

In these two podcast episodes, Richard Bliss explores same-sex relationships in the Roman Empire. With guests, he explores the love stories of the Emperor Hadrian and Antinous, and the cavalryman Numerianus and his servant Victor.

TRANSCRIPT

Hadrian and Antinous: A Gay Love Story

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.

TRANSCRIPT

The Victor Tombstone

Gentle music plays in the background

Samuel Allenby

Hello, I'm Samuel Allenby.

Richard Bliss

And I'm Richard Bliss. In this podcast, we're going to be talking about how we can interpret objects in lots of different ways, and in particular, we're going to focus on the Victor tombstone, which you can see at the museum at Arbeia in South Shields. The first person we're going to hear from is Bill Griffiths.

Bill Griffiths

I'm Bill Griffiths, Head of Programmes and Collections at Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums and Chair of the Hadrian's Wall 1900 Festival.

Richard Bliss

What I'm interested in and what other people who listen to this might be interested in, is the opportunity that's given to explore sexuality around Roman times.

Bill Griffiths

So, I think there's been a real groundswell in looking at the stuff we've got and trying to broaden an understanding of what all these objects we hold mean to people, trying to find – I hate the word 'hidden' histories because that seems to me, a bit loaded. We've never tried in my tenure to hide anything but we can't emphasise everything all the time. But I think there is something in the stories that aren't as obviously told. Stories have relevance to different people and I think for me, in museums, relevance is a key thing and we need to be looking to see what stories are relevant to different communities and tell those stories, work with those communities to find those stories and and just share, because what else is amazing if not to broaden and deepen understanding of the past?

Richard Bliss

I also wondered if you could say a little bit more about why something like Victor's tombstone is important to the service.

Bill Griffiths

Victor's tombstone is, well, gorgeous. First thing to say, if you haven't seen it folks, go and see it. It is absolutely gorgeous, it's at Arbeia, open during the summers. It is one of the finest tombstones from Roman Britain, so as a work of art it is superb. A really, really finely crafted tombstone, really good survival. For me, that pales into insignificance compared to the story that is carved upon it, which is a story of Victor, an ex-slave Freedman, servant of a cavalryman, who's died aged 20. It's a fascinating story because he's an African. He's an African from North Africa, Moorish, and he's buried in South Shields. The wording on the tombstone is more akin to the wording that would happen maybe in a sort of civil tombstone between husband and wife than between soldier and servant. Most military tombstones are very formal, more slightly martial language in a way, lots of abbreviations. This one's different. It says that the cavalryman most devotedly conducted Victor to his tomb, which suggests, or can be interpreted, as a same-sex relationship. So, it's a really, really significant tombstone. It's beautiful as a work of art, it's proof that Africans were here 1900 years ago and it's a very, very strong hint at same-sex relationships in the Roman Empire where we know there were same-sex relationships. So, it's nothing hidden. Who can say, but you wonder, it might well have just been perfectly accepted. Just don't know. But it's fascinating to think about.

Richard Bliss

And that 'don't know' is quite interesting as well with all museum objects because, certainly, from my point of view, for hundreds of years, museum objects got overlaid with the social meanings that were most acceptable at the time. And obviously, when a lot of our museums were being created in that late Victorian period and then we were gathering lots into the collection, a lot of those objects, there was no sense in which we wanted to give them any kind of meaning that was reflective of LGBTQI people that were living at the time.

Could you say a little bit more about the difficulties in overlaying meaning onto objects as well as how we can give objects multiple meanings?

Bill Griffiths

So, the difficulty sometimes, it's a technical one – how much space have you got on the label? Now as we go digital, that becomes easier. It's easier to blog and bring out more nuance. But if someone's coming into the museum for the first time, just looking at an object, how much meaning can you bring out? So, that's just straight technical challenge.

There are the challenges of perception as well. There are elements of society that don't like some of the interpretations we put on objects and so we have to, I think, be able to be robust about that and be clear. It is about an honesty to the objects and the stories they hold. So, there's an element of having to go through it and be sure where we're right and not overclaim and not underclaim. So, if you ask me, did I believe the Victor tombstone represents same-sex relationship? The answer is yes. But if you ask me academically to confirm it definitely did, I can't and I shouldn't. I think that's important as well. So, there is that element of integrity in the storytelling as well, I think.

