

Rethinking the Concept of 'Healing Settlements': Water, Cults, Constructions and Contexts in the Ancient World

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Methodological Aspects

Maddalena Bassani and Ugo Fusco

The study of the exploitation of thermo-mineral resources in the ancient world, and particularly during the Roman period, is an extremely interesting research field that, after an initial period of investigation during the 1990s¹, has in very recent years resulted in numerous scholarly publications.²

The international meeting of the *Roman Archaeology Conference* held in Rome at La Sapienza University in 2016 was an important opportunity for the present authors to organize a session aimed at triggering debate among the European experts studying ancient settlements in the vicinity of Roman contexts characterized by the presence of thermo-mineral waters. Given the significant new findings that emerged during the conference, we felt the immediate need to collect the papers delivered in a single publication. Here we will attempt to offer some introductory guidelines from a methodological perspective.

The archaeological contexts characterized by the presence of this special natural resource – thermo-mineral water – share some common features but also present specificities that help to explain the different solutions adopted by the Romans to best exploit the healing potential of the springs and simultaneously to ensure a cultic component for all those pilgrims and sick people who travelled to the *aquae* in the hope of treatment and cure.

This brief discussion of some typical features of settlements in the vicinity of thermo-mineral springs may help to read the papers in this first section in a broader context, going beyond the confines of the individual sites examined and looking towards a unitary aspect, that of a typically imperial know-how capable of exporting and sharing knowledge, technologies and cult practices.

M. B., U. F.

¹ Chevallier 1992; Perex Agorreta 1997; Termalismo antico e moderno nel Lazio 1999.

² See the volumes published by the University of Padova research group, with articles by numerous Italian and foreign scholars (Bassani, Bressan and Ghedini 2011; Bassani, Bressan and Ghedini 2012; Bassani, Bressan and Ghedini 2013; Annibaletto, Bassani and Ghedini 2014). To these we can now add Peréx Agorreta, Alaix i Miró 2017; Guérin-Beauvois 2015; Scheid, Nicoud, Boisseuil and Coste 2015; Matilla Séiquer and Gonzálo Soutelo 2017.

Towards an Analysis of Sacred Contexts Near Thermo-mineral Springs

In 2014, publishing the data from a survey of over 70 cult contexts among the 140 thermo-mineral sites examined, I proposed some considerations based on the study of these particular ancient sites established and developed in the vicinity of springs, both hot and cold, but always characterized by the presence of dissolved mineral salts.³

The sites analysed included both unstructured contexts and other more structured ones where the rapport between the worshipper and the water and the deities presiding over it clearly differed. Indeed, where we find simple votive deposits in caves or near the springs, pilgrims could establish a direct and immediate relationship with the *aquae* and its associated deities by depositing offerings in the form of coins, pottery or metal. The absence of religious structures might therefore indirectly suggest a lesser role (or even an absence) of priests, called to mediate the request for a cure by a diseased person for themselves, for family members or animals. In these cases, the efficacy of the request – in other words a cure obtained by drinking or bathing in the water or exposure to its vapours – might have been ensured simply by performing the ritual of deposition at the springs.

But alongside simple votive deposits there are also a significant number of cases in which the sacred space near thermo-mineral springs was structured, for example with the building of *nymphaea*, temples or true sanctuaries. These situations are significantly more complex than simple votive deposits, both from the point of view of the efforts made by the public authorities to erect them and from that of the rituals required in fulfilment of the vow.

A first fact that should therefore be considered when analysing settlement types of a cultic nature near mineral springs is their environmental context:⁴ an accumulation of votives near a spring or a natural cave accessed along minor rather than consular roads or heavily travelled routes suggests a different type of pilgrimage⁵ than the sort we could imagine at a temple or even a sanctuary built in the proximity of

³ Bassani 2014.

⁴ Fundamental methodological information in Scheid 2015; de Cazanove 2015, with ample previous bibliography.

