15. Real Men and Mincing Queans
Homosexuality in Ancient Rome

One of the contemporary pundits on the history of homosexuality in Ancient Rome is Craig Williams¹ who uncompromising states that:

As we will see, the sources left to us from ancient Rome make it abundantly clear that Roman traditions fell squarely in line with the world-wide trend: homosexual behavior was not condemned per se, and a citizen male could admit to sexual experience with males in certain contexts and configurations without fear of ridicule or reprisal, without the threat even of a raised eyebrow.

While Williams’ book is authoritative, it is too detailed for us to consider here. An excellent summary, based largely on Williams’ work is that by Bryan Fone in his most readable book, Homophobia, A History². He opens his chapter “Making Monsters” by quoting Juvenal:

\[
\text{The Warren Cup}^3
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In his Satire II, written about 85 C.E., the Roman poet Juvenal portrays a Roman citizen, once a priest of Mars, who now “decks himself out in a bridal veil” in order to marry another man. Juvenal

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¹ Williams, Craig A. Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity, Oxford University Press, 1999
comments, "horreres maioraque monstra putares": "you may shudder and consider such men even greater freaks" — greater, that is, even than such evil omens as women giving birth to calves, or cows to lambs. Invoking the shades of Roman ancestors, Juvenal argues that the presence in society of such men bodes no good for the Roman people; indeed, it has brought them to a "pitch of blasphemous perversion."

Juvénal's horror is directed at effeminacy and at the sexual passivity he believes it implies. Like Greek literature, the literature of the Roman republic and empire generally celebrated love and sex between men, and in Rome as in Athens, homosexuality was widely practiced and, within certain parameters, generally accepted by both the exalted and the humble. Latin poets presumed that all men at one time or another felt homosexual desire, and Roman art.............pictured that desire openly, showing sex between men and boys and between adult males on wall paintings in Roman houses, on coins, and on artefacts — jewellery, terra-cotta lamps, flasks — made for the elite as well as for the masses.

Indeed, visual depictions of homosexual acts between men and boys and occasionally between age mates (for example, on the Warren Cup, where the two male partners seem to be of the same age) clearly suggest........ that the Romans liked looking at scenes of sex between males just as they liked looking at scenes of sex between men and women. As in Greece, the propriety of sexual acts had more to do with power and the status of penetrator and penetrated than with the latter's sex.........However, shame could still attend on men who conducted their homosexual activities in ways outside of what was accepted and approved. That shame left enough room for the satiric creation of a male sexual monster, promiscuous, passive, and effeminate. Even more than their Greek counterparts, Roman writers targeted effeminate men as visible examples of a special tribe.

When we look at Roman images or read Roman literature, it is important we do not do so with through our 21st Century eyes. The Warren Cup is a good example: we have no trouble that the young men on the cup are about the same age, although to the Romans — and more so the Greeks had they been able to see this cup — the similarity of ages would have been a bit of a rarity. What the young men are doing — one is clearly anally penetrating the other — is an unusual sight for us outside gay porn magazines and of course, the Internet. But to the Romans, a spot of sodomy was nothing special: the issue would have been the relative status
of the young men. If one was the other's slave or a non-Roman, no problem; if he were a free-born Roman citizen then this was shocking indeed! This would have been what they called “Stuprum”, which is difficult to translate: Bryan Fone\(^4\) explains it thus:

In early Roman texts, stuprum can refer to a wide variety of sexual activities from general fornication to debauchery in brothels; it eventually came to signify what Romans deemed most shameful: violation, in some sense, of the freeborn. Stuprum condemns not homosexual or heterosexual relationships, but the sexual violation of status. Stuprum could imply anything from sex with a freeborn youth (even if by mutual consent), to rape, to anal penetration of one freeborn man by another. In the latter case, both the shame visited upon the man penetrated, and the penetrator's sexual use of a freeborn male could be called stuprum. Again, at the heart of stuprum was violation of the status of a freeborn Roman, or violation of the sexual status of a male what the Romans called a vir, a real man who penetrates but is not penetrated.

And the young boy peeking from behind the half-open door? This is where the Warren Cup rises above just excellent craftsmanship and becomes art: is the young onlooker just a reminder to us that we are not the only voyeurs at this party? Is it a bit of a joke about “perving”? If the boy is a slave, he might be imaging himself in the same position in time to come; he might even be jealous that his master’s interest has turned elsewhere….. And of course, if all three figures in the picture are free-born Romans, then he could even be scandalized at the stuprum incurred by the young men enjoying coitus. If this last, then what would happen is he ran to the pater familias and told what he had seen?