Richard Bliss

So, Bill talked about putting multiple narratives on objects. I'm not sure what I think about that. I've always been more interested in kind of disrupting narratives. What do you think?

Samuel Allenby

From a historian's point, I would say rather than disrupting the narrative, I would say making it more nuanced, in the sense of going over history again in a sort of revisionist sense, not rewriting it necessarily, but looking and saying: 'could this be due to other reasons?' Looking at sources again and saying: what sort of interpretations could we get from this that haven't already been discussed? Within each narrative, there's going to be a lot of different things going on.

Richard Bliss

You mentioned other sources there – did you have any chance to look at other sources that were kind of tackling what Caroline Vout had said in her book?

Samuel Allenby

I did look through a lot of the things that she had referenced in the sense of understanding there being maybe more evidence for acceptance, at the least, or celebration, at the most, of same-sex relationships.

Professor Caroline Vout

There are more androgynous gods than Antinous and male/male desire is something that gods do. So, if you think about Apollo, he comes down to Earth and lusts after Daphne, who turns herself into a tree to escape his assault. But he also lusts after boys. And the god Dionysus, Bacchus as he becomes in Rome, is a god who, from the 4th century BC on, starts to look more sinewy, more feminine, and who sort of moves across boundaries in really interesting ways. He moves from Earth to the underworld. He moves from Greece and Rome out to India and he sort of moves between the masculine and the feminine.

Richard Bliss

So, in that recording, Professor Vout talks about how gods were represented in different ways at different times. She talks about Dionysus, or Bacchus as he was known in Rome, being represented as more sinewy and having this opportunity to move between worlds, almost becoming like a queer god representing himself in different ways. I understand that that also happened, that Antinous was moulded and sculpted in different ways, depending on the fashion at the time. What did that mean for ordinary people in Rome? Did it mean that they could maybe see themselves as queer in the same way?

Samuel Allenby

So, different images of Antinous being made does suggest that there was some acceptance or celebration of same-sex relationships. And I guess that does maybe go against what we're led to believe by how much of this has been on show by museums in the past.

Richard Bliss

I asked Bill Griffiths about this idea of actually inviting new interpretations of objects to see what impact that can have on audiences for our museums in the region... What sort of things do Tyne & Wear Museums do to make lots of audiences feel included?

Bill Griffiths

I think that is actually about engaging with audiences, working with communities, talking to people, trying to get different perspectives, because we would try and convince ourselves we will try and embrace every perspective, but I can't know every perspective in the world and you need dialogue with others. I think that, for me, is a big change that's happened over recent years. There's ever more dialogue with different communities trying to understand and a proper symbiotic relationship as well. We can't do everything for everyone all the time, like everyone else, we've only got so many resources. But we can have a dialogue and be honest about what we can and can't do, explore opportunities to work together and actually not see us as curating the community stories for them, but thinking of it as co-curation. What actually does the community want? What stories do they want to tell and why? How does that fit in with what we're doing? And just find a way through that's equitable, I think, would be my favourite word for today.

Richard Bliss

So, listening to Caroline Vout and Bill Griffiths, and also what you've been saying, Samuel, it seems like what we need to do is encourage people to come into our museums and ask to see objects and investigate archives and start to put their own interpretation onto objects, so that we get all these different voices and all these different viewpoints and that this might begin to change things a little bit in museums for future generations?

Samuel Allenby

Perhaps in the future there might be some space for that when people have been able to look back at things we've found and realise, 'oh, perhaps there was space for this within our own culture'. Perhaps there were same-sex families, same-sex relationships. But right now, we're finding it hard to find that. So, right now, we're just looking at sources that we don't have many of, that are readily available, and we're trying to get some different interpretations out of, but hopefully one day there'll be lots of historians out there with lots of different interpretations that people can look at and think, 'oh, maybe this could have happened?'

Richard Bliss

This podcast was made by Richard Bliss and Samuel Allenby. You heard the voices of Bill Griffiths, Director of Collections at Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums, Professor Caroline Vout of Cambridge University and the music of Nicky Rushton performed by Northern Proud Voices as part of the Hadrian and Antinous: A Gay Love Story project supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This podcast was made with the support of Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums.