

A Woman's Liberation Through Roman Bathing Practices

Modern historical references to bath houses in Roman society often fail to reflect women's experiences in these establishments. Historians know that women were allowed in these bath houses, but only limited sources are available to help us understand how they might have interacted with other patrons. Most references focus more on the experience of prominent men in Roman society. Roman bath houses in ancient society were an essential part of day-to-day life. In Roman bath houses, all societal classes were welcomed, and it became a place where the rich and the poor could come to discuss current events. Our goal is to examine known literary evidence and works of modern scholars to understand women's role in these facilities.

The ancient Romans placed a considerable emphasis on female modesty and chastity, which had significantly influenced women's daily lives. With the implementation of the Augustan laws during the time of the Roman empire, restrictions on female sexuality became increasingly monitored. Historical texts have mentioned that Roman bath houses were one of the only locations where women were able to break out of their pre-established social norms in Roman society. A striking example of this is expressed in a scene from the ancient Roman author Martial: "...Then why do you bathe with the public? Well then, so you won't see, begrudging, undo your slave's *fibula*, Caelia." (11.75) As revealed from this quote, ancient Roman bath houses often had deep sexual undertones, with little restriction regarding nudity. Roman laws, such as *lex Julia* seemed to be almost wholly shrouded, as bathhouses became a location where men and women were allowed to liberate themselves from society's constraints.

This narrative of sexual liberation can be argued as being expressed within the *Apodyterium* of the Suburban bath house in Pompeii. These frescoes are famous examples of the

sexual undertones hidden from modern audiences within Roman bath houses. This Pompeian fresco, in particular, showcases a Roman man performing cunnilingus on a woman. This scene, in particular, is a prime example of the breaking of social norms. Traditionally, prominent men in Roman society would not perform oral sex on their partners, especially women. This scene distinguishes the woman in a sexually dominant position and the man in a subservient role. Therefore, illustrating the traditionally deviant behavior that could have been performed within these structures.

We will be investigating the experiences of women within Roman bath houses. Particularly, through scrutinizing the position of women within Roman society, and how they were able to break through the social constructs set in place by Roman law and society. By analyzing Roman bath houses from the perspective of laws, culture, and artwork, we will be able to create an accurate depiction of the average woman's experience within these facilities.

Bibliography

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