⁵ Giontella 2012.

healing springs. In the latter case, there are obviously numerous variables to be considered: the type of sacred structure (an isolated building or a group of separate structures), the ritual and cultic facilities (altars, bases, fountains, miscellaneous equipment), the fixed and movable decorative apparatus (wall and floor decorations, cult statues, votive offerings), the relationship between the sacred building and the rest of the settlement. In this context, one fact that seems significant - and apparently also characteristic of the north-western Roman provinces described in the papers by M. Marcato and C. Zanetti - is that these cult spaces were rarely built inside the thermal complex itself. More often, they were positioned in an *other* space with respect to the basins and treatment rooms, almost as if to ensure a clear distinction between the sacred cult space and the 'secular' space reserved for wellness and thermal therapies. This feature seems to emerge both at Campetti, in the complex described by U. Fusco, and in the *nymphaeum* of Chaves presented in the article by S. Carneiro and S. Soutelo, which also lists many further examples of *nymphaea* in the Iberian Peninsula. At the Portuguese site, the space reserved for the cult of the *Nymphs* seems to be clearly separate from the circuit providing access to the healing basins, almost as if to distinguish the cultic and more properly therapeutic pathways.

Thus, a further feature that may suggest interesting interpretations concerns access to the sacred space in the vicinity of healing springs and its relationship with the rest of the settlement, be it a genuine town, as at Baden-Baden, or a spa facility as appears to have been true of the *Aquae Calidae* in Bulgaria, presented, albeit briefly, in the paper by M. Abramova.

In studying the *sacrum* near *aquae*, as in any ancient cultic context, important information can thus be gleaned from a careful observation of the nature of the place, the type of structures, their insertion into empty spaces or structured contexts and finally, the access routes, the type of offerings and, where possible, the deities involved.

Indeed, a key problem is the identification of the divinities attested at thermo-mineral springs, known only in some cases thanks to inscriptions, literary texts or specific artefacts (cult statues, attributes, ritual equipment). The study of the Italian instances, to which the paper by the present author is devoted and which refers back to a previous publication on the inscriptions at the healing spas of Roman Italy,⁶ attempts to examine this aspect in light of the archaeological and epigraphical evidence. In some cases, we have sufficient evidence to identify indigenous deities who presided over the *aquae* and who with Romanization

were assimilated to or joined by deities of the Roman pantheon. For example, at the *Aquae Patavinae* in the Veneto region, *Aponus* was certainly a local deity whose name has been associated with the Indoeuropean root *Ap- connected to water,⁷ rather than with the paronymology suggested by Cassiodorus,⁸ according to which *Aponus* was a word of Greek origin alluding to the absence of pain (*a-ponos*). Later on, this god was joined by *Hercules*, *Apollo* and *Geryon*, but also the *Aquae* themselves, in accordance with a custom apparent in many other thermo-mineral spas of the Roman empire. As in the area of the Euganean Hills, the cult of *Apollo* and the *Nymphs*, and sometimes of *Fons* and *Salus*, seems to have been fairly common; these deities are named in some inscriptions from Roman Italy and from other provinces of the empire.

Elsewhere we find additional deities, who in specific contexts could take on healing capacities in response to the cultic requirements of the local community or who were in any case called to participate in the religious aspect of that specific thermo-mineral place without necessarily possessing healing powers. This is clarified by a passage of Pliny the Younger,⁹ in which it is said that at the springs of the *Clitumnus* there were many gods, but not all presided over springs: in other words, only some deities were venerated for their healing capacities whilst others participated in the sacred quality of the place perhaps because they were well-rooted in the local cultic imaginary for different powers. We should thus exercise extreme caution in systematically ascribing healing powers to a deity simply because his/her statue was found in a context with thermo-mineral waters, as already prudently noted in an article dedicated to sanctuaries and springs a few years ago.¹⁰

Another fact worth noting with regard to the deities of healing springs is the very infrequent presence of *Aesculapius* at Roman thermo-mineral spas. Indeed, as observed in the present author's paper in this volume, the attestations of inscriptions, statues and artefacts ascribable to a cult of this god are truly minuscule compared to those reserved for *Apollo*, who seems by contrast to be one of the most important figures in healing places with thermo-mineral waters.

There may be numerous explanations for this and that proposed in the aforementioned article may be just one of many: that there was a deliberate distinction between *Apollo's* healing powers and those of *Aesculapius*, in other words that there was a specialization in the therapies on offer depending on the different places in which the

⁶ Buonopane and Petracchia 2014.

⁷ Lazzaro 1981.

⁸ Cassiod. var. 2, 39.

⁹ Plin. *epist.* 8, 8, 2-6, on which Bassani 2012a. Cfr. also Scheid 2015.

