

PLINY *NATURALIS HISTORIA* 36.121 AND THE NUMBER OF *BALNEA* IN  
EARLY AUGUSTAN ROME

Determining the number of *balnea*<sup>1</sup> in Rome at any given time depends on the written sources, as virtually no physical remains have survived from the city.<sup>2</sup> The epigraphic material, although voluminous, is unevenly distributed over centuries, thus rendering it virtually useless for computing precise figures for particular periods. Ancient writers allude to the numerous *balnea* in the city, but usually do not offer concrete numbers (e.g., Ov. *Ars Am.* 3.638–40). The only exception is the entry in the Constantinian *Notitia Urbis Regionum* that numbers the city's *thermae* at 11 and *balnea* at 856 (*Notitia Urbis Regionum* 14). The latter figure is not above suspicion: if all the entries for *balnea* listed for individual regions in the *Notitia* are added up, the total reaches 610 (600 in the *Curiosum*), 246 short of the figure given for the city as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the higher total includes *balnea* located in the outskirts of the city, or abandoned and disused establishments, while the lower one does not. Whatever the case, the discrepancy remains curious.

A statement by Pliny the Elder has seemed to many scholars to offer a second precise figure for the city's *balnea*, or at least to provide a minimum number for them. Expressly drawing from Agrippa's memoirs of his aedileship in 33 B.C., Pliny reports (*NH* 36.121):

adicit [sc. Agrippa] ipse aedilitatis suae conmemoratione et ludos diebus undesehexaginta factos et gratuita praebita balinea CLXX, quae nunc Romae ad infinitum auxere numerum.<sup>4</sup>

Dio Cassius (49.43.2) corroborates the essence of Pliny's report, but without the numerical precision. Pliny's notice has been almost universally interpreted as stating that early Augustan Rome contained 170 *balnea*, if not more.<sup>5</sup>

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1. The question of what type of building the term *balnea* (as opposed to *thermae*) denotes has proved difficult to answer. The ancient sources can make clear that some distinction existed (e.g., *CIL* 14.2101 = Dessau, 5686; *CIL* 5.5279 = Dessau, 6728), but then apply both terms to the same building (e.g., the Baths of Sura at Rome, listed as *Bal(nea) Surae* on the *Forma Urbis*, frag. 21, but as *Thermae Suranae* in the *Notitia Urbis Regionum* 14). Modern scholarship has failed to resolve the contradictions presented by the ancient evidence, cf. the despair of W. Heinz, *Römische Thermen. Badewesen und Badeluxus im römischen Reich* (München, 1983), pp. 27–29. I. Nielsen has recently proposed a typological solution that, unfortunately, is too vague to be realistically applicable, cf. *Thermae et Balnea. The Architecture and History of Roman Public Baths*, vol. 1 (Aarhus, 1990), p. 3. In general, the term *balnea* appears to denote small city baths, typified by the numerous examples at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ostia, while *thermae* are more substantial and elaborate structures, such as the great Baths of Agrippa, Nero, Trajan, and the like. Hereafter, I will avoid confusion (and criticism) by employing the Latin term.

2. An exception is the *balneum* of imperial date on the Palatine, described by A. Cassatella and I. Iacopi, "Il balneum presso le Scalae Caci sul Palatino," in *Les thermes romains: Actes de la table ronde organisée par l'École Française de Rome* (Paris, 1991), pp. 129–38.

3. C. Bruun, *The Water Supply of Ancient Rome. A Study of Roman Imperial Administration* (Helsinki, 1991), p. 74, n. 48, comments that 856 is almost double the number of *vici* in the city (423) and just over half the number of *lucus* (1,352). He suggests that the number for *balnea* may therefore reflect a predetermined scheme of two *balnea* and four *lucus* per *vicus*. But if so, why should the author of the *Notitia* invent a figure roughly, not exactly, half the number of *lucus* and twice that of the *vici*?

4. It is unclear whether any significance can be placed on Pliny's use of the word *undesehexaginta* for the *ludi*, but the numeral *CLXX* for the *balinea*. There are no difficulties with the MSS at this point so, as far as we can tell, this is what Pliny wrote. It is a curious feature of the notice.

