

## Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professors Sarah Bond and Joel Christensen

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professors Sarah Bond and Joel Christensen, where I ask them: What were the very first Olympics like? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. We have such an exciting episode today because we have not one but two experts who are literal historical geniuses. Welcome back to Getting Curious, Dr. Sarah Bond, who is an associate professor of history at the University of Iowa. For any of our listeners, you may remember us learning about some incredible Mediterranean drinking cultures with Sarah earlier in the year. And then Joel Christensen, who is our first time guest on Getting Curious, is professor and chair in the Department of Classical Studies at Brandeis University. Welcome, Joel and Sarah.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:00:52] Hey!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:00:52] Thanks for having us.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:00:53] Thank you for having us. It's great to be here.

**JVN** [00:00:36] I am so excited to have you back. And OK, so everyone listening, we have our literal first baby co-guest, Layla, which, she deserves an introduction. She, how, she's just a little teeny, tiny baby.

**LAYLA** [00:01:08] [SAYING HELLO IN BABY SPEAK]

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:01:09] She's seven weeks old!

**JVN** [00:01:11] Ohmigosh! Yes, yes! We've got some audio from baby. This is, we have to welcome Layla. She's our first Getting Curious baby guest of all time. This is an auspicious occasion, and I'm very excited. OK, so here is the scene. This is the question for today. What were the first Olympics like? And not those ones in 1896, honey. The ones that were like, you know, hundreds and how, I don't even know when it was, how it was. And I will just say this. It has been brought to my attention as an adult that the Olympics can, you know, that the Olympics aren't all just production packages on NBC with, like, really good songs that make me cry from, like, all the slow motion, like, training shots and all, like, the victorious shots and then, like, the falling shots, like, those, those packages and the opening ceremonies, the parade of nations, all of it, it's got me hook, line, and sinker from the time I was like five.

Like, I can't help but that I'm obsessed. Now, I do realize that they're kind of, like, you know, they have some corruption pieces, they have some problematic pieces. But I just willfully choose to not look at those and just keep my head buried in the packages, in the athlete's stories, because I just think it's incredible. I love the Olympics. And so that's where the curiosity came from. What were the very first ancient Olympics like ever, and I couldn't think of two better guests to help us learn about it.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:02:25] Can I just say that I wouldn't have been allowed to even be there, because I'm a married woman.

**JVN** [00:02:31] Oh no, they've always been a nightmare! So the International Olympic Committee always was on some bullshit, is that what you're saying?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:02:40] I mean, I wouldn't even be able to be in attendance. If you're an unmarried woman, you could go and be a spectator. But if you're a civilized, matronly woman, I'm, I'm not supposed to attend. So I'll hand this over to Joel to try and set the scene for us.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:02:56] Well, I, and I might not even be allowed there because the first Olympics were, first of all, in Greece, let's be clear with that. But they're also for aristocrats. Right. And though I may look and sound like one, I am not an aristocrat. So I gotta, you know, when we talk about the first Olympics, the question is, there's a mythical first Olympics. There's a historical alleged first Olympics, and then there's a tradition of game playing that you can find in Homer. So I'll give you those options of, like, an A, B and C.

**JVN** [00:03:27] Oh, my God! It's a literal choose your own adventure?! Joel! I wasn't ready this soon for a choose-your-own-adventure! So there's mythical and then the alleged first. And then there's, like, the literal series of games that they played in ancient Greece.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:03:40] Yep.

**JVN** [00:03:41] I hate to tell you this, but my, my motto for 2021 is "Both. And." So we'll probably have to do all of them because honey, I got the curiosity bug and you just tipped it off hardcore. So I think mythical I'm actually, though, least interested in because I want to know what really happened. And I think that-, Layla doesn't even know what "dicks" means yet. So it's-, she's a baby she doesn't even, like, literally know it yet. So because I think that there are, like, dicks involved and stuff, like, I, like, there's, like, naked athletes and stuff, like, I feel like that's what I saw and some, like, some sculptures and stuff. So, yeah. I want

to know about the alleged first. OK, actually no, no, I'm a liar. I'm changing. Whoa. No, no, no. Yeah. That's what I want. I'm sorry I wasn't ready for the choice. I apologize. The first alleged Olympics, in Greece.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:04:28] I will say that whether it's mythical or legend, you can imagine as much nudity and as many dicks as you'd like. Right, because we don't know for sure. So, but, here's the thing. The Olympics are so important in ancient Greece that they were the only unified dating system that Greek city states had. So if you went from, like, Cora to Sparta to Athens, they had different calendars for the months. They had different names. They had different years. But they all agreed that the first Olympics was in what we would call 776 BCE. And then they happened every four years. So if you're reading, like, a Greek historian, they'll say, "This event happened in the third year of the fifteenth Olympiad." And then you have to do all this math to figure out what year are you talking about and then translate it into ours. That's, we're going back to, like, before, you know, the foundation of Athens, the Athenian politics as we know it to 776 BCE.

**JVN** [00:05:20] And every four years after 776 BCE, they had Olympics? For how long?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:05:26] OK, so in 393, Theodosius the First, who's a Roman emperor, is, like, "You know what? Olympics are pagan AF," if, if they used AF. And so he decides that the Olympics are no más. And, and so we have it at the end of the fourth century, although we have lots of games and athletics that continue on after Theodosius' rule. The Olympics are seen as a pagan festival because they center on Zeus. Zeus is, of course, not part of Christianity. And so Theodosius is not a fan, and so we don't have any more Olympics until we get to 1896. That's, that is the reemergence.

**JVN** [00:06:11] I have another, like, nightmare question. That's, like, the third time I've asked on Getting Curious so we're probably going to edit out anyway, but I've just got to get together. With BCE, isn't it, like, the closer you get to zero, the later it was, which is why I'm so confused by BCE?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:06:23] All right. So let's let's there's no zero, oddly enough, so. There's no zero. So let's just say this is one BCE, OK, the Olympics are back here in 776 and then we have to go a thousand years, a little over a thousand years to get to 393. So that's the CE over here. And then Joel hangs out mostly in the BCE, I hang out a lot in the CE, and sometimes we meet up at conferences.

**JVN** [00:06:53] I am-, OK. So basically these go on for a long time.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:07:58] And we're going to make it messier for you, because it wasn't just about Olympic Games. They were Isthmian Games, Nemean Games, Pythian Games, and they all started after 776 BCE somewhere every four years, somewhere every eight years. And there are festivals to different gods, but they all included more or less the same series of events, right, where there would have been dirt, and nudity, and, a lot of times, music and poetry as well. So imagine adding, you know, American Idol or Eurovision because that's closer in time, to the Olympics and that's closer to where you're getting.

**JVN** [00:07:36] OK, so but that Theodosius guy, he became like, like, a hardcore Fox News-watching Christian honey. And then he didn't want to have any more of these pagan games. So why couldn't he just make it more of, like, a Jesus thing and then the athletes could have kept going or was that, like, too controversial?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:07:51] Well, here's the thing is that Constantine cancels gladiators. They don't actually stop altogether. But Constantine is not a fan of gladiatorial fights. And then what is the interesting thing about antiquity is that almost all athletics that are on a large scale for spectators and games, etc., are almost always tied either to an event, but oftentimes to a religious event and a festival. And so if you're getting rid of all the gods who are worshiped and given kudos, essentially, through the use of athletics and games and festivals, if you wipe out the pantheon of gods, then, you know, Jesus doesn't want gladiatorial fights and Jesus doesn't really want charioteers. So it's hard because Jesus is all "I don't want that." And Zeus is, like, "But I do." And so Theodosius just kind of stops it.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:08:52] It's tied to, like, to Greek ritual and religion in really amazing ways. So, like, some of the, you know, first examples of literature we have athletic contests comes from the end of Homer's Iliad where Achilles holds the, holds them in honor of his dead lover friend Patroclus.

