

## An Epigraphic Approach to Roman Public Bathing Culture

Perhaps one of the most celebrated features of the reign of Augustus is his distinct emphasis on urban renewal, a process in which Marcus Vispanius Agrippa played a critical role by sponsoring buildings throughout the *Campus Martius* that blended the political, religious and recreational aspects of Roman life. Most pertinent to this paper are the *Thermae Agrippae*, the first-state sponsored baths in the city, which were constructed in the late first-century BCE (Kontokosta 2019; Dio Cass. 53.27.1-3; 54.29.4). These baths were considered a place of *luxuria* (see Pliny NH 35.26 for decoration); therefore, the increased availability to such public amenities during the Augustan period allowed the general Roman populace to engage with luxurious activities that had previously been reserved only for the wealthy elite (Dyson 2010). In this paper, I analyze a collection of 31 inscriptions related to the *unctores* (masseurs), *iatraliptae* (masseurs), and *balneatores* (bath-attendants) from the city of Rome to demonstrate how the new public bathing culture initiated by Augustan urban renewal created a growth in demand for certain occupational groups (compiled primarily from the *Epigraphik-Datenbank Clauss-Slaby* [<http://manfredclauss.de/>]).

The few studies that mention masseurs and bath-attendants focus largely on the health benefits of massage or the Roman authors' mostly negative attitude towards these occupations, but fail to consider a correlation in epigraphic visibility to the increased presence of bathing complexes and bathing as a social practice in the first century CE (Jackson 2000, Bond 2015). An analysis of the chronological distribution of the inscriptions reveals that 8/19 *unctor* texts, 1/2 *iatraliptae* texts, and 3/10 *balneator* texts are dated to 1-50 CE; furthermore, 26/31 (84%) of the texts in the corpus date to the first or second centuries CE, which raises the question of why

these occupational groups were so active in engaging with the epigraphic habit in this early imperial period (see e.g. Beltrán-Lloris 2015 for discussion of the epigraphic habit). Perhaps the answer can be found in the fact that many of the inscriptions aimed to draw attention to the status of the commissioner or dedicatee as either slave or freeman, who advertised through their monuments the new opportunities the baths and bathing provided them. Several of the texts specifically reference an emperor as patron, emphasizing the interrelated role of imperially funded public amenities and these occupations in democratizing *luxuria* for the Roman people. Therefore, this bottom-up epigraphic approach moves beyond the limited and biased views offered in literary sources to consider how cultural change may have impacted certain marginalized groups in Roman society.

In the future, this project will expand to consider how the establishment of public bathing culture under Augustus potentially impacted other occupations in Rome, such as the *olearii* (olive-oil dealers), who would have necessarily supported the work of the *unctores* and *balneatores*, as both masseurs and bath-attendants used olive-oil to massage or assist in the bathing process. Therefore, although population growth was certainly the largest contributing factor in an increased demand for olive-oil (Mattingly & Aldrete 2000), it is possible that a growing number of *unctores* and *balneatores* partially contributed to the rise in demand for olive-oil in the first and second centuries CE.

#### Bibliography

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