

## The Baths of Caracalla in Rome

The Baths of Caracalla were among the largest bathing facilities in Rome. Construction began in 206 and was completed in 216, when the emperor Caracalla reigned. Further extensions and decorations were added until 235. The baths were in use for over three centuries. During a siege in 536, the Goths destroyed the aqueduct that was responsible for the water supply to the complex. After further destruction by an earthquake, the complex fell into disrepair and served as a quarry. The equipment from the baths was used, among other things, as building material for newly built mansions.

The baths were located on the Aventine hill. A huge terraced platform was built to create space for the complex. This platform had a base area of about eleven hectares. The bathhouse stood approximately in the middle of the complex. The surrounding buildings housed libraries, restaurants, gymnasiums, art galleries and much more. So the baths were not just a pure bathing complex, but actually a large leisure centre. Probably 1,600 to 2,000 visitors could use the baths every day. Heating was provided by huge wood-burning stoves, which were located in a system of tunnels under the complex.

The main building was divided into two side wings with the same structure. The division corresponded to the sequence of a Roman bathing ritual. First you entered the changing room (apodyterium). There you put your clothes in niches and shelves, which were guarded by slaves. Visitors washed the street dust off their feet in a small basin before entering the other rooms. In the tepidarium, visitors could have themselves massaged and anointed by slaves. In the next room, the caldarium, several warm water pools invited visitors to sit and relax. Then came the Sudatorium, a steam bath insulated from the outside, which was comparable to today's sauna. After the steam bath, visitors went into a cold-water pool (frigidarium), which was large enough for swimming exercises. An outdoor pool (piscina) was also available for this purpose.

Many Roman households did not have their own bathroom. Therefore, visiting a thermal bath was very important for hygienic reasons. Bathing also served medical purposes. The Greek physician Hippocrates had discovered warm water baths and cold showers as therapies for the sick. Greek prisoners of war and slaves brought this knowledge to Rome. In the Roman thermal baths, for example, steam baths, mud cures and swimming were used as therapeutic measures for insomnia, headaches, colds, liver and joint diseases. In addition to body care and medicine, spas had great social significance. Many Romans spent several hours in a thermal bath to meet relatives and friends, but also to make political arrangements with party friends or to conclude contracts. Some writers are also said to have used a visit to a spa to recite their works to the other bathers.