

Classics



Philip Matyszak earned his doctorate in Roman history from St. John's College, Oxford. He teaches ancient history at Cambridge University, and has authored over a dozen books on Greek and Roman history, including *The Classical Compendium: A Miscellany of Scandalous Gossip, Bawdy Jokes, Peculiar Facts, and Bad Behavior from the Ancient Greeks and Romans*. Here, "Maty" discusses how getting to know the ancients is not only educational, but also fascinating and fun.

What is it about the classical world that you find so intriguing?

Some people go for things like *Star Trek*, but I prefer studying the ancient world. It's an alternative reality that was, well, real. You get to glimpse a world where people did things completely differently, but were still very much like us. And if you really get into it, you're respected. Speak Klingon, and people say, "Ooh, that's a bit strange." But speak Latin, and people go, "Wow."

Is it important to learn Latin today?

I always say that learning another language—any language—teaches you another way to think, and that's very important. But learning Latin gives you insight into another world. When you read Latin, you find yourself falling into the mental patterns of the people who wrote that way 2,000 years ago. It provides insight into the minds of people in the past, and there's basically no other way of doing that.

Your book *The Classical Compendium* is a banquet of delicious tidbits from ancient times. What prompted you to write it?

I was actually following a classical tradition. Numerous books in the ancient world, including Plutarch's *Moralia* and Aulus Gellius's *Attic Nights*, contain collections of anecdotes and jokes. I loved writing *The Classical Compendium*. I think that what really comes through is our shared humanity: the fact that people sometimes made sardonic jokes under grim circumstances, that they were capable of showing unexpected compassion in various

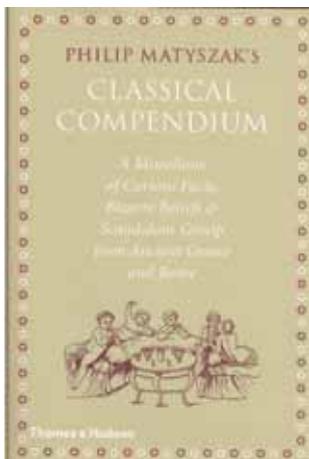


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for All

Interview with Classical Scholar Philip Matyszak

by Amy Entwisle



situations, that they were inventive, and vindictive—the fact that people 2,000 years ago were very similar to us.

The thing that I try to get across in all my books is that the classics aren't just a bunch of dry old texts. The stories are fascinating. In *The Classical Compendium*, for example, I tell the story of Philip V of Macedon, who was campaigning around the city of Larissa, in Thessaly, to make Thessaly a vassal state. In a sneak attack, his army rushed toward Larissa, smacked their ladders against the city wall, climbed

up, and found that the ladders were six feet too short. Then there was Cleisthenes of Sikyon, who spiked the town of Chriseas's drinking water with a laxative to weaken his opponent for battle—so effectively, in fact, that there was no battle. He captured the town virtually unopposed.

I also include some fascinating astronomical observations in the book. The philosopher Pliny the Elder, for instance, observed that the sun must be incredibly huge, because wherever on earth you are, the shadows all point in the same direction or are the same length at the same time of day. And Plutarch—a priest at Delphi known today for his biographies of famous Greeks and Romans—said, “I disagree with this philosophy about atoms, because it means that there should be so much space between the atoms that everything can pass through itself.” That they did all of this by casual observation is truly wonderful.

You say they were very similar to us.

What are some of the ways in which the ancients' lives differed from ours?

Well, for one thing, someone like Aristotle would have defined the basic family unit as a man, his wife, and their slave. What's interesting is that the kids were supposed to follow naturally; they weren't essential, original ingredients, but a slave was so considered.

Just staying alive in those days was a challenge. A scratch could become infected, and in an age without antibiotics, that was pretty much it. They also lacked protection against childhood diseases. If you look at Roman life expectancy, the highest mortality rate was between

ages one and five. Interestingly, though, if you made it past the age of forty, you were likely to live as long as an average person in the 1970s, and that garnered you some respect. The Romans worked on the principle that the world was always degenerating from some sort of perfect ideal, so the older you were, the nearer you were to the days of the highly honored and respected ancestors.

Your latest book explores the life and times of Roman general Petilius Cerealis. Why him?

There's sort of a boy's own derring-do about his approach to life which I find quite compelling. And there have been very few academic studies of an imperial general who wasn't a direct member of the imperial family. Petilius Cerealis was likely an adopted member of Rome's ancient Petelius family, and son-in-law of the emperor Vespasian. He lost half a legion to Boudicca, and took part in two civil wars and two barbarian uprisings. He's the only man who ever tried to take the city of Rome with a cavalry charge. Ultimately, he founded York and became governor of Britain.

He was a fascinating character. In the book, I tell the story of how his flagship was stolen by a Batavian special boat squadron, who thought he was onboard. In fact, he was visiting a lady friend in a nearby village. When his armies thought their general had been kidnapped, he had to show up in his underwear and point out that he hadn't.

Talk about the inside story! Aside from reading about the ancient world, how can we learn more about it?

You might consider taking a look at a field that I'm taking more and more interest in myself, and that's reenactment. It isn't just a matter of dressing up as a Roman legionary and prancing around waving a spear. To a certain extent, it's practical archaeology. For example, we've learned a lot about Roman legionaries' kit (their clothing, armor, and weapons), their tactics, and how it all actually works in practice by doing it. Take the Roman legionary boot: we know how it's made, because we found the various bits of it. But it's only when somebody put it on and tried marching for 20 miles that they discovered that using a file to round off the edges where the leather has been cut prevents horrendous blisters from developing.

These are the sort of practical aspects you can see through reenactments. It's not only fun, but it takes you a bit closer to the subject matter, and that, after all, is the goal of studying history: to get as close to the truth as possible. **i**

Learn more about reenactment at www.larp.com/legioxx/groups.html and www.reenactor.net.