

Public Baths in Late Antique Rome: Between Technical Language and Popular Needs

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AN OVERVIEW

The history of Rome in the 4th and 5th centuries is full of disorders and difficulties; the city had lost its role of one and only capital of the Empire, but continued to be a symbol still worthy of great consideration.

This fact is witnessed by the inscriptions related to public works and by the imperial laws issued after the middle of the 4th century, in which emperors and urban prefects show great interest in completing works that had been interrupted or in restoring already existing buildings. This phenomenon is attested too since the age of Valentinian I by an imperial constitution dated 364 AD:

Impp. Valentinianus et Valens aa. Ad Symmachum praefectum Urbi. Intra urbem Romam aeternam nullus iudicum novus opus informet, quotiens serenitatis nostrae arbitria cessabunt. Ea tamen instaurandi, quae iam deformibus ruinis intercuisse dicuntur, universis licentiam damus. Dat. VIII kal. Iun. Philippis divo Ioviano et Varroniano cons.

Emperors Valentinian and Valens Augustuses to Symmachus, Prefect of the City. None of the judges shall construct any new building within the Eternal City of Rome if the order therefore of Our Serenity should be lacking. However, we grant permission to all to restore those buildings which are said to have fallen into unsightly ruins. Given on the eight day before the kalends of June at Philippi in the year of the consulship of the sainted Jovian and of Varronianus

(Cod. Theod. 15.1.11 - May 25, 364 AD, Translation: Pharr 1952, 424.¹)

Among them, public baths and structures closely linked to them play a very important role.

The reason for this choice is probably the desire to maintain services that were considered fundamental for civic life, and to meet the more and more pressing needs and requests of the popular mass.

This research aims to collect the documentary sources - with a focus on the epigraphic documents - related to the restorations of urban public baths in the 4th and 5th centuries, and to analyse their technical language in order to propose a classification of the different types of intervention, as well as to offer concrete answers to problems that have not yet been studied in depth.

The reginary catalogues (*Notitia* and *Curiosum*), composed in the 4th century, document the existence of eleven imperial thermal buildings in Rome. Among them Caracalla's and Diocletian's Baths are the best-known and best-preserved structures to have survived in the Roman Empire.²

However, after the Baths of Constantine, built on the Quirinal around AD 315, Rome was no longer provided with new imperial thermal structures.³

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, from an early date, even the baths of more recent construction needed interventions of a certain complexity; a concrete example of this are the Baths of Caracalla: from an incomplete text, it is possible to deduce that in the years 326-333 AD the *calidarium* was equipped with a large apse thanks to the *munificentia* of Constantine. The inscription refers to the generosity of Constantine Maximus victorious Augustus and his sons ([---? *munifice?*] *ntia ddd. nnn.* (i.e. *dominorum nostrorum trium*) [---?] *Constantini maximi victoris Aug(usti) et [---]*) that had some works ordered to be done and dedicated ([---] *fieri disposuit ac dedicavit*).⁴ However, only a part of the marble *epistilium* remains of this structure, which is reminiscent of this intervention, and the apse at foundation level.

Similar considerations are also valid for the Baths of Diocletian: two inscriptions known only from manuscript tradition, and probably in both cases connected to trabeations, inform us about a late restoration: the first refers to the baths of Diocletian, built by the ancient emperors (*thermas*

Diocletianas a veteribus principib(us) institutas), while in the other text the reference to the baths of Diocletian can be integrated ([---] *Diocletianas* +[---]).⁵ The best preserved one seems to record the works of a certain relevance, as the surviving letters *OMN*[---] are to be integrated either with the adverb *omnino* or with the adjective *omnis* / *omne*.⁶

In the area of the *Sessorium* there were *thermae* traditionally attributed to Elena, but built on the initiative of *Septimius Severus*;⁷ if the reconstruction of the inscribed text is correct it would seem that Constantine's mother restored the structure for public enjoyment after a devastating fire:

D(omina) n(ostra) Helena ven[erabilis do]mini [n(ostri) Constantini A]ug(usti) mater e[st] / avia beatis[simor(um) et floren]tis[simor(um) Caesarum nostr]oru[m] / therm[as incendio d]estru[ctas restituit]

Our venerable mistress Helena, mother of our Lord Constantine and grandmother of our most blessed and flourishing Caesars, restored the baths destroyed by fire.

