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## Public Saunas in the Stabian Baths – A privilege of men

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Since their excavation from 1853 to 1859, the Stabian Baths have always been intriguing and noteworthy, for both scholars and visitors. They have become even more fascinating and important with the completely unexpected discovery of two round rooms in the courtyard of the baths that were excavated in 2021 and 2023. These rooms can be identified as ancient saunas or sweat baths (laconica). The aim of this article is to present the evidence of these *laconica* and to assess their socio-cultural significance. Since both *laconica* had to be reburied at the end of the excavation campaigns, the millions of visitors who enter and cross the courtyard of the baths every year have no idea what lies beneath their feet. It is hoped that this article can change this and provide some insights into Pompeii's multifaceted and fascinating (re) buried history and life.

The Stabian Baths in Pompeii are prominently located at the intersection of the city's two major streets, the Via Stabiana and the Via dell'Abbondanza. In their last stage of use, they occupied a terrain of about 3300 m<sup>2</sup>, thus





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constituting the largest public bath building in town in use after the earthquake of AD 62. The baths provided two separate sections for men and women (*fig. 1*). Three entrances from three different streets led to the men's section that included a large *palaestra* (C) with a *natatio* (D) and garden *nymphaea* (F, G), an *apodyterium* (II), a *frigidarium* with a cold-water pool (IV), a *tepidarium* (III) with a collective immersion pool, and a *caldarium* (V) with a cold-water *labrum* and collective immersion pool. The women's section was accessible from two different streets and included only an *apodyterium* (XI) with a make-shift cold-water pool, a *tepidarium* (X) and a *caldarium* (IX).

Since their excavation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Stabian Baths played a major role for the reconstruction of the development of ancient bathing culture. Two German architects, Heinrich Sulze and Hans Eschebach, made more than 40 trial trenches across the Stabian Baths in the 1930s/40s and 1970s





for reconstructing the history of both the baths and the city. Based on these trenches and a survey of the architecture, Eschebach presented an intriguing model of urban and cultural development (Eschebach 1979) (*fig.* 2). In the 6th century BC, the terrain of the Stabian Baths would have been crossed by the fortification of the Archaic city. In the 5th century BC, a Greek palaestra with a separate bathing complex would have been built. This complex would then have been developed in six phases into the sophisticated Roman baths that were buried by Vesuvius in AD 79.

Since Eschebach's developmental model seemed questionable for typological, historical, and cultural reasons, a new project dedicated to *Bathing Culture and the Development of Urban Space in Pompeii* was launched in 2015, aiming to reinvestigate the history, development, function, and socio-cultural context of the Stabian Baths and the nearby Republican Baths. In a cooperation between the Freie Universität Berlin, the University of Oxford, and (since 2021) the Università di Napoli L'Orientale, four campaigns were





fig.5







carried out in the Republican Baths and six in the Stabian Baths between 2015 and 2023. Cleaning and excavations were carried out in 38 areas of the Stabian Baths (*fig. 3*), and 19 areas of the Republican Baths.

After the 2018 season in the Stabian Baths, the chronology could already be significantly revised and four large phases were reconstructed (Trümper et alii 2019; Robinson et alii 2020): the baths were built after 130/120 BC with two separate sections for men and women, each providing the sequence of *apodyterium*, tepidarium, and caldarium, while only the men had also a large palaestra (phase 1; Trümper et alii 2019, 147 fig. 31). The baths were first remodeled after 80 BC, when Pompeii became a Roman colony (phase 2), and again in the Augustan period, when the city was provided with an aqueduct (phase 3). After the earthquake of AD 62, the baths had to be repaired and were significantly enlarged to today's visible size (phase 4, fig. 1).

After the 2019 season in the Republican Baths, it could be determined that they were also built after 130/120 BC, with a surface area of 680  $m^2$  and similar bathing program as the Stabian Baths (*fig. 4*); but they provided a round sweat bath, a *laconicum*, in the men's section which the Stabian Baths apparently received only in phase 2. The Republican Baths were remodeled once, presumably after 80 BC, but abandoned around 30/20 BC (Trümper 2018, 2020).

