

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 340: Hadrian and Antinous

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Late October, AD 130.

The body of a young man, still not 20, was found floating in the Nile.

Halled out from the river, dragged through the silt left by the retreating floodwaters, the corpse was brought to dry land.

It was clear that the drowned man had been a figure striking the out of the ordinary.

His body was gem toned. His proportions were perfect.

His face possessed a heart stopping, almost supernatural beauty.

Who was he? A foreigner, clearly.

Yet the stretch of the Nile in which he had drowned was hardly the haunt of glamorous foreigners. Alexandria lay far to the north.

Although there was an ancient temple adorned with squat pillars and the carvings of a forgotten pharaoh looming over the waters in which the young man had drowned, the building did not feature prominently in the roster of Egypt's tourist attractions.

Nothing stood beside it save a scruffy village.

Yet here, to this obscure and rural spot, Caesar himself had come.

Caesar, who ruled in Egypt as pharaoh, had once king and living god.

His barge, together with the great flotilla of other vessels, stood moored in the shallows of the temple.

Clearly then, the young man found in the Nile could only have been of his party and so it proved. So that absolutely brilliant prose, Tom, which is from your forthcoming book, Pax.

This is absolutely not the third time I've had to record this sentence because you were displeased with the original iterations.

I want nothing but the best for the listeners.

I want them to know that Pax is now available for pre-order in the UK, but this is not about advertising.

This is about a dramatic episode in history.

Listeners can draw their own conclusions.

Tom, tell us about the mystery.

Make the mystery sound exciting so people will buy your book because you're so keen for them to do.

Dominic, it's not about buying, but it's about marking Pride Month, which is happening in the UK at the moment,

and has become almost like a kind of religious carnival.

So we're doing two episodes.

The next one is going to be on Oscar Wilde, who is a martyr.

But today we are looking at a god.

Because the young man who has been found floating in the waters of the Nile is indeed of Caesar's party,

and Caesar is the Emperor Hadrian.

And Hadrian will be so devastated by the loss of this young man that he makes him into a god.

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And so there are all kinds of mysteries that surround this episode.

I mean, most obviously, how has he drowned, what's happened to him.

But also, what is the nature of his relationship with Hadrian?

And what is it about him?

The cult of this young man, a Greek by the name of Antinous, becomes hugely successful.

Hugely successful.

What is it about him that makes him such a striking figure?

Right. So it's not just one of the great Roman mysteries.

It's one of the great Roman love stories.

Always love story the right description.

Well, we can discuss that.

So the setting is the kind of a heyday of the Roman Empire.

And Hadrian, best known in Britain for his wall, he becomes Emperor in 117.

He is famously the first Emperor to wear a beard since the first kind of ruler of the Near East to wear a beard

since the time of Alexander the Great.

Because Alexander the Great obviously set the fashion for clean shaving.

Yes.

And in doing this, it exemplifies the twin aspects of his character.

Because on the one hand, a beard marks him out as a legionary, as a common soldier.

And he is much loved by the legions.

He is a man who has served with them, who does everything that whatever he asks them to do, he will do it.

And even though he's building his walls and his palisades and so on, he's doing this.

They're not defensive measures.

They're kind of expressions of contempt for the barbarians who lie beyond the realms of imperial spectacles.

Yeah.

Basically, what Hadrian is saying is that this world, the world ruled by Rome is a great garden.

And anyone beyond it, not allowed entrance.

So, you know, you're kind of beyond the pale.

And the other aspect of Hadrian's beard is that it marks him out as a philosopher.

And Hadrian is a great lover of Greek culture as a young man.

He was called Greitlis.

And this devotion to Greece and to Greek culture and to the Greek way of doing things is something that marks him out as very distinctive among Roman emperors.

There hasn't been a Roman emperor who has been so nakedly Phil Hellenic as Hadrian.

Funny enough, Tom, that's something he has in common with Oscar Wilde.

Who are we going to be talking about next?

Anyway, back to the story.

Well, so the mention of Oscar Wilde brings us on to Antinous.

Because Oscar Wilde was also very keen on Antinous, whose image is...

I mean, you know, there are almost 120 statues of him have survived.

Cracky.

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He's born in 110, 111.

Yeah.

In a place called Bithynia, which is the northwest of what is now Turkey.

A place called Claudiopolis, which is mostly famous for its cheeses.

Really?

The thing about him is that he is stupefyingly gorgeous.

And I went to an exhibition in Nottingham about devoted to his statues, to his busts and so on.

Yeah.