(*CIL* VI 1136 = 31244 cfr. pp. 3071, 4327, 4340; Spinola 1999, 294-295, n. 48; Lasala Navarro 2009, 251-252; *EDR* 111326 del 02/11/2016 (G. Crimi). Date: AD 317-324. Translation G. Crimi.)

The children of Constantine (*Constantius* and *Constans*), instead, are responsible for the major restoration of the Baths of Agrippa in the *Campus Martius*, required because of the antiquated age of the structure:

[Dd. nn. (i.e. domini nostri duo) Constantius] / [ac Cons]tans triumphatores Augusti / termas (!) vetustate labefactas restauraverunt, / Q(uinto) Rustico v(iro) [c(larissimo), praef(ecto) Urbi] / -----

Our Lords *Constantius* and *Constans* victorious *Augusti* restored the baths damaged due to old age, at the time when *Quintus Rusticus*, of *clarissimus* rank, was prefect of the City.

(*CIL* VI 1165 cfr. p. 4331; *EDR* 111337 del 30/07/2016 (G. Crimi). Date: AD 344-345. Translation G. Crimi. For the thermal structure see Ghini 1999.)

During the 5th century AD the Baths of Constantine were lifted from deep degradation and restored to their former glory, at his own expense, by the urban prefect *Petronius Perpenna Magnus Quadratianus*, after a period of long neglect and

devastation following the looting of the city: *Petronius Perpenna Magnus Quadratianus*, of *clarissimus* and *inlustris* rank, prefect of the City (*Petronius Perpenna Magnus Quadratianus, v(ir) c(larissimus) et inl(ustris), praef(ectus) Urb(i)*) restored to their previous form and splendour (*in pristinam / faciem splendoremque restituit*) the baths of Constantine, seriously damaged by a long neglect and by the devastation of a civil war (*Constantinianus thermas longa incuria et abolendae civilis vel / potius feralis cladis vastatione vehementer adflictas*).⁸

Another urban prefect, *Iulius Felix Campanianus*, is responsible for the embellishment (*ad augendam gratiam*) of the Baths of Trajan, as evidenced by a statue base that recorded his name:

Iulius Felix Campania/nus, v(ir) c(larissimus), praefectus Urbi / ad augendam therma/rum Traianarum gratiam / conlocavit

Iulius Felix Campanianus, of *clarissimus* rank, prefect of the City, placed [this] to increase the beauty of the baths of Trajan.

(*CIL* VI 1670 cfr. pp. 3812, 4729 = *CIL* VI 31889; *ILS* 5716; *LSA* 1352; *EDR* 111482 del 09/03/2017 (G. Tozzi). Date: AD 465-467. Translation C. Machado in *LSA* 1352. For the thermal structure see Caruso/Volpe 1999.)

An important example is provided by the *Thermae Decianae* and the inscriptions that are related - or may be related - to them. We owe our knowledge of these public baths, built on the top of the Aventine hill around the middle of the 3rd century AD, and named after the emperor *Decius*, to some reconstructive drawings by *Andrea Palladio*, and a little archaeological remains in the nowadays *Piazza del Tempio di Diana* and under the *Casale Torlonia*. During the 4th century AD the *Thermae Decianae* were affected by the important restoration works that involved the walls of the building starting from the foundations and some other unidentified structures: the text refers to two emperors, named as Our Lords (*DD. nn. (i.e. domini nostri duo) [---]*), who took care of a restoration of the baths of *Decius* (*thermas De[cianas ---]*), including some works on a side wall (*vicini par+[---]*, maybe *pari[etis?]*), the floor (*solo strat[---]*) and a portico (*et porticu[---]*).⁹