Comparing the two baths, several questions arose: first, why were the Stabian Baths not provided with a *laconicum* in their first phase, while the much smaller and much more modestly decorated Republican Baths included one? And second, why did women not have access to the *laconicum*, or differently, what was the socio-cultural significance of *laconica*?

Both questions can be answered after the campaigns in 2021 and 2023 when several large trenches were made in the *palaestra* of the Stabian Baths (*fig. 3*: Areas XIV, XXXIII,



fig.9



fig.10



6



fig.11





## XXXIV).

In the southwest corner of the *palaestra* (Area XIV) a large round room with a diameter of 7.15m was found which can be identified as a *laconicum* (*figs. 5–6*). The walls were made of *opus incertum* and founded on a thick stratum of earth mortar which is typical for all walls assigned to the original baths (Trümper *et alii* 2019, 143–145). While a simple white plaster was well preserved on the walls (*fig.* 7), no remains of a floor could be securely identified. The room was accessible via an obliquely cut entrance of 0.80–0.90 m width in the northeast corner (*fig. 8*). In the center, a platform made of opus *caementitium* was found, with a diameter of 0.75 m and a height

of 30cm, that was surrounded by a circular wall of 15-20cm width (*fig. 9*). The platform must have supported a heating device which cannot be determined any closer, however, because the entire room was much disturbed by later interventions (*fig. 6*). The laconicum was bordered by a corridor of 1.30 m width in the east, of which mostly only the earth mortar foundation survived (*fig. 8*).

Various features found in this trench can be attributed to the three remodeling phases of the baths: the *laconicum* was destroyed and its walls were largely razed in phase 2, when the west wall of the baths was doubled (*fig. 6*: purple); the new wall of 60 cm width was built on top









of the laconicum walls and may have served as the stylobate of a colonnade attached to the west boundary wall of the baths. A large northsouth-running vaulted drainage channel was built in the *palaestra* in the Augustan period (phase 3) when the baths were linked with the aqueduct and much more copious amounts of used water had to be drained; this drain was met at the eastern border of the trench (fig. 6: orange). After the earthquake (phase 4) a large drainage channel with a flat roof was built, cutting right through the northern part of the laconicum (fig. 6: yellow); this served to drain the water from the newly built natatio of the men's section. The roof of the phase 3 channel had to be partially remodeled at the intersection of the two channels. Several quarry pits were found in the interior of the room (fig. 6: grey) which were excavated to access volcanic ash for making pozzolana cement and were also made during the large remodeling of phase 4.

In 2023, two trenches were made to the north of Area XIV to investigate whether there were any features that may have correlated with the large laconicum. In Area XXXIV, a second round room with a diameter of 3.10 m was found that was most likely a laconicum, too (*figs. 10–11*). While most of its walls were robbed out (*fig. 12*), the characteristic earth mortar was found on all sides, allowing to reconstruct the shape and size of the circular room (*fig. 11*: yellow). Only parts of the northwest, northeast, and

southwest corner walls remained, all made of *opus incertum* (*fig. 11*: blue). An isolated travertine block in the area of the southeast corner may have belonged to an obliquely cut entrance that would have been located in the southeast corner of the room, similar to the situation of the large *laconicum*. The east wall of the *laconicum* was the west wall of the palaestra, evidence of which had been found in Area XIV (*fig. 6*), but also in previous years in Areas II and III. The small round room was more substantially destroyed than the large equivalent: no traces of plaster survived on the interior of the preserved walls, and again, no floor could be securely identified.

A small round hearth was found in the center of the room; its walls were made of small stones with mortar and built into/on top of



fig.15





the paleosol (fig. 11: green; fig. 12). This looks like a heating installation for the laconicum on first sight, but it is connected with a long feeding channel in the east, which opens to a large round pit. Two other pits to the south of the hearth contained lots of ash, pottery, and bones, pointing to cooking. The shape of the hearth is not compatible with the use of the room for sweating, but also not typical of cooking installations; it rather suggests some industrial activities. The pits that were partially even cut through the laconicum walls must also postdate the use period of the laconicum. It is possible that a small round hearth was originally used for heating the laconicum and later reused and extended for industrial purposes, presumably during one of the remodeling phases.