And a very famous bust of him got sent from Paris from the Louvre.

And when the curator opened the crate, she saw that there were lipstick marks all over the marble lips of Antinous.

So he is, to this day, capable of exciting, strong feeling.

Members of the curatorial classes had been snogging the bust of Antinous.

That's very...

Yes, evidently.

That absolutely confirms all my darkest fears, Tom, about curators.

Anyway, so he is celebrated as the most beautiful young man that anyone has ever seen.

Everybody admits this.

And Hadrian loves him for that, but loves him as well because he seems to have been very intelligent, very smart.

And again, Hadrian himself inscribes this.

He says that his heart was wise, his intelligence, that of a grown man.

So how does Hadrian come across Antinous?

Well, so Hadrian is a great traveller.

Yeah.

I mean, that's what he's doing in Britain.

He's, you know, he goes all across the empire.

And he is in Claudiopolis, in Bithynia, in one, two, three.

And it's likely that he...

So Antinous would have been 13 at this age.

Hadrian seems to have talent spotted him.

Hadrian is almost 50 at that point, Tom.

Hadrian is, yes.

Yes.

By Roman standards, quite elderly by this point.

Hadrian seems to have sent him to Italy to be educated, be given kind of schooling.

And when Hadrian comes back to Rome, he seems to have, you know, become very, very devoted to Antinous

and starts to take him with him on his travels.

So late 128, he goes travelling once again.

And he is going off with Antinous and also with his wife, Sabina, with whom relations are perhaps understandably a little bit...

Right.

A little bit techy.

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And they go to Greece.

And Hadrian spends a fair while there in Athens.

He goes with Antinous to Eleusis, to the great mysteries.

And these mysteries are about death and resurrection, about winter and summer.

The idea that eternal life can be won.

This is seen as the great gift of Athens to the world.

So the fact that Hadrian shares these mysteries with Antinous is a kind of extra bond between them, I think.

And Hadrian sets up this kind of Greek equivalent of the European Union called the Panhellenion.

It's this kind of confederation of Greek cities with its headquarters in Athens.

And it's all expressive of the way that the Hadrian is devoted to the ideal of Greece.

Can I just ask you a quick question at this point?

What do people in Rome think about all this carrying on in Greece and wearing beards and stuff?

Are they okay with that?

They just think, well, the emperor is the boss, so fine, let him crack on.

Or some people muttering and saying, this is all a bit weird.

There are definitely conservative Romans who dislike it.

And I think the most eminent of these is Tacitus, who's...

As a friend of the show, Tacitus.

The great historian of early imperial Rome.

And I think his portrait of Tiberius, which is of a Greek culture-loving autocrat who ends up murderous and depraved,

is a kind of vicious pen portrait of Hadrian, actually.

Really?

Yeah, I think so.

But the Roman Empire has changed.

It's becoming very, very kind of multicultural.

Greeks are entering the Senate.

They're becoming consuls.

The sense that this is becoming a Greco-Roman world is a wave that Hadrian is surfing.

So it's not, I mean, of course it generates grumbles in Rome,

but not grumbles that are in any way threatening to him.

Right.

And the Greeks love him.

I mean, understandably, imagine that.

And he arrives in Alexandria and he has Antinous with him.

And for the Greeks in Alexandria, as in Athens,

the fact that he has this kind of Greek lover with him

is taken as a marker of Hadrian's respect for their entire culture.

And by the time that they reach Alexandria, which is in 130,

Antinous is 19.

So he's putting on muscles.

He's starting to get hairs on his chin.

He's starting to look at the kind of lad who would go out and engage in a lion hunt.

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And that's exactly what they do.

Hadrian and Antinous go out and they hunted a terrifying lion out in the desert.

Hadrian commemorates this with portraits of great feet.

And these end up on the Arch of Constantine in Rome.

Yes.

They were kind of reused.

So we see this image of how Hadrian saw Antinous

in what becomes the last year of his life.

It survives, kind of like photographic snaps almost.

You used the phrase a few paragraphs ago, his Greek lover.

Is that how everybody perceives them?

They don't just think favourites, cup bearer.

They think lover.

They think lover and they think Greek.

And both of those are very important.

We'll come to why they're important later on.

But just to continue the story of Antinous's life because it's very, very short.

That year of 130 where he's come to Alexandria, they've had the lion fight.

Then they go on a Nile cruise and they're going down the Nile

and this great festival of the God Osiris is being marked.

And what it's commemorating is people may remember the story.

Osiris is married to his sister Isis.

