

to attest a remarkable human being whose activity coincided with an ebullient phase of Western culture.

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Wayne R. Dynes

## BATHHOUSES

As a result of the general expansion and commercialization of male homosexual life after World War II, the institution of the gay bathhouse became a fixture of major cities of Europe and North America. In these establishments only a small area of the premises is devoted to immersion tubs and sauna rooms; the bulk of the floor space consists of cubicles which are used for resting and for consensual sexual encounters. Other rooms are given over to nonsexual entertainment (television, billiards, music).

*Historical Perspectives.* Today's gay bathhouses stem ultimately from a cultural tradition that can be traced back over two millennia. In every society in which public baths flourished, the institution was shaped not only by its specific characteristics, but also by the values and norms of the larger community.

In ancient Greece the baths formed part of the highly developed practice of physical culture and athletics. Archeologists have uncovered bath buildings adjoining the palaestras or training grounds of athletes. By attaching the bath to the athletic (and to some extent military) function of physical fitness, the Greeks broke with the sacral and ritual tradition of Near Eastern lustration—the religious bath—which nonetheless has a successor in the continuing Jewish custom of the *mikva* or ritual bath.

The Romans attached far more importance to public baths than did the Greeks, creating imposing structures known as *thermae* for the purpose throughout their empire. Originating under the

Roman republic, the bath as an institution reached its height when Rome had extended its dominion throughout the Mediterranean. Amounting almost to secular cathedrals, the baths served a variety of individual and social requirements. *Thermae* fulfilled a need for personal cleanliness in an era when private baths were all but unknown. In addition to care of the skin, they fostered physical culture in the broader sense through exercise and massage facilities. Baths whose waters had a high sulfur content served medicinal purposes, anticipating modern spas. Then the baths were indoor arcades, permitting strolling patrons to meet friends and business associates, exchanging pleasantries and information. Some of the more imposing Roman baths embraced cultural and educational functions by offering public lectures and making libraries available to clients. Finally, Roman baths offered a convenient gathering place for those in quest of sexual release. Initially, such contacts were necessarily homosexual, since only men were admitted to the baths. Later, under the Roman Empire, some baths were open to women, for the most part female attendants who also served as prostitutes. Thus the Roman baths offered a kaleidoscopic variety of disparate, yet related functions.

As part of its inheritance from the Roman empire, the civilization of Islam continued the custom of offering bath facilities for health and pleasure, alongside the ritual baths required by Koranic law. Medieval Islamic sources indicate that baths of the former class were used not only for health reasons, but for socialization and homosexual contacts. Significantly, modern bathhouses of Europe and America have been termed "Turkish Baths," and sometimes boast tiled decor recalling this Muslim institution.

Strongly discouraged by Christian moralism in the early Middle Ages, public baths nonetheless reappeared in medieval cities as an essential aspect of sanitation, beginning in the twelfth cen-

tury. These locales were notoriously places of sexual dalliance. In the fourteenth century the English poets Chaucer and Langland attest the use of the word "stews" as meaning both a bathhouse and a place of prostitution, a notion that recurs somewhat later in the term "bagnio" derived from Italian *bagno*. It was in fact the outbreak of syphilis in Europe after 1493 that caused the decline of the medieval baths as loci of heterosexual intimacy.

In early modern Europe baths became less general in character and more institutions appealing to special interests. There is information on baths frequented by a homosexual clientele during the French Second Empire (1852–70) and the German Empire (1871–1918). While the details of the development require further elucidation, it was this specialized European homosexual bathhouse that was transferred in the late nineteenth century to North American cities. An informant describing the United States in the early years of the present century mentions baths patronized by homosexuals in New York City, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and "a small city in Ohio." Contemporaneously, they are also documented in San Francisco, while in southern California outdoor bathing facilities frequented by homosexuals gained favor. During this period security was uncertain and police raids were always a possibility. Small wonder then that many patrons preferred to take their tricks home rather than risk detection—and possible blackmail—in the bathhouse.

