

Bathing Culture in Budapest

International Conference of the Frontinus Society on the History of Water Management and Hydraulic Engineering

Report Gilbert Wiplinger, Vienna

From September 8 to 15, 2022, the Frontinus Society's international symposium on bathing culture in Budapest took place in Budapest. 47 participants from 13 different nations experienced the lecture and excursion program put together by Gilbert Wiplinger with the help of Adrienn Papp (Budapest History Museum) and Gabriella Fényes (Aquincum Museum). The aim was to show the development of bathing culture from Egypt to the present day, specifically using Budapest as an example. With the visit of two baths (Rudas and Veli Bey baths) practical experience (= experimental learning) could be collected on this topic. Martin Steskal in the first opening lecture showed the development from the Greek *balneum* via the Roman baths and the Asia Minor thermal gymnasium to the large Ottoman baths of the architect Sinan. Ingrid Hehmeyer then touched upon the hammam in the pre-modern Islamic city in another opening lecture. The speaker showed the new social customs in contrast to the ancient heritage, highlighting the cultural features also from the Arabic narratives. Previously, after the opening speech by Gilbert Wiplinger, the President of the Frontinus Society, Hans Mehlhorn, the Director of the Aquincum Museum, Orsolya Lang and the CEO of the Budapest SPA Society, Idilko Szüts, welcomed the participants.



Fig. 1 The Gothic Hall of the Budapest History Museum as a lecture hall during the opening of the symposium (© Ákos Keppel /BTM).

During a full and a half day, 19 presentations covered baths in Budapest from ancient times through Ottoman baths to the current use of all facilities up to the 21st century. Details were given on baths in Rome, Pompeii, Baiae (IT), in the western provinces (ES, PT), in Baden (CH), Coriovallum (NL), Macedonia (GR), Pergamon and Antiochia ad Cragum (TR). In addition, special questions were explored, such as what the upper floors of baths might have looked or how bathing culture is described in Roman literature. On another morning, five posters on hydraulic engineering topics not related to baths were presented and discussed.

The lecture hall was the Gothic Hall of the Historical Museum. This hall turned out to be the most beautiful and dignified lecture hall of all Frontinus Society events (Fig. 1).

Lunch snacks were taken in the covered Baroque courtyard, which was also a worthy setting for the gala dinner following the awarding of the Frontinus Medal (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 The Baroque courtyard of the Historical Museum during the Welcome Cocktail (© Ákos Keppel /BTM)

The awarding of the medal was one of the highlights of the symposium. It was awarded to Christer Bruun, professor at the University of Toronto, in recognition of his fundamental work on Roman water systems. In particular, his epigraphic research and the enormous contribution, which makes to larger social issues in the ancient Mediterranean world, was worthy of recognition. Gilbert Wiplinger read the laudation written by Patrik Klingborg, who was unfortunately unable to attend for professional reasons. After the award ceremony, the honoree gave a keynote lecture in which he tried to explain the enigmatic *calix* of Frontinus (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Award of the Frontinus Medal to Christer Bruun by President Hans Mehlhorn and 1st Vice President Gilbert Wiplinger (© Horst Geiger)

Two half-day and three full-day excursions led the participants chronologically to the water supply and bathing culture in and around Budapest. The first day was spent, guided by Gabriella Fényes, in the civil town of Roman Aquincum. A walk took us from the springs in the Roman beach bath along the remains of the aqueduct to the ruined city with private and public baths. A picnic lunch in the ruins area and the final evening swim in the Rudas baths made the day a special experience.

A separate excursion had the legion camp as its destination. Here we visited the bathing complex in the Hercules villa and the large *thermae maiores* (Figs. 4, 5), as

well as the south and east gates and camp barracks. At the end of the day we experienced gladiator fights in the amphitheater as part of a Roman festival.



Fig. 4 Guided tour by Gabriella Fényes in the *thermae maiores* of the legionary camp at Aquincum (© Gilbert Wiplinger).

A second half-day excursion dealt with the medieval water supply. After a lecture on the water lift at 19 Lanchid Street, Karoly Magyar led us to the preserved remains of the system in a now closed hotel. Previously, a tour of the cistern in the castle museum had been on the agenda. Here an animation illustrated the medieval water supply of the castle.



Fig. 5 The participants of the symposium in the palestra of the *thermae maiores* (© Horst Geiger).

A medieval spring house on the Swabian Hill (Sváb-hegy), a beautiful water tower from the 19th century and the view from Normafa on the city with the Danube and the Parliament ended the day.

The next day was entirely dedicated to the Ottoman baths in Budapest and began with a second bathing experience in the newly restored Veli Bey bath. This is integrated into the courtyard of the Hospital of the Brothers of Mercy and was exclusively available to participants and attendees for two hours. Adrien Papp then led a tour of the nearby Király Bath and the bus then took us to the Rác Bath; both baths are closed today for renovation. A visit to the Art Nouveau-style Gellért Baths (Fig. 6) rounded out the day not only chronologically, as two participants treated themselves to a third bathing experience there and - as they later reported - experienced a completely different bathing experience that was more similar to the Roman thermal baths than to the Ottoman baths.



Fig. 6 Guided tour in the Gellért Bath of Budapest (© Horst Geiger)

The last day of the excursion took the participants to Esztergom on the Danube, the border with Slovakia. After visiting the basilica, one of the largest church buildings in Europe, and walking through the castle palace, the participants went to the northwestern tip of the complex (Fig. 7). There was a well as the terminus of a medieval water lift from the Danube. At the foot of the castle hill, a replica model of the water lift in a tower was visited, which aroused great interest among the participants. After lunch in a nearby restaurant on the Danube, the ruins of an Ottoman bath and the Danube Museum were visited.



Fig. 7 Guided tour by Adrienn Papp in Esztergom (© Horst Geiger)

On the last evening, before the gala dinner at the Hilton Castle Hotel, Gilbert Wiplinger summed up the conference, thanked the supporting individuals and organizations with gifts of books from the collection of Frontinus publications (Fig. 8), and concluded by naming the location of the next major international conference:

Spain.



Fig. 8 The organizers of the symposium at the closing gala dinner: Gabriella Fényes, Gilbert Wiplinger and Adrienn Papp (from left to right, © Horst Geiger)