CHAPTER THREE

MEDICINAL HOT SPRINGS AND HEALING SPAS
IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

si primum omnibus templis saluberrimae regiones aquarum que fontes
in hic locis idonei eligentur, in quibus fana constituantur, deinde maxime
Aesculapiio, Saluti, et eorum deorum quorum plurimi mediccns aegri
curari videntur [= In the case of all sacred precincts we select very healthy
neighborhoods with the suitable springs of water in the places where the
fanes are to be built, particularly in the case of those to Aesculapius and
to Salus, gods by whose healing powers great numbers of the sick are
apparently cured].

Thus did the first century BCE Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio
explain the basis for the correct selection of a site for a new sacred
precinct. He recommends choosing a healthy spot with a spring for
all gods but especially for those connected to healing when planning
a new temple.¹

Most sacred buildings at the sites of medicinal hot springs, known
from antiquity, cannot be identified nowadays. Some of the springs were
blocked and others dried up. Where they have remained in use, the
ancient structures have usually been subsequently modified or replaced
by later buildings.²

The following is intended merely as some general observations on
the original use of hot springs for medicinal purposes; the healing
qualities of such springs; ritual worship of the therapeutic sites; the
military presence at these sites; and the archaeological finds in the
Graeco-Roman world. This chapter will focus on a historical cross
section of the socio-economic, cultural and religious aspects of these
places. Bath Spa in Gloucestershire, Britain, will function as a model
for those fascinating aspects. (See Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

¹ Vitruvius, De Architectura 1.2.2; See also Allen (1998): 49.
² Jackson (1990a); Dvorjetski (1992a); idem, (1992b).
3.1 **The Original Use of Hot Springs for Medicinal Purposes**

As early as the era of Hippocrates (ca. 460–370 BCE), who is traditionally regarded as ‘the father of medicine’, bathing was considered not simply as a measure of hygiene. Its properties of cleaning and refreshing were augmented by more general effects, particularly its healing and curing qualities. Bathing was considered one of the means by which a person could both maintain and restore health. The use of hot springs for medicinal purposes originates in the teaching of Hippocrates. In his day, the method became practical and of benefit to the sick.\(^3\) Hippocrates’ ideas were developed mainly by Galen, the Greek physician, anatomist and writer on medicine and philosophy (129–ca. 199 CE), who does not elaborate at length on the benefits of spring water and bathing, but his medical advice includes the use of thermo-mineral waters.\(^4\) Others were Celsus, the encyclopaedist, whose writings on medicine are extant (ca. 25 BC–50 CE); Soranus of Ephesus, the most famous physician of the Methodist sect, who studied in Alexandria before going to Rome to practice during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian (90–150 CE); Oribasius, the Greek physician and medical writer from Pergamon of the fourth century CE; and Caelius Aurelianus, who lived in the fifth century CE and preserved Soranus’ treatise.\(^5\)

Medicinal hot springs were recommended for the treatment of specific complaints, such as disturbances of paralysis, muscle disorders, and diseases of the joints, most notably gout; urinary diseases, including bladder stone; digestive disorders and internal ailments, including colic, liver abscess and ‘wasting’ diseases; skin diseases, including psoriasis and ulceration; eye diseases, head pains, and insanity; female disorders, including infertility; fevers, pneumonia, respiratory problems and chest

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