They have a brother Typhon or Seth as it was, but Typhon in the Greek version.

And Typhon attacks Osiris, kills him, puts him in a coffin,

chucks him into the Nile.

The anniversary of this is commemorated on the 24th of October.

So the last week of October.

And it's in the last week of October that Antinous has found drowned in the Nile.

So he's been thrown into the Nile or perished in the Nile exactly as Osiris did.

And so it's a kind of very haunting scene because on the festival of Osiris,

the Nile is ablaze with small ships, with lamps on them.

And you have music and revelry floating from the shores.

So a kind of very, very dramatic setting for this accident.

If it's an accident or murder, we will come and discuss perhaps what has happened.

But what we know for sure is that Hadrian is devastated.

We're told that he weeps like a woman, which is for the Romans a pejorative.

And he's absolutely prostrated.

But then he has a vision.

Antinous appears to him in a dream and announces his resurrection.

And in the sky, a new star appears and astrologers inform Hadrian

that this is the soul of Antinous.

And so Hadrian founds a city that he calls Antinopolis, the city of Antinous.

And it's a Greek city.

But at the heart of it, there is going to be an Egyptian temple

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devoted to a god called Osirantinous.

So Osiris fused with Antinous.

A syncretic god.

A syncretic god.

And messengers are sent across the Roman world informing people about this.

And so they go across Egypt, they go to Greece, they go to Bithynia.

And this is Hadrian kind of acknowledging that Antinous is a multicultural god.

He's from Bithynia.

He's Greek.

He's died in Egypt.

He's arisen from the dead and have become fused with an Egyptian god.

This is something that is not Roman.

It's something that is bred of the kind of the eastern half of the empire.

Something very radically new, but sponsored by Caesar.

And so to that extent, he is Roman as well.

And so perhaps in that context, it's not surprising that his cults spread very, very rapidly.

So I said that almost 120 statues of him have survived.

And right the way into the present, there's a very famous photograph of a statue of him being discovered at Delphi.

So you have kind of Victorian archaeologists all gathered around and there is this naked figure emerging from the dirt.

And so he becomes this icon of male beauty.

That's why Oscar Wilde loves him.

He compares him to Dorian Gray in his novel.

And today he is celebrated as a gay god.

There are people who kind of enshrine him as...

There aren't people who worship him.

I think they do it in a spirit perhaps of kind of post-modern resource.

But he certainly presents online as a gay god.

So that's the backstory.

And as I say, there are these kind of mysteries that hang around him.

And I guess, I mean, moving in on that, that idea of him as a gay god.

And we're doing this for pride.

The question is it simplifying things?

Or is it are you running the risk of being anachronistic if you describe him as gay?

So if you say this is a homosexual relationship, is homosexuality an adequate word to convey?

The complexities of a relationship that belongs to a very, very different age.

The word itself is 19th century, right?

It's a 19th century word.

So it's a little bit like saying Julius Caesar conquered France to say that Antinous is gay.

And kind of example of that.

There's a book called Roman Homosexuality by a great scholar called Craig Williams, which is really kind of the definitive work on this subject.

And even though he's called his book Roman Homosexuality,

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he writes this in the introduction,
to judge by the textual material left to us.
Homosexuality turns out not to have been an important issue for Romans,
nor for that matter was heterosexuality.
Roman men were not encouraged by their cultural heritage to categorize, much less evaluate or
judge,
sexual acts and agents on the basis of whether only males or males and females were involved.
So what he means by that is basically that for us, gender is the kind of the key binary.
So men and women, do you sleep with men, do you sleep with women?
That's how we define people.
That's why homosexuality and heterosexuality are the two great dividing lines.
But for the Romans, that wasn't the case.
For the Romans, they understood, of course, that some men only wanted to sleep with women
and that some men only wanted to sleep with men.
So Suetonius in his Lives of Emperors describes Claudius as a man who only ever slept with women
and Galba as a man who only ever slept with men.
But these are kind of interesting foibles in the way that we might say,
well, a man only ever sleeps with blondes or with brunettes.
It's an interesting sexual foible, but it's not the defining characteristic.
And it doesn't have a moral charge?
It doesn't have a moral charge at all.
Although that's not to say that there isn't a moral charge around sex which will come to fairly soon.
So basically, if what Hadrian is doing, sleeping with a beautiful young man,
there's no pejorative sense attached to that at all.
So if you think of Vitellius, another of the four emperors,
he has a similar relationship to a young man called Asiaticus, who is his slave.
And Vitellius becomes obsessed by him, is devoted to him
in exactly the way that Hadrian is devoted to Antinous.
And this is remembered as a scandalous story.
But it's a scandalous story because Vitellius frees his slave, Asiaticus,
and then gives him all kinds of honors and raises him up to become one of his chief advisors.
And this is felt as utterly demeaning and disgraceful and depraved.
And so when Vitellius gets overthrown, Asiaticus gets captured and gets crucified as a slave.
Right. Yeah, crucified.
He gets crucified.
But the reason why Vitellius is kind of, you know, this is seen as being disgraceful,
is because he is raising freedmen up to positions that they shouldn't properly have.
There's this kind of sense of social dislocation.
It's not the fact that Vitellius is having an affair with a young man.
That's absolutely fine.
The further dimension with Vitellius is that he is strongly suspected himself
of having offered himself up to an emperor, namely Tiberius.
So Vitellius' nickname throughout his life is Sphincta.
Oh my God, what a nickname.

