

## THE ENTRANCE FEE IN VIPASCA BATHS: WOMEN – 1 AS; MEN – HALF AN AS\*

by

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The third chapter of the legal inscription of one of the bronze plates from Vipasca, which is usually known as Vipasca I or as the first Vipasca law, is dedicated to the running of the bathing resort<sup>1</sup> – **Map 1**.

Let us turn our attention to the third line of this article (**Fig. 1**). It says: “The contractor will charge men half an *as* each and women one *as* each”<sup>2</sup>. That is, in order to be admitted inside the Vipasca (or Vipascum) Baths and enjoy a minimum of services, women had to pay exactly twice as much as men. This curious situation surely did not occur only for sexist reasons; it rather includes a large number of situations which will lead us on a long journey. We can, therefore, start by asking ourselves whether the entrance fee for women was expensive or not. Pompeii will give us this valuable information through the picture of the domestic accountancy of someone living there in the first century AD.

By studying the inscriptions in Pompeii<sup>3</sup>, we know that a lamp or a plate cost as much as entering Vipasca Baths, that is, one *as*; but, for example, a drinking glass would cost two *asses*. The cost of having a tunic washed is even more interesting: one denarius, i.e. four sesterces, that is sixteen *asses*. And if this information is not enough, we may resort to another valuable text, also from Pompeii. It is a kind of an accountancy book, which tells us in some detail the expenses of someone over nine consecutive days<sup>4</sup> (we understood it as being a

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<sup>1</sup> This Bronze plate was found in 1876, amid copper slag brought from the Algaes (Aljustrel) mine.

<sup>2</sup> Encarnação, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Etienne, 1992; CIL, IV, 5380.

<sup>4</sup> CIL, IV, 4227.

family that owned a slave). The daily amount of money spent on bread can be estimated as between eight and two *asses*, the latter figure being only the slave's portion. This man had a daily expense of twenty-five *asses*, which curiously did not include any money spent on the city baths. Therefore, and bearing in mind that the entrance fee to Rome's public baths was four times lower than in Vipasca, the entrance fee for women from this village to the public baths would not represent a very high expense in the daily family budget. Anyway, perhaps women did not visit the baths daily – it is more certain that men were the main customers there especially if we think about Vipasca's main occupation. To reinforce this idea Domergue<sup>5</sup> gives us the example of another mining enclave, Alburnus Maior, in Asia Minor, where a miner daily earned two or three sesterces, that is eight to twelve *asses*. We take for granted that the miner from Alburnus Maior could not bear the expenses of a Pompeiian family, but the act of going to the baths was seen as a duty and as a need.

The entrance fee is expensive, when compared to Rome, but we should also emphasise that neither the freed, nor imperial slaves, nor children nor the garrison soldiers in Vipasca paid it (1.4), which, clearly reduces the revenue.

We can, therefore, approach the subject from another point of view: we must then put ourselves in the bath resort *conductor's* shoes, i.e., the person who rents it so that it can be utilised. In other words, how much could the *conductor* earn from this business and what were the maintenance costs? We shall begin with the raw materials. In order for the baths to function, two things are essential: water and wood.

About the first, we know only that the bath resort renter had to maintain a certain water level and that the liquid had to be in huge quantities. But wood is a more difficult problem. In a mining settlement, wood is extremely important, even indispensable, so that if the *conductor* sold it “illegally”, he would be fined (1.10)<sup>6</sup>. Wood is one of the constant expenses that the *conductor* had to support, and its price could not have been very low, as the fine applied to a hypothetical parallel trade is quite high. In fact, wood is, in some cases, the object of public offers, the *summa honoraria*, as in the case of Pliny the Younger. He gave away, besides the 300,000 sesterces destined for the decoration of his home city (Comum) baths, another 200,000 sesterces for its maintenance – this is, undoubtedly, a fine example of private generosity. But, if wood was expensive, water would also be a source of expenses for our *conductor*, as well as the plumbing maintenance, the covering of the pool and any damage caused by the use of the building.

This means that the fee the customers paid to be admitted to the baths was not enough to cover all the expenses, and so there was no profit at all. However,

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<sup>5</sup> Domergue, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> The fine was 100 sesterces.

in public baths (such as the ones mentioned on the bronze plate in Vipsca) there were other services which could make the business profitable: massage, depilation, unction and sale of perfumed oils, rental of towels and tunics, in short, all sorts of services not included in the entrance fee.

If we are to consider that the baths were multifunctional complexes and that all aspects of urban social life were enclosed therein, we may resort to examples such as the ones shown by the Pompeii Baths (the Central Baths) or by the Neptune Baths in Ostia. The latter constitute a canonical building: the south, turned towards the *decumanus*, was occupied by a number of *tabernae* facing the street and the internal part of the *palestra*. This is certainly another example of baths granted by means of contract, as in Vipsca, and the *tabernae* rental would be the true source of profit for the owner, in order to counterbalance the “political price” of the entrance fee. And if we bear in mind the late timetable of the men, we cannot disregard the possibility of food and wine sales.

