

# Hamam: Ottoman and Greek Tradition

## HAMAM: OSMANLI VE YUNAN GELENEĞİ

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### Abstract

The long-lasting presence of the Ottomans in Greece left its mark on the social, political and cultural life and a typical example of this influence is the Ottoman baths. The baths in the Ottoman era are classified into thermal baths (Kaplica) and public baths (Hamam). Information about the structure, set-up and function of these baths are available in manuscripts, religious archives and travellers' texts. Hamam were improving the personal hygiene, but they were also the appropriate place for social contacts with cultural implications. In addition, hydrotherapy was considered to be beneficial in case of skin lesions, venereal diseases, gynaecological diseases and arthritic pain. Many public baths were constructed during the Ottoman dominion into the Greek lands and most of them continued their operation after the Greek Independence in 1830, as in the city of Patras.

**Key Words:** Greece, hamam, hydrotherapy, hygiene, Ottoman Empire

### Özet

Osmanlıların Yunanistan'da uzun süren varlıkları, sosyal, politik ve kültürel yaşamda izini bıraktı ve bu etkinin tipik örneği Osmanlı banyolarıdır. Osmanlı devrinde banyolar, termal banyolar (kaplica) ve halk banyoları (hamam) olarak sınıflandırılır. Bu banyoların yapısı, düzeni ve fonksiyonu hakkında bilgi, yazma eserlerde, dini arşivlerde ve seyyah metinlerinde mevcuttur. Hamam kişisel hijyeni sağlıyordu, ancak aynı zamanda kültürel ilişkinin dâhil olduğu sosyal ilişkiler için de uygun bir yerdi. Ek olarak hidroterapinin, deri lezyonları, zührevi hastalıklar, jinekolojik hastalıklar ve mafsal ağrısı olan durumlarda yararlı olduğu düşünülmüştü. Birçok halk banyoları Yunan topraklarındaki Osmanlı hâkimiyeti sırasında yapıldı ve bunların birçoğu Patras şehrinde olduğu gibi, 1830'da Yunan bağımsızlığından sonra eylemlerini sürdürdü.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yunanistan, hamam, hidroterapi, hijyen, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu

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The father of medicine, Hippocrates was the first physician to identify the therapeutic character of water. He distinguishes the use of cold and hot water depending on the nature of the disease and also according to the affected part of the body. In the chapter 'On the use of liquids', Hippocrates explains why warm water should be applied on the head and the sensory organs, on the nerves, on the external genitalia, on the teeth and the bones. On the other hand, he encourages sprinkling of the extremities with cold water when a patient collapses and he also advises those suffering from itching or bites

to bathe into warm sea-water. Another part of his second book dealing with baths is in the chapter "On diet", where the eminent physician says that "the avoidance of bathing leads to skin dryness because the water content of the skin is consumed". Therefore, it becomes evident that Hippocrates was encouraging his patients to have a bath regularly in order to prevent skin lesions. Finally, he is accusing people of prejudice and ignorance, because they were told by charlatans to avoid baths in order to cure epilepsy, the so-called "sacred disease".<sup>1</sup>

### Pre-Ottoman Bathing Tradition and Influences

In 1453 the Byzantine Empire collapsed and conquered by the Ottomans, who gave rise to the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans transferred from the East several cultural features of their tradition,

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but at the same time they adapted and assimilated knowledge, ideas and habits of the conquered areas in a very constructive way. A very characteristic example of the cultural blending is the steaming bath or 'hamam'. Ottoman tribes were aware of the Roman and the Byzantine baths of Asia Minor almost three centuries before the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, but they were also influenced by the architecture and the bathing tradition of the Arabic baths in Syria and Egypt.<sup>2</sup> There are several similarities between the Ottoman, Byzantine and Arabic baths, but the most significant ones are the absence of the 'palestra' (open space for physical exercises), since there was no connection between physical exercise and bathing in that time, and the presence of a water tank.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ottoman Baths: Structure, Set-up and Function**

The baths in the Ottoman era are classified into two categories: i) thermal baths (Kaplica), which had a round water tank in the middle of the warm room and ii) public baths. The latter were the so-called hamam and they constituted a basic element of the urban planning in the Empire and the hygiene of the Ottoman societies. Information about the structure, set-up and function of the hamam are available in the Ottoman manuscripts, the religious archives and the travellers' texts.<sup>4</sup> All these sources are accessible when someone investigates the hamam of Istanbul, but regarding the baths in the Greek area the only source of data are the voyagers' texts.