This *laconicum* was also razed in phase 2 of the baths, and the eastern part of the double W wall was built (*fig. 11*: purple). All features, the *laconicum*, the double wall, the hearth and related pits, were buried by a new *palaestra* floor after the earthquake of AD 62 (*fig. 11: orange*).

other and with the currently known 40-50 laconica that were built in the Mediterranean area in the 2nd/1st century BC, among them the example in the Republican Baths at Pompeii (Trümper 2008, pp. 225–275; Trümper 2014; Trümper 2018; Trümper 2020). They were also described at the end of the 1st century BC by Vitruvius in his Ten Books on Architecture, as an integral part of both public baths (Vitr. V, 10, 5) and *palaestrae* (Vitr. V, 11, 2). The walls of both laconica were made of opus *incertum* and astonishingly thin (25–30 cm) in the middle, while the corners were filled with debris. Laconica were commonly covered with conical or hemispherical domes, but the walls of the laconica in the Stabian Baths cannot have carried substantially made roofs. The rooms may have been roofed with a wooden framework with beams and timbers that supported some impermeable covering, as reconstructed for the laconicum of the Casa del Menandro at Pompeii (Ling 1997, pp. 62-67, esp. p. 66, fig. 3). A small hole in the center of the dome (oculus) commonly provided light and air. The better preserved large laconicum (and most likely also the small one) of the Stabian Baths was modestly decorated, with simple white plaster and presumably an earth floor (a permanent concrete floor would have left some traces). That the decoration was not waterproof may seem strange for bathing rooms. But it was not required for laconica because water was commonly not used at all, or at least not abundantly in these rooms. In the large *laconicum*, there was only one single narrow long entrance that allowed to minimize heat loss in the room. In sum, laconica were rather dark and functional rooms, and the austere sombre atmosphere must have had an impact on the atmosphere and experience of collective sweating.

A key problem is how *laconica* were heated because conclusive evidence is very rare, and also not provided by the two new examples from the Stabian Baths. Cross-cultural comparisons



Both laconica share characteristics with each







show that sweat baths are mostly heated by hot stones and much more rarely by open fires or hot air. Literary sources suggest that the hot stone method was known in antiquity but it is attributed to primitive sweating facilities and practices: in the 5th century BC, Herodotus identified this as a Scythian practice, and in the 1st century BC, Strabo referred to similar Lusitanian bathing habits.

> "After the burial the Scythians cleanse themselves as follows: they anoint and wash their heads and, for their bodies, set up three poles leaning together to a point and cover these over with wool

mats; then, in the space so enclosed to the best of their ability, they make a pit in the center beneath the poles and the mats and throw red-hot stones into it. They have hemp growing in their country, very like flax, except that the hemp is much thicker and taller. This grows both of itself and also by their cultivation, and the Thracians even make garments of it which are very like linen; no one, unless he were an expert in hemp, could determine whether they were hempen or linen; whoever has never seen hemp before will think the garment linen. The Scythians then take the seed of this hemp and, crawling in under the mats, throw it on the red-hot stones, where it smolders and sends forth such fumes that no Greek sweat-bath could surpass it. The Scythians howl in their joy at the sweat-bath. This serves them instead of bathing, for they never wash their bodies with water." (Hdt., IV, 75: trans. G. C. Macaulay, London, 1890,



with some modifications by authors.)

"Now some of the peoples (the Lusitanians) that dwell next to the Durius River live, it is said, after the manner of the Laconians — using aleipteria twice a day, where they take sweat baths produced by red-hot stones, bathing in cold water, and eating only one meal a day, made from pure and simple ingredients." (Strabo II, 3, 6, trans. H. L. Jones, Cambridge, Mass., 1923, with some modifications by authors)

Evidence of the hot stone heating method is preserved in one ancient *laconicum*: the peristyle house E2 of Monte Iato in Sicily was built in the 2nd century BC and included a bath suite with a *laconicum* (3.10 m in diameter). A box-like structure made of bricks in the center of the *laconicum* (0.40 x 0.50 m) was found filled with heavily burnt small stones (Isler 1999, p. 47).

