

“Chattering” in the Baths: The Urban Greek Bathing Establishment and Social Discourse in Classical Antiquity

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Abstract

In *The Clouds* Aristophanes has Just Logic remark that the Greek public baths (*balaneia*) were responsible for the lack of character among Athenian youth who frequented them. Literary testimonia of this sort suggests that the public baths were associated in antiquity with frivolity, or were at the very least in some way responsible for the moral degradation of Athenian youth. Despite these comments, or perhaps because of them, public baths were integrated into the fabric of Athenian life. These baths served a critical discursive for the Athenians who frequented them, allowing them to hear news from travelers entering the city and to provide information to those visitors as well. In this paper I will plot each of the four baths on a map of Classical Athens, and then using 3D models of the *balaneia*, I will demonstrate how the space itself functioned to facilitate discourse. In making this case I will suggest that as the baths moved inside the city walls in the late Classical period, visibility between bathers was decreased. In providing less visibility, I will argue that the function of the later baths shifted as they become increasingly utilitarian.

Keywords

Archaeology, modeling, 3D, Greece, architecture

While we easily associate Greek culture with well-known monuments or institutions, or perhaps with vase-paintings or other objects that now fill museum collections, we do not usually think about ancient Greek culture in terms of their bathing practices – a tradition perhaps more commonly associated with the Romans. In Greek antiquity there was a culture of bathing that was not based on the luxury or splendor associated with the later Roman bath. Instead, the early Greek Classical public baths, or *balaneia*, which were located outside the walls of the ancient city, served a function unlike any other in later periods. The early Greek *balaneion*, by virtue of its geographical location within the urban landscape and arrangement of interior space, served a critical discursive function – one that would gradually dissipate when the baths were privatized and moved within the walls of the ancient city in the late Classical period. In this paper I will demonstrate how the locations of the baths and arrangement of interior space contributed to this “coffee-shop atmosphere,” and how the lack of directed visibility between bathers and decrease in intimate space in later periods contributed to increasingly utilitarian baths of the late Classical and Hellenistic periods.

Although much is known about Roman baths due in part to the vast amount of recent and at times heated scholarship in that area over the past decade, the Greek baths stood silent and largely forgotten until the mid-20th century when Rene Ginouvès published the first comprehensive study of Greek baths. (Ginouvès 1962) Now it is almost fifty years since that publication, and still in many ways the study of Greek baths is in its infancy. Although this is something that Ginouvès surely never intended, in some ways it is a credit to his work that this area has been neglected, since there is an implication that all that there is to say about these baths has been said. This was most recently suggested by Inge Nielsen, an authority on Roman baths, who noted, “After Ginouvès’ detailed treatment of both the written and the archaeological source material, the function and architecture of this institution are clear.” (Nielsen 1993, 6, n. 3) This is, of course, far from true.

Bathing played a critical role in Athenian social life, as attested to by the construction of numerous bath buildings as well as frequent commentary on the baths by ancient authors from Homer onwards. The earliest references to baths and bathing in Greece date to the 8th century BCE when Homer refers to the bathing of Homeric heroes in single tubs, describing

these tubs as “polished” and “silver.”¹ The Bronze Age tubs found at Knossos, Mycenae, and Pylos correspond to this 8th century description which suggests that either Homer guessed correctly about the types of tubs used 500 years earlier, or more likely, that private bathing practices had not changed significantly between the Bronze Age and the 8th century BCE when the epics were codified. (Evans 1964, 385–6; Ginouvès 1962, 31, 32, 39, 159, n. 9)

For Homer, the bath is a moment of transfiguration for the Homeric hero. We see this throughout both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but perhaps most poignantly when Telemachus is bathed and emerges from the bath “in form like unto the immortals” and when Homer describes the weary hero Odysseus when he is bathed by his childhood nurse and “forth from the bath he came, in form like unto the immortals.”² In referring to the baths in this way, Homer introduces the notion that baths can have a

transformative effect on the hero who uses the bath. He enters the water a hero, and emerges from it a god.

By the mid-5th century BCE the *balaneion*, or Greek public bath, was well-established in Athens. The circular *tholos* bath was the earliest form of regulated public bath in Greece, predating the late Classical and Hellenistic plunge baths found at Olympia, Isthmia, Delphi, and Nemea. The earliest of these urban baths dates to the mid-5th century BCE, and is located outside

the Dipylon gate in the Kerameikos of Athens. The location of this bath outside the city walls on the west side of the road leading to the Academy suggests that this urban bath served both utilitarian and social purposes and was frequented by a diverse clientele entering Athens through the Dipylon gate coming from the port of Piraeus.