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century there are an increasing number of travellers from Western Europe visiting the hamam of Istanbul. The Frenchman P. Belon (1547-9) describes in detail the cosmetics used in hamam and the geographer N. de Nicolay (1551) seems to be very impressed with the body care techniques. Another traveller, G. Postel (1560), is amazed by the good health of the Ottomans and attributes this fact to their baths, while Pouillet (1657) and Lambert de Saumeny (1731) are advising people to visit the hamam in order to prevent venereal diseases. Few of the voyagers have a personal experience in the hamam; J. Pitton de

Toumefort (1700) initially was afraid that during the bath he might sustain a fracture, but after his bath he felt refreshed, while C.E. Savary (1780) stresses the beneficial results of the baths for skin disorders and arthritis.<sup>5</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women voyagers enriched our knowledge about female baths. Lady Montague (1717), the wife of the British ambassador in Istanbul, describes her personal experience in the hamam and expresses her shock when she had to walk with her underwear in front of 200 naked women, who were bathing for several hours. Similar narrations exist in the texts of Lady Craven (1786) and Julia Pardoe (1836).

"...The thick sulphate steam filled the whole space, the groups of young girls were laughing and talking and eating candies and drinking lemonades and sorbets, the children were playing without bothering from the atmosphere in which I could hardly breathe. All these together created an imaginary spectacle making me doubt whether I was dreaming or not".<sup>6</sup>

### **The Structure and Function of the Hamam**

The word hamam derives from the Arabic language (Hammâm) and signifies a hot area. When a guest was visiting a hamam, he had to enter via the changing-room (Soyunmalik or Camekân), which had a fountain and a wooden attic in order to create more space for the guests. The individual, who was responsible for the wardrobe, was providing the visitors with a linen cloth, two towels and a pair of patens. Then, the guest should go to the warm compartment of the bath (sogukluk, iliklik or tepidario) and spend adequate time until his body got used to the room temperature (25°C). The sogukluk was communicating with auxiliary rooms, like the lavatory and the room for depilation.<sup>7</sup> The next room to enter was the hot room (sicaklik), whose temperature was up to 38°C, and was connected with an oven and a water tank. When the individual got used to the high temperature, he had to enter his personal hot place (halvet), which had a temperature of 40-45°C. When the perspiration had finished, the guest was returning to the hot room and had to massage his skin with a special glove

made of hair. The massage table was located in the middle of the hot bath and was usually an elevated marble bench (göbektaşı). Usually, before the massage from the servants, the guest was cooling his face with a goblet and after the end of the massage he was going back to his personal hot place to complete the body cleaning with oil, perfumes and cosmetics. The visit was accompanied by the consumption of coffee and refreshments and usually concluded after a period of rest in the small bedrooms.<sup>8</sup>

The hamam start to change in structure since the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (1360), particularly regarding the ground plan and the different sections. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the influence of the Byzantine architecture is evident. Few hamam were constructed in the area of Greece and most of them were established in Peloponnesus after 1715.

The hamam's equipment included two types of items a) for the guests' entertainment (coffee services, tea services, backgammon boards, hookah, pipes) and b) for body care (razors, towels, textile, gloves for rubbing the skin, peştemal, soaps, patens-nalin or takunya-etc.). The hamam had also items like mirrors, bottles with rose-water, scented soaps, pumice, perfumes, henna and charcoal, which were used exclusively by women.<sup>9</sup>

The celebrated Greek novel 'Loxandra' of M. Ioannidou gives a picture of the social life of Greeks living in Istanbul during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novelist admits the fact that the heroine was spending plenty of time naked in the warm marbles of hamam "in order to cause uterine dilatation and manage to conceive a baby"; this effect is possible, but the contribution of hamam in fertility still remains unclear. In the novel there are brilliant descriptions of the preparations before going to the hamam (food preparation, dressing etc), as well as the procedures followed in the hamam. Finally, there is mordant criticism about western habits since the novelist states that 'Europeans are definitely very dirty people'.<sup>10</sup>

