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## Aquae Sulis and its baths

The Roman town of Aquae Sulis lies beneath the modern city of Bath in the valley of the river Avon. In a small area of low-lying ground, enclosed by a bend in the river, mineral springs of hot water emerge from underground at the rate of over a million litres a day and at a temperature of between 46 and 49 degrees centigrade. The water we see today fell as rain 10,000 years ago and then percolated two miles down into the earth before rising to the surface as hot springs. These have a low mineral content, consisting mainly of calcium, magnesium and sodium.

Long before the Romans came, the springs were regarded as a sacred place. The Celts who lived on the surrounding hills came to worship their goddess Sulis there and believed in her power to cure their illnesses through immersion in the hot spring waters.

When the Romans arrived they were quick to recognise the importance and potential of the springs as a place of pilgrimage. They erected a set of huge public baths so that visitors could enjoy their experience of the hot springs in comfort.

The most important part of the baths complex was the sacred spring. The Romans enclosed it in a large reservoir lined with lead and surrounded by a simple stone balustrade. The pool with its bubbling waters overhung with clouds of steam presented an awesome and mysterious sight to the many visitors to the baths.

The main building was a long, rectangular structure, possibly the largest and most magnificent set of baths west of Rome at this date. It contained three main plunge baths filled with a constant supply of water at a pleasant temperature. The water was brought from the spring through lead pipes. The pool nearest the spring naturally contained the hottest water, whereas the furthest pool was the coolest, since the water lost much of its heat on the way to it. There was also a suite of warm and hot baths heated by a hypocaust.

Some people travelled long distances to Aquae Sulis, attracted by the fame of its spring and its healing powers. No doubt the heat of the water relieved conditions such as rheumatism and arthritis, but many people must have visited the spring in the hope of miraculous cures for all kinds of diseases. One elderly woman, Rusonia Aventina, came from Metz in eastern Gaul. Her tombstone shows that she died at Aquae Sulis at the age of fifty-eight, perhaps from the illness which she had hoped the spring would cure. Julius Vitalis was a soldier serving as armourer to the Twentieth Legion, based at Chester. His tombstone records that he had served for just nine

