



An Elusive Legacy: Ancient Balneology in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Giacomo Savani, University of Leicester (UK)

giacomo.savani@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper will investigate the impact that ancient baths and classical balneology had on eighteenth-century bathing culture in Britain, stressing similarities and differences in practice and architecture. It will focus on two authors: the physician John Floyer (1649–1734), one of the most fervent supporters of the healing virtues of cold bathing; and the Irish physician and politician Charles Lucas (1713–1771), author of *An Essay on Waters* (1756).

Floyer's treatises on balneology (*An Enquiry into the Right Use and Abuses of the Hot, Cold and Temperate Baths in England* (1697); *Psychrolousia. Or, the History of Cold Bathing: Both Ancient and Modern* (1715, co-authored with B. Baynard)) were greatly influenced by classical authors and ancient practices. Between 1697 and 1702, Floyer constructed a bath-house based on his scientific doctrines at Unite's Well, near Lichfield (Staffs). By looking at both his books and this building, I shall assess the complex and ambivalent relationship that Floyer had with classical physicians such as Hippocrates, revealing his heterodox views on the use of hot baths in antiquity.

A similarly nuanced attitude towards classical antiquity can be found in Lucas' *Essay*. In several passages of his work, Lucas criticises the lack of public baths in modern cities in contrast to the central role they had in the Roman world. Moreover, a large section of the third part of this book is dedicated to the history of Bath and the discovery of a set of ancient baths there in the summer of 1755. I shall discuss how Lucas' comments and his archaeological interests seems to create a link between the modern and the ancient city of Bath, a connection highlighted also in other contemporary and later sources such as Pope's *The New Bath Guide* (1770) and Lysons' *Reliquiae Britannico-Romanae* (1813–17).

Starting from these two significant case studies, I shall then broaden the discussion to briefly address the impact that ancient baths had on the architecture of eighteenth-century baths and the role that antiquarian discoveries played in the reintroduction of features such as the hypocaust heating system in some Georgian villas.

Biography:

Giacomo Savani holds a PhD in Roman Archaeology at the University of Leicester. His research interests lie in the field of Roman social and cultural history and the reception of Roman culture in Early Modern Europe. He is currently investigating the study and reception of Roman baths in Italy, France, and England from 1500 to 1800.