



We should not ignore
the lessons of history

Description

One-on-one with Dr. Gregory Aldrete on why the study of ancient Greece and Rome matters

By Irwin Rapoport

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Both **Byron Toben** and I wrote recent articles on ancient Rome that featured and made reference to **Dr. Gregory Aldrete's** excellent and most informative lecture on Youtube entitled [Cicero and the Secrets of Roman Oratory](#).

It is very insightful and it continues to retain its relevance, and I have shared it with friends, who also appreciated it.

Here is the link for my article, [The fascinating world of Ancient Rome](#), and the link for Byron's, [Did Trump stud Cicero's secrets of oratory?](#)

As both of us were very impressed by the lecture, the question arose – why not go directly to the source and speak with Dr. Aldrete? He was contacted by email and he replied within 24 hours while travelling and, to my delight, he generously agreed to be interviewed on the relevance of Classical studies and his passion for teaching.

Before we get to the interview, here is some background on Dr. Aldrete, Professor Emeritus of History and Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, who has a website at gregorysaldrete.com

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– Dr. Gregory Aldrete

The [Wikipedia page](#) for Dr. Aldrete provides a solid background on this renowned and gifted scholar. Among his many accomplishments:

He was the Frankenthal Professor of History and Humanities at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, where he had been teaching since 1995.

He earned his undergraduate degree from Princeton University and his Ph.D. in ancient history from the University of Michigan.

Aldrete speaks Latin, ancient Greek, Spanish, and can read texts in Italian, French, and German.

Aldrete has written the books *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome*, *Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome*, *The Encyclopedia of Daily Life in the Ancient World*, *Daily Life in the Ancient Roman City: Rome, Pompeii, and Ostia*, *The Long Shadow of Antiquity: What Have the Greeks and Romans Done For Us?* (with Alicia Aldrete), and *Reconstructing Ancient Linen Body Armor: Unraveling the Linothorax Mystery* (with Scott Bartell and Alicia Aldrete).

Aldrete's interdisciplinary approach to the study of the ancient world has earned him fellowships. Apart from numerous research trips to Italy, Aldrete has studied Vatican Library manuscripts.

He has made six educational video courses with The Great Courses. He has contributed detailed courses on Roman history, a study of the general history of the Ancient World with a global perspective, courses on the decisive military battles and military blunders in world history, and a short course on modern movies and TV set in ancient Rome or that use Roman themes.

Aldrete has received multiple awards for his teaching, including the Regents Teaching Excellence Award from the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents in 2015, Wisconsin Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, and the 2009 National Teaching Award for Teaching at the Collegiate Level by the Society for Classical Studies (formerly the American Philological Association).

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And with this information in mind, let us delve into the interview, which is presented in a Q&A format:

IR: *The question has been asked many times and it is still very relevant – why does the study of ancient Greece and Rome matter?*

Aldrete: Understanding ancient Greece and Rome is essential because those cultures were hugely influential in shaping the world that we live in today. Everything from our laws to our religions to our government to our ideas about sport, sex, cities, childhood, food, and superstitions are directly shaped or determined by antiquity. You cannot really understand yourself or other people without understanding where all of you came from.



Dr. Aldrete and students demonstrating the concept of the phalanx battle formation

Furthermore, in order to make good decisions about the future, it is essential to understand how we all got to where we are now. Not all the legacies of antiquity are positive ones, but again it is vital to have this knowledge to inform one's actions today and in the future. This is something I feel so strongly about that my wife and I wrote an entire book about the myriad influences of the ancient world on today. It's called ***The Long Shadow of Antiquity: What Have the Greeks and Romans Done For Us?***

IR: *What are some of the key lessons that we can learn from the Greeks and Romans and how do they pertain to modern problems and politics?*

Aldrete: While technology changes, human nature does not, so by studying how people of the past have reacted to various challenges it can give us ideas for how to deal with similar challenges today. The ancient Roman historian Livy explained it this way: "In history, you see examples of every sort of behaviour displayed before you, and from these, you can identify for yourself and your country good things to imitate and shameful things to avoid."

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– Dr. Gregory Aldrete

IR: *The study of the Classics is more than just battles, politics, and the formation of Christianity. It is about the development of art, literature, drama, public speaking, philosophy, mathematics, various sciences, and engineering and construction, such as Roman aqueducts, roads, and buildings including the Coliseum and, for the Greeks, the Parthenon and the Acropolis, the tunnel on Samos, the lighthouse at Alexandria, and other famous temples and structures, and of course the art of politics, mythology, and psychology. Do you find that people today forget our links to the Classical world and the debt that we owe to that era?*



Aldrete: Unfortunately, this is true. However, I've also found that one of the most effective ways to give people an appreciation for history is to demonstrate its relevance to their own lives.

