

# All the Dirt

A History of Getting Clean

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Ashenburg



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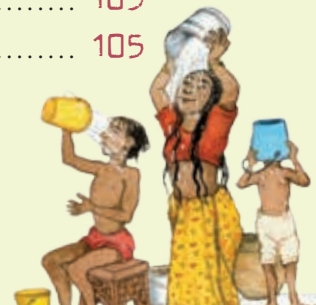
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# Introduction

## Eight Myths About “Clean”

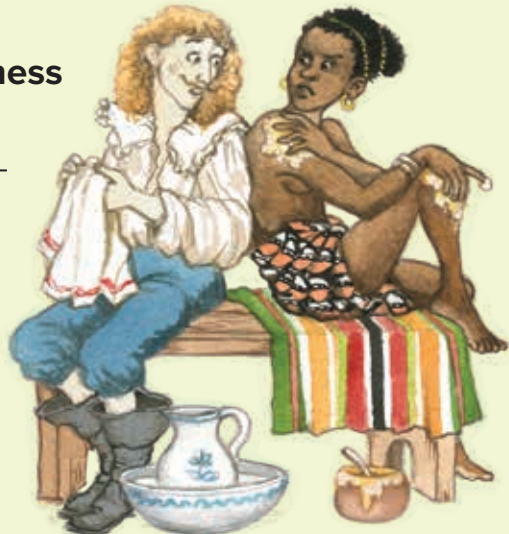
Washing ourselves doesn’t feed our hunger or quench our thirst or shelter us from the cold. So why do we do it? Kids might say, “Because our parents make us.” Adults might say, “Because it makes a good impression” or “Because being clean is healthy.” But throughout history, people around the world have washed themselves for all kinds of reasons, including to show respect to the gods, cure their ailments, and mark important changes in their lives.

At first glance, a country’s bathrooms and bathhouses seem very ordinary. It’s strange to think of them as windows into a people’s values and dreams, but they are. People’s attitudes toward dirt and cleanliness reveal a lot about the society they live in. And, since the earliest times, people had theories behind all the ways they washed themselves. Today, we know that a lot of those theories were wrong. But we still have many mistaken ideas—myths—about cleanliness. Here are some of the big ones.

### MYTH #1

#### The definition of cleanliness is universal.

The funny thing about “clean”—and there are lots of funny things about it—is that most people believe they know what “clean” is and think that theirs is the only definition. Nothing could be further from the truth.

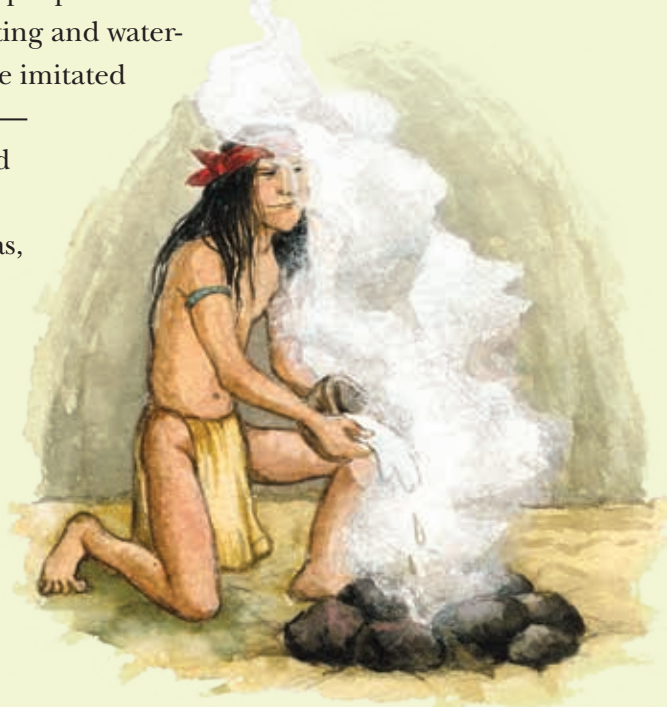


For an aristocratic seventeenth-century Frenchman, “clean” meant changing his linen shirt every day and dabbing his hands in water, but he never touched the rest of his body with water or soap. For a Roman woman in the first century, it meant two or more hours of splashing, soaking, and steaming her body in water of different temperatures, and raking off her sweat and oil with a metal scraper. She did this every day, with lots of other women around, and without using soap. In the southern African country of Zimbabwe, people don’t feel clean until they coat their washed bodies with a mixture of oil and dirt. Along with your parents, the Frenchman, the Roman woman, and the Zimbabwean were each convinced that cleanliness was important and that their way was the royal road to a properly clean body.

## MYTH #2

### Cleanliness depends on modern technology.

It’s true that plumbing and other engineering feats have made our modern Western standard of cleanliness possible, but what’s much more important is whether people *want* to wash. The Roman bathhouses had clever heating and water-delivery systems that no one imitated for more than 13 centuries—because water was scary and washing wasn’t a priority. Long before modern saunas, Aztecs and Navajos had figured out ways to enjoy steam baths.