In theory, there was a law which could have punished the stuprum. This is a law called the Lex Scantinia and it was enacted c. 226 BC. It is mentioned quite often in various texts, but so far no copy of the Lex Scantinia has ever been found and neither have historians found any record of a prosecution under terms of this law. There is simply no record of anyone, either in the Republic or early Empire, having been punished for homosexual behaviour. It has been concluded by scholars that the Lex Scantinia was most probably directed more specifically at offences against minors, both male and female, and was probably not an anti-homosexual law at all. In the 2nd Century AD, Clement of Alexandria

\(^4\) Fone, op. cit pp 45-6.
commented that homosexual acts were legal in Rome during his lifetime, and it was not until the Emperor Philip attempted to make homosexual prostitution illegal in the 3rd Century AD that there is any record of laws limiting homosexual expression.

Of course, if you are lucky enough to be able to read Roman poets in Latin you will know full well that expressions of romantic love between men or men and youths, albeit in the educated elite, were legion. Among others, Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Tibullus, Ovid, Martial and Juvenal, all wrote homoerotic poetry, even if — as in the obvious case of Juvenal — homosexuals were often satirized. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, his great epic about the foundation of Rome, includes the story of Nisus and Euryalus, Greek lovers who died heroes on the plains of Troy.

Unfortunately, I can’t read Latin, so I have to take Fone at his word when he says:

> Perhaps the greatest and most influential homoerotic poem of the ancient world, Virgil’s Second Eclogue, tells the story of Corydon’s unrequited love for Alexis. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid transforms the homoerotic Greek legends of Ganymede, Narcissus, Apollo and Cyparissus, and Apollo and Hyacinth into Latin homoerotic romances. Catullus’ love for Juventius — however cruel the response from that thoughtless, seductive youth — provides, if not the pleasure of viewing love triumphant, at least the pleasure of hearing it described in the best Latin verse.

What I have read — several times, but in translation — is Gaius Petronius’ *Satyricon*. In this popular book, Encolpius recounts the sexual exploits of his young lover, Giton who seems to believe in the philosophy of “try anything once”. In the Roman view, Encolpius is clearly mad to allow a passion to over-ride commonsense and to keep on taking Giton back. Giton, for his part, is demonstrably promiscuous and this is a serious matter, of stuprum, if ever there was one. However, this is strangely enough a story about a couple who, despite outward appearances, really did love each other and in their way, exemplified undying love and devotion!
Heirs to Greece

Although the Romans inherited much from others — from the Etruscans, for example — they were the principle heirs to the civilization of Ancient Greece and like the Greeks, widely enjoyed paiderastia, although the Romans did not elevate sexual relations between adult men and free-born youths to a formal status within their political, military and religious life like the Greeks did. In contra-distinction, although the Romans practised pederasty, they did not imagine it to be of any educative value. To the Romans, sex was sex and it began, as Fone succinctly says, “with desire and ended with gratification”.

Although not all Romans agreed with the practise of paiderastia, or “pederasty” to give it its Latinized name, there were many writers who asserted that boys were better sex than women while others, of whom Martial is the best-known, affirmed that a bit of both was the ideal — :

Nasica raped the doctor’s pretty lad;
But then, they say, the fellow’s raving mad.
Mad? I maintain
He’s very sane.

Beautiful boys were called “puer” “puer delicatus” or, for those who liked to show off their Greek knowledge, ephebus (meaning a ”youth). Occasionally, when there was an on-going relationship, the puer and his lover were called “frater”, literally “brother” but implying a sexual union.

While age per se was not an issue in Rome, what really mattered was who did what to whom and the status of the parties to the event. Fone summed up the situation thus:

For a real man, it was deemed appropriate to penetrate another anally or to receive oral sex. Martial often contrasts the viro with the weak and womanly cinaedus (the Greek kinaidios, Latinized), the effeminate male who engages in passive homosexual behavior. It was considered disgraceful for a citizen to engage in prostitution, to submit to anal penetration, or to perform fellatio. To submit to anal penetration was tantamount to relinquishing not only manhood but also the moral (if not the legal) right to be a

5 Fone, op. cit., p 47.
6 11,29
citizen of the Roman state. For an adult male to perform oral sex was thought both reprehensible and impure, reprehensible because, like passive anal intercourse, it indicated a willingness to submit to sexual mastery; impure because making the mouth a receptacle like the anus or vagina defiled both mouth and man.\footnote{Fone, op cit. p49}

Roman literature, especially satire, was full of words used to describe men who deviated from the ideal of \textit{vir} or manliness. One of the most common was \textit{cinaedus} which is perhaps most closely translated by our terms “queen”, “pansy” or the American “fag”. Characteristics attributed to these effeminate men were certain flamboyant gestures (including scratching the head with only one finger and holding their hands in front of their hips), a lisping speech, and a kind of walk the satirists described using the verb \textit{ceveo}, meaning “to move one’s hips as when having sex” and which we would probably call “mincing”.

