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Public Baths in the 4th-5th Century Rome: Between Popular Needs and Technical Solutions

The regional catalogues, drawn up in the 4th century AD, document in Rome the existence of 11 imperial thermal buildings. Some of them, built in the 3rd century AD (Caracalla’s Bath) or in the 4th century AD (DIOCLETIAN’S BATHS), are among the best known structures, preserved, larger and more complex than the Roman Empire has ever had. After the Constantine’s Baths built on the Quirinal around 315 AD, but probably started by Maximus, Rome was no longer provided for the construction of new imperial thermal structures. Over time, however, interventions aimed at extraordinary maintenance, restoration or embellishment of these buildings of public utility were recorded more frequently. The contribution of epigraphy can be useful to better understand the extent of some interventions - especially in the partial or total absence of archaeological evidence - that from the 3rd to 4th century AD became increasingly frequent. The inscriptions testify that very soon even the thermal baths of more recent construction needed interventions of a certain complexity: a concrete example of this are the Caracalla’s Baths, equipped with a large apse of the caldarium thanks to the munificentia of Constantine (CIL, VI 40772 = EDR073541). A similar case also occurred in the oldest Agrippa’s Baths, which, thanks to Constantine’s sons, underwent restoration work due to the antiquity of the building (CIL, VI 11165 = EDR1111337). Constantine’s Baths were restored to their former glory (in primum faciem splendoremoque), on the initiative of the urban prefect Petronius Perpenna Magnus Quadratus, after a period of long neglect and devastation following the looting of the city (410 or 472 AD) had made them unusable (CIL, VI 1750 = EDR111536). The initiative of Julius Felix Campanius is responsible for the embellishment (ad augendum gratiam) of the Baths of Trajan, as evidenced by a statue base that has adorned the pediment of this urban prefect (CIL, VI 1670 = EDR111482). The boxes below contain some emblematic cases of epigraphic texts dated or datable to the 4th and 5th century AD united by the presence of a restoration made to a thermal buildings. The first example concerns a well-preserved or easily integrated inscription; the second includes two recently acquired texts, partially preserved, of which it is possible to provide some additions. The last example is a fragmentary text known only from manuscript tradition, engraved on a marble lintel which, although published in CIL VI 30374, has not been given due consideration: the place of the discovery and the part of the text preserved would suggest a restoration in the late antiquity to which a building was subjected, perhaps just the famous and monumental Caracalla’s Baths.

CIL: Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Berolini 1863.
EDR: Epigraphic Database Roma (www.edr-erd.it).

Example I: well-preserved or easily integrated text

Salvus ac florentius dd. (dominis) nn. (nostris) Honorio et Theodosio perpetuis semper Aug.(Augustus), Caecina Decius Acinatus Albinus, v(iri) clarissimae, praef(ectus) urbi, vice sacra indicans, cellam tepidarum inl(ocrum) omni parte l(ibellin) [i], de qua cellarium nia pendebat et erectum ubi fuit[is]
dammentis arcum duplici munint[io]ne fulcivit, d(e)us[v]tus (numinis) mi(arr)r(i)st(a)rii eorum.

Chronology: 414 AD.
Bibliography: CIL, VI 1703; EDR111467 (A. Ferraro).

Example II: partially preserved texts

Fragment of a marble slab, mentioning the restoration of the Thermae Deciane, including interventions on specific parts of the building: paries[er], solum, pavimentum, porticus...

Chronology: 4th century AD.

Example III: very fragmentary text

Fragment of an architrave, mentioning the restoration of a collapsed building (maybe a bath?) to give it back to the public use.

Chronology: 4th-5th century AD.
Bibliography: CIL, VI 30374; EDR169395 (G. Crimi).