The Dipylon bath was not unusual in its placement for this period, as public baths were often located outside the walls of the ancient city – examples of which can be seen in Athens, Piraeus, Eretria, and Eleusis.³



Pl. 1. The Greek plunge bath at Delphi.

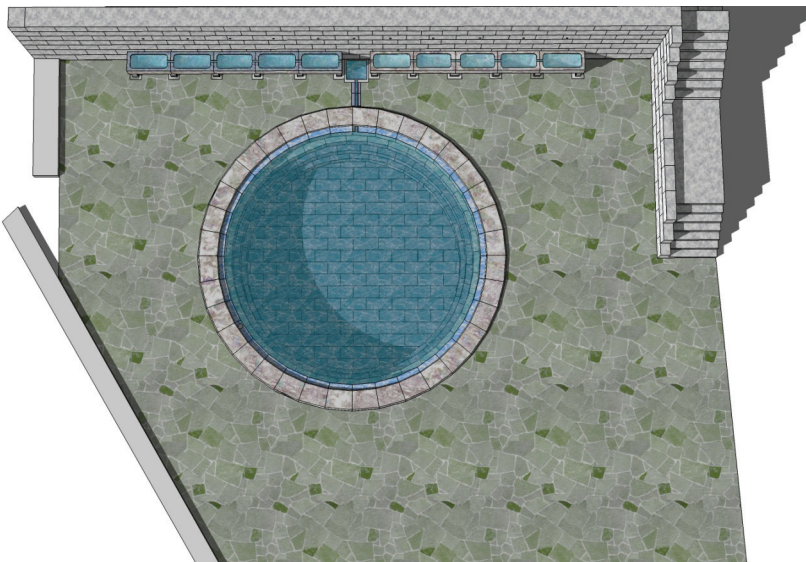


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the Greek plunge bath at Delphi (Richard Taylor, ASU).

¹ References to hot baths appear in Hom. *Il.* 14.3 (“a warm bath”); Hom. *Il.* 22.442 (“a hot bath”); Hom. *Od.* 8.433 (“a great cauldron”); Hom. *Od.* 8.449 (“the warm bath”); Hom. *Od.* 10.358 (“a large cauldron”); References to the bath tubs themselves appear in Hom. *Il.* 10.572 (“polished baths”); Hom. *Od.* 4.47 (“polished baths”); Hom. *Od.* 4.128 (“silver baths”); Hom. *Od.* 17.87 (“polished baths”).

² Hom. *Od.* 3.464; Hom. *Od.* 23.163

³ Most public baths not associated with gymnasia or sanctuaries are located outside the city walls. This can be seen with the Baths of Isthmonikos, the baths at Piraeus, Eretria and Eleusis. By the late 4th century BC the double circular tholos

While the ancient authors commented frequently on the baths, there are no extant Greek sources providing reasons for the placements of these baths outside the city walls. Athenaeus, writing in the 3rd century CE is the first source who mentions the locations of the baths, and he does so in a peripheral way as part of a longer discussion of property ownership, suggesting that the public baths were initially placed outside the city walls as local ordinances forbade them being within the city limits. Athenaeus does not provide additional information about the reasoning behind the ordinances or their date, and it is possible that he was just guessing about the reasons for the original locations of public Greek baths, trying to make sense of the placement of baths outside the walls of the city by linking this custom to a “lost” ordinance or to laws governing private ownership of the bath houses during the Classical period.⁴

While the reasons for the locations of the baths are not immediately apparent, what we do know is that during the Classical period, the public baths played an integral role in Athenian life, evidenced by the construction of the Dipylon bath in the mid-5th century, followed by the building of the Baths of Isthmonikos and the Bath of Diochares within the next thirty years.⁵ (Blegen 1936, 547–9; Gebauer and Johannes 1936, 208–12; Knigge 1988, 159–60; Travlos 1971, 158, 160, 180, 332) The importance of these baths is also underscored by their longevity. The Dipylon bath was almost certainly in use well into the 4th century BCE, and the construction date of the Baths of Isthmonikos in the closing years of the 5th century suggests that these baths were used

into the 4th century as well. In other words, the baths were each at least 50 years old. By the end of the 4th century a fourth bath was constructed outside the Peiraic Gate. (Andreiomenou 1966, 74, Fig. 16, Pl. 81b; Travlos 1971, 180) The geographical location of these baths is very significant since every entrance into the late Classical city would have had a bath poised outside of it.

The placement of the bath outside the city walls, an arrangement which can also be seen at Eleusis and Eretria underscores the discursive function of these bathing establishments.⁶ These civic baths not only functioned as bath houses, but also as places where those entering the city could catch up on the news of the day before venturing further in, and conversely, where citizens could discuss news from outside the city with incoming merchants. In this way the public baths served a critical social function that is often neglected when we consider the baths as strictly utilitarian structures.

