CHAPTER XXIX

THE CENTRAL BATHS

Seneca in an entertaining letter (Ep. 86) gives an account of a visit about 60 A.D. to the villa at Liternum in which the Elder Scipio had lived in the years immediately preceding his death, in 183 B.c. The philosopher was particularly struck with the bath, the simplicity of which he contrasts forcibly with the luxurious appointments of his own time. We cannot follow him through the extended disquisition— he speaks of various refinements of luxury of which we find no traces at Pompeii; but he mentions as the most striking difference the lack of light in the old bath, with its small apertures more like chinks than windows, while in his day the baths were provided with large windows protected by glass, and people ‘wanted to be parboiled in full daylight,’ besides having the enjoyment meanwhile of a beautiful view. Some such feeling as this we have in turning from the two older baths at Pompeii—one of pre-Roman origin, the other dating from the time of Sulla— to the Central Baths, which were in process of construction at the time of the eruption, and had been designed in accordance with the prevailing mode of life.

This extensive establishment, at the corner of Stabian and Nola streets, occupied the whole of a block; but a large part of the frontage on the two streets mentioned was utilized for shops. Notwithstanding the size of the building, it had only a single series of apartments, which were laid out on a correspondingly large scale. It was doubtless built for men, although the use of it at certain hours by women may possibly have been contemplated, in case the women’s baths at the two other establishments should be overcrowded.

Entrances from three streets lead to the ample palaestra, from which the remains of the houses demolished to make room

for it had not yet been entirely removed. On the northeast side is the excavation for a large swimming tank (k), and for a water channel leading to the closet (e). In order to have water at hand for building purposes, the masons had built a low wall around an old impervium on the south side (shown on the plan, Fig. 94) into which a feed pipe ran. For a short distance on the north side the stylobate had been made ready for the building of the colonnade; elsewhere only the preliminary work had been done. The rooms at the southeast corner (f, g) were no doubt intended for dressing rooms for the palaestra and the plunge bath.

Two small rooms (b, c) open upon the north entrance of the palaestra; one of them, perhaps, was to be a ticket office, for the adjustment of matters relating to admission, the other a cloak room, in which the capsarius would guard the valuables of the bathers.

Two doors admit the visitor from the palaestra to the series of bath rooms, one of them opening from the north end of the colonnade. The first room (i, l) was designed to answer the purpose of a store, with four booths (k, m, n, o) opening into it for the sale of edibles and bathers’ conveniences.

The apodyterium (p), tepidarium (q), and caldarium (s) had each three large windows opening on the palaestra; two of those belonging to the tepidarium are seen in Fig. 95. None of the rooms were finished, though a hollow floor and hollow walls had been built in the tepidarium, caldarium, and Laconicum. The bath basins yet lacked their marble linings, and the two furnaces (at x and y) had not been built.
Five smaller windows on the southeast side of the caldarium looked out on a narrow garden, about which the workmen had commenced to build a wall to cut off the sight of the firemen passing to and fro between the two furnaces. The caldarium was so placed as to receive the greatest possible amount of sunlight, particularly in the afternoon hours, when it would be used; this was in accordance with a recommendation of Vitruvius, who says that the windows of baths ought, whenever possible, to face the southwest, otherwise the south.

The contrast is indeed marked between the numerous large windows here, with their attractive outlook, and the small apertures, high in the walls and ceiling, through which light was admitted in the older baths.

In the Central Baths there was no frigidarium; but a large basin for cold baths, nearly five feet deep, was placed in the dressing room opposite the windows. Supply pipes were so laid that jets would spring into the basin from three small niches, one in each wall; the overflow was conducted by pipes under the floor to a catch basin (w), and thence to the street.

The tepidarium (q)—here, as usual, relatively small—is connected with the apodyterium by two doors, and similarly with the caldarium. The latter room has a bath basin at each end, thus affording accommodations for twenty-six or twenty-eight bathers at once; at the middle of the southeast side was a smaller basin that took the place of the labrum. The hot air flues leading from the furnaces under the bath basins were already built, and above them openings were left for semicylindrical heaters like that in the women’s caldarium of the Stabian Baths.

The round sweating room, Laconicum, was made more ample by means of four semicircular niches, and lighted by three small round windows just above the cornice of the domed ceiling. There was probably another round opening at the apex, designed for a bronze shutter, which could be opened or closed from below by means of a chain, so as to regulate the temperature. Doors led into the Laconicum from both the tepidarium and the caldarium.

The oblong court between the bath rooms and the street on the northeast side was apparently to be laid out as a garden. At the north end the workmen had begun to build pillars for a short colonnade. A large square foundation for a sundial stands near the opposite corner.