

The Bath in the Insula IV of the Hellenistic and Roman Quarter of Agrigento

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Archaeological Research in Agrigento. The Roman Bath

The Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples has recently promoted a series of investigations that have been planned within the context of a re-reading of the ancient city, studied and considered in its diachrony. This new perspective has led to a critical rethinking of the archaeological evidence. Certainly, the most striking aspect of this new methodological approach is that it shifts the focus to the Roman and late Roman city.¹ Thanks to this scientific research programme there have recently been some very important discoveries, such as the Roman bath identified in 2014 and the Hellenistic and Roman theatre found in 2016.

Recent archaeological excavations have also been carried out in the so-called Quartiere Ellenistico Romano of Agrigento,² a large sector of the ancient city located in front of the public area of the Forum and previously investigated in the 1950s (fig. 1). Three north-south streets were found (*stenopoi* or *cardines*) divided into three blocks (*insulae*), which also included rich *domus*, with *peristylia*, painted walls, and mosaic floors that all date back to the Roman Imperial period.³

The most recent excavation campaigns, between 2014 and 2018,⁴ have unearthed an unexpected result: just east of the part already discovered, in the area of the 4th *insula* next to the 4th *cardo*, a bath has been identified – or more probably two baths – built on two levels and separated by a strong terrace wall (figg. 2–3).

The buildings were heavily damaged during the Byzantine period when the area was utilised for burials and workshops. Only the foundations of the bath remain today.

In the lower complex six rooms and an open space have been found. Three rooms were heated, attested to by the *hypocaustum* with *pilae*, made of *bessales* bricks and small limestone blocks. Room 3a was rectangular, 2a was apsed, while room 1a was divided into two parts, probably later on, by a small wall. The northern part of the room has a *cocciopesto* floor, while in the southern part some *pilae* have been found (10a). The *praefurnia* were located on the western side of the apsed room 2a as well as on the eastern side of 10a. The small parapets of the *praefurnia* remain *in situ*. The *suspensurae* are not preserved, except for a small section of *cocciopesto* floor in 2a (fig. 4).

Contiguous to the heated rooms was a pool that has been identified as a *frigidarium*, with an apsed *alveus* in *opus caementicium* and *cocciopesto*, preceded by two steps covered by green marble slabs (4a). The floor was also decorated by reused *crustae* of various marbles, some as precious as *pavonazzetto* (fig. 5). The eastern part of the *frigidarium* was later modified significantly by a Byzantine mill⁵ (9a). To the east there was probably a large open space (11a), but we have not been able to recognise the layers



Fig. 1: The Hellenistic and Roman Quarter: general view.

of use relative to the bath because the area was largely modified and utilised for burials in the 6th–7th century AD. Perhaps the gate of the bath was open on the southern wall of this large room, where a drum of a fluted column no longer *in situ*, still remains. Two channels were also found covered by stone slabs that exit two rooms contiguous with the stenopos' wall (5th *cardo*) on the eastern side. One of these rooms has a *cocciopesto* floor with well-preserved *pulvini* (6a), the other is difficult to interpret now, because it was transformed into a pottery kiln during the Middle Ages (7a).

In the upper complex there is a channel along the terrace wall made of sandstone blocks with a clay pipe inside, whose connection to the bath is difficult to understand at the moment. There were also three heated rooms with *hypocaustum* and *bessales* brick *pilae*, arranged on the floor paved by larger tiles (3b, 4b, 5b) (fig. 6). However, in this case no *suspensurae* flooring remains. Nearby there is a large pool with an apse between two orthostates, which perhaps ended on the southern side, but is now spoiled (2b, 7b) (fig. 7). Along the northern side, there was also a seat coated with plaster. A large hole opens at the bottom coated with *cocciopesto* allows us to see a drain channel made of sandstone blocks. Other rooms in the northern part of the complex were probably used for collecting water as attested to by the hydraulic plaster coating the walls; these were later reused during the Byzantine period. In fact, in room 8b, where there are also traces of a lead *fistula*, three polysome burials were found covered by stone slabs (fig. 8). Room 9b instead, in *opus caementicium*, was probably transformed into a cult site connected with the tombs, which is attested by the red cross with *pendilia* letters *alpha* and *omega* painted on the northern wall.



