



Power and people in ancient Rome

Baths in Ostia

Ancient Ostia lay on the coast a short distance from the city of Rome, for which it acted as the chief port.

The site of Ostia was extensively excavated in the twentieth century, with much of the work carried out rapidly in the 1930s. Ostia provides us with some insights into town life that are simply not available in the city of Rome.

There are numerous well-preserved buildings that front the streets, bars that served food and drink,

Ostia was a small town compared to Rome and we should be wary of making simple analogies. Nevertheless the number and variety of public baths in the town is suggestive of the importance of bathing as a social activity.

One of Ostia's most impressive baths was the so called 'Forum Baths'. The northern block was rectangular and symmetrical. This housed the entrance halls and changing rooms. At its centre lay the frigidarium, with two plunge pools on the north and south sides. The heated rooms on the south side of the building step out from west to east. These rooms had large windows in their southern walls to make the maximum use of sunlight. The warmest rooms, the tepidaria and caldarium, were heated by the hypocaust system which ran through the marble-veneered floors and walls. The Caldarium had three hot baths, the southern one with a large window behind it. The Forum Baths had a roughly triangular Palaestra or exercise area, surrounded by a colonnade – off of which may have opened shops and other premises.

For Ostia the Forum Baths were large and impressive. We do not know who paid for their construction but it was a generous act of public benefaction. Ostia also has many smaller and more modest baths. One such is known as the Baths of the Seven Sages. It takes its name from these wall-paintings, found in a small room, which depict and name Greek philosophers and make bawdy references to their bodily functions.

The baths were small but intricately decorated. The round frigidarium had a floor featuring a black and white mosaic depicting hunting scenes.

Some of the archways through to the frigidarium were covered with colourful mosaics. In an adjacent room this plunge bath had walls painted with images of Venus, cupids and marine creatures. The Baths of the Seven Sages were small but well-appointed. They may have served the apartment block in which they were located, but could have also been open to the public. The inhabitants of Ostia could choose where to bathe; they could opt for scale and grandeur or for a more intimate experience.