Other words commonly used were \textit{pathicus}, meaning a man who preferred being the recipient of anal sex, and \textit{fellator}, a man who in current American jargon was a “cocksucker”. \textit{Pathici} and \textit{fellatores} were often prostitutes who provided these services to other men but the words were also frequently used, not only in satire, but even in the Senate itself, to denigrate others.

\textit{As in Greece, it was the cinaedus, effeminate and sexually promiscuous as fellator and pathicus, who provoked the most derision and the most anxiety. Latin words used to indicate effeminacy implied unmanliness, weakness, selfindulgence, and vanity. So large was the lexicon of effeminacy that any number of unpopular or deviant acts could be so labeled, including the adoption of women's clothing, exclusive preference for one or another form of sexual activity, or even allowing oneself to be too much dominated by women.}

However, as Fone pointed out, the \textit{cinaedus} was not just an effeminate homosexual as we might understand it: first and foremost, it was his gender deviancy, his “abdication of the role of vir and the sexual rituals of masculinity, or his mockery of the appearances of manhood, or his sexual promiscuity, that caused him to be derided and portrayed as a dangerous, socially unacceptable monster”

\footnote{Fone, op cit. p49}
Some Romans even went so far as to assert it was effeminate to shave the face or depilate other areas of the body (Julius Caesar was well-known to depilate his pubic area and to keep a slave whose job it was to do it! Caesar argued it was to avoid lice). Moreover — and I hesitate to add this — both Juvenal and Martial pointed their caustic pens at men who cut their hair short and wore beards, so trying to look more virile than they ought!

Romans considered *cinaedi* to be *mollis* (soft) and *tener* (delicate or dainty). These effeminate men were accused of plucking their eyebrows, their beards, even their buttocks; using makeup, and softening their skin with pumice. Juvenal in his *Satire II* goes so far as to assert that *magna inter molles concordia*, (“among the soft ones the harmony is great”) that is, "all queers stick together." (Fone’s translation. He continues:).

Along with *effeminatus*, *mollis* and *tener* are the adjectives most commonly used to describe sexually deviant men. But others occasionally appear, words that express weakness or suggest that homosexual acts are connected with disease: *debilis* and *debilitas* (weak; weakness); *tremulus* (quivering, limp); *inbellis* (unwarlike, hence passive). *Morbosus* (sick, perverted) and *morbus* (vice or perversion) are applied to *pathici* and *cinaedi*, though rarely if ever to active homosexuality.

Martial — no stranger to homosexual sex himself — found passive homosexuality or effeminancy disgusting and, in one of his works, challenges Charmenion thus:

> Since you're always bragging that you're a citizen Of Corinth, Charmenion — and no one denies it — Why are you always calling me brother? I hail from The land of Iberians and Celts and the River Tagus. Do you think that we even look alike? You wander around looking sleek with your curly hair, While mine is wildly unruly in the Spanish style. Every day a depilator makes your body smooth, While I sport hair on my thighs and cheeks. Your mouth is lisping and your tongue is faltering, But I speak deeply from my guts;
Sex with Prostitutes and Slaves

As in Greece, sex with slaves was commonplace and many men who could afford it kept a male slave called a “concinus” for that purpose. And as in Greece, whatever a man did with his slave was his own business. Male prostitution also was commonplace: in fact, male prostitutes during the rule of Augustus, were not only taxed as what we might call “a small business”, but they were also granted a special holiday, as it happened, on April 25th. 9

Then, as now, prostitutes often provided specialised services. In Rome, the general practitioners who serviced both men and women, actively or passively as the client demanded, were called exoleti. More specifically, male prostitutes were called spintria, the word itself for obvious reasons derived from “sphincter”. Those who were exceptionally well “hung” or excessively “endowed” were called drauci and provided their services to pathici or to fellatores.