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That's not a nickname you choose, is it?

What to the Romans is shocking, is not that...

And people who are listening with children might want to just turn the dial down at this point.

What is shocking for the Romans is not a man who forces himself on another male, but a man who offers himself up to another male.

And so this is what Vitellius, as a young man, is meant to have done.

He's offered himself up to Tiberius to be used.

So you don't want to be the passive party, as it were?

You don't want to be the passive.

And anyone who does that, the Romans have this concept of pudicitia.

So pudor is shame, pudicitia is kind of your sexual integrity, your bodily integrity.

And if you lose that, or if you are thought to have lost it,

then that is a taint that endures for the rest of your life.

And the word that is used for this kind of person, you are impudicus.

So you are someone who lost your modesty, you've lost your sexual integrity, or you're apathicus, you're passive.

But Tom, what about women? Where do they fit into this?

Basically, the binary in Roman sexuality and to our way of thinking,

I think it's quite a brutal one, is that there are those who force themselves on other human beings, and there are those who are forced.

And women rank with passive men, or boys, as those who do not force themselves on people.

And the person who is allowed to force himself on other people is a free Roman citizen.

And the penis is seen as being equivalent to the sword of the legions that has enabled Rome to conquer the world.

But a powerful woman, so Calpurnia, Octavia, Livia.

So it unsettles that.

And settles that. But these people would still, despite their power and their general impressiveness, they would nevertheless be tainted by the fact that they were impudica, I suppose.

No, they're not. They're the wives of free citizens.

So you're not allowed, as a Roman male, to force yourself, say, on free women.

Oh, okay.

Or other citizens. This is a crime called stuprum, and is very, very rigorously patrolled.

But the idea is that there are classes of people who are absolutely free game, of whom slaves are the absolute archetype.

Right.

And essentially, one of the reasons why it is shameful for a Roman citizen to be an impudicus, apathicus,

is basically because you were playing the role not just of a woman, but of a slave.

Right.

And the word that sums up, basically, the idea of a man who wants to play the part of a woman, the word the Romans use for this is cenedus.

And, you know, you can be the passive partner in a gay relationship.

That's what a cenedus is keen on.

But also, it's a kind of broader idea that you are not playing the role of a woman,

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that you are, essentially, you are gender deviant, if you want to put it that way. Not playing the role of a man, you mean?

Yeah. Sorry. Yeah.

And so the word cenedus seems to derive from a Greek word for a kind of dancer who shakes his buttocks.

Right.

And so there's a connotation in that word cenedus, that it's youthful, it's Greek, it's eastern, and it's servile.

And this idea that to be apathicus is also to be servile, the corollary of that is that anyone who is a slave is seen, basically, as being feminized, as being effeminate.

And that, in turn, generates this kind of erotic dimension in which the great object of Roman desire throughout the first and second century is a young boy or young youth who looks like a girl.

Right.

So the word for this is a delicatus.

And delicati are the most expensive kind of slaves that you can get.

And they will have feminine hairstyles.

They will wear makeup, wear female clothing.

And these are absolutely prestige elite luxuries, status symbols.

And basically, the more of these you have and the more beautiful they are, the more it redounded your own prestige and status.

And that would go for your Russell Crowe.

You're an incredibly sweaty, muscle-bound, super macho general.

But you would nevertheless surround yourself with delicati because they are...

Yeah.

Well, they'll have Rolex watches or something.

Yeah.

And these delicati would be glabry, smooth-skinned, effeminate.

I mean, the word translates itself.

Yeah.

You would invite your guests around and you would have them kind of adorning your dinner party and everyone would know that you're incredibly rich.

