How They Partied in Baiae, the Las Vegas of Ancient Rome

LOST MASTERPIECES

During its height from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD, Baiae was the place to vacation for Rome's grandest citizens. Today its once-luxurious villas and baths are a mass of ruins.

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A certain class of people, through luck or cunning or inheritance or just plain smarts, accrue a massive amount of wealth and power, not necessarily in that order.

But the work of plotting and ruling can be exhausting. So, who can really fault the rich and power-hungry for building an exclusive vacation destination, a spot to which they can escape to relax and blow off some steam—which, translated into the language of the elite, means gorge themselves on outrageous feasts, engage in hedonistic bouts of drunkenness, and commit epic feats of debauchery out of the public eye.

Las Vegas and Ibiza, St. Tropez and the Maldives may be all bright lights and big party places for the wealthiest in the world today, but they're nothing compared to the spot where the ancient Roman aristocracy once played, the city of Baiae.

“[Baiae] is a place where they were buffered from the real world. They could come and relax and indulge in any of their kinks,” Kevin Dicus, an assistant professor in the Department of Classics at the University of Oregon, tells The Daily Beast. “But the other dirty secret of Baiae is you get a lot of aristocratic shits together like them in one place, there’s bound to be palace intrigue… You get these crazy hedonistic stories but you also get this plotting and these powerful people in their beautiful houses trying to figure out how to get more powerful.”

During its height from the 1st to the 3rd centuries AD, Baiae was the place to vacation for anybody who was anybody in Rome. (Well, mostly the men.) Then, it slowly began to sink into the sea. Today, the once-luxurious villas and baths of Baiae are a mass of ruins, half on land and half buried in the Bay of Naples.

It was the natural landscape of Baiae that brought the elite flocking to the resort town in the first place, and it would be this landscape that would cause its downfall.

Baiae was a beautiful spot in a very strategic location. It was situated on the Mediterranean coast along the shores of the Bay of Naples, which was the biggest and best port in the area at the turn of the first millennium.

But Baiae also sat on the Phlegraean Fields, a massive underground volcanic region that is still active today and that sends natural hot springs bubbling up to the surface.

Long before the Roman Empire gobbled up all it could touch, the local residents of what is now the Italian coast came to Baiae to indulge in a little medicinal bathing in these steaming waters.

As early as 600 BC, the Greeks were in control of the area, where they also dabbled in architectural development around the bustling port. It was a lively town, but it was far from the center of leisure and debauchery that would eventually seal its reputation.

That all changed when the Romans came to power. They made Baiae famous by turning the coastal town into the Las Vegas of the ancient Roman Empire.

When the Roman elite first began coming to their favorite vacation spot, they were eager to relax out of the watchful eye of the big city. In order to spend their leisure time in style, they needed to build fabulous villas that would provide them with all of the amenities that their vast wealth could buy.

Little evidence has been found of public buildings in the city; most of the structures were privately owned or reserved for use by those who lived nearby. (Dicus says to think of it as similar to a country club).

With only the crème de la crème allowed to put down roots, one can imagine the building war that ensued. Each new occupant wanted his villa to be even more grand and fabulous than that of his neighbor.

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The result was a collection of houses that were more like ostentatious compounds. Most were enormous, covered in opulent frescoes, and filled with art including replicas of Greek statues.

One villa that is believed to have been owned by the Emperor Claudius had a giant room with a pool of water in the middle around which his guests would have lounged as delicious morsels floated past.

Many of the most luxurious of the houses had their own pools where they raised fish for their feasts. Innovations were made to pipe fresh water from the mountains miles away into the town to be used for drinking water, but also for maintaining these early fish farms.

On hot days when the sea water would begin to evaporate and the salt levels would rise, a door would open and fresh water would flow into the pools to keep the fish alive. It also supplied the many decorative fountains dotted around the city.

Because excess and originality were championed in Baiae, architectural experimentation was encouraged.

The Temple of Mercury, which, despite the name it was given, was a bathhouse rather than a place of worship, was topped with a domed concrete roof complete with an oculus. Later, this same design would be used on a larger scale to build the Pantheon in Rome.

While Baiae was always an escape for the Roman rich, at first, things were a little more tame. Julius Caesar enjoyed Baiae as did his father-in-law, who, according to Dicus, would gather a collection of philosophers and poets to join him on vacation and provide rousing conversation and literary entertainment.

As the Roman Republic aged, more members of the rich and famous began to gather in the city for some decadent and vice-filled R&R. When Augustus took over as the first emperor in 27 BC, transitioning Rome from a republic into a full-blown empire, he claimed a section of Baiae as official imperial property.

Augustus surely enjoyed relaxing around his new royal digs, though he was much more well-behaved than many of his royal successors. But that didn't mean others were following his lead.

