

TEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS AT AQUINCUM

Every year, in addition to the permanent exhibitions, valuable and interesting temporary displays await visitors at the Aquincum Museum in Budapest. The present article introduces two exhibitions that have followed one another. The exhibition organized between November 2015 and November 2016 on the wellness life of Aquincum presented the flourishing bathing culture that existed even in ancient times, while the collection that can be visited from December 2016 to November 2017 guides the museum audience through the forbidden world of magic and evil sorcery in Aquincum in its day.

GÁBOR LASSÁNYI

SECRET PATHS – BLACK MAGIC IN AQUINCUM

3 December, 2016 – 5 November, 2017

Organizer: Gábor Lassányi

Co-curators: Andrea Barta and Lóránt Vass

“Certainly everyone fears that they will be cursed by dreadful incantations”, wrote Pliny the Elder nearly two thousand years ago. The three recently discovered written curses etched onto lead plates and buried between graves in Óbuda clearly show that even the Romans in Pannonia were not safe from evil sorcery. This exhibition, which can be seen at the Aquincum Museum from the beginning of December 2016, presents this special, forbidden area of Roman era magic, evil sorcery, as well as the protective charms and magic amulets that people used to keep these malign powers at bay.

The exhibition encompasses three sections: the everyday public spaces of the civilian town; the sorcerer’s workshops that were partially withdrawn from this public sphere and were where other-worldly powers were employed; and the cemeteries that were beyond everyday life and opened the gates to the underworld, where the final phase of curse rites took place and where it was possible to commune with the various gods and powers of the underworld (Fig. 1).

The curse tablets, such as the three lead plates from Aquincum that are now being exhibited for the first time, were important attributes for malign magical rites. Through these, it was possible to send messages to the gods and the powers of the underworld, asking them for assistance in providing someone with satisfaction for grievances or to break another person’s spirit. Every level of society—from the imperial family to slaves—could make these dark deals if they felt they had no other tools at their disposal.

The incantations were most commonly prepared by sorcerers well versed in secret knowledge, probably on the basis of instructions from collections of magical formulae. These tablets were often hidden in shrines or were buried or sunk in places such as cemeteries or lakes that were thought to be connected to the next world. The preparation or ordering of these curses was considered a serious crime, and could even be punished by death in Roman law.



Fig. 1: Poster for the exhibit (Graphics: Dávid Cserkúti)

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Numerous magical devices to protect against natural or supernatural dangers existed in the Roman period. The exhibition also presents these objects in detail. Jewellery made from gold, bronze, bone, and amber can be seen, as well as capsules for holding small amulets. These contained metal plates or pieces of papyrus inscribed with magical symbols and mysterious formulae (Fig. 2). The exhibition includes a reconstructed Roman era sorcerer's workshop equipped with an entire collection of magician's attributes: mysterious basic components, magical implements, and collections of mystical recipes (Fig. 3).

A special feature of the exhibition is provided by the illustrations of Dávid Cserkúti, one of the best known Hungarian comic book illustrators, which show a partially imagined conflict reconstructed on the basis of one of the curse tablets from Aquincum (Fig. 4). According to the text, at the turn of the 3rd century AD in Aquincum a group of free men and slaves had a sorcerer prepare curses inscribed on a lead plate prior to a court hearing with the aim of rendering their adversaries speechless or paralyzed.

The majority of the objects displayed in the exhibition are from the collections of the Aquincum Museum, supplemented with works from the Hungarian National Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Janus Pannonius Museum.



Fig. 2: Reconstruction of enchanted papyrus and magical figures in the sorcerer's workshop (Photograph: Nóra Szilágyi)



Fig. 3: The reconstructed Roman sorcerer's workshop (Photograph: Nóra Szilágyi)



Fig. 4: The first hall of the exhibit (Photograph: Nóra Szilágyi)

GABRIELLA FÉNYES

WELLNESS IN ANCIENT TIMES – BATHING CULTURE IN AQUINCUM

16 November, 2015 – 16 November, 2016

Curator: Gabriella Fényes

Today Budapest is rightfully considered a city of baths, and we are proud of this facet of the capital. However, precedents for bathing and the utilization of the outstanding medicinal waters do not go back only to recent history and the Turkish Period. The area was also an important site for baths in ancient times. This is evidenced by the architectural remains of excavated baths as well as the material finds related to bathing culture found during excavations. This thematic exhibition of the Aquincum Museum presents the baths excavated within the territory of present-day Budapest and the bathing culture that played such a great role in the life of the ancient predecessor to the capital, Aquincum (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Comprehensive view of the “Wellness in Ancient Times – Bathing Culture in Aquincum” exhibit

“(Water) is after all essential to life, to the enjoyment of life, and to everyday needs”, wrote Vitruvius two thousand years ago. With this sentence, he summarized everything that water meant to the Romans. This includes the “Roman bathhouse”, a building type that the Romans created, as well as the “bathing culture” that was also given to the world by the Romans. While the origin of the bathhouse as a building type does reach back to the Greeks, with the Romans it went beyond a site for washing oneself, to one for daily relaxation and recreation. This was also the case in Aquincum, with its rich water resources.