And so this is why...

We haven't had eunuchs on the rest of history for a while.

But here we can introduce eunuchs.

This is why eunuchs in the first century become particular kind of prestige status symbols.

Right.

Tom, you love eunuchs.

I mean, there's no doubt about that.

So we talked about Tiberias.

Tiberias is lieutenant who ends up kind of being overthrown by Tiberias.

So Janus, who always seems a slightly drab dull figure in the accounts.

Nevertheless, Pliny the Elder gives this incredible detail that he bought the most expensive slave of all time, which was a eunuch called Paizon, which is basically boy toy.

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I mean, that's how it translates.

Incredible sum of money.

But the most famous eunuch of all, the one that pushes this idea that a boy can be feminized is of course, Sporus.

A friend of the rest of history.

A friend of the rest of history.

This kind of tragic boy who gets castrated and transformed into the image of Nero's dead wife, Papaya Sabina.

And Nero, as ever, is kind of pushing status symbols to the absolute limit.

However, by the time that Hadrian becomes emperor, eunuchs have been criminalized.

You're not allowed to have eunuchs.

And this is despite the fact that Domitian himself owned one.

And so this was seen as the height of hypocrisy.

And Domitian is an emperor who has great attention to detail.

And so when he bans eunuchs, he immediately imposes price controls on the sale of slaves who've already been made into eunuchs, so as to prevent speculation.

That's the kind of attention to detail he has.

But he's doing this basically because it's seen as being depraved.

It's against Roman morality.

You shouldn't be doing this.

It's the kind of thing that Greeks do.

So, okay, so there's a tension there then.

There's a pre-existing tension.

There's a sense that to have these...

Is it just eunuchs or does it include delicati as well?

No, delicati are fine.

So, in a way, eunuchs are kind of cheating.

If you castrate a delicatus and you keep them young, that is, that's seen as being cheating.

So, Domitian is introducing this law basically to stop people from cheating.

He sees it as being against Roman morality.

It's not because he feels sorry for the eunuchs, the boys.

So, he has a eunuch who he's devoted to and he frees him and sets him up.

So, he does seem to have...

Maybe there is an element of that.

I don't think that's not why he's doing it though.

And what that means is that by the time that Hadrian becomes emperor, there is a requirement.

If you can find a delicatus or a boy who is so beautiful that he looks like a eunuch, then that is obviously the dream.

And basically, that's what Antinous is.

I mean, Antinous is not a slave. He is a free person, but he isn't a citizen.

And so, therefore, to that extent, by the standards of Roman morality, he is free game.

And it's that that explains why everyone swooned so heavily over Antinous and basically why everyone is jealous of Hadrian because he's got this incredible boy by his side.

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All right. Brilliant.

So, that's set up some of the backstory and we'll get more into the Antinous.

And then Tom will be...

I'm very excited to say Tom will be solving the mystery.

We love to solve a mystery.

We love to solve a mystery, yes.

So, Tom will be solving the mystery.

And you'll have to come back after the break.

Welcome back to the Restless History.

We are talking about the doomed love story of Hadrian and Antinous.

And of course, if you want to read more about this, you need merely pre-order Tom Holland's own packs.

Oh, I know.

Tom, who was gutted, gutted in the first half.

He thought his book had been undersold.

No one can say this about this moment, Tom.

Thank you, Dominic. Very much appreciated.

Very much appreciated.

So, hard sell over.

You've been talking about eunuchs as you want.

And now let's talk about Greekness because, of course, the thing about Antinous is not just that he is, as you said, a delicatus.

There's sort of incredibly attractive youth.

But he's Greek as well, isn't he?

And that must be a dimension to it.

Yeah.

So, I think that actually there are two dimensions here.

So, the first is that in the Roman erotic imagination, Greeks are seen as being peculiarly attractive. They are associated with perfume, with roses, with all kinds of things that are evoked in Greek love poetry, all that kind of stuff.

And the area of the Greek world that is seen as being particularly productive of kind of delicious young slave boys is the region called Asia, which is, again, basically Turkey.

Yeah.

So, Asiaticus, the beloved of Vitellius, that's alluding to.

And, of course, Antinous comes from Bithynia, which is kind of north of Asia.

So, he is redolent of that.

But further kind of giving an aura of dignity to this whole kind of erotic approach to Greek boys is mythology.

So, Zeus himself has descended from the heavens and taken Ganymede, who is a Trojan prince to be his cup bearer.

So, Ganymede becomes an immortal in the heavens.

And then there's Hercules, who is the greatest of all the Greek heroes.