**JVN** [00:09:08] Is that a guy?!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:09:10] It is a guy.

**JVN** [00:09:11] Oooh!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:09:12] And it's a big, it's a big event. And all the events you know of from the classical Olympics are held there, and prizes are given out. And it's part of funerals, rites, funeral honors. So it's really part of a pagan ritual from a Christian perspective from the very beginning.

**JVN** [00:09:28] OK, so did that Constantine come before or after Theodosius?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:09:33] He comes before. So Constantine is the one that really encourages Christianity. And then about 50 years after Constantine, Theodosius is like, "I'm going to take it next level. I'm going to make it the official religion of the entire Roman Empire." Because Constantine was like, "I'm just going to make it allowable to be Christian." And Theodosius is like, "You know what? That's not enough. I'm going to pass an edict that says everybody has to be Christian." And so that's really when the Olympics come into danger because the Olympics are a form of worship. Right. And so we have all the way back to, say, the second and third century Christian writers saying things like "This is idolatrous, this is blasphemous, it's too sexy, it's a little too sexy." And also it's something that, that is diverting Christians away from what they should be focused on, which is worship within the basilica, within the church.

And so the Olympics are seen as kind of a diversion, but also something that is blasphemous. And that's, that's a shame. But when they're abolished in 393, thereabouts, we have, then its, its reemergence, its renaissance, about fifteen hundred years later in 1896. And so that's the modern Olympics that we have today is that, that's when it restarts is at the end of the 19th century. And then this develops into it every four year festival and has a lot of the same events as the original Olympics but eventually includes women, right, something that the original Olympics did not have because women had their own athletic competitions.

**JVN** [00:11:23] I also have to hear about the Lady Olympics because that's, what, I mean, I typically tend to be more of, like, a lady tennis, lady gymnastics, lady figure skating. I just naturally gravitate towards, like, lady athletes more because I just, I don't know. I think it's the I don't know. I just like it so much more. I don't know. I suffer from, like, reverse sexism when it comes to sports, like, where I like ladies so much better and really only want to watch their stuff. So it's so interesting. But anyway, even though men I think are so, you know, they're so hot, but I think it's the grace. Whatever. This is what I'm asking. 776. What was the deal? What was the lady Olympics? What was the man Olympics? What were the sports?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:12:02] Perhaps we should also define the space within which it's actually being competed in because both men and women are going to compete in running races, and the men do a stadion. And a stadion is 185 meters. So it's just, it's about, it's almost half, half of a track lap. A track lap is 400 meters, 200 meters is half, and 185, you know, just a little bit less. So the men are running a full stadion, which is where we get the word stadium from, OK. And the women, they run five-sixths of the same length as

the men in their own festival to Hera. So I'll hand it over to Joel because he's got Zeus in his pocket and I can, I can say more after him.

**JVN** [00:12:51] When I saw Hercules on Disney when I was little, I'm pretty sure Zeus was, like, sexy and he had a cute crown and he was very nice. So It turns out Zeus was, like, a proper ancient Greek rapist?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:13:07] Pretty much. And he was also, like, the murderer and his first wife is a goddess named Metis and he impregnated her and then ate her. And that's where Athena came from. And all the other stories you know about Zeus, he turns into animals to get close to women and then just, you know, jump on them. I mean, he's not really a nice guy.

**JVN** [00:13:29] Disney, once again, misrepresenting something hard core. Here I was just thinking that Zeus was zaddy, and meanwhile he was a nightmare. So anyway, what were the sports?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:13:43] So the first one is held in honor of Zeus at Olympia. And we know for sure that the foot race was there to begin. But early on, this became a place where, like, the aristocratic families, the noble families of major cities would get together every four years to sort of show off the skills so that they practiced for war if they ever actually went to war. So if you're thinking about, like, the games that they engaged in, it's the kind of things you might do if you want to be a Homeric warrior, right? Homeric warriors throw spears, so you're going to do a javelin throw. They run into battle. So you're going to practice running. Eventually there's a Pankration, which is, it's more like modern UFC, MMA, where it's wrestling and, and boxing.

But then you also have classic Greek sports like boxing and wrestling, which aren't necessarily like ours. So Greek boxing is basically just standing still and punching people in the head till they fell over, and wrestling was a little closer to ours in that it's about throwing people down. But of course, they were naked and oiled up at the time, right. So it's a slightly different sport. And then you get, like, archery and discus throwing, eventually throwing big, heavy things. Basically what you need to be a big, strong warrior.

**JVN** [00:15:00] OK, wait, so the Greek boxing, now, is just, like, I'm imagining Gladiator. I'm imagining Marcus Aurelius and, like, some other guy in, like, a little circle and they just, so you just got to do one punch at a time and whoever, like, didn't fall over and who, like, didn't die, like, was the winner?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:15:17] Yeah. Do you remember the movie, is it, it's a Tom Cruise movie. Is it *Far and Away*, the one where he's an Irish boxer?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:15:22] Indeed.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:15:23] In that movie, so the reason he's a good boxer in that movie is he starts to move around, whereas everybody else just stands still. So if you go watch that scene, the big hulk who was just there trying to punch in the head. That's Greek boxing. But there are two big hulks, and it's really like so if you read like passages from literature, *Odysseus*, when he gets in a boxing match, thinks, "Should I hit this guy to knock him down or just to kill him?" Right? So there's this idea that it's a one punch thing and that you don't necessarily have to be in running shape to compete.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:15:55] Yeah, and I would just add that there are no weight classes in Greek boxing, right. So what we've done today is like, "Oh, you're a featherweight, you're a heavyweight." Right. Because Muhammad Ali can't take on Sugar Ray, right, for many reasons.

**JVN** [00:16:09] You're so smart about boxing.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:16:16] I learned about baseball and sports, mostly from my father, because I wanted to be loved the most out of our six children!

**JVN** [00:16:18] Oh my god, six kids. That's a lot to contend with. OK, wait. So it's, so, Mr. Joel. So what were the, do we know whether there was, like, five sports, four, six. Do we know exactly how many there were at the very first one?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:16:34] I don't know exactly, but I'll tell you what there likely was. There was running, one. Right. There was wrestling, boxing, and we're forgetting the glory competition in ancient Olympics, which was a chariot race. We don't have this in our Olympics, but we have all this evidence from Greek poetry. So here's the thing that's going to shock you. There were poets who specialized in writing victory hymns for winners at the games. We have entire poetic traditions called epinician poetry. Guys like Pindar or Achillides who wrote, who just made a living writing poems for wealthy guys whose kids won in Olympic contests. And many of them are chariot racers. And so that was a big deal, too, again, you sort of, you drive your chariot really fast. They make a tight corner and then come back around. And of course, in the, by the time it got to the high period, you are paying people to drive your fancy horses for you.

**JVN** [00:17:31] OK, so the high period, how much later was the high period after 776.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:17:37] So, when I'm saying that, I'm thinking sort of classical age athletes. Right. So in the 5th century BCE after the Persian wars when it was so important if you were an Olympic victor, that if you won when you came home to Athens, you could eat free on the city's dime for your entire life.

