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Le finalità scientifiche e culturali del progetto EDA trovano le ragioni nel pensiero di Werner Heisenberg Premio Nobel per la Fisica nel 1932.

... È probabilmente vero, in linea di massima, che nella storia del pensiero umano gli sviluppi più fruttuosi si verificano spesso nei punti d'interferenza tra diverse linee di pensiero. Queste linee possono avere le loro radici in parti assolutamente diverse della cultura umana, in diversi tempi ed in ambienti culturali diversi o di diverse tradizioni religiose; perciò, se esse veramente si incontrano, cioè, se vengono a trovarsi in rapporti sufficientemente stretti da dare origine ad un'effettiva interazione, si può allora sperare che possano seguire nuovi ed interessanti sviluppi.

Public baths in the world

Between tradition and contemporaneity

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“How do you complain and say that
you are destitute while the earth, the sky
and the stars are yours?

... and the water around you is
scattered fluffy ...”

Elia Abu Madi (1890-1957)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 13 PREFACE
THE ANCIENT BATHS BETWEEN ORIENT AND OCCIDENT
Olimpia Niglio
- 21 INTRODUCTION
Antoine Dib
- 27 SCENES OF LIFE FROM BATHHOUSES AROUND THE WORLD AS
DESCRIBED BY 26 TRAVELLERS BETWEEN 921 CE AND 1908 CE
Antoine Dib
- 63 PURITY AND CLARITY
Kudret Altun, Müjgan Bekdaş
- 75 PUBLIC BATHS IN ARAB SOCIETY:
A SPACE OF SCENES, CELEBRATIONS AND REVELATIONS
Suzanne Akkary
- 105 EL PEÑÓN DE LOS BAÑOS, TRADICIÓN PREHISPÁNICA QUE
PERDURA HASTA LA ACTUALIDAD
Edmundo Arturo Figueroa Viruega, Minerva Rodríguez Licea
- 131 UNDERSTANDING THE TEMASCAL. ARCHITECTURE EVOLUTION OF
MAYA STEAMBATHS
Nuria Matarredona Desantes

- 159 RIEVOCARE L'ANTICO: NUOVE LINEE INTERPRETATIVE PER
L'«EDIFICIUM THERMARUM» DI LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI
Marco Di Salvo, Emanuela Ferretti
- 181 A VIEW ON TRADITIONAL PUBLIC BATHS IN ISLAMIC CITIES
THROUGH THE BATHS OF TRIPOLI IN LEBANON
Antoine Dib, Mira Minkara
- 205 EVOLUTION, ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF PUBLIC BATHS IN THE POST-
FORDIST WESTERN CITY
Rossella Maspoli
- 223 PUBLIC BATHS IN JAPAN. ART AND TRADITION.
Kevin Alexander Echeverry B.
- 241 PAESAGGI TERMALI. L'ACQUA COME BENE COMUNE E
DISPOSITIVO GENERATORE DEI LUOGHI
Eleonora Fiorentino, Giorgio Peghin, Andrea Scalas
- 263 2000 YEARS OF HOT WATER CONVENIENCE IN SERBIA
Elena Vasić Petrović, Hristina Krstić, Ana Momčilović Petronijević
- 283 AUTHORS



Japan, Hokkaido, Noboribetsu Onsen [EdA archive, 2019]



Japan, Hokkaido, Jigokudani [Daniel Poon, 2019]

The ancient baths between Orient and Occident

Olimpia Niglio

Thales of Miletus, a Greek mathematician and philosopher, affirmed that the water is the *arché*, is the nature, the originating principle of life. Differently, Anaximander, another pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, in his cosmogony held that everything originated from the apeiron, the “infinite,” “unlimited,” or “indefinite”, rather than from a particular element, such as water as Thales had held. However, the history of philosophy teaches that every historical period and every human thought has elaborated a definition of the significance of the water.

The ancient civilizations, in every part of the world, have known the importance of water for life because the relation people-nature has been always extraordinarily strong. Think, for example, the significance of the water in Indian culture or for all civilizations where the cultivation of the rice has been always important for life.

Today, most of our lives are somewhat divorced from nature, in comparison with our forefathers who toiled the land. Today over half the world’s population live in metropolis. Only a minority lives in the countryside. It is very curious, but many people are willing to pay to have a view of a river or a sea. For humans, there is something appealing about water, aside from the obvious necessity that we need to drink it and the fact that our bodies are largely composed of water.

Thales, unlike his contemporaries, was particularly interested in water. One of the ideas that Thales is best known for is his philosophy about the importance of water. He believed that the principle of everything was water (Amen, 2014).

About this topic also Aristotle explains that:

Most of the earliest philosophers conceived only of material principles as underlying all things. That of which all things consist, from which they first come and into which on their destruction they are ultimately resolved, of which the essence persists although modified by its

affections — this, they say, is an element and principle of existing things.... Thales, the founder of this school of philosophy, says the permanent entity is water (which is why he also propounded that the earth floats on water).

But ancient Greeks taught us the importance of water as a medical treatment especially important for health. In this pandemic period, we have understood the value of human life and many people have started to believe in the importance of nature and to the dialogue with the community.

The Greeks and Romans people, in Occidental area, known very well the thermal medicine. Thermal Medicine has been always a discipline that studies and teaches the characteristics of thermal treatments, their biological and pharmacological actions, and therapeutic effects. Ancient Greeks well-knew the beneficial properties of sulfurous springs, especially for healing skin diseases and for relieving muscular and joint pain.