Same-sex Unions

Many popular Roman romances are about same-sex couples whose mutual devotion is so exemplary they could well be considered married: for example, Charicles and Klinias in Achilles Tatius' romance Clitophon and Leucippe are lovers, and Hippothoos and Cleisthenes in Xenophon of Ephesus' novel Ephesiaca. There is evidence too that some long-lasting relationships between men had a more formal status. Fone sums up:

Occasionally, such relationships were construed as similar to heterosexual marriages, though often this opinion was sarcastic or satiric. Cicero, who approved of little, alleged that Curio the Younger was united to his friend Antonius "just as if he had given him the matron's stola," the garment worn by married Roman

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8 Fone gives as a footnote: Juvenal and Martial mock masculine women, too, accusing them of being lesbians, whose promiscuity and vulgarity make them repellent. Of Philaenis, Martial says that she "hurls the heavy ball with ease," drinks excessively, and devours women while being disgusted with men. Juvenal is also appalled by lesbians, whom he describes as drunken voluptuaries who engage in orgies of feasting and "take turns riding each other."

9 Fone, op. cit. p 48
women. Both Martial and Juvenal mention public marriages between men. Martial reports that "the bearded Callistratus married the rugged Afer / Under the same law by which a woman takes a husband"—though he wonders if this is not too much even for Roman morality: "Does this not, Rome, seem enough? Do you expect him to bear a child?" Juvenal, in Satire II, considers another example of Roman decadence: noting that one man has "got his boyfriend to the altar at last," he charges that "soon such things will be done in public." Indeed, two emperors, Nero and Elagabalus, publicly married men.

Asking Juvenal about the sexual practises of Ancient Rome is a bit like asking Fred Nile to comment on Gay Mardi Gras…. Of all the poets, Juvenal is the least tolerant and blames effeminate men and the popularity of homosexual sex for what he considers the decay of Roman moral standards. So obsessed is Juvenal with cinaedi that he seems to anticipate Foucault and convert them into a new species. Fone summed up:

Juvenal, like many in late antiquity, thinks in terms of two distinct types of sexual preference and two distinct types of men. Real men have sex with women and, actively, with boys, but the cinaedi are not real men. Lisping, perfumed, and madeup, smooth and hairless, seductively walking the streets of Rome and promiscuously importuning men for a moment of sex, they draw from Juvenal indignation and condemnation. Indeed Latin satire generally treats them with disdain, so much so that it sometimes seems singlemindedly devoted to constructing them as the monstra that Juvenal despised. All this derision of pathici and cinaedi foreshadows some darker chapters in human history, in which the caricatures of Latin satire come to be taken as universal truths about the "nature" of homosexual desire.

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10 Fone, op. cit. p. 54.
Hadrian and Antinous, Beloved and God

The Peripetic Emperor

Publius Aelius Hadrianus was born in the Roman province Baetica, what is now Andalucia, Spain, in the year 76 AD. When he was about 10 years old, his father died and this precipitated two events in his life which were to lead him to the throne and to determine so much of his life thereafter. On his father’s death, his father’s distinguished cousin became his guardian. This was Marcus Ulpius Trajanus who later was to become the Emperor Trajan. Also, following his father’s death, Hadrian was sent to school in Rome and it was then that he gained his deep and abiding love of all things Greek.

Although Trajan and Hadrian were never close, they respected each other. Trajan’s wife, Photina, took a great liking to Hadrian (some say she was also his mistress but this could well be scurrilous Roman gossip). Photina engineered Hadrian’s marriage to Trajan’s closest female relative, Sabina, so that, on Trajan’s death in 117 AD, Hadrian was well-placed (with Photina’s help) to succeed him as Roman Emperor. The marriage with Sabina was a political success but otherwise a failure: she, for her part, proudly boasted that she did everything in her power to not have a child by Hadrian.

As things turned out, Hadrian was one of the best emperors Rome ever knew. One of his most important policy decisions was to stop the expansion of the Empire and to concentrate on building the peace rather than waging constant wars as had been the policy in the past. However, he continued to pay the armies well and to maintain a very high standard of training. And he also created a well-paid public service to administer Rome during his absences while travelling throughout his Empire.
Royston Lambert, in his book: *Beloved and God – The Story of Hadrian and Antinoüs*\(^\text{11}\) gives an excellent impression of the state of perpetual motion in which Hadrian seems to have lived.