5. Several translators have rendered *gratuita praebita balinea* in the sense of "bathing establishments," e.g., D. E. Eicholz (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); R. Bloch (Paris, 1981); R. König (Tusculum, 1992). Recent

Upon closer inspection, however, the wording does not support this conclusion. Pliny says that Agrippa offered 170 *gratuita balinea* to the public. The word *balneum* can denote the act of bathing as well as the facility where it takes place.<sup>6</sup> In inscriptions the phrase *gratuitum balneum* appears as a synonym for the more common *gratuita lavatio*, meaning “free bathing.” For instance, a Trajanic inscription from Baetica records the granting of free bathing (*balinea gratuita*), oil, and a *gymnasium* to citizens by a *duovir*.<sup>7</sup> Although the precise mechanics of this benefaction are in many particulars unclear,<sup>8</sup> it seems that it could be restricted to specific bath-houses. Thus T. Aviasius Servandus, a benefactor in first-century A.D. Bononia, gave HS400,000 for *gratuita lavatio* in a bathhouse built for the community by Augustus and repaired by Gaius or Nero.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to Pliny's comments on Agrippa's benefactions of 33 B.C., we see that Agrippa was recording in his memoirs the number of offers of free bathing he presented to the public during his aedileship. The terms used in connection with Agrippa's actions—*gratuitus* and *praebere*—are most appropriate to offers to free bathing; certainly I know of no evidence that applies either word to a bath building.<sup>10</sup> Pliny gives no indication as to how the benefaction was carried out. Theoret-

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studies of the baths have largely followed suit, e.g., Heinz, *Thermen*, p. 24; E. Merten, *Bäder und Badegepflogenheiten in der Darstellung der "Historia Augusta"* (Bonn, 1983), p. 31; K. M. D. Dunbabin, “*Baiarum Graia Voluptas*: Pleasures and Dangers of the Baths,” *PBSR* 57 (1989): 8, n. 12; I. Nielsen, *Thermae*, 1:35; C. Bruun, *Water Supply*, p. 73; F. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 30, 45, 66 (repeated in J. Boardman's review, *New York Times Book Review* [6 September 1992]: 9).

6. Cf. *OLD*, s.v. (no. 3). *Balneum* on its own can be used in inscriptions to denote “bathing,” cf. *CIL* 14.3472 = Dessau, 2637 (Vallis Digentiae, near Tibur); *CIL* 11.3811 = Dessau, 6583 (Veii); *CIL* 2.5354 (Burguillos, Spain); *AE* 1953.21 (Lucurgentum, Spain).

7. *AE* 1989.420: “M. Valerio M. f., | M. n., G. pron., Quir. | Proculino, Ilvir(o) m(unicipum) m(unicipii) | Liberi Singiliensis | . . . item | populum universum in municipio | habitantem et incolas oleo et balineo | gratuito dato pervocavit | item quo die ludos iu(v)enum in theatro | dedit gymnasium et balinea viris et | mulieribus gratuita praestit.” Cf. P. Le Roux, “Cité et culture municipale en Bétique sous Trajan,” *Ktéma* 12 (1987): 271–84 for a full discussion of this text. For similar uses of *balneum gratuitum*, cf. *CIL* 12.3179 = Dessau, 2267 (Nemausus) and *CIL* 12.594 = Dessau, 6988 (Pagus Lucretius in the Ager Arelatensis). For *gratuita lavatio*, cf. *CIL* 5.6522 (Novaria) and 5.6668 (Vercellae); *CIL* 11.720 = Dessau, 5674 (Bononia); *CIL* 11.6167 = Dessau, 5673 (Suasa); *CIL* 14.2979 = Dessau, 5672 (Praeneste); *CIL* 14.3015 = Dessau, 6256 (Praeneste); *ILLRP* 617 (Interamna Praetuttiorum); *AE* 1979.202 (Urbs Salvia).

