

**THE HYGIENE WHISPERER**

## **A dive into the hygiene of ancient Mediterranean civilizations**

**“Dirt is only matter out-of-place and is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’. Nature does not care what we think, or how we respond, to matter in all its forms. But as a species we do care, very deeply, about our own survival”.**

**Indeed, our culture leads us to bestowing an undoubtedly positive value to that which is clean, projecting it in moral values... supported by concepts of a religious nature or by conventional behavioral principles.**

**(Virginia Smith, Clean, Oxford University Press, 2007).**

Nico Zardo

Man's need to care for his personal hygiene has a strong instinctive component: like perpetuating the species, procuring food and defending himself from external perils. Since the origin of man, this need has marked his evolution in an attempt to avoid harmful agents, carriers of infectious diseases. Thirty or forty thousand years ago, the first inhabitants of the earth began to be afflicted by diseases such as tetanus from small wounds or rabies from animal bites. In Africa, hunters were probably afflicted by the sleeping sickness transmitted by the “tsetse fly”, a parasite present in large herds of herbivores. Although not understanding the true origins of these and of many other debilitating conditions, man realized that these “aggressions” were tied to places and situations that he needed to learn to avoid in order to survive, by caring for his body and choosing, through migrations in regions having temperate and cold climates, an environment harboring fewer parasites.

WITH THE NEOLITHIC ERA (CIRCA 10,000 YEARS B.C.) MAN BEGAN EVOLVING FROM HUNTER/GATHERER TO FARMER AND BREEDER, choosing those places where water was readily available, forming groups that could better develop and defend themselves. If on the one hand the formation of organized communities freed man from the threat of hunger, on the other it brought with it several perils: the accumulation of human and animal waste caused pollution of the water and in food, leading to infections and fevers. Living in close contact with domestic animals facilitated the transmission of diseases.

For many centuries, and up until the scientific discoveries of the XIX century, man was forced to suffer the carnage caused by diseases and epidemics, blaming the causes on adverse fate or on vindictive divinities, and was able to survive thanks to progressive biological adaptations, the modification of the environment and the adoption of hygienic practices that distanced the aggression of pathogenic microorganisms.

AFTER 5000 B.C., WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT AND CONSOLIDATION OF NEW SOCIAL STRUCTURES based on agriculture and breeding, advanced civilized areas begin to take shape, city-states located in different areas of Eurasia: in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates, in Egypt along the Nile, in India along the Indus Valley, in China along the Yellow River Valley and on the coasts of the Mediterranean.

The abundance of products both for farming and breeding favor the birth of trade, both internally as well as between the different production centers, and the need for a better social organization spurs the birth of new activities for the population. So, while some remain farmers or breeders, others become artisans, soldiers, merchants, priests, creating a social structure that requires a chief at the apex of the hierarchical pyramid and a class of managers that oversees to common socio-political and religious needs.

External formality, that differentiates those holding power or wealth from the others, imposes its own rules of representation through the construction of palaces but also through care in one's apparel and for one's body. Beauty and care for one's physical aspect hence become important exhibition elements of a power that associated external cleanliness with spiritual and moral purity, and water is the element around which this culture developed.

Hygienic practices were partly different from those that we know today. Let's look more closely at these mores that are at the origin of western civilization.

In “Hygiene and Beauty in Ancient Egypt”, (published by Aboca, 2005), Alessandro Menghini, professor at the University of Perugia, paints a very detailed picture of the personal habits of that population. Here are some of its main aspects.

DUE TO THE PARTICULAR CLIMATIC CONDITIONS IN WHICH THEY LIVED, DRY IN THE DESERT AND HUMID ALONG THE NILE, THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS saw the daily bath as a necessary practice to cool the body subjected to heat and wind and also as a means to limit to the minimum - and even contrast - the action of parasites. For them, it was normal to wash their hands before meals, also because - for many centuries - they constituted the means by which food was brought to the mouth. They cleaned their teeth using sodium bicarbonate dissolved in water. Baths were usually taken in the Nile or in ponds: water was first collected in large containers and then poured on hands and other parts of the body. Also, there existed a type of shower, comprised of a sieve or a basket through which water was filtered. The homes of the aristocracy had a bath, as did some workers' homes. In the royal palace, veritable bathrooms could be found and there was also the role of "commander of the bath". Everyone rigidly followed the norm of frequently shaving their head and body. Cosmetics were important for hygiene. Since soap did not exist, earth or salts were used to keep skin clean or to soften areas to be shaved; oils and ointments were rubbed on the body to contrast odor and prevent the harmful effects of the sun or of dry wind.