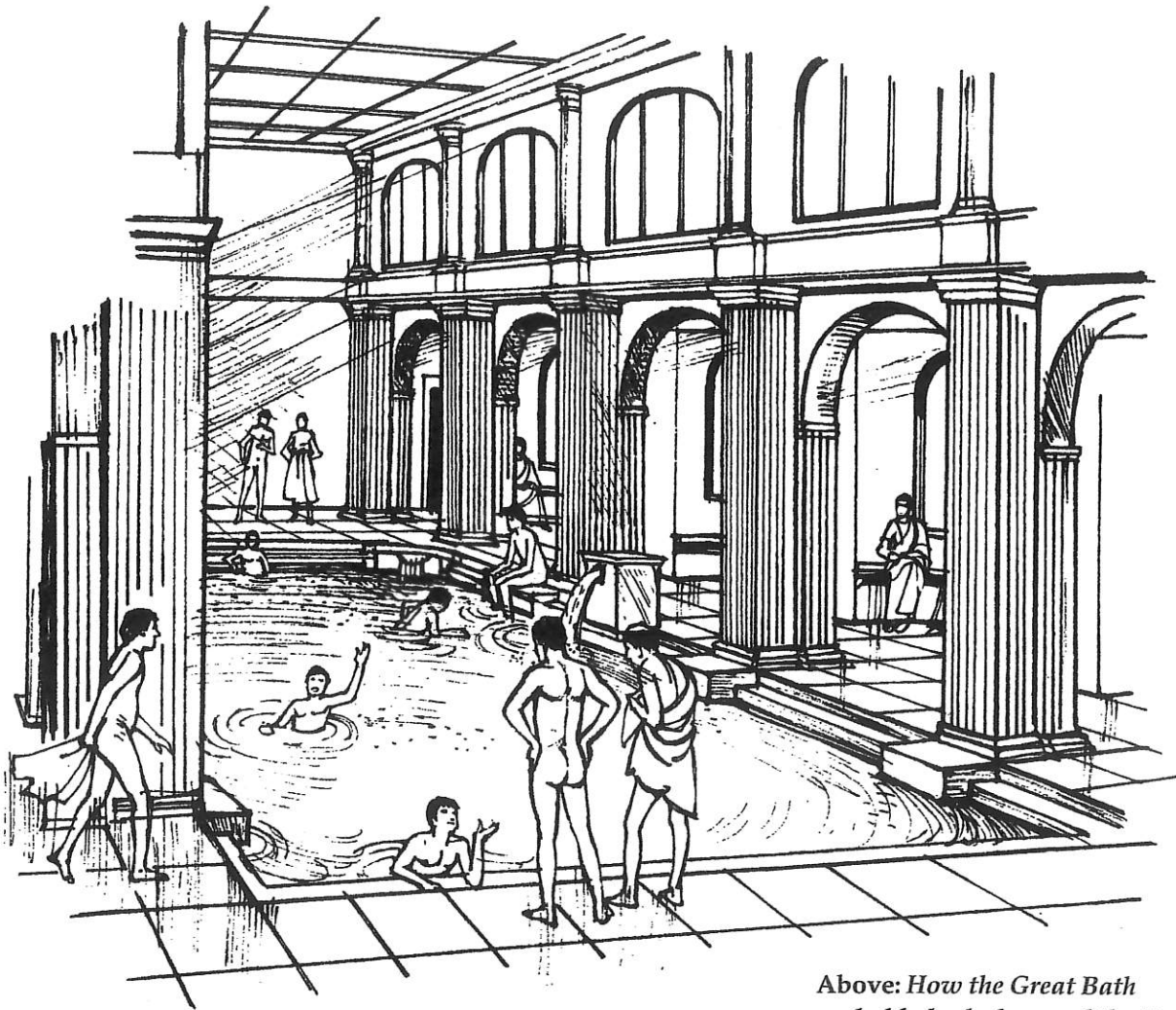




years when he died at the age of twenty-nine; possibly his commanding officer had sent him to Aquae Sulis on sick leave.

Many visitors seeing the mysterious steaming waters would feel that they were in a holy place. They would believe that a cure for their ailments depended as much on divine favour as on the medicinal powers of the water. A temple was therefore constructed next to the bath buildings and the enclosed area round the temple, the sacred precinct, included the spring within its boundaries. A magnificent altar stood in front of the

*The largest of the three plunge baths at Bath: it is now called the Great Bath. Notice the steam rising from the naturally hot water.*



*Above: How the Great Bath probably looked around the time of our story, late first century AD. Below: A portrait of a lady with fashionable hairstyle. From her tomb at Bath.*

temple and a life-size gilt bronze statue of the goddess Sulis Minerva was inside, glowing with golden hues in the flickering light of the eternal flame. By linking the name Minerva to that of Sulis in this way, the Romans encouraged the Britons to recognise the power of the Roman goddess of healing, wisdom and the arts and associate it with that of the Sulis they already knew.

When the temple precinct was excavated the stone base of a statue was found. The inscription on the base records that the statue was dedicated to the goddess Sulis by a Roman official, Lucius Marcus Memor (see the photograph on page 8). Nothing more is known about him but his presence in Bath may be another example of the Romans' efforts to spread Roman ways and customs among the Britons. Many such officials must have contributed to the policy of romanisation in this way.

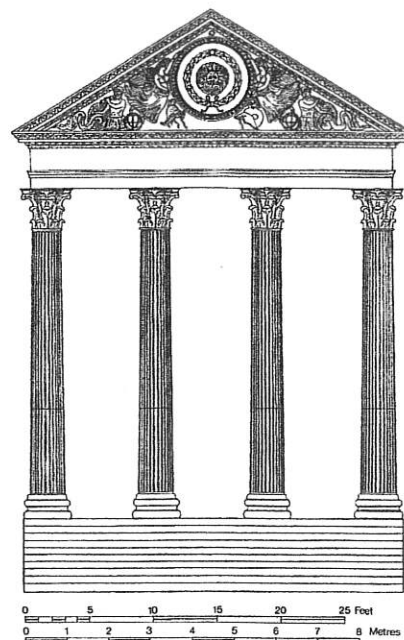




At the time of our story (AD 83), Aquae Sulis was a small but growing community. The complex of bath buildings and temple was the most impressive feature of the town. There were probably a few other public buildings, such as a basilica for the administration of law and local government, and possibly a theatre, but most of the other buildings would have been houses for those who were already living there, and inns for the town's many visitors. Aquae Sulis lay within tribal territory over which Cogidubnus may have had control. It is just possible that he himself was involved in the development of the town.

Aquae Sulis was, of course, a tourist centre as well as a place of religious pilgrimage, and one can imagine the entrance to the baths crowded with souvenir stalls, much as it is today. Visitors would buy such things as good luck charms and offerings to throw into the sacred spring with a prayer for future good health. These offerings were sometimes expensive: they included beautifully carved gemstones and items of jewellery.

The full extent of the bath and temple buildings is gradually becoming known to us from the work of archaeologists. Excavations have revealed the details of construction of the Roman reservoir surrounding the hot spring itself, and the results of these excavations are on display in the museum. Many thousands of Roman coins have been recovered from the spring, together with silver and pewter bowls used for pouring offerings to the goddess. About ninety small sheets of lead or pewter were also found with Latin inscriptions on them. Their translations show that some people were anxious to use the powers of Sulis Minerva for unpleasant purposes, as will be seen in the next Stage.



Above: *Reconstruction of the temple front.*

Left: *A model of the temple in its courtyard.*

