

What does **Emperor Hadrian's** preference for male same-sex relationships reveal about the attitudes of Roman Londoners?

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Head of Emperor Hadrian, early 2nd century

What is it?

This replica bronze head, found in the River Thames in 1834, was once part of a slightly larger than life-sized statue of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (reigned 117-138 CE).

Although most famous for Hadrian's Wall in northern England, Hadrian also made a mark on Roman London (Londinium), which was a thriving city and a beacon of Roman power at the time of his reign. His visit to Britain in 122 CE prompted a programme of rebuilding, with the new Forum and Basilica becoming the largest the Romans had ever built north of the Alps.

The statue would have been put up in a public space like a Forum to celebrate his visit. This was probably the new Forum, but since the head was found in the River Thames, it could have been on the approach to the bridge that the Romans constructed over the river.

The original is at the British Museum.

Why is it related to LGBTQ+ history?

When Hadrian visited Londinium in 122 CE, his entourage is likely to have included young men with whom he was openly intimate. This would not have shocked his contemporaries as, although during the Roman period there was no word for homosexuality as we conceive it today, sexual relationships between men were common.

Hadrian may have been gay in the modern sense of being only attracted to other men, rather than being bisexual which was relatively common in the Roman world. Certainly, what made him stand out most amongst other emperors was the uniquely public show of adoration which he lavished upon one male lover – Antinous.

Hadrian probably met Antinous – a Greek youth – just after his trip to Londinium. They became lovers but Antinous tragically drowned in the River Nile. Hadrian, heartbroken, flooded the Roman world with Antinous's image, dedicating shrines and idols to him in the same way that the Romans did to their gods. He even named a new Egyptian city – Antinoopolis – in his honour.



Bronze head of Emperor Hadrian,
2nd century

Today we might refer to London's LGBTQ+ community. It's important to remember that this is modern terminology that would not have been used by the Romans.

Lesson starter

Here is a suggestion for a short activity to get your class started with this topic. It should take students no more than 15 minutes.

Use your whiteboard to display an image showing the bronze head of the Emperor Hadrian statue. You might want to introduce him as a Roman Emperor, but not reveal anything else.

Then, ask students to work in pairs to answer the following question. They'll only need a couple of minutes.

What words would you associate with this image?

Students may consider wealth, childhood, appearance, job or background. Alternatively, you could focus on it as an object and think about materials, weight, artistic style or size.

When everyone has given feedback, reveal that Emperor Hadrian:

- was responsible for a huge programme of improvements and building works in Roman Londinium
- was a husband, married to a woman whom he treated with respect
- was known for having acceptable affairs with young men
- was known for openly showing his affection for one young man – Antinous
- would not have referred to himself as 'queer' or 'gay'



Model of London's new Forum and Basilica, one of the huge building projects associated with Hadrian's visit to Britain in 122 CE

We've created a suite of resources on London's LGBTQ+ history, just for you. Discover these and other resources for secondary schools on our website.