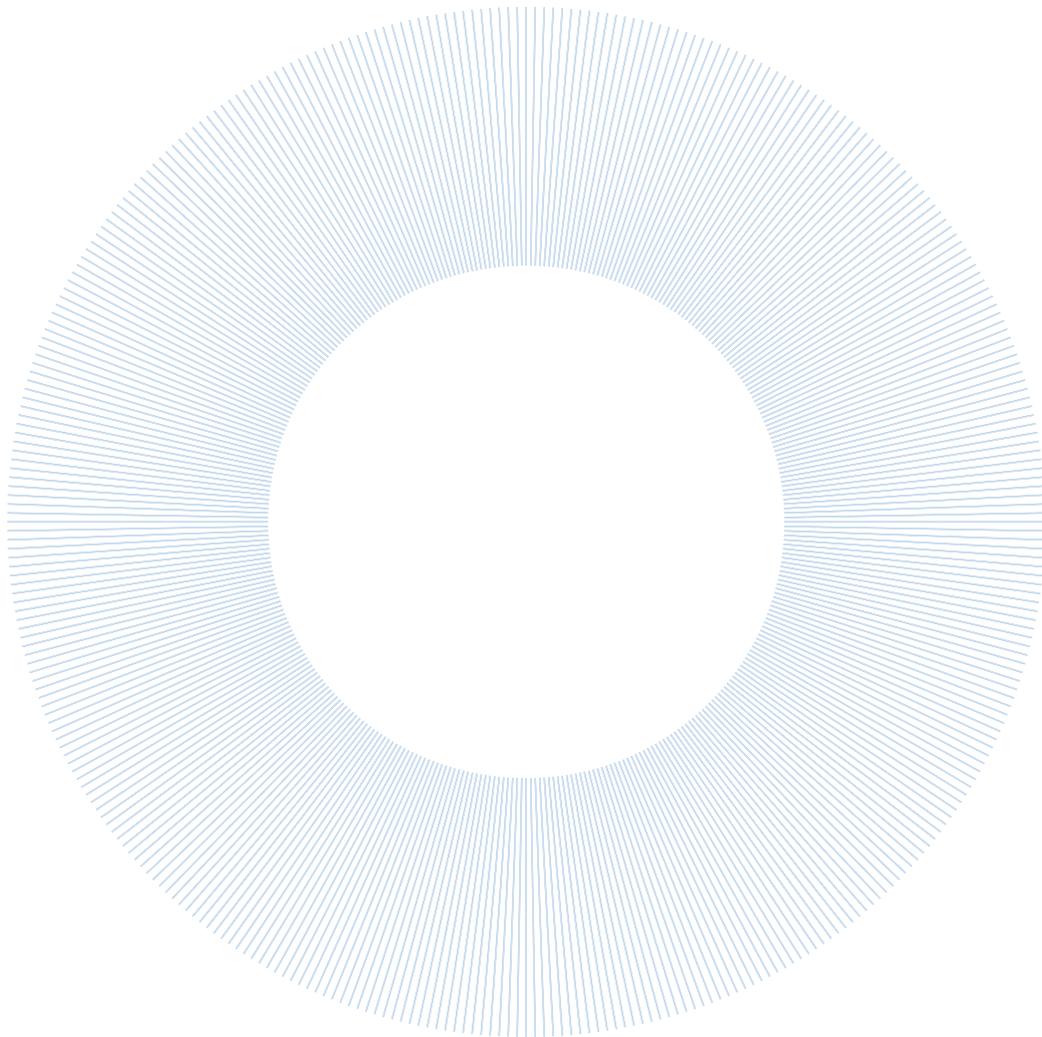


Bathing, Beauty and Christianity in the Middle Ages



Elizabeth Archibald

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BATHING, BEAUTY AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Most of my work focuses on the later Middle Ages, the time of the development of the written vernaculars of western Europe and the rise of romance as a literary genre. But in thinking about my research project on baths and bathing in medieval literature and society in relation to the Durham research theme 'The Recovery of Beauty,' I realized that I needed to know much more about the attitude of the early Church to bathing, and how this evolved in the later Middle Ages. It turns out to be considerably more complex than one might suppose. The early Christians, living in the Roman empire with its culture of bathing, did not all condemn it out of hand. The growth of the ascetic movement and monasticism produced some extremely negative reactions to bathing, but some churches and monasteries built and maintained baths for the poor and sick, and many senior clerics also created splendid bath suites for themselves. In the later Middle Ages, preachers inveighed against luxurious bathing, but both male and female religious continued to enjoy public and private baths, which were increasingly popular across western Europe, and bathing imagery was sometimes used by ecclesiastical writers for didactic purposes. This ambivalent attitude is reflected in the imaginative literature of the period.