**JVN** [00:17:52] Ooh, that's very Russian. Because, you know, if a Russian figure skater or gymnast gets a bronze, silver or gold, I think in the Olympics or the World Championships, they, like, get their apartment paid for them in Moscow or St. Petersburg. It's, like, a thing. So when you say that the Olympics in this era were for aristocrats only, does an aristocrat mean, like, prince, princesses, like, Duchesses, but they had, like, different names in Greece?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:18:18] Only contessas! No, it really depended on the city states. Like, some cities had kings, royal families. So, you know, Sparta had two kings, right. Other families in other cities had tyrants or oligarchies. But even in Athens, which was a democracy, they had families who trace their roots back to kings, right. And so these would be land owners, they would be chiefs of their tribes if we see them that way, and just really wealthy people. So a famous guy, Socrates, he would still be a nobleman, right, an aristocrat.

**JVN** [00:18:52] So, like, were there, like, did they ever open up to, like, commoners, like, could people that weren't aristocratic, come watch the games or did they ever, like, ticketed events? What about, like, referees or judges? Like, were they ever, like, not aristocratic?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:19:07] So this is one of the places where our lack of knowledge is embarrassing. So if you're looking for, like, a Greek era knights-tale type of story where a commoner goes and wins their way to nobility, I don't think we have any evidence of that.

**JVN** [00:19:22] No fucking poems about that at all?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:19:24] None! Yeah, so the poetry really missed the boat on this one. Right? It wasn't a charge because you had to be, look, think about it this way, imagine your life, like, is subsistence living. You have to farm your ass off every day to put away enough food so you don't starve over the winter. The only assholes who can get off work long enough to go hang around for games and get drunk all day are people who have a lot of money to begin with, right? And so they're the ones who are going. So you don't have to pay once you get there because the cost is getting there to begin with.



**JVN** [00:19:58] So what about like, like, what percentage of the Greek population do you think would have had enough money to participate?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:20:07] I have no idea. I would guess a small percentage, I would put it probably at five percent of the population? And that depends on who we're counting. Are we counting women? Are we counting enslaved people? Are we counting resident aliens and foreigners? Right. So the number gets really small. It's one of those things that our, our historical records skews so much to the elite that it's hard to even answer that question without going to sort of really complicated archeological data.

**JVN** [00:20:35] That's interesting because one of, I did an episode on ancient China recently, well, near ancient China. And she was saying how, like, you know, a lot of times history is written by, like, the, you know, "winners." I hold up my air quotes, but it's, like, if you were really suffering and like you say, like, just trying to eat to make sure they had enough food put away, like, you probably weren't writing like a lot of, like, books in, like, on stone or, like, something that didn't wear away over time. So it's, like, however much evidence you could leave was really directly tied to your existence is really directly tied to what your resources are in the time in which you lived, which, it makes it so complex.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:21:08] But I do think that common people were doing some of these games. I think they were playing as well, like they would be running, they would engage in archery and would do some of those things, just like I might go and play pickup basketball, right. Nobody's going to write a poem about my shot, my three-pointer in a pickup game. But it's still part of my life. It's part of my world.

**JVN** [00:21:30] Were these gladiator things, like, you know, in Gladiator the movie -esque things. Was that happening at the same time as the Olympics? But that was more, like, football or something?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:21:40] Well, this is, so, Roman, Romans, even though they are interested in the Olympics, they kind of allow for it to, to happen in Greece. And there is kind of not as much interest until we get to the, the period of Augustus, who is roughly contemporaneous with the life of Jesus. And so Romans have their own sets of sports. They have their own sets of games. And it's not that they never participate with the Olympics or they never go and have spectators, rather, that, that do it. It's just that Romans have their own festivals to their own gods, and there's a big difference in the types of people who are allowed. So Joel has talked a lot about the fact that we have elite men participating in the Olympics. But what we have in Rome is predominantly enslaved individuals who are gladiators.

And so in the movie Spartacus, I'm talking about, go back to the 1960 version, the Kubrick version of Spartacus, that is going to be almost completely enslaved persons who are allowed to participate as gladiators because they're seen as chattel, that is to say, property that is owned by individuals and by the state. And charioteers have a little bit of a higher status, but they're still kind of regular people. And so in Roman athletics, what they're doing is kind of having fun hunting and fishing, wrestling later on, taking on some of the Greek athletics later on. But Greek athletes are later imported into Rome in order to do games that are thrown by the emperor. Or sometimes we have Nero, who is living in the mid-first century CE. Nero actually travels to Olympia and participates in the Olympics. He buys off judges in order to try and get a win.

**JVN** [00:23:42] Because the Olympics go from zero up to three ninety three. So the Olympics are still happening! OK, wait, I have a really basic question and I feel like this happens to me a lot on Getting Curious where, like, I have, like, a literal, highly specified expert. This is going to be a really fucking basic question to ask two historians. So just fucking brace yourself, OK? So Roman Empire happens after Greece, and...?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:24:10] Well, they overlap.

**JVN** [00:24:11] They overlap!

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:24:12] They kind of, they are kind of like a Venn diagram, OK, so they can, they happen at the same time. What people kind of think of as the rise and fall of Greece is, Greece continues to exist. It, it is and always shall be. But when it has the most sway waxes and wanes. And so when Romans in the second century BCE come into the Peloponnese, that is to say, the main area of, of Greece and to Attica, which is where Athens is, they eventually annex it as a province. So Greece becomes part of the Roman Empire, which is a very large Mediterranean empire.

Rome is in the Antarctic Peninsula, but she takes over Greece in, in the second century BCE and then in the first century, we have a dictator. His name is Sulla, and he actually wants to have athletics at his own games back in Rome. So he pilfers Olympians from the Olympic Games. And he's like, "You know what, I'm a Roman potentate. I'm a Roman politician. And I would like to have some of these badass Olympians who are so famous. I want to bring them over to Rome."

And so when Rome takes over Greece, there is a lot of friction because the prestige of the Olympic Games gets usurped in some ways and taken over to Rome as, as a way of expressing empire. Because Rome is like, "You know what? We criticize the Greeks for

being too feminine, for being too naked all the time.” But at the end of the day, they wanted to take some of the parts of the Greek Olympics and athletics and make them their own because they admired them in some ways.

**JVN** [00:25:59] So is it, is it fair to say that, like, Greek, Greek, like, did the Greek empire, they did democracy and then like the Roman one was like, was that, like, like, a monarchy sort of thing?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:26:12] Well, OK, so the Romans start off as a monarchy with Romulus, and this may be a good time to say that Romulus knew about charioteering, just like the Greeks knew about charioteering. Because we're told when Romulus founds Rome on April 21, 753 BCE, so roughly the same time as the Olympics are happening, within about 20 years, Romulus found the city of Rome and almost immediately, to show off the fact that he's amazing, he has his own kind of charioteer games, right? So charioteering across the Mediterranean around a track, which is called a circus. So that's where we get the modern day circus today. The circus, and in Rome, the most famous one is called the Circus Maximus, charioteering was part of Roman tradition for a very long time. So Rome has kings from 753 BCE to 509. And then in 509, this guy named Brutus kills, or, he overthrows the last king who is eventually then later killed. And then they found something called a republic. So it's not quite, it's not an Athenian democracy, but it is a form of republican government.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:27:30] What we often miss out on because we teach these subjects, like, as Greece and as Rome is, if they have shared culture beyond just the space they share. So they were Greeks in southern Italy well before the first Olympics. They were all the way over in Spain, in modern Spain, and they really shared a lot. And just to give you sort of the mind-blowing thing that always shocks me is that in almost the same year the Romans started the republic, the Athenians overthrew a tyrant and created their democracy. There was something going on in the Mediterranean and we often just don't see the shared cultural traits because we just, you know, myopically look at one place and not another. So I think games are there, too, right? I mean, they were fighting the same way. They were training the same way. And the aristocratic culture was similar. Tons of noblemen and noble families from Greece settled in Italy when the Persians came in, and they just moved from one place to another. So too often, like, our academic departments actually keep us from investigating things and seeing the world the way that is.