It’s one thing to look at the locations of these baths outside the gates of the city and suggest a discursive function. What is more difficult is to access the meanings associated with these baths in antiquity. This part of the history of the baths is lost to us, and is only hinted at in brief references in the ancient sources such as in this one in which Aristophanes laments the habits of Athenian youth who spend their days “chattering” in the baths, contrasting the decadence of the bath houses to the “manlier Games.”⁷ Of course it is the degradation of the youth that Aristophanes is concerned with here, and he is not suggesting that everyone spurn the baths. While

bath was introduced, examples of which can be seen at Eretria, Eleusis, and Oeniadaï. The double tholos bath building is composed of two tholoi with closed circular walls and separate entrances on opposing sides. Similar to the early single tholos baths, these were also located outside the city walls near entrances into the city or sanctuary.

⁴ Ath. *Deipn.* 1.18 Only recently, too, have public baths been introduced, for in the beginning they would not even allow them within the city limits.

⁵ These baths are also noted in epigraphic sources. Baths of Isthmonikos: I.G. I³ 84 (I² 94), line 37. Bath of Diochares: I.G. II² 2495.

⁶ Athenaeus, writing in the 3rd century AD, tells us that the public baths were initially placed outside the city walls as local ordinances forbade them being within the city limits, although he does not provide the reasoning behind the ordinances or their date. It is possible that Athenaeus was trying to make sense of the apparent early Greek custom of placing the bath outside the walls of the city, and that he linked this custom to a “lost” ordinance, or that the placement of the baths outside the cities reflected private ownership of the bath houses during the Classical period. Ath. *Deipn.* 1.18: Only recently, too, have public baths been introduced, for in the beginning they would not even allow them within the city limits.

⁷ Ar. *Nub.* 1050 ff.

Right Logic: This, this is what they say:
 This is the stuff our precious youths
 are chattering all the day!
 This is what makes them haunt the baths,
 and shun the manlier Games!

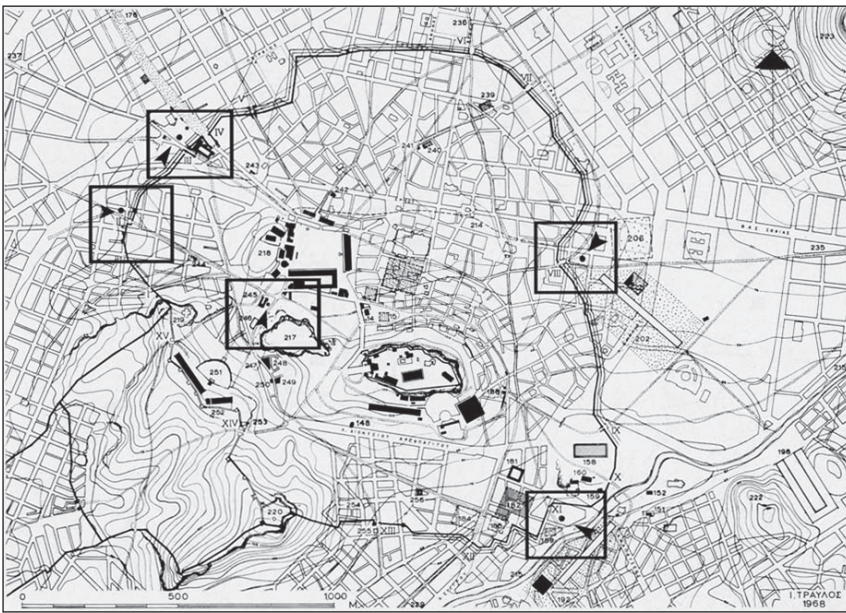


Fig. 2. Map of Classical Athens with locations of bathing establishments added, after Travlos.

we do not know this with any certainty, I feel fairly confident suggesting that Aristophanes knew about the Youth in the baths because he frequented them himself. Plato also tells us that Socrates frequented them, Aristotle studied the vapors associated with heated water and suggested penalties for those who stole people’s things while they were bathing, there was a story about a man who was killed in the bath and haunted it with lamenting cries, and so on. The baths were part of the fabric of Athenian life and the role played by these early baths was unique in the history of bathing. They functioned not only as places to get clean, but also as places to obtain information, to catch up on the news of the day, to find out what was going on outside the city of Athens.