It might be expected that for medieval Christians suspicion of tempting female beauty and disapproval of concern for external appearance would lead to a negative view of bathing. Virginia Smith claims that 'Early Christians evidently had a rooted aversion to baths and nakedness; but in this they were strangely alone, compared to their neighbours [Islam] [...]' (Smith, 2007, p. 140). She echoes an argument voiced long ago by Gibbon, who 'saw the monks as defying all we understand by civilisation and culture. Every sensation offensive to man was thought acceptable to God; pleasure and guilt are synonymous' (Chadwick, 1985, p. 6). But in fact the attitudes of the early Church were much more complicated, and that complexity continued throughout the Middle Ages. It is ironic that it was the Church that maintained some of the old Roman public baths in the early medieval period (and later); in some cases this was an act of charity to serve pilgrims and the poor and sick, but in others the Church made money from the entry fees. While early ascetics were condemning bathing, high-status clerics were also installing and renovating private bath suites. Monastic rules prescribed bathing only once or twice a year for monks unless they were ill and needed medicinal baths (recommended in many medical treatises); but this rule was not strictly observed, and in the later Middle Ages some ecclesiastics were contractually permitted to go to spas.

The first Christians lived in a Roman culture where public and private bathing were the norm. As Yegül remarks, 'Perhaps it would have been unrealistic to expect the Church to take a consistent stance against such a popular institution, which had become a deeply ingrained part of daily life' (Yegül, 2010, p. 202). Many Roman villas had bath suites, but what is striking about the Roman world is the extent of public bathing. Every city had a public water supply and public baths, and the entry charges were moderate. The baths were open for rich and poor, free and slaves, and maintaining them was a civic duty taken on by public figures. It was normal practice to go to the baths to meet and make friends (and also lovers), do business deals and relax in

pleasurable surroundings. So early Christians like St Augustine would certainly have seen going to the baths as normal and pleasurable. The cult of asceticism was not a fundamental aspect of early Christianity, but developed gradually during the third and fourth centuries (Brown, 1988), and was not general practice. Sisinnius, the Novatian bishop of Constantinople at the end of the fourth century, apparently went twice a day to the public baths, and when asked by a disapproving ascetic, 'Do you really think a bishop should have two baths' replied, 'There isn't time for a third' (Hoss, 2005, p. 88, citing Socrates, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.22). It was John Wesley who said that cleanliness was next to godliness, but of the three religions of the book, Christianity is the least concerned about physical cleanliness and ritual washing; it is not necessary to wash before entering a church to pray. Public fountains and baptismal fonts in both Eastern and Western Europe sometimes carried the inscription 'Wash your sins not just your face' (the phrase, attributed to St Gregory of Nyssa, is a palindrome in Greek: *Nipson anomēmata mē monan opsin*). Moral, inner cleanliness is the big issue for the Christian world, and the most important form of bathing is a once-only symbolic form of washing, baptism. Indeed, an Arab gardener in the *Thousand and One Nights* remarks that Christians never have to wash after men in black pour water over them at birth (Ashenburg, 2008, p. 49, citing the translation of Mathers, 1953, vol. 2, p. 57).

Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) in his Christian educational treatise *Paedagogus* explains that there are four reasons for baths: 'cleanliness, warmth, health and pleasure' (Ashenburg, 2008, pp. 56–7). This view still prevailed in the sixth century when Archbishop Isidore of Seville wrote his very influential encyclopedia *Etymologiae*; his definitions of baptism and bathing sum up the ambivalent attitude of early Christians. First he explains baptism:

43. The Greek term 'baptism' (*baptismum*, cf. βαπτισμός), is the equivalent of the Latin *tinctio* ("dipping," "dyeing") because in it a person is changed by the spirit of grace into a better thing [...] than he was. 44. For we were filthy before with the ugliness of sins, but in that bathing we become beautiful in the whitening of the virtues, whence it is written in the Song of Songs (8:5, in an older version), "Who is this that cometh up whitened?" [...] 48. For just as the outer body is washed by water, so the spirit also is purified by the Holy Spirit in a hidden way through the mystery of baptism. [...] [the waters] receive the power of purgation, so that in them both flesh and soul, befouled by sins, may be cleansed (Isidore, 2006, p. 149, VI.xix.43–8).