**JVN** [00:28:36] Yes, tell me, Sarah!

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:28:37] Yeah, yes. I think that's a really good point. I mean, one thing I want to bring in, because we want to talk about nakedness a little bit and

everybody likes talking about birthday suits is that the nakedness of the Olympics, and some people say that started with them wearing loincloths and then migrated with a runner named Orsippus, who allegedly wanted to go, you know, completely naked as, as a runner, that this is a defining feature of Greek athletics, that Romans oftentimes rejected how naked it was. And also the Persians, the Persians were fully clothed when they competed in their own sports and athletics. And Greeks took a lot of pride in saying, "You know what, the Persians are fully clothed and we are civilized men. We are highly masculine men, and we're comfortable in our masculinity. So we're going to be naked."

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:29:32] And this is the thing that's always confused me about runners. I don't understand how people are out there aging, running so hard with no support. There's gotta be a lot of uncomfortable people.

**JVN** [00:29:42] OK, not to be rude, but I feel like a lot of the sculptures, like, I, like, that, like, some small ass penises then with, like, really little balls. So maybe they just, like, it wasn't as much weight on it, you know, because I do think that, like, I just, their dicks seemed, according to the sculpture is a lot littler back then.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:30:00] Well, so, Sarah can say more about this than I can. But the basic thing is that Greek sculpture doesn't represent the body as it really is, right. It's idealized. And they thought that big penises were a sign of excessive desire and animalistic nature. So even if a model might have had a long schlong, it would have been reduced when it was turned into sculpture.

**JVN** [00:30:26] Ancient Photoshop! I hate it!

[CROSSTALK]

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:30:30] Joel, would you say this is Small Dick Syndrome [*AKA Small Dick Energy*] instead of Big Dick Syndrome [*AKA Big Dick Energy*]? You have, like, a gravitas from your small dick instead of a gravitas from your big dick.

**JVN** [00:30:43] So, I'm shook. OK, so, so basically what I hear you saying is, 'cause I think that I really did, I always, obviously I'm not a historian, but I definitely always thought of these two things is, like, existing independently of each other. But really ancient Greece and ancient Rome kind of happen around the same times. And, but, who's widely credited with being, like, the first democracy?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:31:06] I mean, Athens is what people usually say, and they usually don't say it, as always, a positive thing because it was rather chaotic. The rules are

sort of constantly changing. And, you know, it was, it meant a lot of people are voting in the assembly. So imagine if instead of having a House of Representatives of 500 plus people, we let there be five thousand or fifty thousand running and making decisions. And so that's what, I mean, at a level, it was still more of a representative republic than a pure democracy. But Athens is a place where we usually credit that sort of invention of democracy.

**JVN** [00:31:46] And wasn't it Julius Caesar who got stabbed in the back?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:31:51] He did. So actually, they're excavating the area where he was stabbed right now. There is a wonderful archeologist from the University of Michigan named Nic Terrenato and there is a cat sanctuary in Rome. Have you been to Rome, Jonathan?

**JVN** [00:32:07] No.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:32:08] OK, so when you go and we can go together, I mean, I will we can hold hands and go to the cat sanctuary together, if you like. But it's called Largo Argentina, and it's just dozens of cats who live in this kind of sunken pit. And it is the area that we think was where the Curia Pompeii was. That is to say, the Senate House of Pompeii. There are multiple Senate houses and there is a theater of Pompeii. And this is the area where Julius Caesar was stabbed. Now, Julius Caesar is, is taken out by a bunch of people who want to defend the republic because Julius Caesar perhaps is going to establish a new monarchy.

But I will say that going all the way back to Julius Caesar's early career, he had something of a very important magistracy called Aedile. And Romans have a yearly magistrate called an Aedile that puts on games for the whole city. And so Julius Caesar, yes, he gets murdered and is known for that in 44 BCE. But at the same time, he knew the power of putting on games in order to persuade audiences, in order to show them that you have power and you have persuasion and you get free food. So I think Julius Caesar appreciated the Olympic Games and he knew the power of as athletic spectacle.

**JVN** [00:33:37] So he was Roman, though, not Greek.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:33:40] Roman!

**JVN** [00:33:40] Interest! I'm obsessed with this so much. We need to do more ep-. Can I just say, Dr. Sarah Bond, you are so genius to suggest Joel to bring in on this, because we need to do more of these episodes where there's, like, I am obsessed with the

convergence of your expertises, and I didn't really even understand it until we got, like, halfway through there in the middle. I was like, "Oh, yes, Joel," was when you said, like, "Joel's, like, very much in the BCE and I'm very much in the CE but sometimes we overlap," I'm so obsessed with this, I can't even stand it.

OK, so let's, OK, I can't decide if I want to talk. OK, I do want to talk about the Lady Olympics and then we've talk about, like. But I do want to talk about, like, so you said that, you said that, that, the heel guy, the heel man had a male lover? Achilles, honey! He had a male lover that he wrote about and they were literally talking about, like, now can you believe, like, I hear that there is like that whole thing with, like, in Greek culture where, like, the older man and the younger man, can it just be, like, a nice, you know, age appropriate love story? Is it age appropriate?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:34:42] I'm going to, I'm going to make it nice for you, alright, but I'm going to make it a little complicated. So when people say, "In ancient Greece, something happened," it's usually a lie because every city had different customs over in Sparta or Athens. It would have been very common for an older man to have a younger lover. Right. But in a city like Thebes, they had, I don't know if you have ever heard of The Sacred Band, but they had a crack army unit that was all paired lovers, right. Because the thought was you would never retreat before your lover and you'd never leave them behind in battle. Right. Yeah!

So when I, yeah, so when I teach Homer and people say, "Were Achilles and Patroclus lovers and if they are, what does that mean?" I'm like, "What does Homer say?" And Homer says very little because he was sneaky. Right. The Homeric epic's sneaky. It wants audiences to write the love story for themselves. So in some Greek city states, they might be like, "Well, we don't want them to be lovers." In other city states, they are going to be like, "He's older, he's younger, it's all good." And in others, they want them to be around the same age.

**JVN** [00:35:49] So I'm a Thebian?!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:35:51] You can, you can be Thebian as much as you want. Right. But you have to go into battle.

**JVN** [00:35:56] Oh, hmm, ok. So OK, so but they were just, like, really muscular, like, men in their 30s, like, effing each other, like, on the battlefield?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:36:08] OK, now I think having sex on the battlefield might intervene-

**JVN** [00:36:12] The night before?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:36:13] The night before is fine.