And the story goes that he is on the Argo, Jason's ship, which is going with the Argonauts through the clashing rocks into the Black Sea to get the Golden Fleece.

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And after they've gone through the clashing rocks and they're heading up towards the Bosphorus, they stop at a region in Bithynia where they go to get water.

And Hercules has a page boy called Hylas.

And Hylas goes up, looking for water, finds a spring, gazes into the waters, and there are nymphs in the waters.

And he's so exquisitely beautiful that the nymphs reach up and pull him into the water and keep him there forever to be their, I suppose, their boy toy, you know, like Sajanas.

Yeah.

And Hercules is devastated and abandons the, going with the Argonauts because he just kind of roams the mountains of Bithynia, calling out Hylas' name.

Absolute distraught because he's lost him.

Now, this is the region from which Antinous comes.

And Hadrian, being highly educated, would absolutely be aware that Antinous has come from the region where Hylas was lost and where Ganymede was taken up by his use to the heavens.

So that gives him a kind of mythological free saw.

And I think the fact that Hadrian is so devoted to Greek culture is another crucial part in the appeal of Antinous for him is that it kind of enables him to escape.

At least it seems to have done this kind of brutal dynamic that you get in the Roman sexual understanding of morality.

This idea that there's the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak, the active and the passive.

Because Hadrian understands that for the Greeks there is a different way of understanding same-sex relations.

Yeah.

And the Romans generally get this.

So there's a Roman scholar writes about that in Greece it is the custom to praise a young man for taking plenty of lovers.

So they recognize that sexual standards, sexual morality vary from region and country and civilization.

There's contingent, not absolute.

Absolutely, yes.

And so for all these reasons, I think the fact that Antinous is Greek is a crucial part of what makes him precious to Hadrian.

So he's conjuring up dimensions of myth, but he is also offering him what I think you could call love.

And I think that that is, he offers him love in a way that perhaps the traditional standards of Roman sexual morality couldn't.

But we can't possibly know.

Tell me whether he, that's the case.

We can't, we can't because we have very, very few details of this.

All we can say is that Hadrian is devoted to Greek culture.

He seems to have been devoted to Antinous.

And the scale of his bereavement when Antinous dies seems expressive of something more than just a master who has lost a slave.

There really does seem to be something deeply personal and emotional there.

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And again, I think that the readiness of Greeks to worship Antinous as a God in due course reflects a sense that Hadrian really did love Antinous and that by loving Antinous, he was showing his respect for them as subject peoples. That no Roman emperor had done this before. You know, it's not conclusive. We can't know that for sure. But putting all those kinds of strands of evidence together, I would say that what we have here probably is a love story. And certainly it's absolutely the case that never before had a Caesar added to the ranks of the immortals who was neither an emperor nor a member of an emperor's family. You were talking about it's a way to escape from the power dynamic that's there was there had Roman sexual relations and so on. To a degree because of course Hadrian is an old man with a young man. So Hadrian is the most powerful man in the Roman world. Yeah. He's the boy. I mean, there's no two ways about it. Well, we would now describe as a boy. So does. Well, this is obviously a massive question. But when you're we're telling this story, it's hard for us to escape our 21st century subjectivity and to see the power imbalance in it. So does that change the way we talk about it, Tom? Or do you think we have to talk about it through exclusively as the Romans would have talked about the power imbalance for the Romans is not a problem. It's the whole point. Right. OK, right. That's the essence of it. And that's why it's so difficult for us to to get a handle on the Roman erotic imagination. It's very unsettling for us. For us, the idea that the powerful prey on the powerless is shocking and horrific and disturbing. And it's Harvey Weinstein or whatever. Absolutely. So yes, exactly. Or indeed, they're kind of the slight sense of squeamishness that people feel seeing Leonardo DiCaprio, who go out with, you know, an 18 year old. Yeah. There is a kind of nervousness and anxiety about it. But for the Romans, not at all. And indeed, for the Greeks, because the idea that a young man is kind of educated by being the beloved of an older man is seen as part of his moral, intellectual, erotic education.

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But is there an age beneath which they don't go that it's really not right?

If your young man in inverted commas is 12, 10, 8, does that start to create a problem?

For a Roman slave owner, he can do what he likes.

Correctly.

Boys, girls, it doesn't matter what their age.

They are bare game.

It's an incredibly different, incredibly different world.

Yeah.

And that the brutality of that, I think is obviously shocking to us.

But I think it for the Greeks, there is a you don't jump children.

There are kind of rituals.