According to Herodotus, Greek historian of the V century B.C., "priests shaved their whole bodies to get rid of lice and other impure things, when they ministered to rituals". The waters of the sacred lake of the temple not only cleansed the body, but they also purified the "soul". Men shaved their beards using razors, while for depilation, tools similar to our modern-day tweezers were used. To enhance their physical aspect, women wore face make-up. Also, painting their eyelids and eyelashes with burned incense powder mixed with honey or resins had healing properties because, besides constituting a personal embellishment, it was a defense against eye diseases.

IN ANCIENT EGYPT, ANOINTING WAS A COMMON PRACTICE because it had religious, hygienic and health connotations and was aimed at keeping the body young and ensuring immortality. Medical therapy began with the discovery of an intimate correspondence between disease and the benefits extracted from many products, in particular from medicinal plants. Still according to Herodotus, in Egypt there were specialists for every type of disease: ophthalmologists, dentists, interns, etc. But disease was also attributed to immaterial external agents: the breath of a demon that entered the body and perturbed the individual. The Egyptians had great spirit of observation and experimentation and their pharmacopoeia became increasingly enriched with plant, mineral and animal remedies.

IF THE AQUEDUCTS BUILT BY THE ROMANS UNDOUBTEDLY CONSTITUTED FUNDAMENTAL OEUVRES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVILIZATION, the hydraulic works of the Sumerians (3000 B.C.) and the Assyrians (1950 B.C.) in Mesopotamia to bring water to their cities to irrigate fields were certainly just as important. And if already around 2000 B.C. the cities of the Indus Valley, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, could boast the presence of latrines connected to rudimental sewer systems, it is in the Knossos Palace in Crete (1700 B.C.) that archeologists found the first flushing toilet (see page 89) and the first bathtub in history. Besides the refined devices available to royalty, even the inn located next to the palace had hygienic services and also had a device to wash the feet, consisting in a shallow rectangular stone basin, built-in to the floor and having a delivery tube, a spillway and a discharge hole with a stopper.

THE TERM HYGIENE (from the Greek *hygieine* meaning healthy, strong) derives from *Hygieia*, daughter of the healer *Asclepius*, and in Greek mythology represented the goddess of health. For Greek physicians of the school of *Hippocrates* (circa 460-377 B.C.) hygiene was the branch of medicine dedicated to the "art of health". The body was intended holistically as a dynamic state of the interaction among four elements: earth, water, air and fire, that corresponded to the four "humors" constituting the body -- yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm -- whose alterations could cause a given disease. The objective of hygienic practices was to attain a qualitative and humoral balance inside a person's body. To obtain this, it was necessary to respect some rules regarding diet, physical exercise, sexual activity and a proper relationship between sleeping and waking hours. Special care was focused on the diet with precise indications that detailed when it was best to eat certain types of meat or grains and how it was better to cook and prepare them (Hippocrates left us 53 books on the medical science of the time). Although basing their reasoning on empirical methods, Greek physicians were much appreciated for their remedies, whose alternatives were constituted by superstitious rituals to placate the ire of the gods (!).

An important acknowledgement of social hygiene is contained in the Constitution of the Athenians where Aristotle establishes the need for a public service for the collection of urban wastes that must be disposed of not less than two kilometers from the city's borders, and he states: "Some duties are of the more necessary, others of the more honorable sort". Robert Flacelière, professor of Greek literature at the University of Paris, in his "Daily Life in Greece at the Time of Pericles", published in Italy by RCS Libri S.p.A., 1998), describes daily hygienic rituals of the ancient Greeks, described in synthesis in the next paragraph, for which hygiene and physical exercise were indispensable for health and wellness.

PEISISTRATOS AND HIS SONS, IN THE VI CENTURY B.C., HAVE MONUMENTAL FOUNTAINS BUILT IN ATHENS where women could go to fill up their jugs, but where anyone could also take showers by standing directly under the jets of water. If the fountain contains a basin, bathing is prohibited in order to avoid the risk of contaminations. In fifth-century Athens, the number of gymnasiums multiply, all equipped with fountains, basins for ablution and even pools. The circular pool of the gymnasium in Delphi (having an internal diameter of almost 10 meters) and almost two meters deep, can be used for swimming. Before entering the pool, the athletes wash in basins located under the fountains. Even Socrates, elderly at this time, starts exercising to reduce "... a belly somewhat larger than I could wish". Towards the end of V century B.C., the open-air bath is replaced by the more comfortable bath room, where the delivery and disposal of water are assured by lead pipes.