Muslims did not consider bathing as a simple activity imposed by the Coran, which emphasizes

the importance of personal hygiene, especially after the sexual intercourse.<sup>11</sup> Beyond religion, a visit to the hamam was necessary from practical point of view, since the occurrence of epidemics was a frequent event in that era. Therefore, both the state and the citizens were trying to protect themselves by adopting better hygienic measures.<sup>12</sup>

However, the hamam, apart from improving the personal hygiene and purifying the faithful Muslims, were a place suitable for social contacts with financial and cultural aspects. Men were frequently going to the hamam for hygienic reasons, because there were not such facilities in the houses at the time. On the other hand, women, both Muslims and Christians, tended to visit the hamam mainly for socialising, since this was their only social activity outside their residence. The women in the Sultan's harem also adored the hamam, since they were deprived of meeting people in the outside world.<sup>13</sup>

### **Public Baths in Peloponnese During the Ottoman Empire**

The Ottoman Empire began to invade Greece in Thrace during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and concluded the conquest of the whole country in 1669 (Crete).<sup>14</sup> The long-lasting presence of the Turks in Greece left its mark on the social, political and cultural life. A typical example of the Ottoman influence is the hamam, which were an every day activity of the Greeks that contributed to the preservation of a good physical condition.

There is only a small amount of information that can be collected, from a single source, about the role of the hamam in Achaia (a prefecture in Peloponnese) during the Ottoman reign. This sole source is based on the description of the city of Patra by the Ottoman voyager Evlia Tselebi, who visited the city in the late 1660's, and quotes the number and names of the hamam that existed at the time.<sup>15</sup> One of them is still in use today and it was known as the 'Ket-hounda hamam'. There are also some information about the working hours of this hamam, its address and its therapeutic features, as

they were mentioned in the advertisements of the local newspapers.

In Patras and its suburbs there were four public baths and several private ones. Three of the public baths were in the city centre, while the fourth one was in the Castle of Rio. Apparently, since the population of the city was around 10.000 people, the public baths that existed at the time did not fulfil the citizens' requirements.<sup>16</sup> When someone visits the only hamam left until today in the city, he has the impression that the building has still the same architectural features as the hamam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, according to the topography of the area, the baths located outside the fortress were placed within the heart of the religious and financial Ottoman centre; this piece of information confirms the fact that most of the public baths were constructed near mosques and bazaars.<sup>9</sup>

These days, the only hamam still functioning in Patra was built during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There is only a ground floor, which has a trapezoid design and a tiled roof (7.90mx2.00m). The interior of the building consists of two parts: the dressing rooms and the hot room with two private rooms. The hot room was built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is a rectangular area (6.40mx3.80m), which has a vault as a roof. The two private rooms are quadrangular (each side is 2.80m) and are covered by hemispheric vaults with multi-coloured dormer windows. Behind these areas there is a water tank and a fireplace.<sup>9</sup>

The only Ottoman hamam at the outskirts of Patra was in the Castle of Rio. Tselebi says about the castle: '...The garrison commander is in charge of 200 soldiers... Inside the fortress there are 500 tiny tiled-roof houses for the soldiers. There is also a mosque, a hamam and a single spring with crystal clear water...'.<sup>15</sup> The hamam was near the right side of the castle's entrance and a small part of it (7.50m x 4.00m) is still present. Several interventions over the past years have altered the features of its plan and the only recognizable parts of it are the two areas covered by a vault.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The Roman thermal baths and the Byzantine 'loutra' were the precursors of the hamam, since the Ottomans preserved and synchronized them, because they realized the therapeutic spectrum of hydrotherapy. Moreover, public baths represented the meeting point in a city for all the social classes especially for women, as an acceptable way of amusement. Many public baths were constructed during the Ottoman era into the Greek lands and most of them continued their operation for several centuries. Thus, public baths played a significant role in social life and medicine, as a healing method through the centuries.

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