Fig. 2: The Roman bath. Ortophoto.

The building technique of the bath complex was generally in sandstone ashlar and sometimes in *opus caementicium*. The *alveus* of *frigidarium* 4a was plastered inside as well along with the southern part of room 1a (10a). The heating system below the raised floor (*hypocaustum*) was combined with the walls heated from inside. Many box-flue



Fig. 3: The Roman bath. The excavation area.

tiles (*tubuli*) which carried the hot air provided by the furnaces and *tubuli* with peduncle from the vaults have been found in the collapsed part of the rooms.

The regular availability of running water must have been an essential prerequisite for a bath and we know the water supply networks were established through hydraulic underground conduits at Akragas during the Greek period.⁶ At present we do not understand how this system could be connected to our buildings. (M.C.P.)

Preliminary Interpretive Questions

At this point in the research we can only propose some hypotheses about the baths, the first known in Agrigento. Many questions of interpretation remain without answer for now, due to the bad conservation of the buildings, which was significantly altered during the early Middle Ages.

First, destruction of the floors and layers of use strictly related to the baths makes it very difficult to propose a precise chronological dating of the complex. However, we



Fig. 4: The Roman bath. The lower complex: the heated rooms.

do think it was built before the mid-5th century AD due to the layers of abandonment discovered in the rooms.

The data document a *hiatus* between the Hellenistic period and the 4th century AD. Only three findings have been dated to between the 1st and 2nd century AD: a gem with a Nike in a belted chiton stepping forward raising a wreath and shouldering a palm branch, and the fragments of two inscriptions, which were not found *in situ*. One epigraph celebrates an *optimus patronus*, similar to other dedications for acts of euergetism, such as the construction of a bath (*[magnis honori]bus patrono optumo [de]s]uo posuit*).

The loss of decorations and architectonic furniture also affects our attempts to date the building. The few fragments of *opus sectile* that are still *in situ* in the *frigidarium* offer



Fig. 5: The *frigidarium* and detail of *crustae* in situ.



Fig. 6: The Roman bath. The upper building: the heated rooms.



Fig. 7: The Roman bath. The upper building: the pool.

us only a slight idea of how much might be lost forever. We can compare it to a similar floor with reused marble *crustae* in the *Mitraeum* of Ostia, dated to the 4th century AD. The mixed use of brick *pilae* and small sandstone blocks to support the *suspensurae*, though not preserved, could also be proof of posteriority, attested to by the late Roman baths of Gallia and Britannia. In the collapsed layers of the *hypocaustum* and in the *frigidarium* we have found many *tubuli* with peduncle, sometimes inserted with cement into another *tubulus*. As is well known, the experiment with light vaults, after the first Sicilian examples during the Hellenistic period is largely documented in Africa from the 2nd century AD to the late Empire. This technique, probably came from Africa to Sicily where it was frequently used during Late Antiquity. Some examples can be found in Favignana, Mozia, Siracusa, Priolo, Catania, in the Villa of Piazza Armerina, and at Vito Soldano near Agrigento. Similar *tubuli* used in the bath of the *domus* of capo Boeo's *insula* and dated to between the end of the 3rd and early 4th century AD have also been found in Carthage. With regard to the building plan we do not recognize our complex in the standard type of bathhouse plan, which consisted of a canonical sequence of hot and cold rooms. At the moment we are only able to observe that the lower building was characterized by a paratactic alignment of the rooms, but we do not understand the path of the bathers. We have not found traces of the connection between the two levels, which do, however, seem to be part of two different complexes, maybe, but we have no evidence, coeve. The choice of terraced buildings probably aimed to achieve a scenographic effect, frequent in Agrigentine urban planning, which exploited the slope to facilitate water supply and drainage systems, which we are unable to identify at this moment. Furthermore, we are unable to recognize the facilities beside the bathing spaces.