An analysis of the interior space of the bath lends itself to this type of function, since the arrangement of space would have facilitated discourse. The bather would have entered the round *tholos* bath, which would have been roofed and lit by lamps, and then he would have removed his clothes and sat down in a tub along the perimeter of the bath, and the bath attendant would have poured warm water over him, filling the bath. There were no interior walls between these bath tubs, and with the bath lit by lamps the atmosphere would have been intimate and close. With lamps beside each tub (why not?) the bather would have been able to look at his fellow bathers

and sound would have traveled well in that close space. The spatial organization of the early baths would have allowed for fairly good visibility, and would have facilitated discourse. This type of spatial analysis allows us to make other assumptions as well which are borne out by the ancient literary testimonia. The interior arrangement of the early Classical Greek *balaneion* would have prohibited mixed bathing, since the arrangement of space would not have allowed for any privacy for women to bathe in the company of men. This observation is supported by the ancient sources, but it also makes sense since women during

this period would not have been allowed to participate in an activity that would have been considered highly social in a space that would have been highly gendered. This type of spatial analysis also allows us to consider other practical issues associated with the baths – including lighting. With the baths enclosed and dark, there would have been a need to use lamps in the baths.

While the form of the *tholos* bath would have lent itself to this proposed purpose, the same purpose could easily have been served by the double *tholos* bath, which also made an appearance in Greek bath design in the 4th century BCE. The double *tholos* bath building is composed of two *tholoi* with closed circular walls and separate entrances on opposing sides. Similar to the early single *tholos* baths, these were also located outside the city walls near entrances into the city or sanctuary. By the Hellenistic period, if Athenaeus is correct, many of the bath houses would have been privatized. We also see a migration of the baths into the urban center during the Hellenistic period, and an example of this is the single circular *tholos* bath dating to ca. 200 BCE, located in the Athenian Agora. This bath, referred to as the “southwest baths” by their excavator, remained in use until 86 BCE when Sulla’s legions invaded Athens and sacked it.⁸ (Shear 1969, 395–99)

⁸ I would like to thank Professor John Camp, Director of the Agora Excavations in Athens, for bringing this bath to my attention. The *tholos* bath in the Agora is located west of Areopagus Street and south of Piraeus Street, bounded on the west by the retaining wall of the Poros Building.

During the late Hellenistic period the urban baths continued to be used in Athens, but no new bathhouses of this type were constructed. Instead we see an increase in the construction of sweat baths, which would have been somewhat similar to a sauna, and a steep increase in construction of baths associated with athletic establishments and sanctuaries. While Monika Truemper has argued that the popularity of the Hellenistic sweat baths can be linked to an increased Greek interest in luxury during the Hellenistic period, it is also almost certainly true that this type of baths would not have been as conducive to the type of discourse seen in the early baths in which bathers would have spent considerably more time in the tubs than the later visitors to the baths would have spent in the sweat baths.⁹

The baths located in the gymnasia were almost certainly exclusively used by athletes, and this is supported by ancient literary testimonia and archaeological evidence. These baths would also not have been conducive to extensive conversation, since the form that these baths took were plunge baths in which the bathers would submerge or even, as in the larger plunge baths at Isthmia and Olympia, where bathers would have been swimming laps. The sanctuary baths were almost certainly solitary bathing experiences.

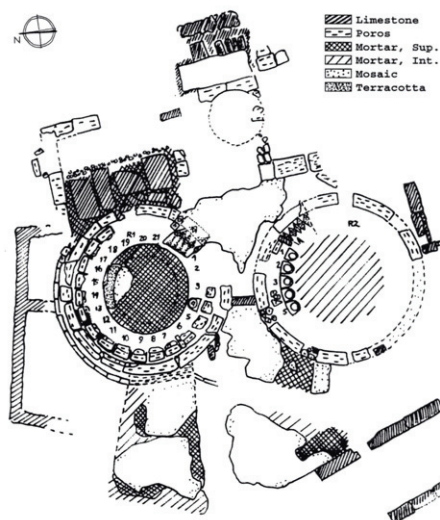


Fig. 3. The double tholos bath at Eretria, after Yegül.

Three-dimensional modeling of these baths allows us access to information that we might not

otherwise have. In creating such a model we are able to consider viewsheds, traffic patterns through the bathing areas, as well as hypothesize about various roof constructions. It is clear that despite Nielsen's brave assertion to the contrary, there is quite a bit still to learn about the Greek baths. Our notions of the meanings associated with these establishments are broadened by the usage of three-dimensional modeling, allowing us to take into account the ways in which the engineering of the sightlines and locations of the baths at critical locations around the city influenced the meanings associated with the baths. These reconstructions open the door to a broad range of interpretive possibilities, allowing us to move beyond traditional assumptions about these baths that were so central to Athenian life.

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⁹ Monika Truemper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, February 2005: Tryphe in bathing: the emergence of sweat baths as a luxurious bathing form in the Late Hellenistic world. Truemper contends that the reason the sweat bath suddenly emerged in the 2nd century and spread so rapidly in all different contexts with bathing facilities, is due to a general increase in luxury and well-being that manifested itself in so many different areas of the Late Hellenistic world.