Here the issue is moral beauty and the dirt of sin. But later Isidore explains that 'Baths (*balneum*) are assigned their name from the idea of the lifting of sorrow, because the Greeks called it βαλανεῖον (cf. βάλλειν, 'cast away'; ἀνία, 'grief'), since it takes away one's anxiety of spirit' (Isidore, 2006, pp. 307–8). This etymology was evidently quite widespread, for it encouraged St Augustine to bathe for relief after his mother's death (though he notes that he felt no better for it): 'The idea came to me to go and bathe, for I had heard that the bath – which the Greeks call *balaneion* – is so called because it drives anxiety from the mind' (Augustine, 2006, p. 182, IX.12.32). Isidore goes on to explain *gymnasium*, *apodyterium* (dressing-room) and *propina/popina* (a place serving refreshments); in the sixth century he is still describing standard classical bathing practices.

Baptism is central to Christian doctrine, but it also represents the Christian adaptation of Roman bathing rituals. Early baptisteries were modelled on Roman baths: the central basin, rooms in which to undress and later lie down to recover, total immersion (three times in memory of Christ's death), though later this was simplified to water on the forehead only (Leguay, 2002, pp. 383–4). A bath before baptism was required, usually on Maundy Thursday for Easter baptism. Augustine, responding to a question about varying practices in relation to fasting on Saturdays and in Lent, gives a possible explanation of the more general custom of bathing at Easter:

If you ask how the custom of bathing arose, no more reasonable explanation occurs to me than that the bodies of those to be baptized had become foul during the observance of Lent, and they would be offensive if they came to the font without bathing [...] and because it was permitted for those about to be baptized, many others wished to join with them in bathing and relaxing the fast (Augustine, 1951, pp. 259–60, Letter 54, 9–10).

Baptismal water cleanses the Christian from moral sin and gives new life: ‘Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you. And a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you [...]’ (Luke 5:12–39, cited by Smith, 2007, p. 129). The equation of sin with dirt occurs in the Old Testament too:

Therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will discover their secret parts [...]. And it shall come to pass, that instead of a sweet smell there shall be a stink [...] and burning instead of beauty (Isaiah 3:16–24, cited by Smith, 2007, p. 131).

Early Christians did not ignore the issue of good and bad smells. The authors of a cultural history of smell note that for the Church, the saints smell sweet in both life and death, whereas ordinary corpses stink, as does the Devil (Classen et al., 1994, pp. 52ff.). They cite St Paul’s comment that ‘we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved’ (2 Corinthians 2:15).

St Jerome was an early and influential writer who favoured the ascetic approach, and condemned those who were repulsed by the unwashed state. Writing to Heliodorus about the hermitic life, he made a famous comment on bathing and baptism: ‘Is your skin rough and scaly because you no longer bathe? He that is once washed in Christ needs not to wash again’ (Mierow, 1963, pp. 68–9, Letter 14:10.3). Some pious Christians stopped washing regularly even if they were not living in deserts or caves. Melania the Younger, granddaughter of one of the ascetic Roman ladies in Jerome’s circle, gave up bathing as part of her campaign to persuade her husband to agree to a chaste marriage (Brown, 1988, p. 410). Later, however, as abbess of a nunnery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, she requested that a bath be constructed in the nunnery so that the nuns need not go to the public baths, further evidence that early Christians did not entirely reject the bathing culture (Hoss, 2005, p. 86). This is apparently the first reference to a monastic bathhouse.