The platform in the large *laconicum* of the Stabian Baths may have supported a container filled with hot stones, and the "hearth" (or comparable predecessor) in the small laconicum may have been filled directly with



such stones, similar to the Scythian sweat baths and the example from Monte Iato. Water could have been poured over the hot stones to create steam and a more humid atmosphere in the sweat room. Alternative heat sources like hot water, provided in large cauldrons, cannot be excluded, however. Stones and water must have been heated at some place, but facilities for this crucial purpose cannot be securely identified in any of the 40–50 known laconica. Since it was hoped to find some evidence of such service installations to the north of the large laconicum a trench was made there in 2023 (fig. 3: Area XXXIII; fig. 14). While the double wall and remains of the last palaestra floor were found in this trench, no evidence of any structures related to the use of the laconica survived because of later remodeling. The above-mentioned drainage channel from



the *natatio* and a large quarry pit were made in phase 4 and destroyed all possible earlier features in this area, with the exception of the small stretch of an east-west-running wall that may even have predated the baths.

An important discovery was, however, made in both Area XXXIII and Area XXXIV. The western part of the double wall could be excavated to its foundations in two deep trenches (figs. 5, 10). In Area XXXIII, this wall was 4 cm wide and preserved for a height of 1.05 m; it was founded directly on paleosol (and not on earth mortar, like all walls of the original Stabian Baths) and made of one large vertically set travertine block surrounded by small blocks of travertine and lava, in the manner of opus africanum (fig. 15). While the west wall of the double wall was nowhere as highly preserved as here, similarly made parts of this wall were found in Areas XXXIV and II. In Area XXXIV, this wall was preserved for a height of 70 cm, founded directly on paleosol, and made of large blocks of yellow tuff and travertine (fig. 16). The evidence suggests that this wall was at least 20 m long, if not significantly longer. It may have served to subdivide two differently oriented lots to its east and west: the eastern lot would later be occupied by the baths, and the western lot by an atrium-peristyle house (domus) built around 50 BC (Trümper et alii 2022; Trümper et alii 2023). Structures predating the baths and the *domus* were found on both lots, including wells, cisterns, some walls, and the just-mentioned partition wall which can broadly be dated to period of the 4th-2nd c BC, based on typological comparisons. But the fragmentary evidence does not allow reconstructing the design and use of these lots before the construction of the baths and domus, respectively. It is only clear now that the partition wall had a major impact on the shape of both the baths and the domus, and that it was later reused first as the west wall of the baths, and then as the east wall of the domus. Its existence explains the strange L-shaped plan of the original baths, and also the particular layout of the men's section.

It can now be fully understood and appreciated how cleverly the patrons and builders of the Stabian Baths adapted the plan to the available lot (fig. 17). The center was occupied by a strictly rectangular *palaestra* with a size of c. 20x40 m that was surrounded by Doric porticoes on three sides. The bathing rooms of both sections were laid out to the east of the *palaestra*, all precisely rectangular and in a row-type organization. Irregular spaces that resulted from differences in orientation and existing neighboring buildings were occupied by service rooms to the east of the bathing rooms and by the triangular shaped terrain to the west of the *palaestra* that included the two *laconica* and possibly additional facilities between them. The terrain with the laconica was most likely accessible from the southern portico of the *palaestra*, which could not be verified, however, because the area is paved today. But a door in the north wall of taberna 6 was explored in 2022 (fig. 3: Area XXVIII; fig. 18). This provided an external access to the terrain with the laconica and was blocked in phase 2 or phase 3 when the *laconica* had been abandoned and the level in the taberna was significantly raised.

