



Power and people in ancient Rome

The Baths of Caracalla

The aqueducts that supplied Rome were feats of engineering and impressive monuments. Water is a necessity of life, but in the city of Rome water was not just essential but also a cultural symbol. The construction of aqueducts, fountains and baths was a matter of civic pride. One of the largest consumers of water in the city was the public baths, especially the large *thermae* constructed by the emperors. The Baths of Caracalla, located in the outskirts of ancient Rome, on the Via Appia, were constructed by the emperor Caracalla in CE 211–216.

The site occupied an area of approximately 120,000 square metres, or 30 acres. The sheer scale of the complex was designed to impress. The Baths stood as a monument to the wealth and power of emperor and empire. The facilities and grounds encompassed not just the baths, but exercise spaces, libraries and gardens.

Today the basic structure of the Baths is reasonably well preserved and the scale of the ruin is still awe-inspiring. But the interiors are largely lost, making it difficult to recreate the full grandeur of the complex but also aspects of how the space functioned. The bath block had four main entrances (now closed up). These were once framed by columned porches. On the interior a large swimming-pool, cold hall and hot room were all aligned on the central axis. A series of secondary rooms, including the exercise courts, were duplicated in a symmetrical arrangement on each side. The main entrance halls flanked the open air swimming pool. With steps leading down into it, the swimming pool or *natatio* was about a metre deep and was overlooked by a stage-like *façade*. The statue niches of this survive and would have originally been adorned with colourful marble figures. On the other side of the entrances were the changing rooms, all paved in black mosaic with white geometric designs. Each *palaestra* or exercise area was originally open to the sky, and was surrounded on three sides by porticoes, paved with mosaics.

A semi-circular *exhedra* off each *palaestra* gave access to the main cold rooms. In each corner of the cold room, or *frigidarium*, were plunge baths, fed by fountains pouring from the niches around them. The south side of the *frigidarium* led to the warm room or *tepidarium*. Beyond this was a circular shaped hot room or *caldarium* which, except for two piers of brick-faced concrete, no longer survives. Other hot rooms flanked this. Their missing front walls were composed almost entirely of glass to maximise light and heat. On the opposite side of the *frigidarium* was a circular pool in a central bay. Beyond this stood the main entrance to the swimming pool. Originally the baths must have been a riot of colour – filled with marbles, mosaics and paintings – only tantalising traces of which now survive.

To the rear of the bath building were further facilities. A stadium shaped structure with tiered seating may have been used for athletic events. A now heavily restored rectangular hall lined with niches may have been a library. Further rooms provided space for socialising and the display of statues.

The Baths of Caracalla catered for a variety of social activities and a visit to these Baths had the potential to be an awe-inspiring experience.