IR: *From what you are saying, should we be concerned about universities providing sufficient funds to ensure the survival of Arts and Sciences and Humanities faculties?*

Aldrete: This is a huge problem. It is trendy today to say that education should focus exclusively on supposedly practical subjects such as the STEM curriculum. But the Humanities, above all, teach people how to communicate effectively and how to think critically, and those two skills are absolutely essential and relevant to almost any situation. Furthermore, simply having a high level of technological knowledge is actively dangerous if you don't have awareness of things like historical context or ethics. These are what the Humanities provide.

IR: *For people just beginning to acquire an interest in ancient Greece and Rome, which books would you suggest in terms of ancient authors and history books – classic and recent?*

Aldrete: Some essential readings from ancient historians would include, for Greek history, **Herodotus' History** and **Homer's Iliad**. For Roman history, **Tacitus'** writings and the **Lives of the 12 Caesars** by **Suetonius**. **Plutarch's Lives** are good for both Greek and Roman history. For a good introductory textbook type survey of Greek history, I'd suggest **Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History** by S. Pomeroy et al. For Roman history I'd go with **The Romans** by Boatwright, Talbert, et al. On everyday life, my own book, **Daily Life in the Roman City** has a lot of info.

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– Dr. Gregory Aldrete

IR: *When did you first realize that you had a passion for the Classics and how did you develop it? Are there any professors that you would credit as mentors who helped guide you in your studies and career?*

Aldrete: From childhood, I had always loved history and read lots of non-fiction history books (as well as historical fiction), but I came from a family of doctors and so was on the pre-med track all the way until my junior year in college. I ended up taking all the hard science courses necessary to apply to medical school, however, early in college I took a course on Late Antiquity taught by [Prof. Peter Brown](#), who basically invented that entire area of study. He was a mesmerizing lecturer and I just fell in love with Roman history because of his lectures. I had to sit down and ask myself "what did I really want to spend the rest of my life doing – practicing medicine or studying Roman history?"

Even though I enjoyed science (and still read scientific journals for fun), the honest answer was Roman history, so I scrapped all my previous plans and re-oriented myself towards history grad school. It was a long shot because I did not have the necessary ancient languages or ancient history courses at the time. But, luckily I got into a history grad program and it all worked out.



Dr. Aldrete (3rd from the left) and students in simulated battle dress

IR: Was it difficult to learn how to read and speak ancient Greek and Latin?

Aldrete: It was very tough because I started on the languages way too late and had to cram a lot of remedial study of Greek, Latin, French, and German into the first two years of grad school. Doing all those languages simultaneously made those years some of the hardest of my life. I got through it (barely), but my main advice to students who want to pursue ancient history is to start the languages as soon as possible.

'I genuinely love history and want others to love it, so early on I determined to openly show that enthusiasm to students, even at the risk of seeming weird or eccentric.'

– Dr. Gregory Aldrete

IR: Teaching is a passion and you are a very passionate educator who cares about his fields of study. Do you find that your passion for the Classics is inspiring a new generation of scholars and potential professors?

Aldrete: As a student, I always found that if a professor was really passionate about a subject, I would get interested in it even if it was not something inherently of interest to me. Conversely, if a professor seemed bored by his own subject, as a student it made me think "why should I care about it then." I genuinely love history and want others to love it, so early on I determined to openly show that enthusiasm to students, even at the risk of seeming weird or eccentric.

Enthusiasm begets enthusiasm. One of the most gratifying experiences of recent years has been that lots of my students have gone on to become teachers themselves in high schools across Wisconsin, and I taught long enough that students began showing up in my college classrooms who were taught in high school by former students of mine. When those students tell me that they have a love of history because their high school teacher was so inspirational, it's a great feeling knowing that I contributed something to their training.

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Via our email conversation, Dr. Aldrete said: “If you enjoyed that video, I have done six entire video courses with **The Great Courses** on various topics. (Unfortunately, those are not free, but if you have a subscription that includes Audible, The Great Courses, or Wondrium, you can watch or listen to them).”

He has also visited our fair city – “I did lecture in Montreal about 15 years ago, and hope I can return and see more of the city sometime.” I, and no doubt many others, would be pleased to hear him speak at a public lecture, and most definitely volunteer to show him the Montreal that we love and cherish. Did the Romans have their own version of Montreal bagels? That is certainly a question we can ask the professor.

Images: courtesy of Dr. Gregory Aldrete

Feature image: Dr. Gregory Aldrete with wife Alicia Aldrete in Pompeii

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