**JVN** [00:36:17] The day after? But that's what they said in the poems, they were doing it? Tell us! We need the dirty homosexual stuff, and by dirty, I mean gorgeous, like, because they can't see my face when I say that.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:36:27] The poetry is rather chaste. It doesn't really get into it, or Homer doesn't, but, you know, there's some stuff, in Plato's Symposium, where they talk about-

**JVN** [00:36:40] The gentle caress of another man. No? Or kinda!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:36:46] No, it's going to disappoint you. It's going to disappoint you, because what we have here: so you don't want to hear about age-inappropriate love, but we have a lot of pederastic poetry. Right. So Theagenes has a whole section of poems, so he's from Megara, seventh century BCE, more or less as a whole bunch of poems about a young boy, or a younger man. Right. And so the reason we don't teach these is that it doesn't really adhere well to our society's customs.

**JVN** [00:37:16] So there was explicit pedatric [*pederastic*] stuff, but not explicit, like sexy, like, grown-up. Devastating!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:37:29] But there's some that refers to it, right? So this is a Hellen-, Hellenistic age poem later on, where one of my favorite lines is "Be my Achilles, baby, and I'll be your Telephis," which is weird. And the, the, the punchline is: "Because my wound can only be healed by your love." And this is from a mythical story where Achilles wounds a guy named Telephis. And the only way Telephis can be healed is with Achilles' "spear." Spear? Which is, what it is literally I don't know if it's supposed to be a metaphor or not.

**JVN** [00:38:03] And is his moon the butthole?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:38:05] I mean, so that, maybe or maybe not. The Greeks see we hear a little more about intercrural sex. So between the thighs. Right. But, you know, people-

**JVN** [00:38:17] Is that where intercourse comes from? Like, intercrural? No? False cognate?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:38:24] No! It's a false cognate, I know.

**JVN** [00:38:25] Nightmare! Hate it!

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:38:30] Can I just say that the Romans are a little bit more apprehensive about male-on-male sex? Not because it doesn't happen, because we have graffiti, we have lots of Roman art. We have an incredible number of vase paintings and in Greek art as well, that, that depict it. Romans are a little bit more hesitant. And this is something that, that I think we need to point out that it exists because in the brothel of Pompeii, for instance, you can purchase a male prostitute or a female prostitute.

**JVN** [00:39:00] Oh, only for men, at these brothels, because I would imagine you wouldn't be having, like, girl patrons with male patrons.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:39:05] You occasionally have women that, that will buy prostitutes at the baths because that's where a lot of prostitution happens as well. Prostitution is legal. And so all of the things that we think about prostitution, which is to say they're illicit, and it has to happen on the down low. I mean, Pompeii has dozens of brothels, and it's a very small, thirty-thousand person town. So people are getting down in Pompeii and it's male-on-male relationships. It's female-on-male relationships. It's just that Greek relationships between men were much more visible and out in the open. And, you know, Julius Caesar, for instance, has a rumor started that an eastern king essentially makes Julius Caesar his bitch. And, and this is a way to impugn his dignity.

And so Romans do have a different approach to sexuality than Greeks. But again, I would stress exactly what Joel said, which is that when I say "the Romans," it's very difficult to say monolithically, "Everybody feels this way," or "All the Greeks feel this way." That there is nuance from town to town and area to area of the Roman Empire. But in general, Romans look at the Greeks as having a more feminized version of love and, and of relationships. And so Romans see it more masculine to give it rather than to take it. So if you're going to be in a, in a relationship with two men, you want to be the penetrator rather than the person being penetrated. So that's a big difference in Romans, is that they are much more supportive of penetrating another man than being the person that is getting fucked.

**JVN** [00:40:55] Which, maybe that's just because they didn't have, like, running water douches, like, so they just knew that it was a pain and it was, like, a nightmare. And so they like, it-. Maybe that's all they mean. That's all I'm left with. I have a question, but what about lesbians, like, any gorgeous, like, ancient lesbian stuff, like, we love an ancient lesbian!



**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:41:17] So, I mean, look, the word lesbian is after the island of Lesbos, where Sappho of the poet comes from, and it's supposed to be an island with the most beautiful woman in the world anyway. But Sappho is known for writing poetry for other women and writing love poetry for them. So we have that. You don't get sort of lesbian or woman-on-woman erotica in the same way that you may for men. But that's more because of the cultural dominance of men in the period. Right. But you do have, Sappho is a good example. Sarah, can you think of any from the Roman period yet?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:41:54] Yes, from inscriptions. We know that there are sometimes women who are responding to and speaking to other women on the walls of Pompeii. And so, again, graffiti allows us to have a prism into the non-elite classes. There are elites that, that actually have graffiti in Pompeii, but then there are lots of non-elites as well. And there's at least one graffito that I have translated that we know was the hand of a woman who is writing to another woman, a, a metered poem. It's an elegiac poem and she is, is professing her love for her. So, I mean, there are lots of different types of relationships. And so when people only focus on, for instance, Roman emperors, and when they only look at the people at the highest echelons of society, then we miss a lot of this different fabric of relationships and different types of love that we see.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:42:58] And it's the, you know, official relationships that become part of the historical record of the elite. It's about power. It's about genealogies. It's about inheritance and wealth. And so the actual sexual behavior, romantic life of ancient individuals, it's almost irrecoverable. It's really hard to figure out, just as we know that there are men loving men and women loving women in the 18th century, in the 17th century, our evidence is just bad because they didn't write it down for fear of persecution.

**JVN** [00:43:28] Hmm. Yes. OK, now I have a question kind of around this but I'm gonna go later because it's an Olympic sports episode and I, sometimes I wander off into homosexual sex history questions and I can't help it. So anyway, the Lady Olympics, what was that called again?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:43:50] This is a festival to, to Hera, so just as Zeus is, is the one that is being courted with the Olympics that we have, we have the kind of lady Olympics. And essentially it is just trying to worship Hera in the same way that the Olympics worship Zeus. It's not as big. It's not as well attended. But we have female runners and we have women who are participating. And there are a lot of stories about women in the ancient world specifically doing many of the same athletics as men, usually they're Spartan women.

So Spartan women, at least according to a lot of legend, worked out naked. So this is something that not most women in other Greek polis and other Greek city states did not do, but Spartan women were particularly intense. And so we have a number of stories about them. Women don't do the same types of athletics or as regularly as men for sure. They have a lot of other things to do. They have a lot of other prohibitions on them in terms of the spaces that they can go to and the areas that, that they can be within, especially if they're married. So, also, most of the athletes that we know are women from, from Greek antiquity, were unmarried as well. But Joel, did you want to add to that?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:45:20] Well, I was just going to say that, you know, to take the Olympics back in the sports, back to how they started, right, so training for war. So women aren't going to do that. And then next they became sort of an indicator of your class. So where we can get games again in Homer, to go back to Homer, because that's what I do is in The Odyssey when Odysseus in disguise in this island of the Scheria, they have dinner, and then they go outside, and they say, "Now we're going to have some athletic contests." And he doesn't want to do it because he's been at sea and he's old. And they say, "Well, this is how you prove that you're a noble person, otherwise you're just a pirate, and you're not worth anything." And Odysseus gets really pissed off at that and then goes and beats them all in games. And so it's so much part of their culture. That, that philosopher you might have heard of, Plato, his name allegedly means, "wide," well, not allegedly, Plato means "wide." And it's a name from his wrestling days. Apparently his chest was. So why'd you do that? Yeah. And that, that he got this name. Plato is a nickname. And that's not even his actual name.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:46:24] Yeah. And I wanted to add in that when we go to the Roman period, which is of course more what I'm comfortable with, we have evidence for female gladiators. And so it's not as though women never have the ability to participate in sports. Now, in, in the Roman period, we do have references under the reign of Nero, under the reign of Commodus, who you may remember from such movies as Gladiator, that there are women who compete in gladiatorial games. But these are mostly enslaved women in all likelihood. And many of them are trying to imitate the Greek myth of Amazons.

