



# LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS



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This interactive PDF explores Love and Relationships in ancient Greece and Rome.

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Some boxes are interactive. If you see a prompt to Click to Reveal, you can do this to reveal a new question or fact.

Terms in **bold** may be words you are less familiar with – hover over these for a glossary pop-up.

For more information on any of the artefacts included in the eBook, or to discover more objects relating to Love and Relationships in the ancient





# LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS



Glance at modern culture – pop songs, reality TV shows, the latest novels – and our obsession with love stories is clear. The Greeks and Romans loved love too; philosophers debated its meaning, poets wrote ballads and fables in honour of it, and a great deal of societal importance and expectation was placed on marital and romantic relationships.

Women in ancient Greece were defined by their marital status. They would be engaged to their husbands by their fathers, and thereafter were expected to manage the household (in Greek, the *oikos*), while providing their new husband with heirs. Their faithfulness to their husband was carefully guarded, to ensure that no question could arise as to the paternity of their children. In Athens, the ideal woman was not supposed to leave the house except for very specific reasons such as religious festivals or funerals.

When she did leave, she had to wear a veil and be accompanied. Of course, the reality was very different; many poorer women, for example, were given more freedom because they needed to work.

Roman women had more rights. They could inherit property, divorce their husbands and enjoy a limited life outside the home. But women were still barred from public life, and were expected to marry in order to bear legitimate children for their husbands. Roman women were placed under the care of a (male) **paterfamilias**, whose role was to oversee the whole household. Two types of Roman marriage existed. Under a **cum manu marriage**, the woman would leave the authority of her paterfamilias and come under the control of her new husband. Under a **sine manu marriage**, her paterfamilias would still retain control over her affairs, and she would continue to enjoy inheritance rights. The woman remained under male authority regardless of the type of marriage.

## ROMAN GRAVE ALTAR OF PASSIENIA GEMELLA AND HER TWO SONS, 135 CE – 145 CE



Museum number: 59.148.302

This grave altar demonstrates how great a power imbalance could exist between men and women in ancient Rome. It was dedicated to Passienia Gemella and her sons by L. Passienius Saturninus, her husband. The inscription refers to her as both his wife and his freedwoman (that is, she was a slave of his whom he subsequently set free and married). Their son Doryphorus was freeborn, while his brother Sabinus is included in the inscription as both her son and a freedman. This indicates that Sabinus was born while his mother was a slave and so was a slave himself until L. Passienius Saturninus freed him.

While women in ancient Rome did usually get some say in who they married, Passienia Gemella may have been unable to refuse her husband – a man who had also been her owner. At the same time, this grave altar is a touching and significant memorial from a husband to his wife, perhaps indicating that their relationship was, despite everything, loving.

An idealised Roman woman would be expected to demonstrate the virtues of piety, marital duty and loyalty. These virtues were all championed by the first Emperor of Rome, Augustus, who instigated reforms to marriage and morality laws in order to revive 'traditional' societal values. Livia Drusilla, Augustus' wife, was upheld as the ideal matron and a symbol of the values Augustus promoted. The portrait below was used to underline this propaganda.

Livia has a long oval face, a wide brow, narrow eyes and a simple, humble hairstyle.

Her expression is of modesty and piety; she wears the **stola**, a long sleeveless thick fabric worn by respectable matrons who were legally married to Roman citizens. The stola also stands for her moral qualities; chastity, modesty and obedience.