Moreover, a fragment of a marble slab testifies to a restoration of a bath, and an intervention on a part of the *Aqua Claudia* (*castellum?*) which may be a response to the desire of the people; in this case, the works were led, in AD 367, by the

urban prefect *Iunius Pomponius Ammonius* with the help of his collaborators. The inscription is dated to the time of the reign of Valentinian and Valens ([--- *pri*]ncipib[us] *dd.nn.* (i.e. *dominis nostris duobus*) [*Valentiniano et Valente* ---]), and mentions *Iunius Pomponius Ammonius*, of *clarissimus* and *inlustris* rank, prefect of the City ([--- *Iunius Pomponius Ammonius v(ir) c(larissimus) et inl(ustris), praef(ectus) Urb(i)* ---]), who took care of a restoration of a public bath, including some works on the aqueduct of Claudius ([--- *aquae Claudiae therm[as]* ---]), with the collaboration of another senator of *clarissimus* and *spectabilis* rank ([---]o *v(iro) c(larissimo) et s(pectabili)* ---]).¹⁰

But already two years earlier, in AD 365, during the reign of Valentinian and Valens, a *castellum Aquae Claudiae* in the *regio I* was restored, as we know from another inscription:

Castellum aquae Claudiae regioni pr[imae] / dispositio dedit et usui tradidit iussu [mode]/rationis Augustae dd. nn. (i.e. *dominorum nostrorum duorum*) *Valentin[iani] / et Valentis victorum / Gai (!) Caeioni Rufi Volusiani, v(iri) c(larissimi), ex praef(ecto) praet(orio), / praef(ecti) Urbi, iudicis iter(um) sacrar(um) cogn[itionum], / curante Eustochio, v(iro) c(larissimo), consuiare (!) aquar[um].*

According to the moderation of our Lords Valentinian and Valens victorious, with the supervision of Eustochius, of *clarissimus* rank, officer in charge of the aqueducts, Gaius Ceionius Rufus Volusianus, of *clarissimus* rank, former praetorian prefect, urban prefect, twice judge in the imperial court of appeal, offered a distribution tank of the aqueduct of Claudius in the first region and provided its use. (*CIL VI 3866 = 31963* cfr. pp. 3814, 4770; *ILS 5791*; *SupplIt Imagines - Roma 1*, n. 1228; *EDR 112711* del 18/10/2017 (A. Ferraro). Date: AD 365. Translation G. Crimi.)

Given the close chronology of the two texts, it seems reasonable to associate the two interventions, both aimed at satisfying the need for water of a complex city like Rome. It is not a coincidence that a large number of restoration works of these kinds of structures (baths, aqueducts, bridges) are attested too during the age of the Valentinian dynasty.

Under the joint reign of Honorius and Theodosius, after the sack of Alaric in AD 410, we are informed in an inscribed slab rich in details of a restoration aimed at saving the integrity of the *tepidarium* through the erection of a pair of external support arches (buttresses). In fact, the wall

of the *tepidarium* was so damaged that without such an intervention the walls of the adjacent cells (*calidarium* and *frigidarium*) would have been at risk of collapsing:

Salvis ac florentibus dd. nn. (i.e. *dominis nostris duobus*) *Honorio et Theodos[io] / perpetuis semper Augg.* (i.e. *Augustis duobus*), *Caecina Decius Acinatius / Albinus, v(iri) c(larissimus), praef(ectus) Urbi, vice sacra iudicans, / cellam tepidariam inclinato omni pariete labe[n]te[m], / de qua cellarum ruina pendebat erectorum a fu[n]damentis arcuum duplici muniti[o]ne fulcivit, / d(evotus) n(umini) m(aiestati)q(ue) eorum.*

During the reign of Our Lords Honorius and Theodosius forever Augusti, Caecina Decius Acinatius Albinus, of *clarissimus* rank, prefect of the City, judge of appeal, has devoted himself to their divine spirit and majesty, reinforced from the foundations, with a double arch, the hall of the *tepidarium* that was about to collapse completely.

(Bibliography: *CIL VI 1703* cfr. pp. 3173, 3813, 4738; *ILS 5715*; *SupplIt Imagines - Roma 1*, n. 1231; *EDR 111467* del 09/06/2011 (A. Ferraro). Date: AD 414. Translation G. Crimi.)

G.C.