The remains of the baths, stone and brick walls and fragments of frescoes, and the personal belongings found amongst these ruins as well as the bathing accessories placed as grave goods buried with the deceased bear witness to the former culture of bathing. Items for the exhibition were selected both from the old materials kept in the museum’s storeroom and from finds discovered during excavations in recent years. In addition to the objects, a map shows the ancient baths excavated within the territory of present-day Budapest, and photographs as well as reconstructive drawings provide vivid images of the remains. To make all of this understandable and interesting even to the lay observer, voice was given to the witnesses of the past, the ancient inhabitants. Ancient authors were, after all, extraordinarily loquacious in respect to bathing culture, and perhaps it is not going overboard to state that it is one of the most discussed topics of Roman life and everyday activity. Our goal was for those who viewed the exhibition and then went out to the archaeological park surrounding the museum building or visited the Flórián Square Bath Museum to not only see the ruins of the baths as mere brick and stone walls and the dilapidated remains of a heating system, but to be able to form an image of the teeming life that once existed there.

The exhibition dealt thematically with the flourishing life within the baths in Aquincum. The bathhouses and bathing customs of the Romans were presented through twenty brief descriptive texts and quotes taken from ancient authors, and all of this was illustrated using archaeological finds discovered at Aquincum. First, the exhibition provides a brief glimpse into the archaeological excavations. So far, twenty-four baths are known of from Aquincum. The first bath was discovered in 1778 during the digging of a lime pit. One of the chambers of this baths was formally excavated by István Schönvisner in that same year. This excavation was one of the early research endeavours into baths throughout Europe, and so we felt it was worthwhile to display the publication issued on it by István Schönvisner.

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The baths of Aquincum were supplied in part with water from springs excavated within the area of the present-day Római Strandfürdő (Római Open-Air Baths) through the aqueduct visible even today running north–south along Szentendrei Road. The collection basins for the springs were discovered during the excavations, and an original of one of these was displayed to the public. Well houses were erected above the springs. The waters continued from the well houses through a joint conduit and were conveyed along the north–south running aqueduct to the civilian city and then on further towards the military camp. The well houses enclosing the collection basins each housed an altar erected to the gods, in some cases healing gods, including one erected to Apollo and Sirona. Sacrificial offerings have been found in the collection basins of the springs, and the most typical examples of these – a gold ring, coins, and a small terracotta sculpture – were exhibited. These objects led the visitor to the next topic, the medicinal waters and the gods venerated at medicinal springs. Since the Romans did not leave any thermal springs unexploited, we also looked into where evidence of this was found within the territory of Budapest (Fig. 6).

The next section presented the components of the baths and their engineering fixtures through explanatory illustrations, as well as an underfloor heating system (*hypocaustum*) installation constructed in part from original pieces and in part from replicas made from original finds. The hygienic baths, whether they were private baths connected to rich residences or public baths, contained a complex baths system of engineering features developed during the 1st century AD, which after that time could be found in every bathhouse in the Roman Empire. This encompassed the entire system of water supply, heating of the room and the water, and the disposal of waste water. Hollow bricks, flooring bricks, small but beautiful mural painting fragments from the governor’s palace on Óbuda (Hajógyár) Island, stucco and lead water pipes illustrated this (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6: Detail of the “Wellness in Ancient Times – Bathing Culture in Aquincum” exhibit with the altar stone erected to Apollo and Sirona found on the territory of the Római Strandfürdő (Roman Open-Air Baths) and on the side a model of the chain pump



Fig. 7: Detail from the exhibit: display of the Roman underfloor heating system (*hypocaustum*)

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Following the introduction of the architecture and the engineering infrastructure, there is a glimpse into life in the baths together with the material finds. Roman baths could be public, private, or military. The most imposing private baths here were those at the governor's palace, and these are presented through photographs made during their excavation. The largest baths, the baths of the military troops stationed at Aquincum, the legio II Adiutrix, appear in the exhibition through the text of their reconstruction inscription, reconstruction drawings of the building, and photographs of the ruins visible at the Bath Museum. The other section of a military bathhouse, which is not as well known even amongst experts, is the *caldarium* (hot-water and steam room with high humidity) excavated in a corner of the Királyfürdő (Royal Baths), and the fragments of mural paintings from this were displayed.

