Did the Romans wear underwear?
Have you ever wondered whether the Romans wore pants? If there were pets in the ancient world? If people believed in ghosts or aliens? From Cleopatra to the Colosseum, from Augustus Caesar to Alexandria, many ancient histories tend to focus on people and events that remain popular due to films, television and video games. Yet this approach can mean that the details of daily life often go unnoticed.

Enter historian Garrett Ryan, who has made it his mission to answer the niche and obscure questions surrounding Ancient Greece and Rome by heading online and offering his expertise to public forums like Reddit. We spoke to him about his new book *Naked Statues, Fat Gladiators, And War Elephants* which, through a series of short and humorous essays, seeks to answer these questions and many more.

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Can you tell us a little about yourself and your interest in the ancient world?

For as long as I can remember, I've been interested in history, and especially in the Ancient Greeks and Romans. This eventually led me to earn a PhD in Greek and Roman history at the University of Michigan. After teaching at a few universities, I left academia to start toldinstone.com, a website that explores ancient history. While promoting my site, I discovered online history forums – especially AskHistorians on Reddit – where tens of thousands of people were asking questions about the Greeks and Romans. I became active on these sites, and began to think about writing a book that would answer some of the most frequently asked questions in a way that was both informative and humorous. The end result was *Naked Statues, Fat Gladiators, And War Elephants*.

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What is the most common question about the Greeks and Romans you see asked online?

There's no single question, but certain topics come up again and again. I see a lot of questions about the classical world's most famous figures – Cleopatra, Caesar, Alexander the Great. Other favourite topics include the fall of the Roman Empire, the Roman army and gladiators. In general, most people know Ancient Greece and Rome through mass media – movies, television, video games – and their questions reflect that.
Have you ever been stumped by a question? And if so, can you tell us what it was?
I'm stumped routinely, and that's half the fun! When you aren't sure about a topic you have to dive into the sources, and frequently end up discovering things you never suspected. Once, for example, a student in a class I was teaching at the University of Michigan asked me whether the tomb of any Roman emperor or empress had ever been discovered intact. With all the confidence of a newly minted PhD, I answered: “No, they were looted in the Middle Ages.” But later I began to doubt my answer, did some reading, and discovered that the tombs of two Roman empresses had been uncovered during the demolition of old St Peter's in the Renaissance. The question about imperial tombs was eventually included in my book.

In your experience, what do people find the most surprising about the ancient world?
We know the Greeks and Romans – or at least we like to think we do – in a way we know no other ancient civilisation. This leads to all sorts of misconceptions. People who are familiar with Classical history primarily through movies or video games, for example, often imagine the Greeks and Romans in lurid colours - all bloodshed and debauchery, impossible virtue and improbable vice. That is misleading, of course. The Greeks and Romans, after all, were just people, not all that different from us in the basic concerns of making a living or raising a family. But it is equally misleading to think that the Greeks and Romans were just like us. For most of us, it’s hard to even imagine living in a world in which virtually every meal consists of bread or porridge, life expectancy hovers in the twenties, and slavery is a casually accepted fact. Yet that was the world in which the Greeks and Romans lived.

Why do you think that aspects of daily life and many of the other topics covered in your book seldom appear in popular histories?
While there's always demand for another biography of Caesar or Cleopatra, it can be hard to convince a publisher that the public is clamouring to learn more about some niche topic like ancient barbers or birth control. There are, of course, books that cover daily life in antiquity, but most of these are either academic monographs or student handbooks. What sets my book apart, for better or worse, is its variety. To the best of my knowledge, no other book on ancient history tries to meet popular interest by addressing questions on a wide range of topics, familiar and otherwise.

Is there anything you’ve discovered when answering questions that surprised you?
All sorts of things. To give just one instance, the first question in my book is: “Why didn’t the Greeks or Romans wear pants?” While researching the answer I discovered - among many other things - that the Athenians often kept small coins in their mouths (since their clothes didn’t have pockets), that pants were repeatedly outlawed in the city of Rome, and that Caligula liked to dress up as Zeus at parties.

We’d hate to spoil the book’s surprises, but did the Greeks or Romans wear underwear?
As far as we can tell, not often, at least not in the modern sense. Women wore breast bands (a sort of proto-bra), but otherwise there’s almost no evidence for people wearing what we would consider underwear. The Greeks and Romans generally preferred light under-tunics.