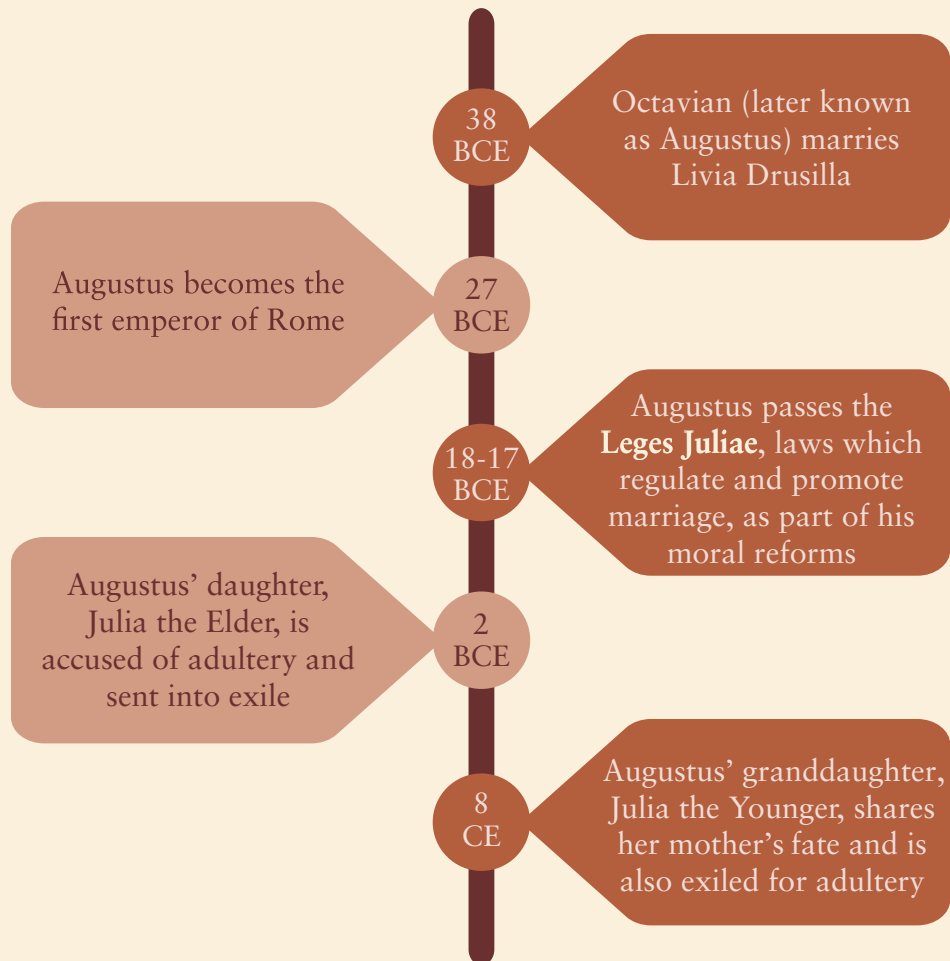
Museum number 1988.116

## ROMAN PORTRAIT OF THE EMPRESS LIVIA, 1ST CENTURY CE

Livia Drusilla (59 BCE - 29 CE) came from a distinguished noble family, the Claudians. She married Octavian, who would go on to become the Emperor Augustus, in 38 BCE, divorcing her previous husband. She had two sons from her previous marriage, Tiberius and Drusus. Tiberius was adopted by Emperor Augustus and following his death, became his successor. Livia was instrumental in securing her son as the heir. Many Roman writers accused her of plotting and even murder.

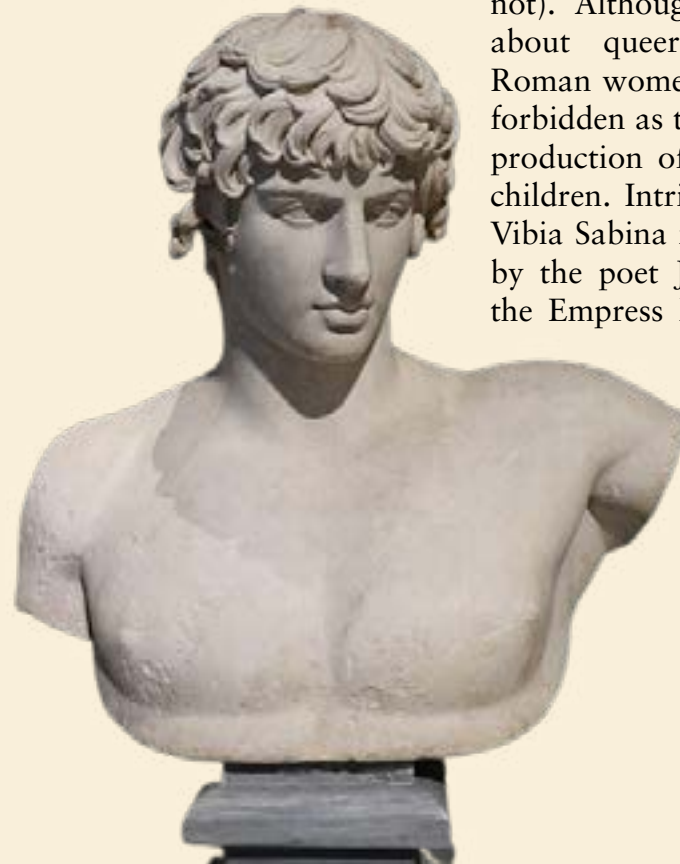


Augustus' moral reforms were only partially successful. For all that the ideal of the Roman family was made centrally important, love and passion still led many to undermine the institution of marriage. In fact, the emperor's own daughter and granddaughter (both called Julia) were exiled for adultery under the new laws!



Laws protecting the institution of marriage and forbidding sexual relationships between two Romans outside of marriage nevertheless allowed scope for Roman men to engage in affairs with those of a lower social class (including their own slaves). Queer relationships were permitted as long as the Roman citizen remained the penetrative partner in intercourse. The Emperor Hadrian favoured his male lover Antinous openly. When Antinous tragically drowned in the Nile River, Hadrian had him turned into a god and sent statues of him across the Empire. Although this is an extreme example, it demonstrates the Roman ability to separate marriage from (heterosexual or queer) love.

Roman women were not allowed to engage in extramarital relationships (which does not mean that they did not). Although we know very little about queer relationships among Roman women, they were not legally forbidden as they did not result in the production of potentially illegitimate children. Intriguingly, Hadrian's wife Vibia Sabina is praised in love poetry by the poet Julia Balbilla – perhaps the Empress had her own Antinous.