Early Christians continued the Jewish custom of brides bathing before the wedding (Hoss, 2005, p. 82), but some male writers did inveigh against bathing for women. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (d. 373), proclaimed its dangers in his ‘Second Letter to Virgins’:

The dove is acquainted with the bath in the ordinary waters in the basin; she does not take off her garment or reveal her nudity [...]. A basin is sufficient for you to wash away your dirt [compare OT and NT characters – outer purity is less important]. But learn how women who bathe have been injured and have dragged others down into corruption. The first is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, who, when she stripped, instantly stripped such a great man of holiness and rule (2 Samuel 11) [...]. You see how she who wanted to bathe poured out filth on such a man; for because she washed her body, she defiled another man’s soul. But she was not the only one! Susanna as well, when she washed and bathed in the garden, caused the two elders to fall (Sus.). For the uncovered flesh covered their eyes so that they did not contemplate heaven (Sus. 9). Therefore, if these things happened in this way, it is not suitable to bathe, lest there be scandal for you and others (Brakke, 1995, p. 297, ch. 15–17, and see Smith, 2007, pp. 139–40).

Brakke notes that in the third century the virgins of Carthage defied their bishop, Cyprian, who did not want them to use the public baths, with the argument ‘Let everyone look to the

disposition with which he comes there; my concern is only that of refreshing and washing my poor body' (1995, pp. 42–3). But the Christian view, often repeated by the early Fathers, was that it was all too easy for women to lead men astray, regardless of intention. The tradition that a bathing woman could seduce a man with disastrous consequences is of course epitomized in the story of Bathsheba, much illustrated in the later Middle Ages, often in a fairly titillating way. Brian Levy comments on the Bathsheba story that 'medieval theologians and preachers saw in the bath a potent sex-aid leading to the sin of wanton pleasure, for the expiation of which the Penitentials laid down clear tariffs (even to see one's own wife naked and to bathe with her constituted a sin against marital morals)' (Levy, 2000, p. 144). It forms an interesting contrast with the equally popular story of Susanna, where the bathing woman is virtuous and has no intention of tempting the lecherous elders who falsely accuse her (though evidently her intention was irrelevant to Athanasius). Réau comments that for the theologians, David symbolized Christ and Bathsheba in the bath the Church, washing off worldly dirt to be worthy of the Bridegroom; in early Christian art Susanna and the Elders symbolized the saved soul, and then later the Church, with the Elders as persecuting pagans (Réau, 1956, vol. 2, part i, pp. 273 and 395). He notes that the success of these stories in art owed more to titillating potential than to religious symbolism: the image of Bathsheba degenerated over the centuries, so that 'Cette scène scabreuse est représentée avec réserve dans l'art du Moyen-Âge, sans aucune réserve à partir de la Renaissance.' The reserve is already weakening in both scenes by the later Middle Ages, as Réau notes. Both sets of illustrations offer interesting variations on the design and location of indoor and outdoor bathing tubs and pools.

In the early Middle Ages churches were quite often built on top of Roman public baths; this may have been a way of challenging and annulling pagan practices, but the large spaces would have been very convenient for Christian basilicas, and also for baptisms. Yegül notes that 'The widespread Christian belief that the baths of the pagan world were linked with the devil could be conveniently reversed by formally purifying them' (Yegül, 2010, p. 202); St John Chryostom expelled a devil from the public baths in Ephesus in the fifth century and then performed a service there. Not all leading Christians were so hostile, however. Henry Chadwick writes of 'Augustine's asceticism with a human face' (Chadwick, 1985, p. 23), noting that he did not share Jerome's admiration for dirt and squalor: 'He thought it ostentatious. He once observes that one consequence of the Fall, by which Adam was condemned to work by the sweat of his brow, was that Eve found her partner repellently malodorous' (Chadwick, 1985, pp. 16–17, citing on daily washing Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte* ii.12.41, and on Eve *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 133.2). Tertullian tried to justify bathing as not being the equivalent of paganism, arguing that the intention and circumstances are crucial, and that bathing in itself is not a sin: 'It is not places in themselves which taint us, but what is done in these places' (*De spectaculis* 8: 9–10).

Christians like Jews were opposed to the use of gymnasia (Hoss, 2005, p. 81), so it is interesting that a gymnasium plays a crucial part in the very popular late Latin narrative *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*, which was in a number of monastic libraries in the early Middle Ages and was much copied and translated in the later Middle Ages (Archibald, 1991). The shipwrecked and destitute hero goes to the public baths in Pentapolis (North Africa) where he meets and impresses the king by his exploits in the gymnasium; he is then invited to dinner at the palace, and later marries the princess. In some medieval versions this episode was retained (even when it was not fully understood), but in others it is omitted and replaced by some other popular activity such as a ball game or a tournament (Archibald, 1991, pp. 72–5). This suggests that while going to the baths did not generally need explanation and was fairly widely accepted, the gymnasium was more problematic, both conceptually and morally, and some writers did not want the hero to visit public baths at all.