Have you ever been asked a question that particularly amused you?
Two spring to mind. The first one was: “Did anyone ever streak in the Colosseum?” The answer, unfortunately, is no. Or at least no written source mentions it, and it would have been very difficult. The arena of the Colosseum was separated from the first row of seats by a steep drop and an elaborate fence. Archers were stationed along the barrier to maintain order in the arena, so even if someone managed to scramble over the fence he would have been pincushioned with arrows before he got far. The other question that made me laugh was: “Were aqueducts ever used as water slides?” Here again, though we have no textual evidence one way or the other, the answer is almost certainly no. Almost all Roman aqueducts have a very slight gradient - sometimes only a few inches per mile - so any attempt to slide inside one would have only produced bruises.
Ancient Questions

The title of your book - Naked Statues, Fat Gladiators, And War Elephants - is intriguing, to say the least. Can you tell us a little about where it came from?

It catches the eye, doesn’t it? The title refers to three questions in the book: “Why were so many Greek and Roman statues naked?”, “Were gladiators fat?” and “How were war elephants used in battle?” (In case you’re wondering, the short answers to those questions are “artistic convention”, “not really” and “very carefully”.)

Could you tell us more about these fat gladiators?

About 15 years ago, archaeologists working at Ephesus in Turkey discovered a gladiator cemetery. The bones were analysed by forensic anthropologists, who announced that gladiators had lived on a fattening vegetarian diet. We already knew this from textual sources – the Romans used to call gladiators “barley boys” because they lived on bean and barley gruel – but the Ephesian team were the first to suggest that the gladiators’ diet was intended to fatten them up. Layers of fat, they pointed out, would have helped to protect a gladiator’s vital organs. This led to a series of popular articles about fat gladiators. But there’s no good evidence that gladiators were actually overweight. They were probably fed beans and barley simply because they were nutritious and cheap. The masters of gladiator schools, after all, didn’t want sluggish fighters. Since gladiators trained hard, they would have burned their bean and barley calories pretty efficiently. They may not have been as trim as modern athletes, but to judge from our textual and artistic sources the average gladiator was far from overweight.

Were the answers in your book difficult to research?

For every page I wrote, I probably read three or four hundred. This was time-consuming, particularly since the pandemic limited my access to research libraries. Reading so broadly was a new experience for me. When you earn a PhD in the classics you focus on your thesis topic - in my case, the political dimensions of monumental building in the eastern Roman provinces - to the virtual exclusion of everything else. For this book, on the other hand, I had to research a huge range of topics, which was both fascinating and exhausting.

We imagine that you can’t just go into a library and look up something like “did the Romans wear underwear”?

I usually began with a general topic and worked back to the sources. For the underwear question, I started by looking up articles on Greek and Roman clothing in classical dictionaries. I used the bibliographies of these articles to find books on related topics, and then read those books to find the primary sources that actually answered the question.

There’s one we’ve always wanted to know: what were the Romans’ drinking habits?

One of the questions in my book is: “How much wine did the Greeks and Romans drink?” So hopefully I can satisfy your thirst for knowledge. Drinking habits varied from person to person, of course, but it’s been estimated that the average Roman man drank about a litre of wine per day – roughly one-and-a-third modern bottles. This might sound like a lot, but it was taken with meals and mixed with water, so we shouldn’t imagine the Romans staggering about during their daily routines. The really heavy drinking took place at banquets. Tales of debauchery abound. There was one Roman, for example, who was nicknamed tricongius - 'the three gallon guy' - for his ability to drink three Roman gallons of wine (more than ten litres) at a single swig.

Wow… and was this wine as we understand it?

More or less, although it wouldn’t have seemed very savoury to us. As I mentioned, wine was almost always mixed with water, and although it was strained before it was poured it still contained plenty of stray seeds and bits of grape skin. And all sorts of things were added to it - from marble dust to perfume and even salt water.

So when can we learn more about these fascinating aspects of the ancient world?

Naked Statues, Fat Gladiators, And War Elephants will be published at the start of September, and is now available for pre-order on Amazon and the Foyles website. In the meantime, I’d encourage readers to visit toldinstone.com, which explores many more aspects of the ancient world.

Naked Statues, Fat Gladiators, And War Elephants by Garrett Ryan is available from 1 Sept 2021 from Prometheus Books