### MYTH #3

**People were more or less filthy until around the start of the twentieth century.**

Tell that to the ancient Egyptians, Aztecs, Chinese, and Greeks, who were pretty sensible about cleanliness, and to the Romans, who were extravagantly clean. Even medieval Europeans enjoyed a regular trip to the local steam bath. Especially in the West, there is no straight line of progress from “dirty” to “clean.” It’s all over the map.



### MYTH #4

**Doctors and scientists are the best sources of advice when it comes to cleanliness.**

Not so—at different periods in history, some of the worst advice came from medical men and scientists. Even today, the experts don’t always agree on how important it is to be sparklingly clean.



### MYTH #5

**Washing is something you do in private.**

In the West, many of us do expect to be alone when we wash our naked bodies. But for the Romans, getting clean was a party! And it still can be for modern Indonesians, Turks, Finns, Hungarians, and other people around the world who wash in company.



## MYTH #6

### Getting yourself clean is a personal ritual with no connection to the larger world.

Cleanliness is closely connected to religion, culture, geography, and science, all around the world. It has been influenced by such things as the spread of Islam, the American Civil War, the Industrial Revolution, the worst plague ever, the abundance of hot springs in Japan, the discovery of the germ theory, the birth of advertising, the development of the American hotel, and much more. Exploring the history of cleanliness is kind of like seeing the history of the world through a soap bubble.



## MYTH #7

### Keeping your body clean is healthy.

Not so. Only one simple cleaning practice is important for your health. And you're going to have to read to the end of this book to find out what it is.



## MYTH #8

### Cleanliness is a nice, polite subject.

Wrong again. There's a lot that's gross about cleanliness. If you're squeamish, be forewarned—this book contains references to poop, bodily fluids, strong smells, and other shocking subjects. Have fun!



## Chapter 1

# Ancient Grime



3000 BCE TO 306 CE

## Telemachus on Tour

### **PYLOS AND SPARTA, TWELFTH CENTURY BCE**

Telemachus was miserable. His father, Odysseus, had left for the Trojan War when Telemachus was a baby. He'd been gone for 20 years, and no one knew where he was. Telemachus's house was filled with rude, violent men who wanted to marry his mother, Penelope. They ate his food, drank his wine, and sang their drunken songs all night. Telemachus hated these bullies, but he was young and awkward and didn't know how to get rid of them. The goddess Athena came to him in disguise and told him that his childhood was over; now he must be strong and go searching for his father. If he found that Odysseus was dead, Athena said, Telemachus must return home and kill his mother's suitors.



That was a scary task, but Athena filled the boy with confidence, and he sailed for Pylos, home of King Nestor. Nestor's mansion was everything Telemachus's disorderly house was not, and Nestor was the perfect host, ready with food, drink, a jug of water for hand-washing, and—above all—a bath. Important guests in ancient Greece were normally offered a bath when they arrived, as well as a servant to bathe them, but because his father was a famous king and warrior, Telemachus got extra-special treatment. The person who bathed him was none other than the king's youngest daughter, Polycaste, and she rubbed him with olive oil after the bath. Wearing a tunic that Polycaste had given him, Telemachus emerged from his bath as handsome as a young god. Everywhere he went, people noticed his resemblance to his father, but the boy also wanted to act like his father, resourceful and brave.

Next he traveled to Sparta, where King Menelaus and his queen, Helen, welcomed him. There, too, he was given a hot bath with all the trimmings, this time by servants. The courtesy and comfort of their palace and the respect they showed Telemachus left him with new poise. Now, in spite of the difficulties, he was determined to find his father and to rid his house of the bullies who wanted to marry his mother.



Bathing Telemachus's father

# The Well-Washed Family

Telemachus and his parents, Odysseus and Penelope, are the main characters in Homer's great adventure story *The Odyssey*, which was written around 700 BCE. They are a very clean family, for reasons that would have been obvious to Greeks in Homer's lifetime. Greeks had to wash before praying and offering sacrifices to the gods, and in the story Penelope frequently begs the gods to return her husband and then her son. Greeks always bathed before setting out on a journey, and when they arrived at the house of strangers or friends, they would first be offered water to wash their hands, and then a bath. *The Odyssey* is a story full of arrivals and departures, as Telemachus searches for his father and Odysseus struggles to get home.

Homer loved describing the preparations for these baths—heating water in a copper container set on a tripod over a fire, and then pouring the hot water into a tub of brass or polished stone. His characters always look much, much better after a bath, sometimes even resembling gods—partly because *The Odyssey* is full of magic, but also because travelers on the hot, dusty roads of ancient Greece really did benefit from a good soak.

## Washing, the Greek Way

By the fifth century BCE, if you were a boy or girl who lived in a comfortable house in Athens, with servants or slaves, you could clean yourself in various ways. Your house would probably have a washing room next to the kitchen. It would house a washstand that looked like a big birdbath, called a *labrum*. Using a jug or a basin, a servant would carry water from the tank that held



# Taking the Plunge in Ancient India

In the Bronze Age, on the banks of the Indus River in what is now Pakistan and northwestern India, a peaceful and prosperous civilization grew up.