And so incorporating myth and thinking about the warrior groups, just like we did with the men, I think would be really important to understanding female athletics as well, because these female gladiators that are called in the plural gladiatrices and then in the singular a gladiatrix, these women, we know from a relief in the British Museum that has two women fighting each other. But we also have literary references that, that tell us that it was something of a spectacle to go to the Colosseum and see women fighting each other because it wasn't as common as seeing men.

**JVN** [00:47:46] Obsessed. OK, so what about, like, ancient body image stuff as it relates to-, because I feel like a lot of the stuff, like, is about, like, bodies and like, you know, your wide chest or, like, you know, wanting to run around nakie. So, like, was there a lot of, like, were you meant to be really fit, like, fitness was something that people were really, like, talking about a lot then?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:48:08] So, I mean, in our earliest evidence of so talking about bodies from, from the-, Homer's Iliad and The Odyssey, there is an absolute correlation between you being an aristocrat, a noble and looking good, looking pretty, right. So, for instance, when Telemachus, the deceased son, goes abroad, people say, "Well, he must be a nobleman. Look how big he is." And Achilleas from The Iliad is famous for being the most beautiful man who went to Troy. So, you know, the fancy word for this is physiognomy. The idea that your virtue is shown on your body.

And the ancient world is that, so if you were noble, you would look better, you'd be taller, your skin would be clearer. You've got your teeth. And a lot of this comes from having a good diet, right, and when you, when you're growing up having access to food and health care and, you know, not to not to get modern again, but we have this in the modern world, too, like, you ride the subway, you see, you can read on people's bodies how hard their life has been. If they had an orthodontist when they were young, if they went to a dermatologist, right, if they exercise a lot. And so in the ancient world, it was the same way. And the only way you'd have the time to exercise to be a top athlete is if you're wealthy to begin with.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:49:20] Right. And I would just bring in on the Roman side that if we look to Mark Antony, for instance, one thing that Mark Antony was criticized for is that he went out and got a Greek athletic trainer because Greek athletic trainers go all in vogue in the first century BCE is that you've got to get a gorgeous Greek male athletic trainer and he's going to work you out. He's going to cover you with olive oil and strigil you, which is how you get dirt off. And I'm sorry that I didn't bring this up prior, but you don't have soap being used in the ancient world. It exists, but people aren't using it on their bodies. And so people covered themselves in olive oil. And then you have a strigil that you scrape off from your skin. And so Mark Antony is heavily criticized by Romans back at Rome because they believe he's gone Greek. He's hired a Greek athletic trainer. He wants to look beautiful. But again, just like Joel said, there's this belief that mind and body are intertwined. And in order to have a beautiful mind, you need to have a beautiful body. And so these two things are not mutually exclusive.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:50:30] And I think we're going to ruin some of your ancient Olympic fantasies here, Jonathan, because the first Olympics would have been smelly and dirty. They didn't, they didn't bathe. They didn't have soap. They just scrape the dirt off their bodies and then go back to it. So I think probably, for us, like if we had a time machine and we used it for this purpose, we'd probably gag.

**JVN** [00:50:53] So they were kind of stinky, kind of smelly, a little bit yuck. When you said Troy. Where's Troy again? Is that Greece, too?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:50:04] Well, it's in Asia minor, modern Turkey, but in the classical period, there are lots of Greek city states in what we now call Turkey. In fact, up until the 1950s, there were large Greek populations in parts of Turkey. So it was there.

**JVN** [00:51:22] So in 393, when they're, like, they are definitely canceled at this point, like, Theodosius is, like, "No more!" Like, but Greece still continues. We just don't have the Olympics anymore. And then that sets the stage for 1500 years later, they come back, which is kind of leading me towards what we saw when you were saying, like, this, we're talking, like, the sex and the baths and the prostitution, which reminded me of that Showtime show, *The Borgias*, where that, where that, the Vatican, like, the Vatican and then the guy fucked his sister and then their other brother got syphilis and then have a treatment for syphilis. So they crammed like a metal straw up his peehole and tried to, like, scrape all the stuff out of there. And then he ended up going crazy of the syphilis, and then he jumped off a bridge or his brother, like, threw him off the bridge. So with syphilis, and, like, other deadly STDs, because, like, did they talk about that out there ever? Because they couldn't really get chlamydia and die back then because there was no antibiotics?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:52:23] So, these are all, these are all good questions, I mean, there were sexually transmitted diseases in antiquity, but we, we don't get a lot of literary evidence. Most of the evidence comes from osteological evidence, which is to say bio archeology, that is bones, some people who have been excavated, et cetera, that a lot of this is very ephemeral. It's hard to prove except for, except for when you get certain pocks that are left actually on bones or we get traces of it in other ways from them, actual archeological evidence. But yes, there absolutely were STDs in the ancient world.

And the Borgias are the 15th century. And definitely that, that is something that ran rampant within Renaissance Rome, with Lucrezia, who may or may not have been the model for Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. We don't fully know. And, and I think you're referring to Cesare, one of one of her brothers. But, yes, that is a very good show. And I do think that sexually transmitted diseases Julius Caesar probably had the most to because he was very into cuckolding his opponents by sleeping with their wives. And so allegedly, Julius

Caesar traveled to each of his political competitors and would try and sleep with their wives. And then when he got mad at them in the Roman Senate, he'd be like, "Yeah, I fucked your wife." So cuckolding is also a thing in ancient Rome.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:53:59] And, you know, there is a disturbing lack of good evidence for sexually transmitted infections or concern about it in ancient literature. We know I mean, part of what has happened with them is that as the world has gotten more populated and we've had sex with each other more, local variants of viruses have exploded, right. There is evidence in, like, non-human ancestors of Neanderthals that you know of some STIs, but there's almost nothing in, sort of, ancient literature. I, in fact, I am glad you asked this question, because I remember being in high school Latin class, reading Latin poetry and they're, like, having an affair. And my question to my embarrassed Latin teacher was, "Aren't they worried about getting pregnant or getting diseases?" Right. And she's like, "No." I was like, "Why not? Why aren't they worried?"

**JVN** [00:54:48] Because they probably would just, like, lie about paternity if they needed to, like, if you had an affair, be like, "No, it is yours." But it's like with-

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:54:54] But they actually had, Sarah, what's the name of the drug that they had in antiquity that was a really good abortifacient that was so effective that we, we, that they, they used it to extinction?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:55:05] Oh, gotcha. I will, I'll have to, I think it's just, like, zillium? Silphium? Yeah, I believe it's called silphium. Yeah. We have it all the way up until, I think, the sixth century. We have a writer who writes about it being used under the reign of Justinian, but we have a lot of abortifacients, that is to say, the, the use of various different herbs and plants to abort children, because there are, there are not really condoms. Women stuff things into their vaginal cavities to, to keep things from coming in.