TECHNICAL LANGUAGE AND POPULAR NEEDS.

The late antique inscriptions recording the restoration of public baths and aqueducts present important and recurring novelties, in comparison with the similar earlier texts as well as with the late antique inscriptions related to other categories of buildings.

In the first place, the description of the works carried out is often much more detailed than in most other epigraphic documents, and this does not seem to be only the result of the evolution of the epigraphic language in the Late Antiquity.¹¹ In fact, we can find the specific mention of the different parts of the monument involved in the building process, with the consequent use of a wide range of technical terms, referring to a distribution tank of the aqueduct (*castellum aquae*), a room with tepid water (*cella tepidaria*), a wall (*paries*), an arch (*arcus*), a floor (*solum*), a portico (*porticus*), and so on. Sometimes there is also a description of the type of intervention: reinforcing with counterfort (*munitio[n]e fulcire*), paving (*strare*), and so on. The example of the inscribed marble slab published in *CIL VI 1703*, quoted

above,¹² is particularly clear in this sense and it mentions the restoration of a specific part of the *Thermae Decianae*, where it was necessary to build a double vaulted arch that could support the external part of the *tepidarium*.

Starting from this text, it is also possible to come up with at least certain proposals for a very fragmentary inscription, recently found on the Aventine, and re-used in a modern wall in the Casino Torlonia, probably not far from its original location.¹³ This text mentions the same baths (l.2: *thermas De[cianas]*), and seems to mention a wall (*paries*) as well (l. 3: *vicini pari[etis?]*), while specific works could have included the maintenance of the floor, since in l. 4 the term *strat[---]* might be integrated either as a past participle (*solo strat[o?]*), or as a noun (*strat[ura?]*), both referring to a possible activity of paving the floor.

Moreover, another innovative and recurring element in this kind of a text is an explicit reference to the people or the citizens as beneficiaries of the intervention, which is unprecedented, which suggests that this is more than a mere coincidence. The turning point of this linguistic - but also ideological - evolution seems to be the inscription which was set up to commemorate the building of the Baths of Diocletian, which states that 'the emperor's Maximian and Diocletian dedicated the baths, completed in every detail, to their beloved Romans' (*Maximianus et Diocletianus ... thermas ... omni cultu perfectas Romanis suis dedicaverunt*).¹⁴ Since then, a concern for the needs and the desire of the people, to whom the building or the restoration of the baths or the aqueducts is ideally dedicated, is a recurring element in the phrasing of these epigraphical texts, although they may not be always in the same form: in an honorific inscription carved on a statue base in Rome, at the end of the 4th century AD, by the town council of *Saena* (probably modern Siena, in Tuscany), an anonymous senator is honoured for having given public water back 'to the necessary uses of the city' (*necessariis usibus civitatis*).¹⁵

The same textual structure can be recognized in a marble slab of unknown origin, seen for the first time in Rome in the Albani collection, where a whole senatorial family is acknowledged for having supported, with their own finances, the restoration of unspecified balneae that they 'gave back to the citizens' (*restituerunt civibus*).¹⁶ The presence of such an expression in the inscription recording the works made by the urban prefect *Iunius Pomponius Ammonius*¹⁷ remains uncertain, since the meaning of the verb *desiderare*, in l. 4, might refer either to the 'desire' of the people, or to a certain feature that was 'missing' in the structure restored.

On the other hand, it is possible to recognize similar features in very fragmentary materials, and this can help us to shed more light on epigraphical documents that would otherwise remain difficult to understand which improves, therefore, our documentary base.

A large marble fragment pertaining to an architrave, for example, was found in 1589 in the Baths of Caracalla. It is known only from two different manuscripts of the same scholar, Celso Cittadini,¹⁸ who lived in Rome in the 16th century, and who drew many of the inscribed monuments that were unearthed in those years. The text is published in the section dedicated to inscribed fragments in *CIL VI* found within the Aurelian walls (*Fragmenta in urbe reperta*), and among the fragmentary inscriptions unearthed in a specific neighbourhood of Rome (Regio XII, Piscina Publica) (*fig. 1*),¹⁹ and therefore has not attracted much interest among the scholars.

