

# German History Intertwined with Bathing Culture

Even back in mythical primeval times, water was doubtless the very basis of life for everyone. Of the four classical elements revered since ancient times – earth, fire, air and water – mankind's relationship with water above all has always been a principal part of human culture in Germany.



Water, particularly clear, flowing water, was extolled for its cleansing, healing and atoning traits. Evidence from mythical times reveals how springs in Germania were thought to be inhabited by gods, spirits, mythical creatures and nymphs, and they were included in acts of worship and other ritualistic ceremonies. Decorative brooches from the Bronze Age found inside a historical spring in Bad Pyrmont in Lower Saxony show how the people of this era tried to appease the gods they believed inhabited springs with sacrificial offerings.

Curative springs and waters, especially those with special characteristics in terms of temperature, smell, salt content or gases, were said to have miracle powers until modern times. Shrines, temples, and later chapels and churches were built on top of springs. Indeed, words with religious connotations are still used to refer to special occasions at German spas, while 'spring temples' with their typical architecture remain a typical sight there. Mineral water springs and wells frequently still bear the names of Christian saints such as the world-famous Apollinaris Spring, named after the patron saint of the surrounding Ahr Valley. In their magical, mythical beliefs, people of old saw themselves as one with nature and its life-giving springs. For the people of Germania and elsewhere, water was more than a symbol of life; it was life itself.

## **Spa Culture and Spirituality**

It should be remembered that for hygienic reasons, bathing in public and private baths, bathing as a leisure activity and to keep in good health, the use of medicinal springs to combat disease, and ritual bathing in Jewish, Islamic and Christian religious communities were closely related for cultural and practical reasons. All the various manifestations of spa culture were only made possible by the architectural and technical progress accumulating over the centuries within the general development of European civilisation. Following the imperial age in Rome, growing impoverishment as of 400 AD was accompanied, including in Germania, by the degeneration of the ancient bathing culture.



However, in the fifteenth century, people began visiting areas with natural thermal and mineral springs again. Spending a few days at a spa became the done thing. Of course, long beforehand mineral springs had already been used for medicinal purposes, as demonstrated by Roman discoveries in Baden-Baden, Wiesbaden, Bad Ems und Bad Bertrich. Clearly believing in the principle of 'the more the merrier', in mediaeval times people spent hours in medicinal springs, often several times a day. They ate and drank in the water, enjoyed long conversations there, and in addition were often entertained by musicians, whereas the evenings were devoted to dancing and other forms of entertainment. Large inns and public bathhouses were built adjacent to outdoor pools containing healing water or even had their own bathhouses with spring water piped into the bathtubs. In addition to individual baths, men's and women's group baths were also opened, surrounded by pretty gardens so that visitors could comply with medical recommendations to get some exercise after bathing in refined surroundings.

## **Dynamic Development in the 20th Century**

Clearly, a close link between healing and 'wellness' needs (to use the modern term) existed back in the spa culture of the Renaissance. The first German seaside spa resort was opened in 1793 on the

Baltic coast in Heiligendamm by the ruling duke, complete with a racecourse to attract the sort of dignified clientele already frequenting the large spas at that time such as Baden-Baden, Montecatini and Vichy. Norderney on the North Sea was also made a seaside resort in 1797.

A new era began for German spas and health resorts in around 1957 with the development of democracy accompanied by the introduction of social welfare treatment at health resorts as the healthcare service was opened up to all sections of society. Health cures were made part of the national health system alongside orthodox medicine practised at regular hospitals. In 1957, the legal system governing medical rehabilitation in Germany was overhauled, with health resorts becoming officially recognised as especially suitable for this purpose.



Pension insurance companies were made responsible for medical rehabilitation for working people in Germany, and they began performing therapy on a large scale at German spas 'to safeguard and restore the ability to work'. Note that in contrast to other European countries, the concept of medical rehabilitation in German social welfare law also includes the use of therapy to treat chronic diseases rather than just compensating for lasting problems caused by accidents, illness or genetic reasons.

Within just a few years, several special clinics for medical rehabilitation were built at health resorts by pension insurance companies and spa developers, often replacing the grand hotels of the late eighteenth century as the main feature in the townscape. Following a transition phase, nowadays rehabilitative spa treatment away from home paid for by pension insurance companies is only carried out in these clinics. Spas and health resorts also offer outstanding facilities for preventive medicine.

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