**JVN** [00:55:43] No, not the antiquity diaphragm! No!

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:55:48] Essentially it is a sponge. All women in antiquity were sponge worthy. So, you know, maybe you aren't going to get that because people don't watch Seinfeld anymore? But it's a Seinfeld reference. But they, women had to kind of take their matters into their own hands and also to keep getting pregnant in that way. But yeah, a lot of literature does not talk about STDs. And so we have to really look at, at actual osteological evidence, which is very sparse because many of them are very ephemeral. Once somebody dies, we don't have a lot of evidence for them anymore.

**JVN** [00:56:25] OK, so two more questions that you won't even believe the segue. What's, like, the most recent evidence that we have of, like, ancient Roman and Greek Olympics, like, are we, like, how often are we finding new stuff? Like, could there be like a book with all sorts of, like, gay love stuff and Olympic stuff somewhere that we just haven't found yet that didn't, like, biodegrade? Like, are we still finding, like, cool ancient shit that's not ruined?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [00:56:53] So, so Sarah's much better at this, but when it comes to literature, I can say a few things. So papyri fragments. So papyrus is, you know, the plant that's been prepared to make a thing like paper is preserved really well and like deserts. So there's a place in Egypt called Oxyrhynchus that they've been pulling papyri out of fragments out of four for a while. So we do, almost every decade or so, we have new poetic fragments published. And there's still, there are a bunch of carbonized scrolls for the library at Herculaneum, which is part of the Mount Vesuvius eruption, and people are still tearing apart, trying to make sense of. So there's always a chance we'll find something, but most of the time it'll be a disappointment.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:56:39] Right. And there's only, maybe, a little over a third of Pompeii has been excavated. And I don't think most people recognize the fact that there's still dozens, even more than that, hundreds of excavations going on all over the Mediterranean. And I write about a lot of them. But, you know, we find a lot of skeletons every year. And so is there the chance that we're going to find a new skeleton for somebody who has an epitaph that tells us that he was involved in the blank Olympiad? Absolutely. We find a lot of statues still, and, you know, statues, oftentimes, were allowed to be erected at Olympia or in the, the hometown of the athlete in commemoration of their victories.

And so a lot of the athletes that we may discover in the future is because we find a new statue that tells us. So, like, the discobolus, you know, the discobolus? The discobolus, that is an Olympic sport. The discovery itself is from the fifth century BC. And so we have a lot of these athletic statues that can reveal to us perhaps the ideal scenario, but perhaps the names of Olympians who we don't know about. And so inscriptions, statues, skeletons, they come to light very frequently. And the ancient world is not static. It's not dead because we're constantly finding new papyri, new statues, new pieces of art, new frescoes. And this shifts and changes our ideas of the ancient world all the time.

**JVN** [00:59:22] So then, last question, I think, but I could literally talk to you guys for 15 million years. When was the first evidence of someone doing, like, a standing back tuck or like a back handspring or, like, thinking that, like, gymnastics was interesting?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [00:59:37] Oh, this is ancient Egypt, my friend, we have gone into the acrobatics. So the acrobats of ancient Egypt are very famous, and we have an ostrakon, which is to say a little piece of ceramic, and it's kind of like a Post-it note for the ancient world that you have drawings on and inscriptions and things like this because you'd just throw away pieces of broken pots all the time so you could draw things. But we have a number of them from the second millennium and it goes back even farther that you have acrobats doing back handstands. So you can go to The Met and see probably the most famous depiction of an acrobat.

But then Romans become obsessed with acrobats and hire them like Cirque de Soleil to come to the ludi, which is the games. So they perform at the Coliseum, they perform at the palace and acrobatic teams become super popular. So gymnastics comes from the Greek word gymnos, where we get gymnasium, which is to say naked space. But acrobats were something that we're not really competitive in the ancient world. But they were troops. They were traveling troupes of acrobats, much more like Cirque du Soleil, that could be hired, but they become very popular, particularly in ancient Egypt.

And so we have Egyptian acrobats being brought in by the Romans as a way of being like, "Ooooh, look at this exotic thing that I have brought from a different area," just like a rhinoceros or a lion or a tiger. And I don't like the equating of people with animals. But Romans used athletes as a way of showing supremacy. So, "I brought, I brought this gladiator from Thrace. I brought this tiger from India, and I brought this elephant from Africa." And that's a way of creating supremacy over all of these peoples and things and animals. And so acrobats and athletes play a part in kind of the constellation of empire that Rome is really drawing.

**JVN** [01:01:43] OK, well, I accidentally have another kind of, like, thought. So sorry about it. So, much in the way that we are thinking of, like, you know, ancient Greece and ancient Rome didn't operate independently of each other, like, there is a Venn diagram, or, and there's, like, a confluence of thoughts. There's, like, shared cultures and stuff. But ancient Egypt was also going on during that time, which just occurred to me so that the ancient Greeks and the ancient Egyptians like, get down. Was there ever any, like, didn't even ever come over from Egypt and like, you know, try to Thuc like some other guy in the Olympics or something? You know, it always comes back to gay sex. But did that ever happen?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:02:20] I don't know if there's any evidence of the Egyptian participating in the games, but the Greeks were engaged with Egyptians one way or another for most of their history. They were trade partners with them. They got into military conflicts, of course, like, the high period of Egyptian culture that you will be familiar with is before the period of Greece that we know. But we want to make it more

complicated, too, because it wasn't just Egyptians and Romans and Greeks floating around here. We have people called the Phoenicians who were involved as well. The Persians we talked about, many of the people who show up in the Bible were all in this mix. So, and, they're all there. They all have different sexual customs and athletic customs that they're actually passing back and forth and comparing to each other.

**JVN** [01:03:05] But there was pharaohs in Egypt during ancient Greece, right? Or no?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:03:11] Yeah, so I mean by the time of our period of ancient Greece that we talk about, Egypt had fallen and was under different kingdoms. Right.

**JVN** [01:03:19] What?! So by 776 BCE, when they had the first Olympics, like, Egypt was getting run by somebody else?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:03:30] Yeah, unfortunately, after about the seventh century, we have the Persians coming in in the seventh century to take over Egypt.

**JVN** [01:03:39] BCE?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:03:40] BCE. So Egypt has essentially been occupied since the Persians and the seventh century BCE and then it goes. So Egypt is then ruled by Persians. Then we have the takeover of Ptolemies, who is a general of Alexander the Great and Ptolemies goes all the way until the overthrow of Cleopatra and Cleopatra dies in 30 BCE. And then the Romans rule it and annex it as a province. And so Egypt has been an occupied territory for so many years.

**JVN** [01:04:14] But so Cleopatra was a-

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:04:17] She's a Ptolemy. She is part of a Macedonian dynasty, although we don't know about the heritage of her mother. So before the movie comes out with Gal Gadot, I will send notes about this. But she comes from a Macedonian line. We don't know about her genetics fully.

**JVN** [01:04:36] So where's Macedonia?! Is this a second episode? It's a second episode!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:04:41] You'd probably need to go on, but, so, Macedonia is Northern Greece, right and it's where Alexander the Great comes from. I'm sure you would love to do an Alexander Hephæstion episode because there's quite a bit of material for you there. And so this is, you know, the Macedon came and conquered southern



Greece and then went and led the Greeks to conquer the Persians and then conquered, went all the way down to Egypt. And so from about 323 BCE or so, Egypt was ruled by a Greek-speaking noble family. [CROSSTALK]

**JVN** [01:05:14] And I think this is actually my last question, which I probably should have asked at the very beginning. So when from, like, 776 in the first alleged Olympic Games or 776 BCE, when was Greece the most powerful, like, would the Romans have been, like, the most afraid of the Greeks, like, when were they really just dominating?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:05:32] So I mean, the Greeks were never as powerful as the Persians, in a way, but they're mostly just fine themselves. They never threatened the Romans, right. When they were at their most powerful, it was when the Alexander led the Macedonians and the Greeks out of Greece and conquered the Persians. But it's one of those things where if maybe the Persian Empire had been stronger, it wouldn't have happened.