[---]ente delapsam (!)
[--- p]opuli reddideru[nt].

The place of discovery, the type of monument (an architrave), and, moreover, an explicit reference to a 'collapsed' (*delapsam*, alternative form of *dilapsam*) building that was probably restored and 'given back to the use - or the needs - of the people' (... *populi reddiderunt*) suggests that this

30374 fragmentum marmoris satis grande, quod pro architravi, ut dicunt, inservit in interiori cella thermarum Antoninarum, ex ipsis ruinis effossum a. 1589 CITT. (Marc.), brevius ID. (Vat.), qui annum addit 1590.

ENTE DELAPSAM
p OPVLI REDDIDERV^{nt}

Cittadinius Marc. p. 31, Vat. 5253 f. 160.

Datur ut integra utrimque. — 2 REDIDERV Vat.

Fig. 1. Fragmentary inscriptions from the Baths of Caracalla? (Image from *CIL VI 30374*).



Fig. 2. Building inscription from the Baths of Caracalla - left fragment (© Soprintendenza Speciale Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Roma).

almost neglected epigraphic fragment might be a document recording a late antique restoration of the Baths of Caracalla.

In the underground rooms of the same monument, probably coming from the *Thermae Antoni-*

nianae, another interesting inscription, although very fragmented, is still preserved, unpublished (figs 2, 3). It is a group of three fragments (a-c) pertaining to the same monumental marble slab with a moulded frame: the first (a) belongs to the central part of the upper side, the other two (b-c) form the upper right corner of the slab. According to the unscribed space visible below, they belong to a long text in four lines, carved in large and elegant letters,²⁰ whose left and central parts are missing:

[--- *thermas A*]ntoninian[as ---]utas omnino stra=
 [---]ormatis tectis
 [--- r]atione perfectas
 [---]ore co[---] reddid[---?].

The text is very poorly preserved, but the comparison with the inscriptions discussed above suggests a few interpretations:

- 1 In line 1 the comparison with the already mentioned inscriptions referring to a late restoration of the Baths of Diocletian and of the *Thermae Decianae*²¹ could lead to the proposal [*thermas A*]ntoninian[as a *veteribus principibus instit*]utas



Fig. 3. Building inscription from the Baths of Caracalla - right fragment (© Soprintendenza Speciale Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio di Roma).

- omnino stra[vit/straverunt?]*, hypothetically referring to a 'complete paving' of a monument whose original builders are also mentioned.
- 2 In line 2 an absolute ablative can refer either to the state of abandonment of the monument (*[def]ormatis tectis*), or to one of the phases of the intervention (*[ref]ormatis tectis*).
 - 3 Line 3 belongs to the description of the works, that have been completed (*perfectas*), maybe 'in every possible way' (*omni r]atione*), as it is suggested by the dedicatory inscription of the Baths of Diocletian,²² described as 'completed in every detail' (*omni cultu perfectas*).
 - 4 In line 4 the important verb referring to a 'restoration' of the baths (*reddid[it] or reddid(erunt)*) is probably preceded by some expression describing an improved status of the monument (*[meli]ore co[mptu?]*).

As a whole, the text seems to refer to a late antique restoration - sponsored by an unknown public authority - of the Baths of Caracalla (*Thermae Antoninianae*), built in the past which were then in critical condition, with a detailed description of the different kinds of works and the reasons that had required such works.

These case studies are focused on Rome, but the same observations can be extended to the rest of Italy and to the provinces of the Roman Empire, where other documents of the same kind can be found.²³ Therefore, the characteristics that have been outlined above do not seem to be a mere coincidence, but instead point out the concern of the public authorities who would have tried to describe with precision the works involving public baths and water supply with particular attention to the details since these buildings and their infrastructure were thought to meet the primary needs of the people.

S.O.