For partial ablutions and for children's baths, there were small round or oval basins made of metal, terracotta or wood. But the most diffused bathtub is a large circular container erected on a rather high footage, with a flared bottom and surmounted by a column. These tubs must be filled and emptied by hand and the water is first heated in a pail. But hot baths are blacklisted by supporters of Spartan rigor. Towards the end of the V century in Athens, public baths become popular. Here, individual tubs are placed in crown-like fashion around a circular heated hall. Their low cost makes them accessible also to the less wealthy, who spend several hours there in the winter to warm up. People go to a public bath to wash, usually before dinner, but also to chat with friends. Many public baths had rooms reserved for women mostly belonging to the poorer classes, for courtesans or slaves. Athenians from the bourgeois class could afford to bathe in their own homes.

STARTING FROM THE 3RD CENTURY B.C., ROME ADOPTED MANY HYGIENIC MORES OF THE GREEKS, further developing them with the construction of aqueducts which, in the Imperial Age, could supply over 1,000 liters of water per person (today, consumption in European cities is around 300 liters per person) and baths (thermae) that could contain 1,600 people, thousands of fountains, public baths and latrines. The most appreciated physicians were Greek and were consulted by people who nurtured doubts as to whether a disease was indeed a curse of the Gods. The ancient Romans cared for their bodies as far as personal cleanliness and hygiene were concerned. As Seneca tells us: "They washed their arms and legs every day, for necessary cleaning after work but took a complete bath only once every nine days."

In Rome, the hot bath taken at the thermae was not necessarily something one did for reasons of personal hygiene. It was rather a physical relief that was not denied to paupers or to slaves and was - not only in the Eternal City but also in the extreme provinces of the Empire - the pivot or the pretext for an intense social life.

The public and private baths that opened their doors at noon and closed them at dusk, were considered a place of daily rendezvous where - immersed in hot, warm and cold baths, one could perform gym exercises and enjoy conversation for a good portion of the day. The initial separation between men and women through the use of distinct water systems or hours, gradually disappeared until it was totally abolished in the Late Empire. If the most luxurious private adobes were endowed with often rather elaborate thermal devices, even the more modest houses often had the possibility of using "neighborhood" systems: in the city of Ostia Antica, the structures built for this purpose can still be seen today and were directly accessible from several insulae (buildings).

With the decline of the Empire, as a consequence of invasions, wars, famine and plagues (the first apparition of the Plague was in 547 A.D., under the reign of Justinian), urban centers began to depopulate. The decadence of the systems used for the city's water supply also led to the abandonment of the thermal baths. Christianity imposed deep changes to the cult of one's body in the name of a contemplative ideal of life which initially tended to also exclude some hygienic mores that, in the collective imagination, were connected to pagan habits. •

1. Water corresponds to yellow bile, also called choleric, and resides in the liver; earth corresponds to black bile and is found in the spleen; fire to blood and is located in the heart, and air to phlegm, located in the head.

### **THERMAE:**

«I have lodgings right over a bathing establishment. So picture to yourself the assortment of sounds, which are strong enough to make me hate my very powers of hearing! When your strenuous gentleman, for example, is exercising himself by flourishing leaden weights; when he is working hard, or else pretends to be working hard, I can hear him grunt; and whenever he releases his imprisoned breath, I can hear him panting in wheezy and high-pitched tones. Or perhaps I notice some lazy fellow, content with a cheap rubdown, and hear the crack of the pummeling hand on his shoulder, varying in sound according as the hand is laid on flat or hollow. Then, perhaps, a professional comes along, shouting out the score; that is the finishing touch. Add to this the arresting of an occasional roysterer or pickpocket, the racket of the man who always likes to hear his own voice in the bathroom, or the enthusiast who plunges into the swimming-tank with unconscionable noise and splashing. Besides all those whose voices, if nothing else, are good, imagine the hair-plucker with his penetrating, shrill voice, - for purposes of advertisement, - continually giving it vent and never holding his tongue except when he is plucking the armpits and making his victim yell instead. Then the cakeseller with his varied cries, the sausageman, the confectioner, and all the vendors of food hawking their wares, each with his own distinctive intonation.»