¹⁰ de Cazanove and Scheid 2003.

two gods were worshipped. As proof of this hypothesis we can note on the one hand that *Apollo's* relations with *aquae* and all the phenomena linked to thermo-mineral resources (fumes and muds) were from the outset fundamental to the god's powers: not coincidentally, the Panhellenic sanctuary of Delphi was built above a faultline that emitted vapours rich in CO₂, causing the Pythia to fall into a trance and thus to prophecy on the god's behalf.¹¹ On the other, recent studies have shown that sanctuaries of *Aesculapius* only rarely contained thermo-mineral springs;¹² instead, they were more commonly built near fresh water springs, essential both for the god's rites and for official Hippocratic medicine and all traditional treatments.

The theory that there was a deliberate distinction between treatment facilities depending on the available natural resources, presided over by *Apollo* if the waters were mineral-rich or by *Aesculapius* (or other deities) if they were oligomineral thus requires further study, currently underway and shortly to be published. Confirmation of this also seems to come from the paper by E. Borgia in this volume, devoted to the healing contexts of Asia Minor. In the case of the *Asklepieion* at Pergamon, the cult place and healing centre were not served by waters rich in dissolved mineral salts since no chemical-physical or geological study currently seems to attest for the presence of a geothermal phenomenon at the site. The waters may have been considered health-giving because they were sacred, as at *Clitumnus*, but were in fact simply fresh waters that gushed from the numerous springs identified in several places. By contrast, thermo-mineral waters were present in abundance at *Hierapolis* where *Apollo* was the principal deity and where the sanctuary of the god, connected to the *Ploutonion*, was not coincidentally built above a faultline that emitted gases rich in CO₂.

In conclusion, then, there are numerous factors to be borne in mind when analysing cult places in the vicinity of *aquae*: we need the prudence to consider all the available data and the curiosity to go beyond the known facts to suggest new lines of inquiry.

M. B.

Towards a Topographical and Architectural Analysis of Healing Contexts near Thermo-mineral Springs

The papers in this section illustrate the wide distribution of thermo-mineral complexes in the various parts of the Roman empire: from Italy (Bassani, Fusco) to Africa (Koehler), from Gaul (Marcato) to the Iberian Peninsula (Carneiro, Soutelo) and from Asia Minor (Borgia) to Germany (Zanetti), and Bulgaria (Abramova). Despite

the numerous attestations, a comprehensive analytical study of this class of monuments is still lacking; as studies of specific geographical contexts we could cite the publications on the instances in Italy by the University of Padua¹³ and the recent books on those in Spain.¹⁴ The potential for new scholarly developments and discoveries is thus extremely high and for this reason this introduction will survey the principal topographical, planimetric and architectural features of thermo-mineral complexes.¹⁵ It is to be hoped that future more wide-ranging and in-depth studies will bring to light the similarities and differences between these monuments, also considering the peculiarities of the areas in which they are attested.¹⁶

As a starting point, it might be helpful to consider the relationship between the buildings under consideration here and the baths used for hygiene purposes, an architectural typology that is now very well known¹⁷ and that influenced the complexes under consideration here in various ways.¹⁸ From a chronological point of view, baths used for hygiene are known to have developed earlier (mid-3rd century BC) than medical-therapeutic spas where structures were present (2nd century BC).¹⁹ From a functional point of view, the hygiene baths were used principally for bodily cleansing and were not prescribed to those suffering from diseases;²⁰ thermo-mineral complexes, by contrast, had specific therapeutic functions linked to the curative properties of the spring.²¹ Further differences thus consist of the type of water used (oligomineral for hygiene baths and highly mineralized water for thermal complexes), their location (generally, though not exclusively, inside the city for hygiene baths and on the outskirts of or outside the city for thermo-mineral complexes given their therapeutic function) and the strong sacred component attested at thermo-mineral complexes.²² Nonetheless, the two architectural types share numerous features, such as the water management systems and the layout and architectural features of the structures used for bathing (basins, pools) or, more generally, of the buildings connected with water (*nymphaea*, cisterns, water basins, etc).²³ There does not appear to be a substantial difference in terms of building technique

¹³ Annibaletto, Bassani and Ghedini 2014.