*By 121 Hadrian felt his position in Italy completely secure. He had removed the opposition (and his overweening supporters), conciliated the Senate, placated the people, set on foot his measures of administrative, legal and social reform. The villa was rising at Tibur. Already in 119 he had travelled around the peninsula inspecting and improving the cities of Italy. But Italy was too confining for this ecumenical Emperor. The moment had come to inspect the Empire itself. Sometime after the founding of the cult of Roma on 21 April 121, leaving Sabina at home to brood by herself, Hadrian set out on his first great journey. The coins blared forth his mission as 'the restorer', 'the enricher of the world'.*

*For well over half of his reign, at least twelve and a half years out of twentyone, Hadrian was travelling outside Italy. Of the forty four provinces of which the Empire was composed, we can be sure that he visited thirty eight and the few which he may not have seen were hardly significant. No Emperor before, except for the pathetic Nero, had journeyed across the eastern Mediterranean on errands of peace, none had felt so secure or so out of place at home to be away for such continuous stretches of time: from 121 to 125, from 128 to 134 and possibly again in 135. Hadrian’s journeys were*

partly a product of his incurable restlessness, his insatiable desire to explore lands, cities and cultures, mountains, rivers and monuments, and to experience everything at first hand for himself.

It was during the Emperor’s visit to Claudiopolis in the Roman Province of Bythinia in modern-day Turkey, that the youth, Antinoüs, somehow or other crossed Hadrian’s path. At that time Claudiopolis — also known as Bithynion — was an important and wealthy entrepôt at the crossroads of the trade routes between Greece and Syria. We know remarkably little about Antinoüs’ early life and indeed, would probably have known nothing of him at all except for the way he died. All the records of his life are posthumous…

He was most probably born on 27th November in 111AD, in the thirteenth year of the reign of Trajan, so he would have been about 12 when Hadrian paid his visit to Claudiopolis. His parents were probably rather humble people; whoever they were, they left no lasting record. Some ancient historians suggested Antinoüs was a slave but most agree he was free-born and that he went to Rome willingly.

It is very unlikely that the Emperor saw Antinoüs and fell in love. For one thing, the best estimate of his age when their paths crossed would make him a child at the time. As Royston Lambert, after assessing the evidence, goes on to say:13

Indeed Hadrian may not even have set eyes on the boy...... at Claudiopolis. As a handsome, robust and intelligent lad, he may have been recruited into the royal service by some official who anticipated the Emperor’s taste in retainers. Even if Hadrian did select him, it is unlikely that the untrained and provincial boy would have been added to the deliberately lightweight entourage which travelled over Asia Minor, the Danube and Greece in 123. It is much more probable that he was packed off to Italy and arrived, a bewildered and awestruck bumpkin, in the great bustling metropolis of Rome to be groomed for his tasks ahead.

12 Claudiopolis is now called Bolu
The imperial paedagogium where…., Antinous found himself, was not just another of those seraglios of seductive and willing boys collected by the wealthy debauchees of the day, though… it may have functioned partly as such. It was a formidable institution, separately housed, under the control of a master, usually a freedman, for the training of pages for the court. It was as one of these, we can presume, that Antinous started his career. These boys, often from well-to-do backgrounds and, as the graffiti scratched onto the surviving walls vividly tell us, from all over the Greco Roman world, were being schooled not only to perform domestic duties in the household while young but to graduate into civil servants when older.

Whether Hadrian saw Antinöüs or not, when the Emperor left Claudiopolis,

..........he visited the cities along the coast .......... Late in September 123 he stopped off at Samothrace where, ever keen to probe to the frontiers of spiritual experience, he was probably initiated into the mysteries of the Cabiri.

Later, in September 124, Hadrian reached Athens where he stayed for six months during which time he was initiated into the lower mysteries at the great festival of Demeter at Eleusis and presided, in Greek dress, as agonothete at the festival of Dionysos. Hadrian was determined that Athens should become the centre of a revived Hellas….

Hadrian returned to Rome, to his villa at Tibur, in September 125. Three years later, he once more travelled to Greece, this time with Antinöüs by his side as his favourite. We can only presume that Antinöüs has risen through the ranks, from a menial position, to one of the amici, but how that happened we have no record.

