
THE HISTORY OF HYDROTHERAPY IN ITALY

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Water is essential for human life : from the remotest times it has been considered vital for both sustenance and for the birth and development of civilisations.

It was not long before man discovered its important beneficial properties : its ability to protect from diseases, as well as its healing and preventive properties. Multiple magical virtues were attributed to water, and it was even considered a true gift of the gods. Numerous myths and legends, in fact, narrate the miraculous healing of the soul and body, attributed to its mysterious powers. Man has always searched for health and well-being in water, which, throughout history, has often been loaded with symbolic and cultural values.

The most ancient populations like the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Hebrews and Israelites were used to immersing themselves in cold and hot water, and, of course, baths and ablutions were prescribed by religious laws in Oriental cultures. In the Pre-Hellenic civilisation of the Aegean great use was made of baths. The buildings of Knossos, Festus and Tirinto, contain different types of bath chambers.

In Italy, the Etruscans, facilitated by living in an area rich in springs, were one of the first to use water for healing purposes. A little for cleaning, a little for keeping themselves healthy and beautiful, they equipped healthy springs and other springs with thermal facilities, though never reaching the architectural perfection and splendour of the Romans. The baths, perfusions of healing water, were usually accompanied and enlivened by the sound of musical instruments.

Nevertheless, it was the Greeks, attracted by the strange phenomena of thermal springs that attempted to classify them and study their properties and effects on man. Herodotus was the first to establish the precise methods of balneotherapeutic practices, but it was Hippocrates, the most celebrated physician of antiquity, who dedicated a large section to the therapeutic properties of thermal water in his work "*De aere, aquis at loci*". He analysed its chemical and organoleptic features, described the hygienic problems of using baths in various diseases and, in general, the effects of hot and cold baths on the human body. It is widely known that as early as the V^e century BC the beneficial properties of the sulphurous springs were already known, especially for healing skin diseases and for relieving muscular and joint pain. In the Homeric poems and in Hesiod continuous references are made to the use of baths. After the difficulties encountered in battle or long journeys, heroes welcomed the coolness or wellness of a long restorative bath.

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The Greek cities had private and public baths, accessible on payment and attended by dawdlers and pleasure-seekers who spent entire days there. The facilities were very simple : they consisted of an area allocated to a hot bath with a slave who poured water and another chamber for unction and massage.

The Romans, who, in the early years of their empire, had made limited use of baths, soon became their most fervent and passionate enthusiasts, after having made contact with Oriental populations.

If, initially, the bath was taken at home, in an area close to the kitchen so the water could be heated, later it was taken in public areas, first simple, then ever larger and more complex, with a rigorous separation for both sexes.

In ancient Rome, different types of these facilities existed : private reserved baths, homes with one or more bath rooms not open to the public, attended by a restricted and familiar clientele ; public baths, usually privately managed ; finally, public facilities, a civic institution which allowed even the poorest to bathe with ease and at an affordable price. The latter, donated by the emperors or by rich individuals, were tendered to an impresario, who had the right to demand a small entry fee. The elderly and children were granted free access.

Over time, as a testimony to the importance attributed to the therapeutic properties of the water, the thermal phenomenon involved building in a more evident way, accompanying the hygienic significance of bathing with social and cultural connotations. Thermal baths were open to all, independently of their social class : access was also soon made available to women. Large thermal baths soon became the centre of fashionable life ; those who wanted to exchange a few words with friends, preferred the baths managed by private individuals, even if they were more expensive and less sumptuous. The larger thermal facilities were crowded and prevented any peaceful rest.

Towards mid-afternoon the majority of Romans gathered in the thermal facilities so that after their various daily occupations, or before their evening meal, everyone granted themselves a restorative bath and the baths would be teeming with people. The Baths in Rome were open from noon to sunset ; the only exception being the sick to whom emperor Hadrian allowed entry also in the morning. Instead, in the province, the baths could also remain open in the evening, for a few hours, above all where the places were insufficient to contain and satisfy all the demands of the population.