Looking at the new reconstructed plan (fig. 17), one could assume that the *laconica* were doubled here in correlation to the bathing sections and that one (the larger one, of course) was used by men and the other by women. But the accessibility and circulation pattern do not support this notion: the bathing sections were strictly separated, and women and men would never have met after entering their sections. The laconica were, however, both accessible via the same entrances and shared collective space between them; thus, men and women would have seen each other, potentially even naked, if they left their clothes somewhere outside the sweat room. That the use of the two laconica was really reserved for men only is confirmed by the development in phase 2



when the two *laconica* were destroyed and replaced by a new one, which in turn was only installed in the men's section (see below). One can only hypothesize why the men's section of the original Stabian Baths offered two *laconica*, especially since there is only one comparison so far, the so-called Agora of the Italians in Delos where this phenomenon can also not be explained (Trümper 2008, pp. 225–258): patrons may have wanted to double the capacity or enable uses differentiated according to temperature, humidity, activity (oiling, sweating, sitting, walking), or size and status of (male) user groups.

The first question is now answered: the Stabian Baths (*fig. 17*) were not inferior to the Republican Baths (*fig. 4*), on the contrary, they surpassed them, providing two *laconica* of which one was significantly larger than that in the Republican Baths. But the strange duplication leads immediately to the second question: why did women not have access to laconica in public baths?

Laconica were introduced in the entire Mediterranean world as innovative purposebuilt bathing form for sweat bathing in the 2nd century BC, in different contexts: in gymnasia/palaestrae; public baths; houses and villas; and some unusual contexts like the above-mentioned Agora of the Italians Delos (a garden-porticus complex) in (Trümper 2008, pp. 225–275; Trümper 2014; Trümper 2019). Laconica did never become standard in any of these contexts, but were always an extravagant feature, because their construction and operation were costly. The largest examples by far were built in gymnasia/ palaestrae, with diameters of 6.90-10.20 m, among them two examples in Sicily (Akrai and Solunto; Trümper 2019). These served athletes for collective sweating. The second largest are found in public baths, with diameters of 2.10-6.50 m, the example in the western Mediterranean being much larger than their eastern equivalents. Domestic contexts include the smallest examples, with average diameters

of 1.55–3.30 m.

Thus, the larger example in the Stabian Baths fits well into the context of gymnasia/ palaestrae while the smaller is compatible with (small) public baths or residential contexts. The combination of palaestra and *laconica* is indeed reminiscent of Greek gymnasia/palaestrae, and the Samnite patrons deliberately merged two different cultural and functional concepts in the original Stabian Baths: the Greek gymnasium and a state-ofthe-art public bathing facility. The Greek gymnasium was conceived for the training and education of male citizens, and women never had access to it. This restricted concept was obviously maintained for the laconica, even though these were also introduced outside gymnasial contexts (Trümper 2012a, Trümper 2012b). Indeed, none of the Late Republican and early Imperial baths that include separate sections for women and men and laconica provide a *laconicum* in the women's section (Aquinum, Central Baths; Pompeii: Forum Baths; Republican Baths, Stabian Baths; Herculaneum: Forum Baths; Trümper 2022). Whether the male connotation of *laconica* and sweat bathing also applied to contexts that did not provide separate spaces for women and men, must naturally remain open.

That the Greek concept really mattered in the Stabian Baths is confirmed by an important inscription. When two *duoviri* of the Roman colony initiated a modernizing remodeling of the baths after 80 BC (phase 2), they documented this in an inscription (*fig. 19*): "C. Ulius, son of Gaius, and P. Aninius, son of Gaius, duoviri for administering the law, by decree of the decurions, let contracts for the construction of a laconicum and a destrictarium, and for the restoration of the porticoes and the palaestra, from that money that, according to the law, they ought to have spent on games or in building. They saw to the work and also approved it." (CIL X 829). There is explicit reference to a *palaestra*, a term well known from Greek culture, and a



*laconicum* and *destrictarium*, two terms that the Romans invented presumably in the early 1st century BC. *Destrictarium* is only known from this inscription; it comes from the Latin word destringo (to rub off) and refers to scraping off dust and oil after exercise in the palaestra (Nielsen 1990, p. 165). *Laconicum* is more frequently used and refers to Spartan (Laconian) bathing customs, to an ascetic lifestyle with hard physical exercise that the Romans admired (Nielsen 1990, pp. 158– 159).