By the time Antinous indubitably makes his appearance chasing the boar which may refer to a hunt in Asia Minor in 129 he has moved immediately behind the Emperor, hobnobbing in rank with the much older marshal of the court and obviously next in intimacy with Hadrian. On the lion relief, commemorating the hunt of 130, the shorn and manly
The life and death of Antinoüs

There are few glimpses of Antinoüs during his time as Hadrian’s lover. Apart from knowing that he and the Empress Sabina were on reasonably cordial terms (no mean feat of diplomacy for a youth in the Imperial court), the clearest image we have of the relationship between him and Hadrian was that they both enjoyed hunting together. This in turn suggests that Antinoüs was no mincing, effeminate queen but lived up to the Roman ideals of vir, no matter what he and the Emperor did in bed together. It also suggests he was intelligent. For centuries after Antinoüs’ death, critics condemned him as both effeminate and stupid, saying he had sacrificed his manhood for the Emperor’s carnal desires. Many of these critics were Christians, appalled by Hadrian’s open pederasty. Some later historians even interpreted the earlier phrase “sacrificing his manhood” to mean he was a eunuch, despite the growth of beard on the young man’s chin!

In 128 Hadrian set out again on his travels, this time taking Antinoüs with him. In Athens they both took part in the Eleusian Mysteries which celebrated the death and rebirth of Persephone and the mourning and return from the Underworld of her mother, Demeter, which of course signified the return of fruition to the earth. There was a public part and a secret part to these mysteries, so we know little about the secret part, but whatever went on, Antinoüs could not help but have been deeply impressed by the message of divine resurrection..

Religion in Rome and to a large degree, throughout the Empire was in a state of flux. By the 2nd Century AD, people seem to have lost much of their conviction in the traditional gods and were turning instead to many, often mystical cults which were being imported into Rome from Asia and especially from Egypt. Cults, such as those surrounding Cybele, Mithras, and particularly the Egyptian Isis and Osiris, all of which seemed to offer more solace, especially in death, than the aloof gods of Rome and Greece. This was not a problem: Roman religion, provided due reverence was paid to the gods of State, was not dogmatic and tolerated all manner of personal beliefs, unlike the spiritual totalitarianism

14 Lambert, op. cit. p 62
which was to descend when Christianity became the official religion and Paganism was outlawed.

In 129 the Imperial party left Athens and sailed to Asia Minor where Antinoüs returned for the first time to his home-town, Claudiopolis. From there they journeyed through Syria, Cappadocia and Armenia and the land we now call Jordan. Then in the summer of 130 AD, they entered Judea where Jerusalem was still in ruins after its fall to Titus in 70 AD. Hadrian had plans to create a new city to be called *Aelia Capitolina*, but his plans for a new Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter and his ban on circumcision led to a revolt. Several years later, still burning Jewish anger flared into an unsuccessful war against the Romans under the leadership of the so-called “Messiah”\textsuperscript{15} Bar Kochba which in turn resulted in the diaspora of the Jews. Meanwhile, however, Hadrian did his best to settled things down and left Jerusalem for Egypt. For his part, the otherwise tolerant Emperor never really understood that he called the Jewish “stubbornness” in matters of religion.

In the Nile delta the waters — what there were of them — were also troubled: the annual flood of the Nile had been inadequate for the past two seasons. To make matters worse, Alexandria gave the Emperor only a half-hearted welcome. Perhaps seeking to avoid these tension, Hadrian took a select party, including Antinoüs, to Libya on a lion hunt. On this celebrated hunt, Hadrian was the first to wound the lion which had been terrorising the neighbourhood for years; however, as it happened, Antinoüs bore the brunt of the lion’s subsequent charge and it was only Hadrian’s timely intervention which saved the young man’s life. Three bronze medalions were struck to commemorate this hunt. Significantly it is these medalions which show Antinoüs not as an *ephebe*, but as a tough and solidly-muscled young man with a beard beginning to grow on his face.

Back in Egypt, at the end of September or early October the Emperor’s party assembled for a cruise up the Nile. From the beginning, the adventure seemed doomed: although the Nile had not flooded satisfactorily, it was in flood and it was traditionally believed a sacrilege for a Pharoah to sail on its waters at that time. Further, it was believed from ancient times that failure of the flood for two or more years signified the gods were unhappy with the pharoah who, in the remote past, had been obliged to drown himself in the rive as human sacrifice.

\textsuperscript{15} Many considered Jesus had failed to live up to expectations and so this new man, Bar Kochba was hailed as the new Messiah.
Later — even until the 5th Century AD — it was said human and animal sacrifices continued to be made to appease the gods and ensure the annual inundation on the occasion of the Neilaia, the festival of the Nile, on 22 October each year.