Natural hot springs seem to have been regarded rather differently from public bath structures by Christian writers. Gregory of Nyssa describes them as part of God's bounty in *De pauperibus amandis* (Van Heck, 1964, p. 12, 464 A.4–6, cited by Hoss, 2005, p. 82): 'Who made the hot sources spring out of the soil? Some heal coldness and dampness, others loosen dryness and stiffness.' Healing springs are sometimes found at sites of martyrdom, for instance where St Julitta walked to execution (Berger, 1982, p. 78). Isidore of Seville describes the properties of lakes and springs all over the known world (Isidore, 2006, pp. 276–7, XIII.xiii), and hot springs are often mentioned by medieval historians and poets in describing topography. Wherever there were natural hot springs, they probably continued to be used by the locals from Roman times into the Middle Ages regardless of political and religious changes; they were particularly popular in the later Middle Ages, when elaborate spas sprang up about them (known in Germany as Wildbäder). If Bath is indeed the subject of the fragmentary eighth-century Old English poem 'The Ruin,' as is widely believed, the Roman structures had clearly fallen into disuse by that time, but bathers may still have visited the lake that formed there. Discussing the poem, Cunliffe comments 'The phenomenon of nearly half a million gallons of steaming hot water being extruded from the ground every day is hardly likely to have passed unnoticed in Anglo-Saxon England,' and notes that Bath seems to be mentioned (though not by name) by Bede and by the ninth-century chronicler known as Nennius (Cunliffe, 1983, p. 79). In the late eleventh century the newly appointed bishop of Wells, John de Villula, moved his see to Bath; he was himself a doctor, and thus particularly appreciated and exploited the access to the hot springs, with great success (Kealey, 1981, p. 58).

This is further evidence that the Church did not totally reject the practice of bathing, though it certainly tried to regulate it, in various ways. In fourth-century Byzantium, Athanasius repeatedly wrote to the Emperor to ask that on holy days and during Lent, Christians should not frequent baths or taverns – this suggests that they usually did (Talbot, 1975, p. 87). But Athanasius was not calling for a total ban on Christian bathing, and as Ashenburg notes, '[...] while they remained heroically dirty themselves, saints frequently washed other people' (Ashenburg, 2008, p. 62). St Radegund, a sixth-century French queen, washed lepers and paupers in tubs every Thursday and Saturday, according to her biographer (Ashenburg, 2008, pp. 62–3), as did later saints such as Elizabeth of Hungary. In some visions saints instruct the sick to take baths (Berger, 1982, p. 80); this is reminiscent of the Greek cult of Asclepius. In early medieval Italy and in Byzantium, the old Roman public baths were sometimes maintained by Christian clergy, and made available to the poor and sick. In the East, according to Brown, 'On Maundy Thursday and on other feast days, the poor marched to the public baths, a new class of citizens, called to enjoy a new form of public benevolence' (Brown, 1988, pp. 440–1, and see Magdalino, 1990). For the Church, bathing was no longer a daily bourgeois activity aimed at social and business activity, but a charitable, medical and religious enterprise (Stasolla, 2002). Yegül comments that 'For the most part the Church was ready to tolerate bathing for the masses if the pleasure component was taken out of it – that is, if bathing was undertaken as a functional, hygienic, and medical activity' (Yegül, 2010, p. 204, citing Gregory I, *Registrum Epistolarum* I.xiii.3).

Bathing and thorough washing must have remained fairly normal for Christians, or there would have been no point in saintly figures not washing for long periods, the ascetic practice known as *alousia*. St Anthony is reputed never to have washed even his feet; the hermit Julian forbade his followers to wash. This extreme strategy is reflected, in a more restrained way, in rules for monastic life. According to the Benedictine Rule (c. 530), monks should bathe only a few times a year (usually at Easter), unless they were ill, in which case they could bathe according to need. Not all indulgence was banished, however: as Smith notes rather cynically, 'Asceticism was eventually tamed: nowhere had such excellent baths and latrines as the grand medieval monasteries' (Smith, 2007, p. 143, and see Squatriti, 2008). At least six baths (some for

medical purposes) are included in the plan of the great Carolingian abbey of St Gall (Horn and Born, 1979). Bishops and popes had elaborate bathing facilities built in their palaces. Augustine's view that dirt was not necessary for holiness is echoed by a number of later Christian writers. For instance, in the anonymous treatise written for English female recluses known as *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1200), the (male) writer approves of regular washing: 'Wash yourself wherever there is need as often as you want, and your things too – filth was never dear to God, though poverty and plainness are pleasing' (*Ancrene Wisse*, 1993, p. 196).