We can, therefore, conclude that the reasons that led to the promulgation of higher fees for women were not strictly economic – perhaps it was a question of balance. The social role of women in Roman society does not justify this variation. Woman is, in some cases, a *civis romana*. However, we should remember that a Roman mining settlement would probably have a rather different social composition from a standard town. Another reason might be attributed to the timetable: in fact, women’s timetable was longer.

In the case of Vipsca Baths, as was the common practice throughout the Empire, there were different timetables for men and women: the morning was reserved for women, and the afternoon for men. With this method, the division between both sexes was guaranteed. Separate units are exceptional cases in the Empire, the Stabian Baths in Pompeii being one of the most quoted examples. This care in dividing spaces is linked with moral factors, as proved by Hadrian’s law about it in the second century AD, which was later confirmed by Marc Aurelius<sup>7</sup>. The fact is that women who went with men to the public baths did not have a good reputation. This happened, for example, in Caracalla Baths (Rome), where a part of the baths was common to both sexes – the *Frigidarium* pools. In this case, the majority of women would rather use other places where their reputation would not be harmed.

Returning to Vipsca, we are confronted, therefore, with the explicit stipulation of these timetables, according to the orders of the mine procurator. Women (1.1) were admitted from dawn – 6:00 or 8:00 – until the seventh hour – around 12:00; men were admitted between the eighth hour – 13:00 – and the second hour of the night.

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<sup>7</sup> “Lavrcra pro sexibus separavit” (SHA, Adriano, 18,10 and SHA, Marcus Aurelius, 3,8). This law was abolished by Heliogabalus (SHA, Heliogabalus, 31, 7).

From 6:00 to 7:00 and between 12:00 and 13:00 the building was closed to the public, probably for cleaning. This means that women had the right to use the baths for six to eight hours and men could only use it for five hours. We should note that the inscription spoke of the Summer timetable, as generally the eighth hour corresponds to that period of the year, while in Winter it was the ninth hour.

Anyway, different timetables do not justify different entrance fees, as – even supposing that more wood is needed to heat up the baths in the morning, since they would have to work for one or two more hours – the men’s time would have to have artificial lighting, at least during the later hours (and that would be another expense for the *conductor*).

To conclude, we may say that the public baths in Vipsasca set a different entrance fee depending on sex mainly due to a question of balance in the *conductor*’s profits. But the price is still symbolic: after all, it is a public good and a symbol of Romanization. There is not, in my opinion, an intention of “overloading” female expenses. Moreover, the knowledge we have about the population in Vipsasca, or more precisely, of these baths, is only provided by the inscription, as we do not have archaeological proof of the existence of this building, nor of its plan or dimension.

Nevertheless, we should not overlook another question. There certainly were other baths, and perhaps this was only public one. We may assume there would have been private baths, the *balnea*, belonging to the wealthiest families, where a certain number of women could enjoy the pleasures of bathing without paying an *as*.