To add insult to injury, the Pharoah Hadrian fully expected his people to feed him and his huge party as they journey up the river. This placed a terrible burden on the people who had suffered such bad harvests. And, as far as Antinoüs was concerned, perhaps a further ill-omen was the arrival to join the Emperor’s party of Lucius Ceionius Commodus, a handsome, pleasure-loving aristocrat then aged 29, whom gossip suggested first as a new lover for Hadrian and later, perhaps his potential successor. It is possible that Antinoüs, now clearly too mature by the rules of pederasty to continue as Hadrian’s *eremonos*, found Commodius’ presence disturbing….

The Imperial flotilla made a leisurely progress up the river, past Heliopolis, stopping at Memphis to visit the famous sanctuary of the Aphis bull, then at Hermopolis Magna where Hadrian had discussions with the priests of Thoth (in Greek, Hermes), the god of philosophy, science and the arts. This was also a great centre for the arts as well as the location of the tomb of Petosiris who, it was claimed, had attained immortality. It was also here that a 15-year-old girl, Isidora, had drowned in the Nile a year or two before the Imperial visit, but who had also attained eternal life because such was the gift of the Nile for those who perished in its waters. Isadora had become assimilated into the worship of Isis, or among the Greeks, become a water nymph.

A little way downstream on the opposite bank of the Nile was a small settlement called Hir-wer. Apart from a few mud huts, the only building of note was a temple Rameses where several gods, including Thoth, Ra, Hathor, Haracte and Bes were all worshipped. It was here, in the last week in October 130, that the body of Antinoüs was discovered, drowned like Isadora and the ancient pharoahs, in the swirling waters of the Nile.

**The mystery and deification of Antinoüs**

All we know about how and why this, perhaps the most famous young man in late Antiquity, came to drown is summed up in Hadrian’s own few words: **“He fell into the Nile”**. Unfortunately for history, Hadrian used a verb which could imply either by accident or by intent. The
Historia Augusta\textsuperscript{16}, almost censoriously, comments that Hadrian “wept for him like a woman”. This is but one of many criticisms that the Emperor’s grief was excessive.

Exactly when Antinoüs died has to be “guestimated”, but many suggest it could well have been on the 22\textsuperscript{nd} October, the date of the festival of the Nile\textsuperscript{17}. Some suggest also that his body might have not been discovered for three days, during which time, like that of Osiris, he had remained in the Nile.

Royston Lambert\textsuperscript{18} also insists that we recognise that Antinoüs drowned. This insistence is in the face of many rather horrific theories which appeared in centuries after the young man’s death. One even had Hadrian rummaging through Antinoüs’ intestines reading the auguries for his own future health and rule. All reliable sources agree that Antinoüs drowned in the Nile sometimes in the last week in october 130, but why he drowned remains the mystery.

There are several theories, some advanced shortly after the youth’s death, others down the centuries since. One blamed a palace conspiracy, but Antinoüs seems to have been a relatively powerless, well-liked youth who was no threat to anyone. Another suggests that Hadrian himself had him drowned as a sacrifice to the Nile, mostly to preserve his own health and well-bing. Another suggests he was drowned because the Emperor had grown tired of him, that the Imperial reputation was endangered if the Emperor broke the rules of pederasty and continued a relationship into the eromenos’ adulthood. But the theory favoured by Royston Lambert is that Antinoüs either drowned himself or allowed others to drown him, and this could have been because (a) he believed that, by willingly sacrificing himself, his lifespan would be added to that of the ailing

\textsuperscript{16} The title was coined in 1603 by Isaac Casaubon. This is a collection of biographies of late Roman Emperors based on several written by Marius Maximus, the author of a more or less reliable sequel to Suetonius’ Lives of the Twelve Emperors. Many later biographies written by other authors are less reliable and some are obviously bogus.

\textsuperscript{17} See Lambert, Royston, \textit{op. cit.} p129.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Op.cit} 129.
Hadrian; (b) that he was the one worried about the beard growing on his chin and chose to end his life rather than become an embarrassment to Hadrian, or even (c) because he feared there would be no place for him now he was maturing so fast, and he believed, according to all he had seen and learned recently, that he would indeed gain immortality and therefore, like Lydia who hoped deification would reunite her with Augustus, he planned on being with his lover in Elysium.

We will probably never know which, if any, of these reasons prompted the young man to throw himself into the river, if indeed, that is what happened. He was a strong swimmer and even though the current ran swiftly near the mud-brick village, it is unlikely he drowned while skinny dipping one evening.

