

The Gods of Water—Baths, Country Houses, and Their Decoration in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Flanders

Ursula Härting

Today's preoccupation with wellness has meant that the focus of bathrooms has shifted from simple rooms devoted to personal hygiene to aesthetically conceived environments designed to encourage relaxation and enjoyment. Yet this is by no means a modern phenomenon, but one which, in Europe at least, has its roots in the *thermae*, the large baths of ancient Rome used by ordinary citizens. More privileged members of society had private baths, often of considerable size, as evident from Pliny's (61/62–ca. 114) description of his country retreat, which boasted five rooms devoted to different saunas and hot and cold baths with adjacent resting areas.¹ Bathing was always considered a pleasurable way of engaging in *otium*, the Latin word denoting leisure. Public bathhouses in early-modern times could be segregated according to the sexes, but mixed bathing was also allowed, earning bathhouses the reputation of being places of disrepute, where visitors engaged in immoral sexual conduct and decadent behaviour.² The following study will examine how the popularity of private bathing facilities among Europe's elite gave rise to the demand for and creation of a new form of erotic and eroticising decoration.³

While early Renaissance architectural treatises only briefly refer, if at all, to private bathing complexes,⁴ Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439–1501/02)

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1 Pliny, *Delphi Complete Works of Pliny the Younger*, trans. J.B. Firth, books 1–v (Delphi Classics, Hastings, East Sussex, UK: 2014), vol. 28, Letter to Domitio Apollinari ... (2,17); to Gallus (5,6).

2 Wolthall D., *In and Out Of The Marital Bed, Seeing Sex In Renaissance Europe* (New Haven–London: 2010) 121.

3 Cf. Scaillièrez C., *Le bain et le miroir: soins du corps et cosmétiques de L'Antiquité à la Renaissance* [exh. cat., Musée de Cluny, Paris; Musée National de la Renaissance Ecouen, Ecouen] (Paris: 2009) 64–66. 'Le bain, lieu de nudité et métaphore du plaisir érotique' (the bath is a place of nudity and a metaphor for erotic enjoyment).

4 Cf. the many texts, especially on *Villegiatura* (rural retreat; see below), by Ugolino de Montecatini (1345–1425), Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), Giuliano da Sangallo (ca. 1443–1516) and Filarete (ca. 1400–ca. 1469).

included a detailed account in his treatise of the early 1480s, which was published in Italian and so accessible to a wider audience.⁵ He obviously studied the ruins of ancient *thermae*, as one of his drawings shows the ground plan of part of the extensive complex of baths built by the emperor Hadrian (117–138) in his villa at Tivoli.⁶ Through his patron, Duke Federico da Montefeltro (1522–1582), who had his own bathing facilities in his palazzo in Urbino, Di Giorgio had access to the works of ancient authors and especially the writings of Vitruvius, which were particularly influential; on the basis of these texts, Di Giorgio was able to establish the correct terminology for the various rooms and their functions: one undressed in the *spoliatum* or *apodyterion*, while the sauna was called *stufa* or *stuffetta*; the floor and walls of the *hypocaustum* were heated; the *sudazioni col tepidario* were steam baths with a lukewarm resting room whereas the *frigidarium* contained a pool of cold water. If one had no separate resting area, one retired to the bedroom. This enfilade or succession of rooms catered to all needs and desires, from basic hygiene, to relaxation and perhaps even erotic activities. The term *stufa*/*stuffetta* emerged as the generic name for bathing facilities conceived to provide the owner and his guests with enjoyment of every sort.⁷ The experience was not just about cleanliness, but also about eating together, conversing and playing games,—and sexual fulfilment, or at the very least an amorous adventure.⁸

Rome's Castel Sant'Angelo still retains its Renaissance bathhouse, installed by Pope Clement VII around 1527,⁹ and described by Vasari 1568 as 'una stufa

5 Giorgio Martini F. di, *Trattati di architettura ingegneria e arte militare, 1480–1485*, ed. and trans. L. Maltese Degrassi (Milan: 1967). My study is indebted to Waarts L.L., *Badkamers voor Pausen en Prelaten, Leven en welzijn aan het Vaticaanse hof in de renaissance* (Delft: 2014); here Waarts, *Badkamers* 110–113.

6 Hadrian's Villa was also studied by Raphael. For a list of ancient baths, see Waarts, *Badkamers*, 112, n. 898.

7 The bathing facilities installed by Cardinal Guiliano della Rovere (1443–1513), the future Pope Julius II, in his castle in Ostia and Pope Clement VII (1478–1534) in Castel Sant'Angelo show how quickly contemporary architecture was influenced by Di Giorgio's ideas.

8 The layout was geared for optimal efficiency by locating the kitchens next to the warm areas of the baths.

9 The floor and walls of the bathing room in Castel Sant'Angelo of his predecessor, Julius II, 1504, were heated by circulating warm air. According to Vitruvius Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *Vitruvii De architectura libri decem = Zehn Bücher über Architektur*, trans. and with notes by C. Fensterbusch (Darmstadt: 1996) v 10, 1, containers for cold water and bronze boilers for heating hot and lukewarm water were stored in a room (*praefurnium*) adjoining the warm room (*tepidarium*). Cf. Waarts, *Badkamers* 112.