## ROMAN STATUE OF ANTINOUS, 130 CE – 138 CE



Museum number: LL 208

This statue depicts the over-life-sized likeness of Antinous, a youth of renowned beauty and the lover of the Emperor Hadrian. Antinous drowned in the river Nile in 130 CE and Hadrian was devastated. He found consolation by surrounding himself with portraits of his beloved. He also founded a city on the banks of the Nile in honour of Antinous, which he called Antinoopolis and which had a temple to Antinous. A festival was also founded to honour his memory. The statue presents an idealised and heroic body while the youth's gaze to the sky emphasises his newfound godhood.

*Some say that the finest thing on black earth is an army of cavalrymen; others say it's infantry, or ships. But I say it's whatever you love. It's quite easy to explain. Helen, who far surpassed mortal-kind in beauty, left her husband, the best of all men, and went to Troy, paying no mind at all to her child or loving parents. She was led astray... She has reminded me now of the absent Anactoria.*

Sappho, fr. 16

An extract from a love poem by the Greek poet Sappho. Here, she compares her love for an absent female companion to that of Helen's destructive love for a man. Sappho's poetry often gives voice to strong desire for other women. Because of this, she has become an important queer figure. Sappho was from the island of Lesbos, where we get the word lesbian from, and wrote poems for public performances. However, we know very little else about her life, mostly relying on what we can piece together from her poems. Later tradition reported that she had married a man called Kerkylas from the island Andros – but this is almost certainly a joke. Her husband's name could be translated into English as 'Mr Cox from the Isle of Man'.

# ROMAN STATUE OF A STANDING HERMAPHRODITE, 70 CE -100 CE

So Romans and Greeks distinguished carefully between marital and romantic relationships, although both were governed strictly by social convention and even laws. Different rules applied to men and women. Even so, there was still space for some constructive ambiguity within societal norms. Hermaphrodite statues like the one below depict a mythical figure whose gender is non-normative and who therefore provokes interesting and challenging tensions. These kinds of statues were hugely popular in the ancient world, and Ovid also told Hermaphrodite's story in his anthology of myths, the *Metamorphoses*.

This statuette depicts the mythical figure of Hermaphroditus or Hermaphrodite. They are called by both names because one is a man's name (Hermaphroditus) and one is a woman's (Hermaphrodite). In classical mythology, Hermaphroditus was the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. The nymph Salmacis became infatuated with the handsome youth but Hermaphroditus resisted her advances. When Salmacis forcibly embraced Hermaphroditus, she prayed that they never part. The gods granted her wish, and the two became a single being, both male and female. Hermaphroditus thus has both typically-male and typically-female sexual characteristics.

Hermaphroditus was a common subject in ancient Greek and Roman art. Hermaphrodites are normally depicted either nude, as in this statuette, or lifting a garment to expose their male genitals. The term hermaphrodite was historically used to describe people with ambiguous genitalia or gender. Today the word hermaphrodite is generally considered misleading and problematic when used to describe people. Instead, the term intersex is used to describe someone whose body does not neatly conform to one or the other gender.



Museum number: LL 13

Ovid's version of the story of Hermaphroditus inverts the usual trope of a man spying on a woman bathing, by having the nymph Salmacis spy on Hermaphroditus:

*Without hesitation, he removed the delicate clothes from his soft body, lured by the temperature of the enticing water. He really pleased her then, and she burnt with desire for his naked form... She could scarcely endure delay, she could scarcely put off her joy, she longed to embrace him now, she barely restrained herself from loving him now... "He's mine", cried the nymph, and she flung all her clothes off and threw herself into the water. She held him as he fought, stole forced kisses, fondled him, touched his unwilling chest, and wrapped herself all around him... "You can fight, naughty boy," she said, "but you can't run. Oh gods, let it be so, and let no day separate this man from me, or me from him!" The gods were moved by her prayer; their two bodies were mixed together and combined, and a single form was produced... They were not two but a twofold form, so that they could not be called woman or boy – they seemed to be neither, and both.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4.344-379

## SLEEPING 'VENUS', 1ST – 2ND CENTURY CE

This statue originally showed a reclining hermaphrodite breastfeeding infants. However, its owner Henry Blundell had it altered in the eighteenth century to remove the male genitalia and children, and transform it into a statue of Venus. This involved significant re-carving of the original sculpture, an echo of the unnecessary medical interventions still inflicted on intersex people today. There is a sketch of the statue in its original condition in the British Museum collection.

Museum number: 59.148.25



Watch the video at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OTCCPj2w6k>



## ACTIVITY:

Use the link below to watch this video on  
*Queer identities in the Ancient World* by Dr Peter Swallow

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMSGf-SoBzY>



This resource was created by the Advocating Classics Education (ACE) project and the Liverpool World Museum as part of the AHRC funded project (AH/V006592/1) 'Improving access to Classical Studies in museums and schools' on which Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson (King's College London) was Principal Investigator.

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