**JVN** [01:05:57] And so it was that, though?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:05:58] 331. 331. He went up. [CROSSTALK] BCE. He won it. And so then the story of the Mediterranean afterwards, the eastern Mediterranean is a bunch of huge battles between Hellenistic kingdoms ruled by Macedonian kings, but outside of Greece.

**JVN** [01:06:20] And then when does Cleopatra die?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:06:23] So Cleopatra dies in 30 B.C. This right after a big naval battle with Rome. And Octavian is there who later becomes Augustus.

**JVN** [01:06:33] I thought Alexander the Great and Cleopatra did it.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:06:35] No, that's-

**JVN** [01:06:38] Who did Cleopatra do it with?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:06:39] Antony! [CROSSTALK] She sleeps with Julius Caesar first and they have a son named Cesarian. And then she hooks up with this BFF Antony. And Antony and Cleopatra die within a few days of each other. So Cleopatra dies in 30 BCE and that's really the end of the Ptolemaic empire. And Alexander the Great's empires, kind of writ large, all kind of end at that point, even though they had been separate kingdoms afterwards and Cleopatra, then her kingdom becomes Roman Egypt. And so when I refer

to Egypt from the death of Cleopatra forward, I say Roman Egypt, because that means that Romans have colonized and taken over it. So, yeah, it's, it's a fascinating period. And, and Egypt is happening, again, at the same time as Greece and Rome, even though when a lot of people teach it, they teach it as "OK, once upon a time, here's ancient Egypt, here's ancient Greece. Here's ,here's Rome." But it's not a linear narrative at all.

**JVN** [01:07:47] Which I think I just really spent the last hour and fifteen minutes realizing when I thought I was going to talk about the Olympics. So this is the literal final question. It's open. Final thoughts, Joel. Sarah, is there anything that we should have covered that you're like, "Fuck me? We really should have said this thing about Greece that we didn't," or like. Is there anything that we missed or that you just want to say working people find your work? I mean-

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:08:08] I mean, so, look, I think we covered the great stuff because we talked about how complex things are and how there's not simple answers. So that's a big win. I put a lot of stuff on a website called [sententiaeantiquae.com](http://sententiaeantiquae.com). And I'm going to say this so my publisher doesn't hate me, I have a book called *The Many-Minded Man* about the Odyssey, from Cornell University Press. And every time I go on podcasts, I forget to mention it.

**JVN** [01:08:35] Not today!

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:08:37] Let Bethany know I didn't forget her!

**JVN** [01:08:39] Bethany, you did good! And we did not forget!

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:08:44] I think that we've covered a lot of interesting topics and certainly there's a lot to keep in mind before the Tokyo Olympics happen. One thing I will say is that I've been following a lot of the things having to do with Simon Biles lately, and I think this should be allowed to shine. So I think that, you know, in ancient Greece, there were umpires, there were judges, but they also allowed athletes to be as exceptional as they possibly could be. So I think one thing I would take away from this is like, let Simone be great. Let her get the points that she deserves for all of the amazing dismounts that she's doing and all of the amazing gymnastics. So that's one thing.

The second thing is that the Olympics have always been not only religious but political. And so we didn't get to talk about Hitler and the Berlin Olympics in the 1930s. But we should also know that the Olympics has been manipulated and used in modern culture as a way of connecting different cultures, particularly in Nazi Germany back to ancient Greece. And so it's not completely innocuous. It has been made political at various times. So, so I

think it's important to see that the Olympics are important to study, but have also been used by governments and by various different cultures over time as a way to get prestige from did it, but so did Nazi Germany. And to an extent, I think other people do it still today using Olympic athletes as a way of reflecting greatness on their own nation. So you mentioned the Russians, for instance, and I think that people still see a lot of nationalism embedded in the Olympics that we should really address. So those are the things I think.

And in terms of my stuff, I write for Hyperallergic, which is an awesome arts and culture blog that is run by Hrag Vartanian. And so most of my stuff is there. And long ago I wrote a book called Trade and Taboo: Disreputable Professions in the Roman Mediterranean. There's some gladiators in there if you want to learn more. And that's from University of Michigan Press and came out in 2016, although there's an Audible version that you can listen to that is not actually my voice, because I sound, you know, probably not like something you want to listen to for ten hours straight.

**JVN** [01:11:14] That is not true. I love your fucking speaking voice. Don't you ever talk about your voice like that to get on my podcast, Dr. Sarah Bond. But you have an amazing voice. But also, did you have anything else to say? I said one other question. [CROSSTALK] Was there gold, silver, bronze medals in ancient Greece?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:11:32] Nope.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:11:32] No. You got a crown of olive leaves or laurel leaves depending on the things. It's all about the glory, man.

**JVN** [01:17:39] Was there a second and third?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:11:40] Nothing for second! Nope, no second. No third. We know that athletes sometimes got these, like, red skeins of yarn that they could put on themselves and tie them. But yeah, we're talking about just an olive wreath that goes on top of your head and no prizes for second or third.

**JVN** [01:11:59] All the way up to 393 CE, when they ended, there was never-, no second or third. Like, that didn't happen until 1896, like, the modern ones.

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:12:05] Right. And, there's we, I think that later on we get the payment of athletes, but the very first Olympics and the very first Olympic athletes, they're not getting paid any kind of money.

**JVN** [01:12:17] Just all glory. Oh, and what was the money, was it just, like, little circle rocks?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:12:22] No, we have, we have coinage that, that comes into circulation and the coinage is all coming from base metals that are gold, silver and bronze.

**JVN** [01:12:32] But even in ancient Greece, too, Joel, there were those coins?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:12:35] Yeah, I mean, some of our greatest historical evidence comes from coins, and different, all the different city states made their own with their own divinities or images on them, especially this entire field of study in coins called numismatics. That-

**JVN** [01:12:52] Would Sparta take Athens' coins or was it only in the cities?

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:12:54] So Sparta actually banned money. They, they, they had, like, iron rods instead. So you weren't allowed to have money in Sparta. You had to spend all your time being a buff warrior.

**JVN** [01:13:04] Oh my God, Joel. I think I may have just accidentally, like, looped you into another podcast recording for a later date where we talk about, like, inter-ancient Grecian politics.

**PROF. JOEL CHRISTENSEN** [01:13:14] I'd love to do that.

**JVN** [01:13:15] Oh, fuck! Oh, and then also, Sarah, last question. When was Pompeii again? When was that eruption?

**PROF. SARAH BOND** [01:13:20] So Vesuvius, which is the, which is the volcano on the Bay of Naples. It erupts many times, but the one that we focus on is 79 CE. So that's a few years [CROSSTALK] after Nero. It's a few years after Nero, about fifteen years.

**JVN** [01:19:21] Oh my, you guys, are we starting a history podcast?! Like, are we starting, this is, like, I can't, this is so good. I love you so much, thank you so much for your time. Drs. Sarah Bond, Joel Christensen. Thank you so much for your time. You guys are amazing. Thank you. Thank you.

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