*Toward the Present.* With the more open American society after World War II these conditions began to change. Ethnographic studies of the bathhouses in the 1970s revealed a number of salient features. Mindful of the older history of raids and continuing general social disapproval, patrons continued to rate security and protection as important. The establishments kept a low profile by having obscure entrances, sometimes being located on the upper floors of nondescript

office buildings—or by being situated in warehouse districts with little traffic at night. Admission was controlled by a booth where, after payment the client could deposit valuables in a small lockbox. He would then proceed to a cubicle or locker, exchanging his clothing for a towel, the only garment usually worn. The layout of a successful bathhouse would facilitate encounters so that the desirable sexual contacts could be made through the characteristic milling activity in the often labyrinthine halls. Some patrons preferred to remain mostly in their rooms with the door open, indicating by body position the type of activity required. Should a potential partner regarded as undesirable enter, he would usually be gently rebuffed, as with the words "I'm just resting." One of the more attractive features of the baths was the mildness of turndowns; the rejected person, for his part, knew that other potential partners were available.

Many bathhouses possessed "orgy rooms" for group activity, though these are now mainly a thing of the past. Physically, the bathhouse should assure a certain level of comfort and cleanliness, possibly boasting a snack bar, gymnasium, and television room. However, older, deteriorating establishments were able to conceal their dilapidation by dim lighting. In a very few cases, as in the old Continental Baths of New York City, live entertainment was provided. In any event, recorded music relaying the latest hits—and sometimes pieces meant solely for a gay audience—enhanced the sexual atmosphere throughout the premises. Many patrons were repeat visitors, basking in a known, shared reality. In an era of soaring hotel prices, some tourists would use bathhouses for cheap overnight accommodation. Usually, however, an extra fee was charged for a stay of over eight hours. It was not common to find male prostitutes (hustlers) there plying their trade—few would be willing to pay for what they could get for free—but hustlers would sometimes be brought in by a client they had met outside

in order to use a room. Despite strong disapproval on the part of the management, some surreptitious drug dealing took place among patrons; consumption of mind-altering drugs, often taken just before arriving, was certainly common. As a rule, alcohol was not served, but could be brought in. Stereotypically, sexual encounters in the baths were completely anonymous; however, a few clients report having begun love affairs or friendships as a result of meetings there. A curious dynamic is that during off-hours, when few people were present, contacts could generally be made quickly, while when the building was crowded patrons could become quite choosy, in hopes that the continuing intake would produce more desirable individuals. Some patrons would have ten or more contacts, but the majority seem to have restricted themselves to two or three, or even one.

In the 1980s, with the unfolding of the AIDS crisis in the United States, the bathhouses came under attack because the promiscuous sexual encounters that took place there were held to promote the spread of the disease. Although this charge was denied, and many bathhouses began to distribute safe sex information and condoms as a positive contribution, it was clear that their days of glory were over. Many bathhouses in smaller localities were forced to close for lack of business. The owners of some establishments tried to change them into health clubs, but with mixed success. In San Francisco, as a result of pressure from public officials, the last bathhouse closed its doors in 1987. In Europe, however, bathhouses—usually termed saunas there—continue to flourish, and new ones even open from time to time.

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Wayne R. Dynes

## BEACH, SYLVIA (NANCY) (1887-1962)

American expatriate bookseller, publisher, and intellectual. The daughter of a Presbyterian minister in Princeton, NJ, Beach settled in France during World War I. In 1919 she established Shakespeare and Company, an English-language bookstore and lending library in Paris that was to become one of the chief gathering places of the international avant-garde. Beach's companion, Adrienne Monnier, whose own bookshop was located only a short distance away, played a similar role in French letters. A kind of arbiter and confidant of the whole "Lost Generation," Beach was associated with such figures as Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, Bryher (Winifred Ellerman), Ernest Hemingway, Robert McAlmon, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein. Her greatest accomplishment was her two decades as publisher for her close friend, the mercurial James Joyce.

A member of the influential lesbian colony in Paris in the years between the wars, Beach nonetheless led a discrete, almost closeted life, supported by her "marriage" with Monnier. Electing to stay on during the German occupation of Paris, where she saved her books from confiscation, she emerged triumphantly after the war as a senior figure in the world of letters.

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## BEACHES

Most North American (and many European) cities located near water have a gay (male) beach. If geography permits, it is typically more remote or difficult to reach than the beach serving heterosexuals. Only those "in the know" will go the extra distance, or negotiate the natural barriers, to get there.

Where there are no natural barriers, one portion of a large public beach may become known among homosexuals as