8. Benefactors could hire the building and open it to the public for free (cf. *Dig.* 19.2.30.1), or perhaps pay the *conductor* a fixed sum for each day of the benefaction. Alternatively, entrance *tesserae* could have been distributed. Le Roux's suggestion (“Cité et culture,” p. 276) that the benefactor provided wood sufficient for heating the bath to each beneficiary appears unduly difficult to execute. Cf. also F. Cenerini, “Evergetismo ed epigrafia: *lavationem in perpetuum*,” *RSA* 17–18 (1987–88): 199–220, esp. p. 216; Nielsen, *Thermae*, 1:133.

9. *CIL* 11.720 = Dessau, 5674: “divus Aug. parens | dedit; | ///// Augustus | Germanicus /// | refecit. | in huius balinei lavation. HS (400,000) | nomin. C. Aviasi T. f. Senecae f. sui T. Aviasius Servandus | pater testament. legavit, ut ex redditu eius summ. | in perpetuum viri et impuberes utriusq. sexus | gratis laventur”; the text is discussed by Cenerini, “Evergetismo,” p. 217. See also *CIL* 5.6522 where Terentia Postumina at Novaria offers free bathing in an establishment on her own property (due to the ambiguity in the meaning of *dare* here, the text may also mean that Terentia built the bathhouse, and then opened it for free): “balineum solo privato et | lavationem gratuitam in | perpetuum dedit.”

10. So, for instance, when a bath is built or restored, the verb *praebere* is never used to describe the work, rather *facere*, *perficere*, *aedificare*, (sometimes *dare*), *reficere*, *restituere*, and the like are preferred, cf. e.g., *CIL* 2.3542, 9.3522 (*facere*); *AE* 1911.217, *CIL* 8.20266 (*perficere*); Dessau, 5693, *CIL* 2.5354 (*aedificare*); *CIL* 10.4884 = Dessau, 5664 (*dare*); *CIL* 11.6225 = Dessau, 5679, *CIL* 14.376 (*reficere*); *AE* 1987.307, *CIL* 10.5917 = Dessau, 1909 (*restituere*). Likewise, *gratuitus* never appears to denote a structure given to or built for a community. Instead, the formulae *sua pecunia* or *sua omni impensa* (and variations) are the norm, cf. e.g., *CIL* 10.4884 = Dessau, 5664, *AE* 1935.28 (*sua pecunia*); *CIL* 2.3361 = Dessau, 5688, *CIL* 2.5489 (*sua omni impensa*); *CIL* 9.2447 (*sumptu proprio*); *CIL* 12.2494 = Dessau, 5768 (*de suo*).

ically, all 170 offers could have been made in a single bathhouse, spread over 170 days, or in 17 bathhouses over 10 days each; the possibilities are many.<sup>11</sup> But the main point is that Pliny's notice cannot be used to show that Rome contained 170 or more *balnea* in 33 B.C. Rather, it illustrates only Agrippa's generosity with regard to offers of *balnea* (i.e. *lavationes*) *gratuita*. Pliny's further comment on the subsequent growth of the numbers of free baths in the city (and perhaps also of games, if the closing relative clause refers also to the *ludi facti*) is understandable, given the construction by his day of the large Baths of Agrippa and of Nero, both of which appear to have served the public *gratis*.<sup>12</sup> The notice may be seen to reflect a perceived general growth of the bathing habit among the Romans between 33 B.C. and the mid-first century A.D. (when Pliny wrote), but it cannot be used, as it has frequently been to date, to offer a firm figure for the city's *balnea*.

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11. Dio Cassius comments that Agrippa's benefaction was carried out δι' ἔτους, "throughout the year." This does not necessarily mean that the offers of free bathing were made for the duration of the year; Agrippa could have presented the offers at intervals over the course of the year.

12. The imperial baths appear not to have charged an entrance fee. Dio Cassius (54.29.4) states that Agrippa bequeathed his baths to the people so they could be used free of charge, and Fronto (*Ep.* 5) asserts that publicly owned baths were free, while privately owned establishments were not. For recent modern discussions, cf. Merten, *Bäder*, pp. 6 and 11; Nielsen, *Thermae*, 1:133–34.