Whatever methods were applied, the driving force behind the Roman bath was always the same : heat the body, strengthen it with a very cold bath and finish with an elaborate and thorough massage.

The Romans built baths during the entire span of their civilisation : the Stabian Baths, which can still be admired in Pompeii, belong to the Pre-Roman – Samnitic period (II^e century BC), the great Baths of Diocletian, among the best known, date from 306 AD. In this space of time many facilities were built throughout the regions of the Empire, above all in urban centres and in the presence of hot water springs. The facilities were quite elaborate technically speaking. According to Vitruvius, the greatest architect of the time, the following areas had to be present : the changing room (*apodyterium*), the hot

and dry area to induce sweating (*laconium*), the *frigidarium*, the *tepidarium* and the *calidarium*, three rooms at different temperatures, heated by hot air circulating under the floor, and then the gym, the swimming pool and a bath for ablutions fed by a fountain (*labrum*) with warm water. This architectural scheme is found in monumental structures like the Baths of Caracalla, the most famous of the Urbe, and in private homes.

It was precisely during this period that a new type of public bath was conceived and rapidly spread ; facilities which were rich and sumptuous, in which the areas allocated to splendour and luxury, entertainment and performances, eventually overtook the areas allocated to the original bathing and healing purposes. Rendered majestic by marbles, statues, paintings and refined decorations, over time, libraries and meeting rooms, gyms and solariums, studios and gardens were also added. Every city of the Empire, from North Africa to Britannia, had its thermal facility, to affirm that the superiority of Rome was not measured on its military ability alone but also, and above all, on the comfort of its citizens. Scientifically-speaking numerous famous Roman physicians like Pliny, Galen and Herodotus attempted to make the first classifications and interpretations of the relationship between the curative effect of thermal water and the relevant chemical-physical characteristics. The recommended duration for the therapeutic bath was initially 30 minutes to be increased progressively to 2 hours, progressively reducing towards the end of the treatment. The bath had to be taken on an empty stomach, preferably in spring and autumn, rigorously under medical control.

Following the demise of the Roman Empire and the turbulent barbaric invasions, the ancient and sumptuous thermal facilities began to be deserted, also due to the spread of a Christian culture that was contrary to forms of nudity and promiscuity. Nevertheless, the bath was still accepted as a simple cleaning process. But the profound change in living conditions, alongside the general impoverishment of the populations and with the ruin of the aqueducts, led to the desertion and progressive ruin of the thermal baths.

If, on the one hand, the ancient social and hedonistic value of the bath was banished during the Middle Ages, from the medical point of view the mechanisms of the power of the various types of water were investigated, by studying the relevant specific effects: sulphurous water, for example, was recommended for skin diseases, while the salsobromiodic water was recommended for female sterility.

In the High Middle Ages, although the habit of bathing was not entirely lost, any places suitable for this purpose were built only for the benefit of the upper classes. But with the revival of city life, starting from the XI^e century, bathing facilities began to be built again in a number of German, Spanish and French cities. In Italy, many of these facilities were restored or renewed close to thermal springs already exploited in the past (Bagni di Lucca, Viterbo, Acqui, etc.) ; there are many testimonies of real instances which allow sick people to heal themselves at the Baths of Bormio and Baja ; news of refurbishment and reconstruction at Abano. In Acqui, Piedmont, from the XV^e century there is news of a “mud factory” which, at the time, was rebuilt by the Town Hall.

A sure contribution to the spread of the use of baths again in the Western World was the resumption of internal and regular relations with the East because, in these areas, the

thermal tradition never died out, but rather was kept alive thanks to the lavish generosity of a number of Byzantine emperors such as Justinian. Refined examples of this kind remain in Spain but above all in Sicily as in Sciacca and Acireale.