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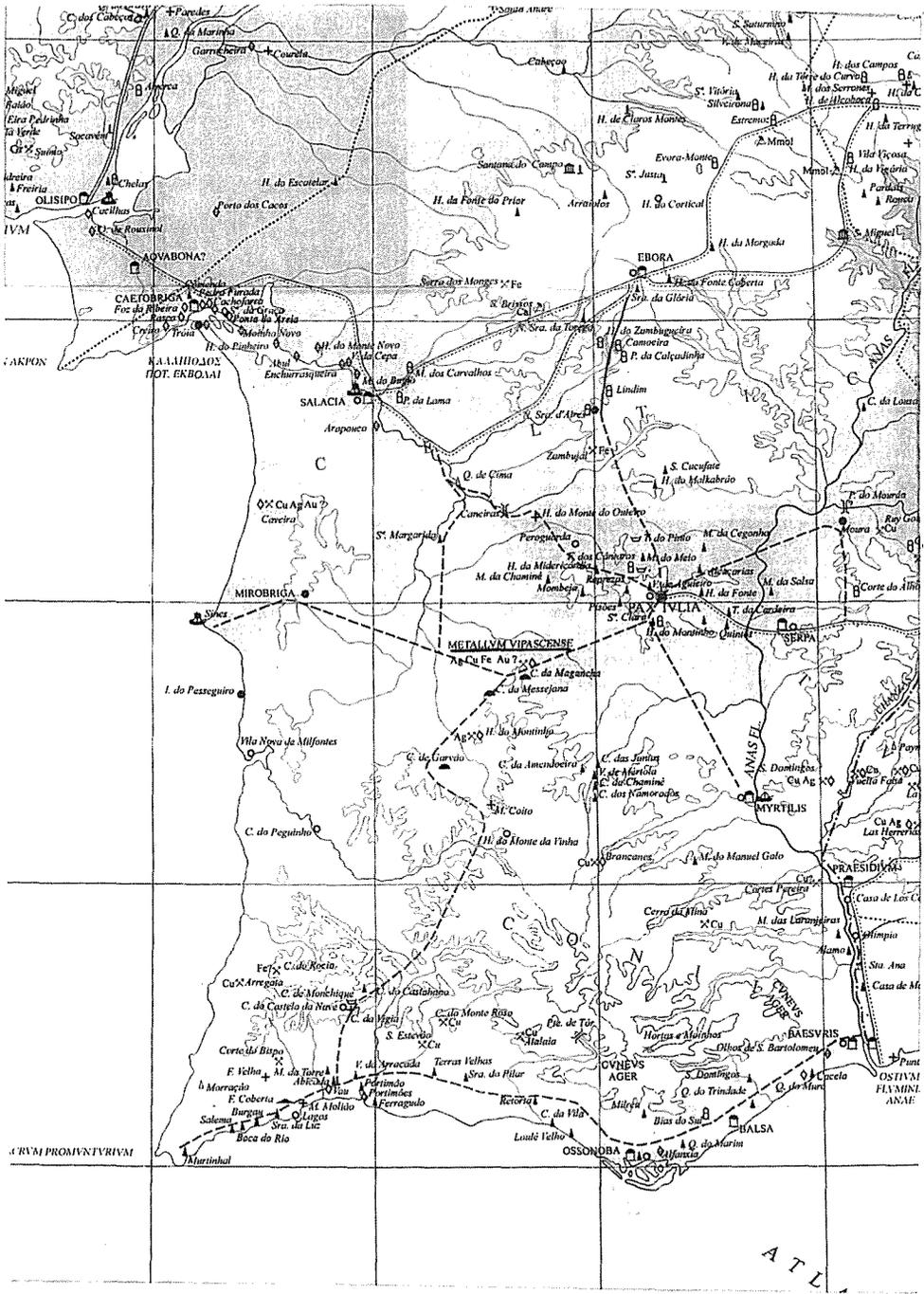
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QVI MVLOS MVLAS ASINOS ASINAS · CABALLOS · EQVAS SVB PRAECONE VENDIDERIT · IN F · I · X III · D D · C  
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AERIS SEMISSES ET A MVLIERIBVS AERIS ASSES EXIGITO · EXCIPVNTVR · LIBERTI ET SERVI  
COMMODA PERCIPIENT ITEM · INFVBERES · ET MILITES CONDVC TOR SOCIVS · ACTORVE EIVS  
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VETVTV · LAVARE TERGERE YNGVEREQVE ADIPE E RECENTI TRACENSIMA QVAQE DIE · RECTE DEBETO  
ERIT QVO MINVS · LAVARE RECTE POSSIT EIVS TEMPORIS PRO RATA PENSIONEM · CONDVC TOR REPVTARE DEB  
ALIVT · EIVSDEN BALINEI EXERCENDI CAUSA · FECERIT · REPVTARE NIHI · DEBEBIT CONDVC TORI VE  
BVS RAMORVM · QVAE OSTILI · IDONEA NON ERVNT NE LICETO · SI ADVERSVS HOC QVID FECERIT · IN SINGV  
30 SI ID BALINEVM · RECTE PRAEBITVM NON ERIT · TVM PROC · METALLORVM · MVLTAM CONDVC TORI · QVO  
AD HS CC · DICERE LICETO LIGNVM CONDVC TOR · REPOSITVM · ONNI TEMPORE · HABETO · QVO  
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DEBETO CONDVC TOR · VNVM PLVRESVE ARTIFICES · IDONEOS IN PORTIONEM RECIPITO  
TABERNARVM · FVLLONIARVM VESTIMENTA RVDA VEL RECVRATA NEMINI V  
CIVS · ACTORVE EIVS LOCAVERIT PERMISERITVE LICETO · QVI CONVICTVS FVERIT · ADVERSVS EA QVI  
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SCRIPTVRAE SCAVRARIORVM ET TESTARIORVM QVI IN FINIBVS · MET  
AS ARGENTARIAS · AERARIAS PVLVEREMVE · EX SCAVRIS · RVTRAMINA · AD · MESVRAM PONDVS  
DIRE FRANGERE CERNERE · LAVARE VOLET · QVIVE LAPICAEINIS · OPVS · QVO QVO MODO FACIEN  
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CONDVC TORI SOCIO ACTORIVE EIVS · PIGNVS CAPERE LICETO ET QVOD EIVS SCAVRIAE PV

Fig. 1

Vipasca I – Facsimile of the text published by Hübner, CIL II, 1892, P. 789.



Map 1  
 From *Tabula Imperii Romani*, hoja J-29: Lisboa.