Bathing Culture in Roman Sicily

In Sicily experimentation of the healing technique began during the 3rd century BC, and the thermal architecture of private or public baths was developed between the 2nd and 5th century AD in the cities, as well as in the countryside in rural towns like Vito Soldano, in the rural or *maritimae* villas, and along the land routes of *cursus publicus* as infrastructure in the *stationes*.⁷

We can compare the lower complex to the buildings in Vito Soldano, or in Sofiana or to the southern Baths of Piazza Armerina which date to the 4th century AD.⁸

Regarding this topic, baths are certainly a distinctive trait of a Roman city and acted as the standard bearers of “becoming Roman” or of “being Roman.” Baths, both as a social and cultural phenomenon, and as a peculiar architectural expression, are an essentially Roman experience. The bathing habit represents the adoption of a role model, which reflects an identity pattern.⁹

In the case of Agrigento, it is necessary to understand the relationship with the housing context, not only in urbanistic or spatial terms, but particularly with regard to



Fig. 8: The Roman Bath. General view of the upper complex.

its function and cultural significance. From this perspective, it is a priority to identify for certain whether the property was private or public, fundamental for understanding the socio-political dynamics.

Our first impression, that it could be a neighbourhood bath, would have to be reconsidered in light of the data emerging from the next excavation of *Insula IV*. At the moment we can only observe the diverging orientation of the buildings with respect to the *domus* of the remaining three *insulae*. While we await confirmation, we assume Agrigentum's bath had a life span of about one hundred years, lasting into the 4th century AD, during which it was also restored, attested to by the plaster layer applied at a later time in the *alveus* of the *frigidarium*. The buildings were later abandoned in the mid-5th century AD.

This hypothesis fits with the archaeological evidence of life in the Hellenistic and Roman quarter, whose rich *domus* and their precious furniture survived until the 4th century AD.¹⁰ The streets among the *insulae* also show continued restoration work, which probably demonstrates state control of the public space. During the age of Costantine, on the ruins of the Augustan *Gymnasium*, a large complex that included three buildings was built and used, according to archaeologists, as a *macellum*.¹¹ In this period the theatre was already abandoned, but the remaining part of the *forum* was still in use. But it is on the hill of the temples that we recognise the evidence of changes to the classic urban setting. A large paleochristian necropolis was built in the ancient walls and the areas around the Greek temples. But if the Christian city required its space, the economy does not generally seem to suffer a negative turnaround: the *tegulae sulphuris* document the Imperial management of the sulphur trade,¹² local small wine amphoras were also produced perhaps for export,¹³ and the harbour near the mouth of the Akragas river maintained an unbroken relationship with North Africa until the 7th century AD.¹⁴ (V.C.)

Notes

¹ Caminneci et al. 2015; Caminneci et al. 2015, 37–39.

² Parello – Rizzo 2016a. Archaeological research in the *Insula III* of the Ellenistic and Roman Quarter is directed by an équipe of University of Bologna (Lepore et al. 2018).

³ De Miro 2009.

⁴ D'Angelo et al. 2016; Caminneci – Parello 2019; Caminneci et al. forthcoming.

⁵ Parello, Rizzo here, in these Proceedings (*Agrigento, archeologia e produzioni di una città antica tra vecchie ricerche e nuove acquisizioni*).

⁶ Furcas 2016.

⁷ Belvedere 1988, 373–375; Wilson 1990.

⁸ Pensabene 2012.

⁹ Fagan 1999, 176–198.

¹⁰ Parello – Rizzo 2016b about housing in Roman period; Gueli 2017, 292–299, for the case study of the II L House.

¹¹ Fiorentini 2011, 71–96 .

¹² Zambito 2018.

¹³ Rizzo 2014.

¹⁴ Caminneci 2014, 160.

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Fig. 1–8: Archive of Archaeological and Landscape Park of the Valley of the Temples.

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