There are age centered dynamics in the relationship between an older man.

And there's kind of evidence the Hadrian sends Antinous when he is a child to Rome and then doesn't see him for several years and then comes back.

So it's likely that the sexual relationship, if there is one, you know, again, we don't even know for sure that there's a sexual relationship.

We have no, as it were, hard evidence for that.

But I mean, it's pretty likely I would think if there's a sexual relationship, then it begins when Antinous is around the age that in the Greek world is seen as being the proper age for a young man to become the beloved of an older man.

And I think that Hadrian seems to have found emotional sustenance in that relationship in a way that he certainly doesn't with his wife and he doesn't seem to have done with any other sexual partner concubine, whatever.

Yeah.

And I think that that explains the Titanic scale of his grief.

And there seems to be a kind of almost conscious repudiation of Roman standards because when he reclaims Antinous of God, he doesn't ask the permission of the Senate, which, you know, he's actually obliged to it's the Senate who can proclaim that the immortality of immortal.

He doesn't do that.

He doesn't go to Rome to do it.

He uses the world as his stage.

And so he founds the city Antinopolis to be on the shores of Egypt to be this great center of pilgrimage.

He goes to Athens and he inaugurates games called the Antenea where youths on the cusp of manhood.

So just as Antinous had been when Hadrian starts taking him on his travels, they compete for athletic and artistic prizes.

And he goes to Eleusis where he and Antinous had shared in the mysteries and he sponsors a similar series of contests.

And what's intriguing about what he does at Eleusis is that he erects a statue of Antinous as a divine physician, someone who is a healer of the broken, a comforter of the wounded.

And what's interesting about that is that reverberates back to the temple of Antinous in Antinopolis where it's proclaimed that the divine Antinous listens to the appeals of those who invoke him and heals the sick among the needy poor.

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And so Antinous as a god is offering provincials in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, people who are conscious of their subjection by Rome, an image of someone who is like themselves.

So when they look at Antinous, they are not seeing as they would with the statue of Asesia, the statue of Gustus or even Hadrian.

They're not seeing someone who is expressive of the might of Rome. They're seeing themselves.

And more than that, they are seeing someone who can offer comfort to the weak and the sick.

And the slave who became a god.

The slave who becomes the god.

And so it's not surprising that Christian authors, I mean, they don't like any pagan gods, but they peculiarly detest Antinous because they see Antinous as a kind of perverted parody of Christ.

And there's a sense in which Antinous, who, I mean, he wasn't a slave, but he played the part of a slave in his relationship with Hadrian and who offers comfort to the weak and to the sick and is a provincial, not a Roman.

In a sense, is fighting on the same terrain as Christ.

That's going to say they're market competitors.

They're market competitors.

They're the same people.

Yeah, absolutely.

And so that's why the Christians really hate Antinous and of course preserve, you know, incredibly useful details of his cult and his life because invariably we know about pagan gods because Christians complained about them.

So interesting.

Yeah.

People worshiping Antinous, do you think, all the way through to the the triumph of Christianity?

Absolutely.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I mean, so evidence for his cult has been found in, I think, over 70 archaeological sites, which is a lot.

So he is a God who is genuinely adored.

They're not people aren't just doing it because, you know, Caesar has told them to.

So a really fascinating and intriguing figure.

And I mean, I do encourage people that listen to this who have never seen Antinous.

Just go and Google his name.

You'll see the statues of him are really stunning.

I mean, that kind of absolute archetypes of male beauty.

But of course, we are left with one last mystery to try and solve, which is the question of how did he drown?

Why did he drown?

Well, that's the biggest mystery of all.

So come on, Tom.

We've assembled in the drawing room.

Okay.

Lay out the theories, the clues and so on.

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Okay.

So death on the Nile.

Yeah.

So there are various theories.

Certainty is impossible.

So I'm afraid I can't do a Poirot and reveal what definitely happened.

But here are the options.

So one is that it was an accident.

And this is what Hadrian himself claimed.

Hadrian said he fell into the Nile and drowned.

So that's one possibility.

A more glamorous and sinister theory, which is proposed by historian called Cassius Dio, probably drawing on earlier speculation, is that he was the victim of a sacrifice.

So Suetonius has a story that Nero sought to prolong his life by offering up the life of a mortal to the gods of the underworld.

This idea that an emperor, because Hadrian, as you pointed out, is quite, you know, I mean, he's getting on by this point.

He's increasingly sick, increasingly tired.

The idea that Antinous is sacrificed to try and preserve Hadrian's life.