"Many of these elite people probably felt pressure to behave themselves in Rome because there literally was a code of conduct, especially during the early empire," Dicus said. "Augustus really puts a hold on ostentatious display and hedonistic behavior. He's almost like a moral father of the society. But Baiae is safe. Baiae is sort of protected from these new rules, and it just continues as it always has."

“It was absolutely a place of pleasure and debauchery and the mere mention of Baiae brought to mind scandal and could ruin your reputation”

During the reign of Augustus, the poet Sextus Propertius called Baiae a “den of licentiousness and vice.” Earlier, the Roman scholar Varo had described it as “the place where old men come to become young boys again and young boys come to become young girls.”

But the denizens of the most fabulous den of iniquity didn’t always get away scot-free. Everyone knew the sorts of things that took place in Baiae, so association with the town could get you into some hot spring water, so to speak.

“It was absolutely a place of pleasure and debauchery and the mere mention of Baiae brought to mind scandal and could ruin your reputation,” Dr. Candace Rice told PBS’s *Secrets of the Dead*.

But that didn’t slow the merrymakers down. Over the succeeding generations, the wickedness and decadence only increased. Baiae became a hot spot for the ancient Roman equivalent of posh sex, drugs, and rock ’n roll.

In addition to the sins of lust and laziness, gluttony was of utmost importance. Epic feasts were given in private villas or on party boats

contracted for the purpose. To this end, Baiae became a place were innovations in oyster farming were made.

It was off the coast of this city that Sergius Orata formed the first artificial oyster bays and their location "reinforced the oyster's reputation for licentiousness," according to Drew Smith in *Oyster: A Gastronomic History*.

The oyster also became a way to publicly display one's status. As the Secrets of the Dead documentary explains, "To prove their wealth, the rich would sometimes eat 100 oysters in one sitting."

Baiae was all about excess, diversion, and depravity. But, at its heart, it was also a city of contradictions.

The natural hot springs attracted the aristocracy, but they also contributed to the city's destruction; visitors came to escape society's condemnation and rules, but too close an association with the resort town could ruin their reputations; and Baiae was a place where individual freedom was cherished above all, but with the loosened restraints came an increase in personal danger.

It was the perfect setting in which to plot against one's high-powered neighbors.

Nero was king among these schemers, and it's no surprise given that even stodgy Rome couldn't dull the antics of the bad boy emperor. He behaved like a maniac in the capital of the empire, but he was even worse in Baiae where his hedonism was legendary.

Nero had inherited the imperial villa from Claudius, but one home in Baiae just wouldn't do. He was known for coveting other people's stunning mansions, particularly that of his aunt. When she died, he inherited the residential prize… and the suspicion that he had helped speed her end along.

But while it's unclear if Nero killed his aunt, it is known that he was the cause of his mother's murder.

Once upon a time, Nero and Agrippina had been close. But when Agrippina became a little too interested in her son's throne, Nero decided that the threat must be extinguished. He invited his mother to be the guest of honor at a big banquet in Baiae.

"What Agrippina didn't know is that her 'dutiful' son back on the Baiae shore had rigged her boat to fall apart piece by piece as she sailed the ocean back home"

After the last oyster had been slurped, he bid her farewell and watched as she sailed away from the resort town's port.

But what Agrippina didn't know is that her "dutiful" son back on the Baiae shore had rigged her boat to fall apart piece by piece as she sailed the ocean back home.

Unfortunately for the emperor, local sailors discovered the tragedy taking place and saved her life. Nero was forced to default to a more conventional murder plot—he sent soldiers to assassinate her in her home. At her request, they stabbed her to death in her womb as a sign of her son's betrayal.

Nero soon became the object of his own Baiae murder plot. The emperor was spending more of his time in Baiae, where he had begun to enjoy the hospitality of his close friend Gaius Calpurnius Piso, who owned a gorgeous beachfront villa. It was during these stays that Piso, who was a Roman senator, decided that the increasingly mad emperor had to go. So he plotted a coup against him.

Everything was in place, but then Piso got cold feet. It wasn't killing the emperor of Rome that gave him pause; it was the thought of defiling his beautiful home with such a dirty deed. Dicus says that because Nero was Piso's guest, his murder would "bring dirt into the house that you really couldn't clean up." That, for Piso, was unacceptable.

The hesitation led to the death of both the plot and the plotter. The delay allowed Nero to discover the plan, and he ordered Piso to death by forced suicide.

Around the 4th century AD, the volcanic caverns beneath the land that had so graciously provided heat to the natural thermal baths in the area

began to empty out. As they emptied, the land began to sink—the land under half of Baiae.

Around this same time, residents began to abandon the city, though scholars are uncertain if they were already moving on when the seismic activity occurred or if they fled due to the fact that their city was beginning to disappear into the sea.

Today, all that remains of the Romans' favorite city of vice is a pile of captivating ruins, half on land, half submerged at the bottom of the Mediterranean, where its once-grand villas have been left to the devices of fish and the archeologists and tourists who snorkel through the debris of a vanished world.