Secular bathing did continue in some places on more Roman lines, though this probably happened more in Italy and southern Europe, where Roman buildings and facilities such as aqueducts survived more widely than in the north. In early medieval Italy, at least, many Roman baths were renovated and continued to be used even under Gothic rule, and in southern Italy some private houses were equipped with bath suites (see Ward-Perkins, 1984; Squatriti, 1998; Caskey, 1999). Public baths seem to have been quite widely used, according to Paolo Squatriti: Collective bathing at central, public places was instead ingrained in the social fabric. Going to the king's, duke's, or even to the bishop's baths was one of the expectations of the elite which supported these leaders, at least into the ninth century. [...] the bath remained the standard place of gathering and intermingling among peers (1998, p. 48).

Squatriti is writing of Italy in the period 400–1100, but there is vivid testimony for north of the Alps in the case of Charlemagne, who built a palace at Aachen specifically because of the hot springs there, and liked to bathe and swim with more than a hundred of his family and entourage (Smith, 2007, pp. 145–7, citing Einhard, 1969, pp. 133, 77). In part this reflects his aspiration to be like the Romans, but his behaviour is further proof that the Church could not stamp out bathing altogether, or did not try to.

I do not have space here to discuss the use of bathing in imaginative literature in the Middle Ages (this will be part of my monograph), but it is worth noting much medieval literature was written by ecclesiastics, including the important genre of romance as it emerged and rapidly developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Baths occur infrequently in romance, relative to what we know about real-life usage, but I do not think that this means they were unfamiliar: they are certainly presented as quite unexceptional in the aristocratic world of romance (Archibald, 2005). It is clear that baths (both public and private) were becoming more widely used in western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This may have been in part because the crusaders saw and admired the culture of bathing and water in the Middle East. As Roberta Magnusson points out, it is hard to know whether demand prompted a greater supply of water and bathing facilities in the twelfth-century 'renaissance' when western Europe was relatively stable and peaceful politically, and the aristocracy had more time and money to spend on the pleasures of gracious living, or whether technological developments made more facilities available (Magnusson, 2001, p. 153); or both factors may have been significant. There is also a lot of advice about care of the body in the Arab medical treatises, largely derived from Greek sources, which became available in Spain from the tenth century on. But there was also more continuity from the Roman world than has been previously supposed, as Caskey notes (1999, p. 189): 'What was once deemed a sudden (re)appearance can now be shown to stem from a continuous tradition stretching from late antiquity to the Renaissance.'

Health is an important aspect of the popularity of bathing with both ecclesiastics and laypeople. Bathing was strongly recommended as one of the six 'non-natural things' beneficial to health (others included bloodletting and exercise) in many medical treatises in the classical Galenic and Arab traditions which filtered through to the West (Nicoud, 2007). Influential medieval texts include works by Constantine the African, an eleventh-century Tunisian doctor who worked

at Salerno and became a monk at Monte Cassino, and other Salernitan treatises; Aldobrandino of Siena, whose much copied *Régime du corps* (1256, dedicated to Beatrice of Savoy), was the earliest vernacular health manual; Peter of Eboli, an early thirteenth-century Campanian monk and court poet to the King of Sicily, whose Latin poem describing each of the various baths at Pozzuoli was much copied and illustrated; and the very popular *Secreta Secretorum*, a twelfth-century translation of an Arabic treatise purportedly by Aristotle, which circulated very widely in Latin and the vernaculars. All recommend bathing, with complex instructions about the impact of baths in different seasons, before and after meals, according to the age of the bather, etc. In Aldobrandino's work, bathing is recommended throughout the life cycle: for pregnant women, newborn babies, children, the middle-aged, and the old (Wallis, 2010, pp. 493–500). In the captions to illustrations in another popular translation of an Arab source, the *Tacuinum Sanitatis*, baths are recommended as remedies for a wide range of problems, from the effects of autumn, winter, northerly and southerly winds to digestive difficulties caused by veal and rice bread (Arano, 1976). The cures recommended in the *Physica* of Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth-century German abbess and mystic, frequently involve baths made with the water from boiling various plants, leaves and barks (and even in one case an anthill with its ants), as treatment for problems including leprosy, ulcers, scabies, fever and what she calls 'Gicht,' which according to her modern translator can mean gout, arthritis, lumbago, sciatica and a kind of paralysis or 'an abolition of function or falling apart' (Hildegard, 1998, p. 6).