And it is the festival of Osiris, right?

Absolutely.

So that is also a kind of crucial context for it because Osiris is the god of the dead who has risen up from death back to life.

And so the coincidence, well, is it just a coincidence?

I mean, lots of people have thought not.

An alternative is that Antinous sacrifices himself.

And again, that might play into, you know, his awareness of the special location, the special time, the fact that they're on the Nile.

They're in the stretch of it where Osiris is meant to have been thrown into the Nile, that he is offering himself up as a sacrifice to the gods to preserve the life of his beloved partner.

I mean, that's another possibility.

Another possibility is that Hadrian, who is by and large a man who keeps his emotions in check, but he's known to have the occasional fit of murderous rage.

Perhaps Hadrian uses it and kills him, has his body dumped in the river.

See, I like that, Tom, because that would explain the excessive grief.

The guilt.

Yeah, the guilt.

Yeah.

Maybe Sabina, who is with Hadrian on this voyage, on this cruise.

I mean, maybe she's jealous, kills him.

Maybe somebody in the court is resentful of Antinous.

I mean, you know, Asiaticus is the kind of example of the hatred that, you know, a favorite is capable of generating.

So maybe they get rid of him.

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And a final theory is that perhaps he doesn't die at all, but perhaps he's kind of fed up, jumps overboard and kind of swims away and lives in Alexandria.

But over all of these theories hangs the fact that at the age of he's, you know, 19 or 20 by this point, he is not a eunuch.

And so therefore he is losing the youthful bloom of his beauty.

He's starting to bulk up, getting a bit of a beard.

Is this a problem?

Does he feel that it is more demeaning to be the passive partner, even of an emperor?

He himself is becoming a man.

So that again is the kind of possible psychological dimension to the story.

And we just can't know.

I mean, we just don't know.

Tom, I know you're not going to want to do this, but I'm going to try and get you to do it anyway.

Pick one.

And it can just be your favorite.

It doesn't have to be.

I know we all know you don't know, but come on, what do you think?

So I think the fact that Antinous is turning 20 and the fact that they are on the Nile at the time and at the place where this great festival of Cyrus happens.

I think it's entirely plausible that Antinous is upset about what's happening to his body, that he's devoted to Hadrian, this man who has cared for him and shown him the world, and that he does offer himself up as a kind of sacrifice to try and preserve Hadrian's life.

I'll be honest, that is the count I would like to believe.

Yeah.

I mean, as I say, we don't know, but that's the count I like to believe because it, I think it dignifies both Antinous and Hadrian.

Okay.

I personally, listening to you lay out the theories, as is my want, I've gone for a much more undignified.

I think they had a row.

And he's scrambled off.

No, Hadrian hit him on the head with a pot or something.

Yeah.

Killed him and had him dumped in the river.

Yeah.

I think the differences in our reading of the crime sum up the difference.

Sum up our characters so well, our respective characters.

Well, you're more romantic, aren't you?

More idealistic.

He did it.

He did it and he was right to do it.

Whereas I'm a bit more banal.

Not at all.

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You always, no.

I mean, I agree that's equally possible.

Yeah.

You've gone for the stuff of a proper, you know, a real...

I've gone for the sacral and the emotionally complex.

Yes, I have.

It's brilliant.

Such an interesting story.

Such an interesting story.

I think it's really interesting because it simultaneously takes us into a completely different sexual world.

Yeah.

And it reminds us of how contingent our attitudes to sex and gender are.

Yeah.

And I think you can see why calling Antonia was gay doesn't do justice to the complexity of what's going on.

But at the same time, I think the...

And again, it may be it's wishful thinking on my part.

Maybe I am being overly romantic.

The sense of that there is love there.

I do find touching because it's very difficult to find anything like that by and large in the dynamics of kind of Roman relationships like this.

So if people want to read more about this, they can, of course, turn Tom.

They can pre-order your book Pax.

They can.

I know you're much too modest, a man.

I am.

To promote to yourself.

So I'm going to do it for you.

I'm going to do the dirty work, as it were.

So you can pre-order Tom's book Pax.

Now, next time on The Rest is History, we'll be talking about a man to whom this story meant a lot.

So a man who was really interested with the Greeks, with the idea of Greek love, and with the story of Antinous.

And that is Oscar Wilde.

So you said we've got a god and a martyr.

Yes, you do, don't we?

So we'll be talking about the trials of Oscar Wilde next time.

Tom, on that bombshell, thank you very much.

That was brilliant.

Thank you.

And we will see you all next time.

Bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

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