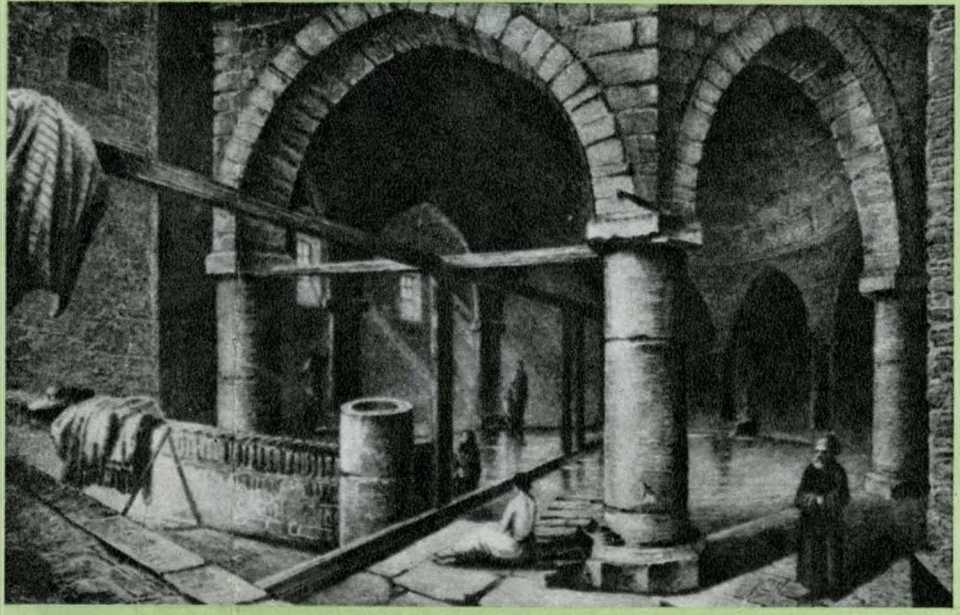


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# THE ROMANS STARTED IT

## THE BATHING CULT IN BUDAPEST



A print from 1856, after Rohbock's drawing, portraying the old Rudas Bath.

**I**f Budapest has more than its share of public baths, the Romans can be blamed for it. As far back as the 2nd century A. D., the inhabitants of Aquincum, the border fortress of the Roman Empire built on the Danube, lollied in baths fed by the waters of the Buda springs, and laid aqueducts to bring the water to their homes. Little did they dream that they were establishing a bathing cult which would persist for centuries afterwards.

### THE FRIGIDARIUM

Aquincum, which stood a half-hour ride from the Budapest of our times, had three public baths for civilians and one for the military. One of the biggest stood on the main street. Bathers entering its columned gate were handed a round bone disc with a figure incised on it. The bather was wise who guarded the disc well—that was the ticket for his clothes. Niches lined up along the walls of the dressing room bore the same numbers as were on the tokens—these were dressing cubicles where bathers left their togas. Sometimes the bather left without his clothes: there were thieves then, too, who went in with one toga and left with three or four. Then, too, the bather could take his water by degrees. He first entered a red-walled room called the *frigidarium*, probably because it had a basin filled with cold water. From here, he passed into a room with a basin of tepid water and from there to a third, with hot water.

Along with the other buildings of Aquincum, this bath now lies in ruins. After the fall of Rome, the hordes that swept over

Europe destroyed the buildings and carried away the stones, but its foundations still stand and a part of the heating system has been preserved. And the bathing cult continued to persist.

### UP TO TURKISH TIMES

In the Middle Ages, hundreds of people seeking cures for their ailments set up camp in Buda near the Sáros (Muddy) Bath, the predecessor of today's Gellért Bath. The old bath got its name from the fact that a lot of mud was brought up by the hot springs. Two other baths were to be found at the foot of Gellért Hill at that time. One of these was visited frequently by King Matthias, the Renaissance monarch, because it was near to his residence.

Later, during the Turkish occupation, the country was ravaged and laid waste. The Turks built only minarets and baths, nine of them to be exact, in the vicinity of the Buda springs.

By the time the nineteenth century began, the baths of today had been established by and large; mainly swimming pools and lidos were built in our century.

### NUDISTS AND SUICIDES

The Rudas Bath at the foot of Gellért Hill was the haunt of nudists, although the bathers may not have called themselves such. Under its Turkish dome, men, women and children splashed uninhibited, in their birthday suits.

# IN AQUINCUM



The Császár Bath and the old mill (contemporary drawing).

This bath also had an uncanny attraction for would-be suicides, it appears. But the bath's attendants were on the alert: at the sound of a revolver shot, they would descend on the spot with buckets of sand and with brooms to remove traces of the tragedy.

The adjacent Rác Bath was a bath for the poor, where inexpensive meals were served in the restaurant, gypsies played their violins and sometimes a ballad singer entertained the bathers.

A few miles to the north we can find the Lukács and Császár baths, at Óbuda. The hot springs here have been known from the time of Árpád (?—907), who led the Magyars to the territory of Hungary. Later the Knights of St. John built a hospital and bath here.

The peasants, who tilled the soil and grew grapes in the Buda Hills used to frequent the Lukács Bath, until the big building was erected. At one time, the waters from six springs ran together and formed a large pool. The peasants had an abiding faith in its healing properties. One time, it is related, a doctor advised a patient to take baths in the water to cure his complaints. So eager was he to become well that he spent twelve hours in the hot pool. Naturally, he wondered why he became worse.

The Császár Bath nearby was rather for the élite. Nobles, officers and priests strolled along the promenades to the strains of a military band, the rooms were scenes of gallant adventures and dances were held in the ballroom. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Császár Bath was the venue of a "revolutionary" incident: after the defeat of the 1848 War of Independence, Hungarian ladies refused to dance with Austrian officers.

Today Budapest has not only a wealth of public baths; it has scores of swimming pools and lidos, too. Tens of thousands of Budapest residents, cultivating the habits of the old Romans, fill these to overflowing on summer days.

Barna Marthy

The Király Bath in Buda, built during the Turkish occupation.



The thermal springs of the Rác Bath were used for curative purposes as early as the 15th Century.

