

TRANSCRIPT

Upbeat musical theatre song plays in the background with lyric: “Hadrian’s gay, I bet you didn’t know that?”

Richard Bliss

This podcast has been created by Curious Arts, the North East’s leading LGBTQIA+ arts and cultural organisation. It’s just one part of a larger project uncovering the love story of Emperor Hadrian and Antinous, a young man from Asia Minor who caught the Emperor’s eye and later captured his heart. I’m Richard Bliss and I’ve been finding out why a gravestone in South Shields should be celebrated throughout queer culture and how Hadrian’s love for Antinous led to a queer religion that flourished across the whole of the Roman Empire.

The song you could hear there was written by Nicky Rushton and, as she tells us, Hadrian’s gay. Well, it’s maybe not quite as simple as that, as I found out when I met Professor Caroline Vout of Cambridge University on a Zoom call. She told me a little bit more about Hadrian and Antinous and the religion that was founded in Antinous’s name.

Professor Caroline Vout

We don’t know very much about Antinous, really. We know that he was born in Bithynia in Asia Minor, and really, we only know another couple of things about him and that’s that he was the young male lover of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, or became so, travelled around the Empire with him for a bit and then in 130 AD fell into the River Nile. I mean, he happens to fall into the River Nile, fortuitously or unfortunately, in October of that year, coinciding with the Festival of Osiris, who’s an Egyptian god who had himself fallen into the River Nile. That, I suppose, imbues Antinous’s death with more mysticism and then all of these rumours start circulating about what happened to him. And before you know it, images of him are going up all over the Empire, and not just large-scale marble sculptures of a public kind. There’s a city founded in his honour on the banks of the Nile, there are coins minted by provincial cities but there’s also, in Roman Britain, we know that they have little perfume jars shaped like Antinous busts.

Richard Bliss

And was it Hadrian that kicked this off or were there other people that were driving this?

Professor Caroline Vout

It’s very clear that the reputation, at least, was that Hadrian grieved inordinately for this young boy and that that grief stimulated this process of commemoration. But it’s always seemed to me that you’re in a culture where Roman emperors and their family were routinely honoured in visual media, so there’s nothing new there. But Antinous was kind of in bed with the Emperor, quite literally, but actually kind of just like you or me. So, he wasn’t born royal and that somehow captured the imagination, so that when people looked at him, they got a glimpse of maybe what turned their Roman Emperor on, and they also in a sense, felt that same desire that he did, maybe, for this beautiful boy that’s now kind of rendered in marble. Or maybe they actually wanted to be him and to be that close to the Emperor. So, he became a sort of human face of Roman rule that people could get behind. And what’s interesting is that when you look at his commemoration, he is honoured as a god and as a hero. But he’s also a bit of a ‘Ken doll’, so depending on where you are in the Empire, he’s sometimes represented as Apollo-like, he’s sometimes represented as Hermes-like, he’s sometimes represented as Sylvanus-like or Osiris-like. So, you can kind of make him any God you want to. He becomes this kind of blank canvas onto which you can project your fantasy and that’s rather lovely. I think that’s his power.

Richard Bliss

After I’d spoken to Professor Vout and then when I read her book, ‘Sex on Show: Seeing the Erotic in Greece and Rome’, I started to wonder if there was any evidence of queer Roman lives being lived on or around Hadrian’s Wall. Samuel Allenby, of Curious Arts, and I took ourselves off to the Roman fort Arbeia in South Shields...

So, we are standing now in Arbeia, in front of Victor’s tombstone and the information board is telling us that this is the tombstone that commemorates the life of Victor, a Moor from North Africa, and that he was the slave of Numerianus, a cavalry soldier. But the reason that I’m really interested

in this is that I think it's a gay icon and of international significance. So, what we've got here is Numerianus saying about Victor the kind of words that he would normally say to his wife. I don't know what you think, Samuel? What did you think when you saw it?

Samuel Allenby

I thought it's so well-preserved especially, and it's so well-decorated that it must be for someone that they really cared about, to go through that much effort to make that tombstone so well. So, like you say, I think it definitely suggests, especially with those words on it, that it was someone's gay lover or partner.

Richard Bliss

Whilst Samuel and I got pretty excited about Victor's tombstone, I thought I better go and check in with a Roman expert and get their opinion on whether the tombstone really is a gay icon of international significance. So, I went off to meet Alex Croom on the north side of the Tyne at Segedunum. We started by talking about how discovering an LGBTQIA+ past through archaeology is a tricky business.

Alex Croom

I am Alex Croom, Keeper of Archaeology.

Richard Bliss

We had a really great chat downstairs but what I found really interesting was how hard it is to find a 'way in' through objects. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about that?

Alex Croom

Yes, this is always a problem with archaeological museums. You're presenting the actual remains of the buildings themselves, and it's just the objects that get dug up that go into the museum, and the museum is interpreting the site. The site here at Segedunum – you had 600 men living in the fort for a couple of hundred years and we have no tombstones whatsoever for any of them. They've all been broken up, re-used in the post Roman period.

Richard Bliss

And you mentioned the tombstone – we went to see Victor's tombstone and I just wondered if you could say a little bit more about that?

Alex Croom

This is a tombstone from the Roman fort at South Shields and it's got a nice image of Victor reclining on his couch, and then underneath is the inscription. So, that inscription is all the information we know about these two people. The last bit of the inscription says Numerianus devotedly conducted Victor to his tomb. So, we can't prove anything, but the fact that Numerianus bought this really large expensive tombstone and then that phrase, devotedly conducting him to his tomb, suggests they may have had a relationship.

Richard Bliss

Which is an incredibly beautiful thing, I have to say, having seen it.

Alex Croom

It's one of the best ones in the country. It's made out of a really fine sandstone, so they've really been able to get the detail, the carving on, it's almost certainly carved by someone who actually came from Syria. It's very close to the Palmyrene style of sculpture.

Richard Bliss

I asked Alex if she knew of any objects that had been found in our region that could tell us more about the relationship between Hadrian and Antinous, or the religion that was founded in Antinous's name, like the perfume bottles that Professor Vout had told me about. Sadly, she didn't know of any, but she did tell me about a painting that you can see inside Segedunum.

Alex Croom

At Segedunum, we have a viewing tower. So, I think it must have been about 10 years back, we had a project where we had an artist and volunteers came in to actually paint scenes of Hadrian's

life. Going up the tower was sort of a 'Hadrian's column' and so there's just one of Hadrian and Antinous.

Richard Bliss

In this recording, you heard original songs by Nicky Rushton performed in rehearsal by LGBTQI choir Northern Proud Voices. Northern Proud Voices went on to perform the songs throughout the North East, including on the Curious Stage at UK Pride 2022, at the Pride Chill Out at the Cumberland in Byker, and at special performances at Segedunum in Wallsend and Arbeia in South Shields. You also heard the voices of Professor Caroline Vout of Cambridge University, Alex Croom, the Keeper of Archaeology for Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, and Samuel Allenby of Curious Arts. Hadrian and Antonius: A Gay Love Story, was supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums. This was a Bliss production for Curious Arts.