Antinoüs in the guise of Osiris

Hardian’s “excessive grief” was not limited to weeping: within days of the young man’s death, the Emperor had declared him a god and proclaimed a new city, Antinopolis, to be built on the site of the little village near where his lover had drowned. Coins were minted — this too was seen as “excessive” because only Emperors and members of the Imperial family were shown on the coinage. A new star which was seen in what is now the constellation of Aquila was named for the new god. Cassius Deo\(^{19}\) said of it:

"Finally Hadrian declared that He had seen a star which he took to be that of Antinous, and gladly lent an ear to the fictitious tales woven by his associates to the effect that the star had really come into being from the spirit of Antinous and had then appeared for the first time."

\(^{19}\) Cassius Deo, *Epitome of Book 69*
Thousands of sculptures were commissioned of which over 1500 remain today. Many of these were depictions of Antinoüs as a child or as the ephbe, often in the *kouros* pose. Others show him as a god, some of them truly monumental, and some in the guise of other gods such as Osiris or Dionysis. All show him as a beautiful, charismatic young man.

The new religion which Hadrian proclaimed was complete with temples and even annual games. Central to this religion was Hadrian’s belief that Antinoüs, by sacrificing himself, had been reborn a god and that he could now offer similar salvation to others. An epitaph also tells how he was said to have appeared to others in dreams to provide cures for the sick.

The city of Antinopolis was about 2½ km long by 1½ km wide, built on the chequered plan common in the time of Trajan, with no Egyptian features. It had an amphitheatre and a hippodrome, baths, porticoes with columns, triumphal arches, and of course, temples. Although the city’s importance declined in the 7th Century after the Arab conquest, its ruins remained almost intact until Muhammad Ali, the founder of modern Egypt used its stones to build a sugar refinery.  

Images of the Divine Antinoüs remained popular until Theodosius prohibited Pagan images in 391 AD. Gradually too, churches replaced temples in Antinopolis, the city became its own bishopric (at one stage it

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20 More recently, one of the largest and most beautiful spiders in the world, a Brazilian Tarantula was named after Antinoüs, *Pamphobeteus Antinous*. 
even had two competing bishops!), while anchorites and other aesthetics occupied caves in the surrounding hills... Gradually, the worship of the Divine Antinoüs was conflated with Christianity: there is even an image of Antinoüs in the guise of Dionysius, grapes (but no fig leaf) in one hand, and a cross in the other! Perhaps as a final irony, Antinopolis even had several Christian martyrs.

In this secular age we might well ask how a real person, albeit the lover of a semi-divine Emperor, could become an object of worship for so long? A web-site\(^{21}\) devoted to the modern-day worship of Antinoüs, raises this point:

> Because we no longer view our leaders as semi-divine, this seems ignorant, to a monotheist it seems blasphemous, to a rational philosopher it seems stupid. Medieval Catholics, and those who retain elements of their almost pagan veneration of the Saints might understand.

The author of this site — who signs himself Antonius Nikias Subia, goes on to suggest that we, even in our technologically sophisticated age, still venerate “beautiful celebrities tragically taken in the prime of their youth”. He names James Dean as an obvious example, but I would want to add Princess Di as a more universal and contemporary example.

Hadrian died at the age of 62, on July 10th, 138 at his villa at Tibur, now called Tivoli, where many believe the embalmed body of Antinoüs is still buried, perhaps somewhere on the island in the artificial lake where the sick and aged Emperor spent so many of his last days.

Antonius Nikias Subia\(^{22}\), if that is truly his name, can have the last word:

> Antinous was the last God of ancient pagan Rome, and he was also the facilitator who prepared the way for the eventual triumph of the Catholic faith. The Christian fathers found an easy target in the questionable moral message that


\(^{22}\) Op cit. “The Ancient Religion of Antinous”
Antinous embodied. They used him as an example to illustrate the shameful character of paganism, how it had become a religion of pederasty, immoral sexual indulgence, and idolatry. After the conversion of Constantine, even the pagans began to turn against the still living cult of Antinous, as though his memory had become a threat to the credibility of the pagan gods. Antinous’s religion lasted longer than the Empire, but it suffered severe persecution and was eventually completely silenced. It is significant to note that when the cult of Antinous was denounced and his images smashed by the iconoclasts, the peace and stability of the Empire went into decline. Hadrian had blessed the Empire with a gentle protector, who gave her prosperity and grace. When the Empire turned against her vulnerable protector, she opened the way for chaos and destruction.

![The remains of Antinopolis](image-url)