NOTES

¹ See also Cod. Theod. 15.1.14 - Jan. 1, 365 AD: *neque novam constitui fabricam iusserimus, antequam vetera reformentur* (translated by Pharr 1952, 424: no new structures shall be begun before the old ones are restored); Cod. Theod. 15.1.15 - Feb. 16, 365 AD: *aliquid novi operis adripere, priusquam ea, quae victa senio fatiscerent, repararent...* (translated by Pharr 1952, 424: any new works before they repair those which have been overcome by old age); Cod. Theod. 15.1.16 - Mar. 15, 365 AD: *ne aliquid novellum adgrediantur opus veterum illustrium fabricarum reparatione neglecta* (translated by Pharr 1952, 425: to undertake any new work, thus neglecting the repair of illustrious buildings); Cod. Theod. 15.1.17 - Oct. 6, 365

AD: *instaurare antiquum opus rectius potuerit quam novum inchoare* (translated by Pharr 1952, 425: you can more correctly restore ancient structures than commence any new ones); for a collection and discussion of these constitutions see De Dominicis 1975, 125-142; Pergami 1993, 39, 135, 166, 179, 286; Alföldy 2001; Bottiglieri 2010; Marano 2011, 151 with appendix III, 24-28; Piacente 2012; for the language and recurring expressions of restorations inscriptions see Thomas/Witschel 1992, 142-177; for aqueduct restorations in the 4th century see Vannesse 2012, 476-489.

² See respectively Piranomonte 1999 and Candilio 1999.
³ Vilucchi 1999.

⁴ Complete text and images can be found in *CIL VI* 40772; Gregori/Filippini 2013, 536; Crimi 2017; *EDR* 073541 del 15/02/2018 (A. Ferraro). Date: AD 326-333. *CIL VI* 1131; cfr. pp. 3071, 4327; Caruso 2014; *EDR* 111324 del 22/02/2015 (G. Crimi). Date: end of 4th-beginning of 5th century AD; *CIL VI* 1131a cfr. p. 4327; Caruso 2014; *EDR* 111325 del 22/02/2015 (G. Crimi). Date: end of 4th-beginning of 5th century AD.

⁶ See infra about the unpublished marble slab.

⁷ Gatti 1999.

⁸ Complete text can be found in *CIL VI* 1750 cfr. p. 4751 = *CIL VI* 31920; cfr. *CIL VI* 583*; *ILS* 5703; *EDR* 111536 del 08/06/2017 (A. Ferraro). Date: 5th century AD. It is a question of whether the devastation refers to the sack of the city in AD 410 or to that of 472. See Orlandi 2013.

⁹ La Follette 1994, 19-21, and app. I, 83, n. 6; *EDR* 150579 del 24/06/2015 (G. Crimi). Date: 4th century AD. For the thermal structure, see La Follette 1999.

¹⁰ Crimi/Orlandi 2017; *EDR* 166240 del 13/01/2018 (G. Crimi). Date: AD 367.

¹¹ As in the case, for example, of Petronius Perpenna Magnus Quadratianus (*CIL VI* 1750, quoted above, p. 248), where there are also explicit references to the damages suffered by the building and to the poor state of public finances, not common before the 5th century AD. In general, for this subject, see Orlandi 2017.

¹² See above, p. 249.

¹³ See above, p. 248.

¹⁴ *CIL VI* 1130 = *EDR* 110850 del 21/11/2018 (G. Crimi), with references to all the different copies of the text.

¹⁵ *CIL VI* 1793 = *EDR* 121037 del 01/10/2016 (S. Orlandi).

¹⁶ *CIL VI* 29706 = *EDR* 170132 del 20/04/2019 (S. Orlandi): the presence of a *signum* (*Acholi*), and the name of the father (*Aurelius Symforus*) suggest a date not before the end of the 3rd, but after the beginning of the 4th century AD.

¹⁷ Quoted above, p. 249.

¹⁸ *CIL VI*, LVI, n. LXI.

¹⁹ *CIL VI* 30374 = *EDR* 169395 del 22/10/2018 (G. Crimi).

²⁰ Very similar to those of *CIL VI* 1763 = 32089 = *EDR* 109754 del 16/08/2016 (S. Orlandi).

²¹ See above, respectively, p. 248 and p. 249.

²² *CIL VI* 1130 = *EDR* 110850 del 21/11/2018 (G. Crimi).

²³ See, for example, Crimi/Orlandi 2018.

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