Sanitas Per Aquas

The history of the use of water in medical treatments extends back through the Hippocratic tradition and forward to our modern notions of hydrotherapy. “Taking the waters” was once a common practice intended to treat everything from infertility to diseases. Both the Romans and the Greeks maintained a long tradition of bathing for purposes other than simply keeping clean.

By the sixteenth century, spa therapy in Europe was simultaneously thought to be medically beneficial and morally dangerous, and spa towns maintained bathing facilities for both local and travelling patrons. *De Balneis* is a large compendium of articles on balneology (the medical uses of bathing) and detailed descriptions of European spas. It also contains some notable illustrations, including a full-page woodcut of the famous French spa at Plombieres-les-Bains that shows people on crutches being assisted into the waters for their curative effect. This French spa saw visits throughout the centuries from royalty seeking its cures, including a visit by Napoleon’s wife Josephine, who was instructed by her doctors to bathe at the spa as a cure for infertility. *De Balneis* provides a unique summary of medical theories and public practices that have since fallen in and out of favor many times.

**The Ebling Library copy RM 810 D4**

Our copy of *De Balneis* bears the bookplate of Ralph Hermon Major, M.D., a distinguished physician and professor at the University of Kansas who was deeply interested in the history of medicine. Following his retirement from the medical school, he became Professor of Medical History at Kansas and worked at the Clendening Library, where a substantial portion of his collection remains. He was the author of the two-volume *A History of Medicine* as well as *Classic Descriptions of Disease and Physical Diagnosis*. The pages of Dr. Major’s copy of *De Balneis* are very well-preserved, maintaining their brightness after many centuries due to the quality of the paper that was used when it was printed in 1553.