Much of the available advice about medicinal bathing came from Arab sources (sometimes drawing on classical medical writers); it may be that some was repeated even though it was not applicable in the medieval west, but I do not think that was the case. It was translated and circulated by ecclesiastical writers, without any comment about exotic foreign customs, or hostility towards the practice as pagan or immoral. Such cures were practised by ecclesiastics as well as the laity. In twelfth-century Yorkshire, Ailred of Rievaulx suffered terribly from urinary stones, and took up to 40 baths a day, according to his biographer Walter Daniel (Daniel, 1950, p. 34). But no doubt the bath suites included in many episcopal and papal lodgings were not designed only for medical purposes. Church councils and writers of penitentials frequently condemned mixed bathing, which suggests that it happened quite a lot. Brundage comments on the period 1100–1140 'Canonists likewise repeated as legal injunctions the counsels of penitential authors against bathing in mixed company where men and women seeing one another in a state of undress might be sexually aroused' (Brundage, 1987, p. 204), and these injunctions continued in subsequent centuries.

Such rules seem to have honoured more in the breach, however. In comic tales such as the French fabliaux and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, there is much satire of lecherous monks (and nuns too) in erotic situations which feature bath tubs (see Levy, 2000). The statutes of Zurich Grossminster from 1376 on guaranteed the canons spring and autumn spa trips of eight days to nearby Baden without loss of pay, and the same was true for Mainz cathedral, and in Nuremberg for leading city officials (Studt, 2001, pp. 35, 48). Nuns too left their convents to go to spas, though enclosed religious were not supposed to; in fifteenth-century Germany, visitation records complain frequently about this (Studt, 2001, p. 48). According to Hemmerli's *Tractatus perutilis de balneis naturalibus seu termalibus* (1450), clerics and religious of both genders frolicked at Baden (Studt, 2001, p. 49). As late as the Renaissance, Cardinal D'Este was said to have frequented the baths for the women, not the cure (Palmer, 1990, p. 19).

Though both male and female religious may have enjoyed baths themselves, preachers in the later Middle Ages reminded their congregations in sermons that worldly pleasures such as scented baths would be replaced in the next life by cold pits, or by the fires of hell (Owst, 1961, pp. 413–14). In Lydgate's *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of Man* (c.1400, a translation of

a French allegorical poem by Deguileville), the personification Grace Dieu tells the pilgrim how he inappropriately pampers his mortal enemy:

Al hys desyres thow pursues,
 Somwhyle to lede hym to the stewes, [baths/brothel]
 To wasshe and bathe hym tendyrly,
 And to leyn him softely
 On ffether beddys, mad vul wel,
 Ffor to slepe hys undermel [...] [afternoon nap]
 (Lydgate, 1905, p. 250, lines 9039–44.)

This sounds delightful, but it is disastrous for the soul, since the enemy is revealed to be the body. In Middle English *stewe*, the word for a bath or bathhouse (derived from the French *estuve* meaning stove or heated room) soon came to mean *brothel* too; medieval literature and art make it very clear that baths were part of amorous foreplay, and this gave public bathhouses a bad name, leading to the closure of many in the sixteenth century. However, ecclesiastical writers sometimes recognize the popularity and value of bathing in spiritual analogies. In John Capgrave's *Life of St Katherine of Alexandria* (C15th), Jesus orders that Katherine be washed clean in preparation for her mystic marriage, and the Virgin adds:

It is a goodely usage, sothely to seye,
 Who schal be weddyd onto duke or kyng
 Befor hir weddyng to hafe a bathyng
 For to make her swete, for to make her clene,
 Else myght she renne in ful grete offens [...] [cause great offence]
 Aftyr your waschyng ye schal be full mery!
 (Capgrave, 1999, 3. 1069–73, 1078.)