Archaeologists call it the Indus Valley civilization. Cleanliness was important to the Indus Valley people, and most of their mud-brick houses had bathrooms and private wells. Wastewater from the bathrooms went into covered underground drains. Archaeologists can usually identify the bathroom in one of the surviving Indus Valley houses by the waste drains and the better-than-average quality of the brickwork.

In 1926, archaeologists excavating the Indus Valley city of Mohenjo-Daro discovered what may be the world's oldest public bath. Built around 3000 BCE, the pool measures 12 meters (39 feet) by 7 meters (23 feet), and is at its deepest at 2.4 meters (8 feet), about the size of a regular classroom. Many religions include washing and bathing in their ceremonies of purification and renewal, and scholars believe that this Great Bath, as it is called, was used for religious ceremonies.



the household's water or from the nearest well. He might fill the *labrum* with water, or just pour it over you. The washing room might also include a pottery hip bath—big enough for you to sit in, with legs straight out in front, but not to lie down in—which drained through a channel to the outside.

Keeping clean was harder for people without money or servants. Poor people might use the nearest well for a daily wash and make an occasional visit to the public bath. These baths were either free or had a very low admission price, so that everyone could afford to go.

# Just What the Doctor Ordered

Doctors in ancient Greece didn't have much to offer in the way of medicine or safe surgery, so they often prescribed baths. Hippocrates, the great doctor from the fifth century BCE, was a champion of baths. He believed that a smart combination of cold and hot soaks could bring the body's humors, or liquids, into a healthy balance. Warm baths also helped the body by softening it, allowing it to absorb nourishment, and supposedly eased ailments from headaches to problems with peeing. Cold showers were prescribed for people with joint problems. Female ills were often treated with steam baths.

## The Naked Place

Once a middle- or upper-class Greek boy became a teenager, he had another place where he could wash—the gymnasium. This was an important meeting place for Athenian boys and men, and its rooms bordered an outdoor exercise field, with a running track nearby. Greek males exercised in the nude—gymnasium means “the naked place”—first oiling their bodies and then covering them with a thin layer of dust or sand. After wrestling or running or playing ball games, they removed the oil and dust, now mixed with sweat, with a curved metal scraper called a strigil. You could scrape your chest, arms, and legs yourself, but you needed a friend or a servant to do your back. (The strigil had staying power: the Greeks used it for centuries, and the Romans took it up from them.) After a good scraping, you got washed, either standing at a *labrum* or using a tub or shower. The shower was pretty low tech: the showerer stood under a hole in a wall, and a servant poured water through the hole.



# Wimps Versus Tough Guys

You probably don't think that bathing in warm water says much about you as a person. For the Greeks, it said a lot! They worried that washing with warm water would make men and boys weak and fussy. In his fifth-century BCE comedy *The Clouds*, the playwright Aristophanes makes fun of the tug-of-war in Athens between the tough guys who washed in cold water and those who liked pampering. One of his characters, Strepsiades, fondly remembers his grimy boyhood, a time when no one bothered him about washing or keeping tidy. Strepsiades admires men who never shave, get their hair cut, or wash at the baths, whom he compares to his son, who is "always at the baths, pouring my money down the plug-hole." A character called Fair Argument harks back to the good old days when boys sang rousing soldier songs and would have been embarrassed to cover their bodies in oil.



"Sit in my  
own dirty  
water?  
No thanks!"


but they never sat in a tub. A slave would douse them with warm water from a basin or a jug in the bathroom, which had a drainage hole in the floor.

Many people who shower think baths are gross because you're sitting in dirty water, and the ancient Egyptians agreed. They were a very clean people, especially the priests, who shaved their own bodies every day to prevent lice. Most middle- and upper-class Egyptians washed themselves several times a day—when they got up in the morning, and before and after the main meals—

He complains about the current crop of boys, who shiver in the cold after their hot baths and waste their time gossiping.

Greece's two most important city-states, Athens and Sparta, could not have been more different. The Athenians admired athletes, but also thinkers and artists. Sparta had little time for anybody but soldiers and athletes.

The Spartans despised luxury and even normal comforts. Boys were taken from their parents at seven and toughened up in dormitories, walking without shoes and sleeping on scratchy reeds. They never got enough to eat, which meant they had to steal food—another part of their education. Spartan girls were trained in sports and military exercises, and were encouraged to mock boys who weren't good at those things. Does it sound likely that these kids would have taken hot baths? You're right. We know of no warm bathing—and not much bathing of any kind—in Sparta.



## Pour in Wine, Then Add the Baby

Although the Spartans were not big on baths, they bathed their newborns in wine. Plutarch, a Greek historian, saw the practice as a test: a wine bath would throw sickly children into convulsions, he thought, but would harden and strengthen healthy children. Spartan mothers might also have had the idea that wine acted as an antiseptic, but no one today knows for sure. One thing is

certain: the wine bath wasn't the newborn Spartan's only test. A committee came to inspect every baby, and if the infant looked weak, they would leave it to die on a hillside.