¹⁴ Peréz Agorreta, Alaix i Miró 2017; Matilla Séiquer and González Soutelo 2017.

¹⁵ Extremely useful is the article by Annibaletto 2014.

¹⁶ For the architectural development of these sites in Italy: Bassani 2014.

¹⁷ There is a vast bibliography on the subject; see most recently Yegül 2010.

¹⁸ Annibaletto 2014. On the distinction between hygiene baths and healing baths see: Zanolletto 2013; André 2006, 317.

¹⁹ Annibaletto 2014, 130-131.

²⁰ Scheid 1991, 208-209.

²¹ On the maladies that could be cured depending on the different characteristics of the thermal springs, according to the ancient sources: Basso 2013; Rizzi 2014; Zanetti, Rizzi and Mantovanelli 2012.

²² Zanolletto 2013. On the sacred aspect of springs: Giontella 2012.

²³ Annibaletto 2014.

¹¹ Bassani 2012b.

¹² Lippolis 2009.

and typology between hygiene baths and thermo-mineral complexes; consequently, in the absence of clear evidence for the presence of thermal springs the identification may be uncertain.²⁴ Additionally, like hygiene baths, the complexes under consideration here present an extensive architectural development with a progressive occupation of the area; this might be a flat area or a slope organized into terraces.²⁵

Some uncertainties persist as to how thermal sites were used. Whilst the information present in the literary and epigraphical sources provides considerable information on the organization and the procedures undergone by worshippers at another well-known type of ancient healing site in the Greek world, the *Asklepieion*,²⁶ in our case the available documentation is less rich in details.²⁷ The famous passage of Pliny the Younger on the sacred and perhaps health-giving area near the *Clitumnus* in Umbria,²⁸ already mentioned in the previous section, provides some interesting hints as to its internal organization. The principal characteristic of a thermo-mineral site is without doubt the presence of numerous springs;²⁹ the main spring, not always located at the centre of the architectural layout of the site (Carneiro, Soutelo; Fusco), is generally subjected to processes of monumentalization (e.g. Carneiro, Soutelo on Chaves). The springs could be located at the ancient ground level but could also be underground and with access provided by tunnels dug into the bedrock, of which some examples survive (Fusco; Carneiro, Soutelo).³⁰ Finally, within a thermo-mineral site, waters of non-mineral type were also used for various purposes and for this reason little aqueducts to transport water and cisterns to store it are attested.³¹

The structures used for bathing (basins, pools, *natationes*) made it possible to use the thermal waters (bathing therapy) and are the most common architectural feature of these complexes (Bassani; Borgia; Carneiro, Soutelo; Fusco; Marcato; Zanetti; Kohler). They vary in shape and size, but from a technical and structural point of view they present the same characteristics as those attested at hygiene baths.³² Among the remedies on offer, in addition to bathing, we could also mention the drinking of the waters; other therapies cannot be ruled out (such as treatments using muds and therapeutic showers) though structures used for these purposes have hitherto not been located with certainty.³³

Thermo-mineral sites usually present evidence of cult activities, though these are not always associated with true sacred buildings. The cult structures may be of various types, including temples (Zanetti), altars and shrines (Fusco, Borgia).³⁴ Given the topographical separation within thermo-mineral sites of buildings used for bathing and those serving a religious purpose (e.g. Fusco; Carneiro, Soutelo) we can suggest that the pathways were also distinct.³⁵

The internal organization of the spaces must also have included residential areas for both patrons and the staff who ensured the upkeep and running of the site by performing a variety of specialized tasks.³⁶ It is also likely that there were artisanal structures in the vicinity of thermo-mineral complexes, created to exploit the available resources; the evidence for these is discussed in recent studies.³⁷

U. F.

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²⁴ Annibaletto 2014.

²⁵ Annibaletto 2014.

²⁶ Melfi 2007.

²⁷ For an analysis of the literary sources: Zanetti 2014.

²⁸ Plin. *epist* 8, 8, 2-6.

²⁹ Annibaletto 2014; Zanovello 2013.

³⁰ Annibaletto 2014.

³¹ Annibaletto 2014.

³² Annibaletto 2014.

³³ Annibaletto 2014.

³⁴ On the cultic aspect see the overview in the previous section and Bassani 2014, 2012.

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³⁶ Ghedini and Bassani 2014, 269.

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