



Hadrian.
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Hadrian (76-138)

by Eugene Rice

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A Roman emperor of Spanish provincial background, Hadrian (reigned 117-138) was an accomplished military leader and administrator who helped stabilize the Roman Empire. Today, however, he is known primarily for his passionate love and inordinate mourning for a young Bithynian named Antinous.

After Antinous drowned on a journey down the Nile in October 130, the emperor declared his *paidika*, or beloved, to be a god and founded a city in his honor, Antinoopolis in Middle Egypt. (After surveying the site in 1798-1801, one of Napoleon's engineers calculated that there must have been 1,344 Doric columns supporting the porticos that lined the two main streets.)

Devotees of the new god propagated cults, with temples, altars, priests, libation and sacrifice, mysteries and initiations, oracles and miracles. Cities organized festivals and games to commemorate him. Between 133 and 137, thirty-one Greek cities possessing minting rights issued coins bearing his portrait (143 issues are known).

To meet an enormous demand, Graeco-Roman craftsmen may have produced as many as 2,000 bronze and marble statues and busts of the youth (some 115 of them survive), as well as uncounted numbers of reliefs, medals (to be worn around the neck as talismans or amulets), cameos, and gems.

The image of Antinous, immediately recognizable, established the last great ancient type of male adolescent perfection. Even Christians, hostile to both his apotheosis and his morals, conceded that Antinous's beauty was unsurpassed: "What Ganymede was more fair," asked the implacable Tertullian, "or dearer to his lover?"

When Antinous died, Hadrian "wept for him like a woman." Apart from this unmanly outburst and the extravagance of his commemorative mourning, deplored by conservative Romans as signs of unseemly erotic excess, the emperor's passion for the beloved youth infringed no rule of Roman masculine behavior or sexual propriety.

Hadrian was a brave, resourceful soldier and an intrepid hunter of bears, boars, and lions. He bore cold and bad weather with stolid endurance. He was bearded and dressed simply. He allowed no ornaments on his sword belt or jewels on the clasp.

His sexual taste, like that of Trajan, a cousin of his father and his predecessor as emperor, was predominantly for teenage boys, though ill-wishers accused him also of affairs with grown men (*adulorum amor*) and of adulteries with married women. He had no children. He often said that had he been a private citizen he would have sent away his ill-tempered wife Sabina.

His love for Antinous was exceptional not because the lovers were male or because Antinous was a teenager and Hadrian the "grey-haired prince," but for its obsessive intensity. What can still surprise us is turning a favorite into a god and the ease and range of the cult's acceptance, among townsmen and in the

countryside alike, in both the Greek-speaking East and the Latin-speaking West--more evidence, were any needed, that in the second century boy-love continued to be a commonplace, non-exclusive alternative to love of women.

Hadrian was a patron of the arts and a lavish builder. A dozen of his epigrams survive. Since the eighteenth century, historians have likened his reign to a golden age. More recently, he has been the subject of a celebrated historical novel, Marguerite Yourcenar's *Mémoires d'Hadrien* (1951).

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About the Author

Eugene Rice, who died on August 4, 2008, was Shepherd Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University. His last book, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, was awarded prizes by the American Society of Church History, the American Catholic Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Historical Association. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, he instituted Columbia University's first "Seminar on Homosexualities" and served as an adviser to Columbia University Press for its series on gay and lesbian studies. At the time of his death, he was working on a history of Western homosexualities.