While Ulius and Aninius restored the existing palaestra with its porticoes, they claimed to have constructed the laconicum and destricatrium from scratch. This statement can now be fully correlated with the archaeological evidence (fig. 20): the old *laconica* were destroyed, for reasons that are not well understood. They may have been dilapidated or even collapsed because of the flimsy walls, or they may have been outdated. A new laconicum was built at the expense of the men's *tepidarium* and the former east portico; this was much more solidly and elegantly built and provided with a conical dome of opus caementitium and four semicircular niches in the corners, a new feature introduced by the Romans around 100 BC. The destrictarium was built to its north, in the former east portico. While not much survives of this room because of later transformations (in phases 3 and 4), it was accessible from the *palaestra* and provided most likely the only access to the *laconicum*, the current southern door of which was later broken in. As a result, the east portico had to be moved west, and the *palaestra* now also occupied the former triangular shaped terrain. Despite these changes, the cultural and functional concept of a gymnasial complex (palaestra, destrictarium, laconicum) was maintained, in accessibility and spatial organization.

The trias might even explain the presence of two *laconica* in phase 1: maybe one of them was conceived and used as a *destrictarium*, thus primarily for oiling and scraping off dust, in a (mildly?) warm setting.

Between Eschebach's and our project, but also during the course of our project, the image of the original Stabian Baths has significantly changed (cf. the reconstructions in Trümper et alii 2019, p. 147, fig. 31; Trümper et alii 2022, p. 19, fig. 33; and fig. 16 here). The strong male connotation of ancient saunas and sweat bathing that had been assumed before (Trümper 2012a; Trümper 2012 b; Trümper 2014) is now confirmed in an exemplary manner by the Stabian Baths. They represent a very ambitious cultural experiment. Late Hellenistic Samnite Pompeii was most likely not the only city to provide such a daring innovate hybrid complex but no other examples can currently be securely identified (a similar example may have existed in *Cumae*; see Trümper 2022, pp. 280–281). The combination of gymnasial elements and highly modern bathing facilities was still chosen by Agrippa, the right-hand man of the emperor Augustus, when he built an intriguing multifaceted complex on the Field of Mars in Rome in the last quarter of the 1st century BC (Hrychuk Kontokosta 2019). But it is now obvious that complexes like the Stabian Baths at Pompeii paved the path for this practice and concept, and this about 100 years earlier.

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# Collection of immages

Pompeii, Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, 2023

fig.10

fig.11



Pompeii, Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, 2023



# Collection of immages





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- Fig. 6 Stabian Baths, Area XIV, phases; A. Müller M. Trümper

Fig. 7 - Stabian Baths, Area XIV, northwest corner of the laconicum with white plaster on the wall; east part of double wall (long scale) built on top of the laconicum wall; A. Müller

Fig. 8 - Stabian Baths, Area XIV, northeast corner of the laconicum with the entrance and the corridor to its east; A. Müller

Fig. 9 - Stabian Baths, Area XIV, platform in the center of the laconicum; A. Müller

- Fig. 10 Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, orthophoto; A. Müller M. Trümper
- Fig. 11 Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, phases; A. Müller M. Trümper

Fig. 12 - Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, remains of the southwest corner of the laconicum and fill of the trench of the robbed-out south wall; A. Müller

Fig. 13 - Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, hearth and pits in the center of the laconicum; A. Müller

Fig. 14 - Stabian Baths, Area XXXIII, orthophoto; A. Müller - M. Trümper

Fig. 15 - Stabian Baths, Area XXXIII, earlier wall reused as west wall of the baths; A. Müller

- Fig. 16 Stabian Baths, Area XXXIV, earlier wall reused as west wall of the baths; A. Müller
- Fig. 17 Stabian Baths, reconstructed plan of phase 1; C. Brünenberg M. Trümper
- Fig. 18 Stabian Baths, taberna 6, Area XXVII, blocked door in the north wall; B. Kupke
- Fig. 19 Stabian Baths, inscription CIL X 829, today in Naples, Archaeological Museum; M. Trümper
- Fig. 20 Stabian Baths, reconstructed plan of phase 2; C. Brünenberg M. Trümper