The architectural framework of the Roman baths was filled with life by real flesh-and-blood everyday people. Of course it is only possible to imagine the “noise, racket and din”, as is described in the 56th epistle of Seneca, but the everyday items used in the baths, cosmetics accessories, tweezers, razors, perfume jars, tokens, and dice have been discovered during the excavations and these were displayed in the exhibition. Standing out amongst the objects are the scraper (*strigil*) found at the large military baths, the bronze perfume jar (*balsamarium*) decorated with a black person's head found in a grave on Bécsi Road and the rarely found iron vessel for transporting bath oil also discovered on Bécsi Road (Fig. 8).

For the most part the only information about the people who worked at the baths is from ancient texts, but we were able to display the typical medical implements used by doctors practicing at the baths. Perhaps the inscribed statue base erected for Telesphorus was related to a doctor's practice at the baths, since it was found in a building that can be considered a bathhouse.

At the end of the exhibition there is a summary of what we have inherited from the Romans. In most Roman residences there was no bathroom, these were only built in the dwellings of the wealthiest people. Thus, most people went to the baths to clean up, and the great majority of these also enjoyed the wellness services provided at the baths. People going to the baths first worked out, then according to their inclination chose between the hot or cold baths and may have toned their bodies up in various sauna rooms. They probably did not leave without a massage as well, and if necessary, they could take advantage of medical or cosmetic treatments. If they were thirsty or hungry, they went to the snack bars in front of the entrance to the baths. In addition to this, Roman baths served as a scene for social life and a place for people to get together. The Romans also made use of both thermal and medicinal springs. Medicinal bath centers were established at these sites, with the most famous being sought out from distant provinces, and medicinal waters along the border were used by the military for recreation.

We tried to make the exhibition easily understandable and enjoyable for everyone. For kids a model of a chain pump was constructed, which turned out to be popular with the adults too. According to the archaeological data, these types of water pumps operated in baths that were not connected to the town's water supply system. According to the conception of Klára Póczy, these types of water pumps must also have been installed at the starting point of the Aquincum water mains. The museum's restoration experts



Fig. 8: Case displaying the bath items found at Aquincum

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prepared the replicas of the ancient bath accessories using materials and techniques from the time. At the exhibition, visitors could pick up and try out these items, including bath slippers, scrapers, perfume jars, combs, and mirrors. In ancient times people often attached these items to a ring and brought them to the baths with them, so we did this as well, hanging them in a small dressing area. We provided unique “comfort areas” for visitors who wanted to sit down and rest. Public toilets were an important part of Roman baths, so our benches were constructed on the basis of their distinctive seats. Here people could play board games, read, or check out sketches based on ancient ideas. In little bottles placed on a small Roman table (also a replica) there were extracts of rosemary, lemon grass, rose, sage, and lavender, as well as a cream made on the basis of a recipe from one of the ancient world’s most famous doctors, Galen. Through these visitors were able to get a whiff of the aromas used in Roman baths. The experience was finished off by an enormous drawing made for children, which summarized in an illustration everything that was a part of the exhibition. To close the exhibit for adults, there was a portion of Seneca’s famous 56th epistle, conjuring up the sounds of the ancient baths.

On the basis of feedback, we were successful in raising people’s interest in ancient wellness, from grade schoolers to grandparents, and there were even return guests who brought more curious visitors in with them. Due to popular demand, an informational booklet was also published that presented the exhibition materials. The exhibition was awarded honourable mention in the 2015 Exhibition of the Year competition. Numerous programmes were linked to the topic during this year-long temporary exhibition, and these were used to look at ancient bathing culture from every aspect. In addition to the programs organized by the Aquincum Museum itself, there were centrally organized events that were also related. Thus, through publicized events the “Wellness in Ancient Times – Bathing Culture in Aquincum” exhibition participated in the Night of the Museums, the Night of the Researchers, and the Fall Festival of Museums, and even joined in on the challenges of Global Wellness Day. There were educational presentations on medicinal baths, people were able to prepare aromatic essences and ointments based on ancient recipes, we looked at Roman baths from a female perspective, and we even visited the Flórián Square military baths. The combined guided tours led by an archaeologist together with actors met with perhaps the greatest success. In these, they interpreted the writings of ancient authors and brought Roman bathing culture to life in the exhibition and even amongst the ruins of the public baths in the civilian town.