Philanthropy.

So magnificent indeed were the Public Baths, that historians use the most grandiloquent language in describing them. The Egyptian granite was beautifully in-laid with the precious green marbles of Numidia. Statues of Emperors, Generals, Philosophers, and Poets ornamented the halls; and pavements in gorgeous colours, representing the Mythology of the Greeks, the Roman games, and battles of the gods; and heroes, birds, beasts, fishes, and monsters of all kinds, griffins, sea-lions, sea-devils, and imaginary beings depicted in Mosaics. Gibbon, in his great work, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," observes, "the walls of the lofty apartment were covered with curious Mosaics, that imitated the art of the pencil in the elegance of design, and the variety of colours. It was the ambition of the Roman Emperors to construct these superb *Thermæ* either to conciliate the people, or to exhibit their own power and riches. They were the common luxury of all classes, in them the people found their chief amusements; music and dancing, gymnastics, and gladiatorial exhibitions often accompanied the recreations of the *Sudatory* and *Piscina*."