The history and the study of archeological sites have handed down a lot of information on the use of water and thermal structures. Every city had a gymnasium with a thermal site. Indeed, the beneficial effects of thermal cures are well-known since the ancient time, when men discovered the importance of water as an essential element for human life and built the first civilities near to seas and rivers.

Also, Indian culture thought that the water was on the basis of the world (*archè*) and of the human being, as well as the Genesis of Bible, water has been described as the origin of cosmos.

Many civilizations have considered the sacrality of the water. Due to its importance, water was seen as magic and considered a gift of the divinity. Egyptians and Israelites used to plunge themselves in the sacral water of Niles and Jordan, Hindus in the Ganges river for healing their soul and body.

Hippocrates and Plato, Hellenic famous philosophers wrote of the benefits of hydrotherapy. Hippocrates dedicated a large section to thermal water and, he described the chemical and organoleptic water features, and the effects of hot and cold baths on the human body (*De Aere Aquis et Locis*). Hippocrates had proposed the hypothesis that all the human diseases started in an imbalance of the bodily fluids. He had analyzed also the origin of the water and affirmed that the waters that flow from earthy hills and high places were deemed the best, as they came from very deep springs; especially good were those that flowed in an eastern direction. This passage is practically the only one that is specifically about spring water in the Hippocratic corpus (Temkin, 1991).



Fig.1. Milet, Thermes de Faustine [Emmanuel Parent, 2010]

However, in Greek and Roman period, to restore the balance of the body, changes of habits and environment were advised, included bathing, perspiration, walking, and massages. For this reason, baths were often associated to a gymnasium (Gianfaldoni & Oth., 2017).

With Romans thermal baths became a social experience for everyone. In a first time, numerous baths (*Balnea*), both private and public, had been constructed in Rome and conquered lands all over Europe. *Balnea* were also built at private houses, often with special areas dedicated to the sauna or the massage. The advent of the aqueducts led to the building of magnificent edifices (*Thermae*) with a capacity for hundreds or thousands of people.

Unfortunately, in the Middle Age, the progressive decline of the Roman Empire, the barbarian invasions, and the spread of Christianity, lead to the thermal crisis. *Thermae* became progressively desert. Baths were accepted only as a cleaning or a therapeutic tool. Thermal baths in Occidental culture, in the following centuries, were exclusive sites for the high society and only in these last years the culture of the *thermalism* became an important experience for socializing, relaxation and working.



Fig.2. Ganga baths in Varanasi, India [Sara Schafer, 2009]

The new thermal centers (or SPA, “Sanus per Aquam”), in addition to *balnea*, are consisted of gardens, shops, and libraries. Many ancient sites have been recovered and dedicated to SPA (Squatriti, 1998).

Also, in American continent the ancient civilizations, as Inca in the South, and Atzeca and Maya in the center, had a great veneration for the water. The water was the symbol of the male fertility and the earth the female reproductivity. If we observe the organization of these ancient settlements is easy to understand the value that the water had in these civilizations.

Differently in Oriental culture the water has not been only an important element of life of the community, but above all for the care of the body.

The Indian culture teaches us many traditions and the water in the daily life is fundamental. There are not Indian traditions without the water. The water is sacred, is a divinity. In India, the water is regarded as the primordial substance from which the material universe came into being. The core concern of Hindu ritualism is concerned with the manipulation and maintenance of purity and impurity and the water is very important in these rituals (Sharma, 2014).

In the Satapatha Brahmana, an important Hindu sacred text, we can read:

[...] Water may pour from the heaven or run along the channels dug out by men; or flow clear and pure having the Ocean as their goal...In

the midst of the Waters is moving the Lord, surveying men's truth and men's lies. How sweet are the Waters, crystal clear and cleansing...From whom... all the Deities drink exhilarating strength, into whom the Universal Lord has entered [...].

At same in Japanese and Korean culture the water is an important element in the life. For example, in Japan it is sufficient to visit Kyoto's city, the ancient capital of Japan, to understand the value of water in this culture.

The key to the water's constantly good quality is the fact that the well water varies very little throughout the year in temperature and taste. The well water has created many opportunities for older businesses to enhance their reputations, and they still take good care of their wells for their signature products, such as *saké* and tea. Kyoto's fine water helped in the development of the *sado* tea ceremony and ikebana flower arrangement. It also kept temple and shrine gardens moist and supported the growth of traditional industries like weaving and pottery.



Fig.3. Japan. Hokkaido, Shikanoyu Onsen [Olimpia Niglio, 2013]

But, generally, in Orient, in Thailand, in China as in Korea or Japan, a thermal bath may serve the role common to the town green, central plaza, public house, salon, and coffeehouse: a meeting place for the informal exchange of ideas and information, a place to build communal spirit and cohesion. Or it may be a place to share more subtle experiences without words, more like a church (Emerson, 2016).

Some of these different cultural experiences are part of this interesting book coordinated by Antoine Dib, Lebanese engineer, that in these last years lived between Europe (Italy), America (Mexico) and Asia (Japan) and reunited excellent scholars from Colombia, Mexico, Spain, Italy, Serbia, Turkey, Lebanon. Every article introduces an ancient tradition and helps us to know the diversities and uses of the thermal baths in the world through an interesting journey in the history of the countries and of the people. This book opens an interesting cultural perspective to recovery the role of the water as method to take care of the health and not just expressions of exhibitionistic and exclusive fashions.

The water is a significant *heritage* for humanity's life, and while this book cannot be exhaustive, it is hoped that these pages may provide starting points for further exploration of the different connotations that the water has had in premodern societies globally.

January, 2021