

MELC, NELC 0905/ANTH 0905
Fall 2024
Monday & Wednesday 10:15-11:45 AM
Classroom: TBD

Instructor: Emily Hammer
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Office Hours: TBA

WATER IN THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGHOUT HISTORY

Course Description

Water scarcity is one of most important problems facing much of the Middle East and North Africa today. These are arid regions, but human and natural systems have interacted to determine relative water scarcity and abundance at different times and places. This course examines the distribution of water resources throughout the Middle East and the archaeology and anthropology of water exploitation and management over the last 9000 years, looking at continuities and changes through time. Students will learn to make basic digital maps representing Middle Eastern hydro-geography and arguments about modern and historic water resources in the region. The class will cooperatively play an “irrigation management game” designed to familiarize personnel involved in the operation of irrigation schemes with the logistical and social issues involved in water management. We will engage with a variety of media, including academic readings, popular journalism, films, satellite imagery, and digital maps, in our quest to explore whether or not the past can inform present efforts to better manage modern water resources.

The course is structured in units focused on each of the major hydro-environmental zones of the Middle East: the river valleys of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Levant, the internal basins of western Central Asia and the Levant, the deserts of Arabia and North Africa, highland zones in Yemen and Iran, and coastal marsh areas along the Persian Gulf. We will examine irrigation systems, water supply systems, and ways of life surrounding water sources known from ethnographic studies, history, and archaeological excavations. These data will allow us to engage with debates in Middle Eastern anthropology, including those concerning the relationship between water and political power, the environment in which the world’s earliest cities arose, and the relevance of “lessons of the past” for present and potential future water crises and “water wars.” In our final weeks, we will discuss archaeology and historical anthropology’s contribution to conceptions of water “sustainability” and examine attempts to revive traditional/ancient technologies and attitudes about water.

General Education Curriculum

This course fulfills Sector IV (Humanities and Social Sciences) and the Cross-Cultural Analysis Foundational Approach. It is a Freshman Seminar. It counts towards the MELC/NELC and ANTH majors as well as the MMES major. Other majors may also accept it—check with specific departments.

Course Aims

By the end of the semester, students will:

- Understand how humans and climate change shape the availability of water in arid regions
- Describe continuities and changes in Middle Eastern water use and water technology from ancient times to the present, with special attention to the social contexts that sustain or disrupt particular technologies and attitudes towards water
- Explain how knowledge of the past informs our present understanding of water sustainability and how modern water management systems have disturbed some long-term sustainable strategies
- Develop or improve their ability to integrate information from diverse social-scientific and humanistic sources, critically evaluate arguments, and present ideas in verbal and written formats
- Possess a detailed knowledge of the hydro-geography of the Middle East through interpretation of maps and satellite imagery; know how to make original representations of this hydro-geography in digital map format

Course Format

The course meets twice per week. At the beginning of the course period, the instructor will give short presentations and lectures, expanding on material covered by the assigned course texts and by films students will be asked to watch during their own time. The remainder of the course time block will be dedicated to a variety of activities, including peer-to-peer discussion, larger group discussion, close reading of annotated articles using Perusall, digital map making and satellite imagery interpretation using Google Earth Pro, drawing diagrams of concepts from readings on whiteboards or chalkboards, and playing an irrigation management game.

Completion of the course readings is absolutely essential for participation in discussions and for success in the course. Activities during class time will assume that students have completed the course reading and thought about it carefully.

Evaluation and Activities

Student evaluation will be based on:

- Active participation in discussions and class activities (20%)
- Shared annotation of course readings using Perusall on designated days (10%)
- Two short writing assignments, 5-6 pages each (20%)
- An annotated Google Earth map of sites and landscapes discussed in the course (10%)
- A brief 8-10-minute group presentation of a historical or modern water issue in the Middle East in connection with course themes, accompanied by student-generated digital maps (15%)
- A final exam (map and essay-based) (25%).

Materials and Equipment

Students will not need to purchase any books for this course. As readings and films are drawn from a variety of sources, the instructor will upload pdf files and weblinks to the Canvas course site for all required materials.

Students will need access to a computer to use Canvas, Perusall, and other online tools. They will need to have administrative access to this computer in order to be able to install the free program Google Earth Pro.