During the Renaissance period the discovery of printing encouraged the circulation of information, which led to a wider use of hydrological cures. Some of the most gifted and genial physicians of the time, including Andrea Bacci (author of a treatise which described the baths present in Italy in the XVI^e century), Pietro d'Abano (celebrated teacher of medicine at the University of Padua), Falloppio and Mercuriale studied them. In the field of methodologies, alongside the bath and the beverage appeared the application of mud, the inhalation of vapours, inhalation and sudatory therapies in natural grottos in which thermal springs arose.

The name and fame of many thermal baths were connected to illustrious characters like Fredrick II, Petrarch and Boniface VIII (Fiuggi).

Starting from the XVIII^e century, the development of medicine facilitated the first analysis on the composition of mineral water, guaranteeing therapies adequate scientific support. Italian thermal baths were enlarged and boosted. Once again, these facilities became similar to the ancient health structures of the Romans, places of reflection, meeting and healing. They were enriched with libraries, sports centres, games rooms, parks, gardens ; residences and luxury hotels were built. Between 1900 and 2000 we witness the so-called "elitist" hydrotherapy. The economic and cultural elite goes to "take the water" and relaxes at the thermal facilities, but progressively the phenomenon tends to extend itself to the middle classes. By then the people who matter, cannot but go to the thermal facilities ; European and Italian baths like Salsomaggiore, Montecatini, Abano, and San Pellegrino become the meeting point for nobles, royals, bankers, artists, writers and philosophers. At the end of the century, mountain resorts also become popular, such as Meran, attended by the Habsburg royals and, in particular, by princess Sissi.

The period is characterised by firm confidence in healing baths, both hot and cold, in the contact with nature considered crucial for therapeutic success. From a medical point of view Lorenzo Berzieri deserves a mention. Of all the pioneers involved in hydrological experimentation, he was the first to use mother water for therapeutic purposes, in 1839, in Salsomaggiore. This was the water that remained after the salt had been removed and which was usually disposed of, as waste, in a nearby torrent.

In the early Twentieth century the popularity of thermal baths is at its peak. All the *villes d'eau* (towns of water) competed with each other to make them more beautiful architecturally speaking, both in Italy and in Europe. Paintings, drawings, mosaics attempt to recall the splendours of Roman baths. Cupolas and majolica, changed from the Orient, are erected ; marbles, capitals, statues and fountains are added that extol the strength recovered, beauty and health. Thermal cities like Montecatini, Salsomaggiore and San Pellegrino soon became large centres characterised by their planning and the large and stately liberty style of pavilions for water healing treatments, but also by large hotels, theatres, railway stations, hippodromes and cafes. In addition to the baths, inhalations,

mud and douches, visitors to the thermal facilities were able to dedicate themselves to concerts, plays, sports races, painting exhibitions and conferences. Important political and economic meetings were also held there.

The second half of the Twentieth century brought a further development in hydrotherapy. After two World Wars, changes to the social fabric and to the political aspects of the various nations, the popularity of the thermal baths again decreased. The destruction of the baths reduced to ruins, the difficulty of revival, the progress of chemistry and pharmacology have radically changed the way of taking “baths”. Elitist hydrotherapy has given way to a social form of hydrotherapy, open to a decidedly larger public, with the addition of thermal cures in the therapeutic programme of the national health system. No longer fashion, no longer elegance and ostentation of one’s “status”, but the right to care for all. Until the end of the last century the thermal facilities experienced a period of evolution and transformation, which have led them to a healthy identity crisis.

The early years of the III^e millennium have brought Italian hydrotherapy back into the limelight ; water has regained the importance due to it in the therapeutic experience of the physician, through studies of hydrology, pharmacology and biochemistry. Scientific rigour together with thermal intervention has assumed a preventive, therapeutic and rehabilitative significance in numerous human pathologies. The concept of cure is joined to the concept of wellness, with an extraordinary flourish of parallel and complementary activities.

Consequently, thermal facilities have reconverted and welcome numerous visitors each year. However, the firm point is, and remains, the effectiveness of the treatment using mineral water. Crenotherapy is strictly part of medicine ; continuous progress in the medical field, in pharmacology and surgery, does not blur the value of prevention and thermal care.