This indicates that the custom of a bride bathing before her wedding was still current in late medieval England, though I have not found it in the romances, where one might have expected it to occur. Here the ritual washing designed for purity and beauty in the secular world of the aristocracy becomes a sort of baptism, as well as a marriage ritual, in the case of the saint. The Luttrell Psalter includes an image of a haloed woman bathing another haloed woman in a tub which may represent the Virgin being washed by St Anne (British Library MS Add. 42130, fol. 97v, in Brown, 2006).

A most unusual connection between bathing and marriage appears in the illustrations in the Wenceslas Bible, a spectacular, large and lavishly illustrated six-volume (but incomplete) manuscript produced in the late fourteenth century for the King of Bohemia (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2759–64). Many of the marginal images relate to bathing: the king himself appears, sometimes naked, sometimes in a tub or trapped in a pillory formed by the letter W, having his body or his hair washed by female bathing attendants wearing skimpy white shifts (sometimes completely see-through). The same female figure appears alone holding a pail and a bunch of twigs; sometimes a wild man is shown with the same accessories. There has been much critical debate about the significance of these images; the bible is associated with the king's second marriage, though it may have been started during the lifetime of his first wife. A recent suggestion is that the bathing maidens are images not only of virtue but also of fertility – both the king's marriages were childless (Hlaváčková, 1993; see also Krása, 1971). The frequency of these bathing images in such an elaborate bible produced for a king indicates both that bathing was a popular practice and that bathing images including nudity were not considered inappropriate in a religious text (the female bath attendant also appears in other manuscripts made for Wenceslas, such as the Golden Bull, and on the vaults of the gate of the Charles Bridge in Prague).

Rawcliffe notes that 'All forms of medical treatment invited theological analogy, but the bath, with its overtones of baptism and confession, was especially rich in religious symbolism' (2006, p. 228). In an early sixteenth-century German religious allegorical treatise, Thomas Murner's *Badenfahrt [Cleansing Journey]*, 1514, bathing imagery is used in a different but equally startling way (Braunstein, 1988, pp. 608–9). Christ borrows the trumpet of a bath attendant to summon Christians and teach them how to behave:

Thereupon God, taking pity on us,
Began to teach us
How we ought to bathe,
Wash, and purify ourselves, abandoning our shame
To the strength and might of His holy name [...]
It was God Himself who called us to the bath at the sound of His trumpet (1988, pp. 608-9).

In the woodblock images, Christ is seen blowing his trumpet as the Christian approaches the bathhouse, washing him as he lies on a couch, and pouring water into the tub where he sits. In 'The Bath of the Soul,' undressing represents getting rid of vices, the bathrobe is the shroud, the daily bath is the mass, the oil bath is baptism and the last rites, the thermal bath is deathbed conversion, and thanking the bathhouse attendant is thanksgiving. As Philippe Braunstein comments, 'The life of the body and the life of the spirit were perfectly congruent, the former providing concrete illustration of the latter' (1988, pp. 608–9). In his view, by the late Middle Ages the Church had stopped insisting on the dangers of bathing, which was practised by all levels of society: 'In the minds of many people frequent washing may have assumed the same spiritual value as frequent confession' (1988, p. 600).

Contrary to popular (and some scholarly) opinion, then, bathing was not entirely rejected by the early Christians; it continued to be a widespread and popular practice in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, though not on the scale of Roman bathing. The Church was particularly concerned with providing baths for the poor and sick; better-off bathers went to public baths, or used their own tubs at home. Although the Church worried about immoral behaviour at the public baths, and imaginative literature suggested that bathing and sex were often linked, medical baths were sanctioned by ecclesiastical writers, and were widely patronized by clergy and laity. The level of enthusiasm for bathing in Western Europe in the Middle Ages can be seen not only in imaginative writing and in the visual arts, but also in the way the Church used metaphors of bathing to encourage good Christian behaviour. In spite of Jerome's insistence that the only necessary bath was baptism, bathing (both public and private) was a very significant part of medieval life.



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Insights

Insights is edited by Barbara Graziosi, IAS Director and Professor of Classics. Correspondence should be directed to Audrey Bowron (a.e.bowron@durham.ac.uk)