

NELC 2900/ANTH 1925
Spring 2025
Wednesdays 12:00-3:00 pm
Classroom: TBA

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Office: Williams Hall 836
Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:30-4:30 pm (or by appt.)

WHO OWNS THE PAST? ARCHAEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Course Prospectus for Spring 2025

Course Description

This course explores the role of cultural heritage, archaeological discoveries, and museums in the politics of the Middle East, from the nineteenth century to recent or ongoing territorial conflicts of the 2010s and 2020s. We will explore 1) how modern Middle East populations have related and currently relate to their pasts; 2) how archaeology and cultural heritage have been employed to support particular political and social agendas, including colonialism, nationalism, imperialism, and the construction of ethnic-religious identities; 3) the changing role of western and local museums in cultural heritage and identity; and 4) the context and impact of recent cultural heritage destruction events by governments and terrorist groups. Throughout the course, we will discuss the role of the Penn Museum in archaeology and politics over the last 100 years.

Although it was first introduced to the Middle East as a colonial enterprise by European powers, archaeology became a pivotal tool for local populations of the Middle East to construct new histories and identities during the post-World War I period of intensive nation-building after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. To understand this process, we will first look at the establishment of archaeology in the late Ottoman Empire as a foreign and elite practice. We will examine how Penn played a role in this practice through its sponsorship of early excavations in Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, and Iran. Then we will move on to individual case studies in Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Iran, and the South Caucasus to look at the role of archaeology and cultural heritage in the formation of modern nation-states with set borders and a shared identity among citizens as well as the role of archaeology and cultural heritage in recent and ongoing territorial conflicts. We will conclude with an examination of the context and impact of recent cultural heritage destruction events undertaken by the Islamic State (in Syria and Iraq) and by various governments (in the South Caucasus); the changing attitudes of Middle Eastern countries toward foreign museums (especially as embodied in object repatriation requests); and the politics behind inscription of Middle Eastern sites on the UNESCO world heritage list. Course activities and evaluation will center on reading, discussion, and writing. Several course activities incorporate field trips to the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and to the Museum's archives. Where possible, we will draw on the breadth of expertise represented among Penn faculty, graduate students, staff, and affiliates to incorporate guest discussion participants.

Penn College Requirements, Designations, and Majors

This course is a Benjamin Franklin Seminar. It fulfills the "Cross-Cultural Analysis" foundational approach within the Penn College General Education Requirements. The course counts towards majors in a variety of School of Art and Sciences departments, including NELC, MMES, ANTH, ANCH, and CLST. For a full list of course attributes, including designations for Wharton and Engineering, see Path@Penn.

Course Aims

By the end of the semester, students will:

- Understand cultural diversity among modern Middle Eastern societies and the perception of cultural heritage in these societies.
- Develop a critical viewpoint on the entanglement of archaeology and history in colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, and orientalism in the Middle East and the role of archaeological and historical discoveries in promoting particular political ideologies and territorial claims.

- Be able to explain the political contexts in which modern ethnic and religious groups have formed a shared identity as putative direct descendants of particular ancient groups.
- Understand the use of cultural heritage destruction as a weapon in recent wars and conflicts and the role of Middle Eastern objects residing in foreign museums in recent international diplomacy.
- Have practiced developing arguments and communicating ideas through verbal discussion, response papers, presentations, and digital maps.
- Find commonalities and differences across case studies and present these in the context of well-structured arguments.

Course Format and Policies

The course meets once per week. *Completion of the course readings is absolutely essential for participation in discussions and for success in the course.* The instructor and special class visitors will frequently give short presentations on material related to the topic for the day, but the core activities of each meeting will be discussion of assigned readings and/or consideration of other material within frameworks introduced by the assigned readings. The written work for the course will also draw on the course readings.

Laptops are required for some course activities, but students must put them away for discussion times and when the instructor or class guests are presenting, so make sure you also bring paper and pens/pencils for note-taking. Research shows that using a laptop in class prevents you and your neighbors from concentrating, engaging, and learning! Please do not use your phone during class time.

The course time falls during normal lunch hours, so it is understood that you may need to eat during our meetings. Please be courteous of your classmates and the instructor while eating. To minimize distraction, please if possible consume your lunch during the first 30-ish minutes of class and clear the seminar table afterwards.

We will take one 10-15 minute break near the middle point of each course meeting.

Evaluation and Activities

Student evaluation will be based on:

- *Active participation* in discussions and in-class activities, including discussion leadership on assigned days (40%)
- *Four short response papers* of 3-4 pages assigned throughout the term, related to field trips, assigned reading, class discussions, and other activities (44%)
- *A final short paper* of 6-7 pages in which you connect recent events in the Middle East (destruction of a particular cultural heritage site, museum repatriation of a specific object, or UNESCO inscription of a particular site to the World Heritage list) to topics discussed throughout the course. This will involve a modest amount of (guided) outside research (16%).

Reading and Participation

You should expect to spend several hours per week on required readings. Contributions to discussion that demonstrate of your independent understandings of the required readings will be central to your grade. Contributing obviously requires attendance. Each student is allowed 1 excused absence for the semester by writing to the instructor in advance. Any additional absences, regardless of the reason, will affect your participation grade because you will receive a zero for contributions on that day.

Each week, two or three students will be responsible for leading discussion on the course readings (depending on exact enrollment numbers). We will establish a schedule during the first two weeks of the class. When it is your turn to lead the week's discussion, you and your partner(s) will post key questions and reflections for class discussion on the course website by 9 pm on the day before class. You and your

partner(s) will also take a lead role in motivating and moderating the discussion during class time, as well as a lead role in engaging with any guest speaker(s) for that week.

Written Work

All written work for the course should follow page limits and should be submitted via the course website by midnight of the due date. Please double-space your work and use 1" margins and Times New Roman 12-point font. Be sure to cite class readings and outside sources where appropriate. You may use whichever citation system you are most familiar with, but please be consistent.

Plagiarism is not tolerated and will be reported to the Penn Center for Community Standards and Accountability (CSA). Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to: representing others' ideas or work as your own, copying text from any source without using quotation marks and citations, and using material generated by large language models (such as ChatGPT). All student submissions are automatically submitted through plagiarism and AI detection software. Any plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the assignment; serious cases will result in a failing grade for the course.

If you are in doubt about proper citation practices, please come see the instructor. Read Penn's definition and explanation of plagiarism here: <https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>. For more explicit guidance on how to avoid plagiarism, I recommend the Purdue Online Writing Lab's resources, which you will find on their website (https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html) under "Avoiding Plagiarism" (menu on the left).

Late assignment will be marked down 5% per day; assignments more than 5 days late will not be accepted.

Research Project

Detailed prompts for the short response papers and final paper will be provided closer to their due dates. Students must meet with the instructor at some point in April to discuss their final paper topic. This paper topic should be conceived as an extension of one or more of the topics discussed throughout the course. Evaluation of the final product will rest on strength of argument and the degree to which it engages with key ideas and debate discussed throughout the semester.

Online Resources

A course website is available via Canvas. Pdfs of the readings will be uploaded to this website. Assignment boxes and conversation spaces will be available for you to digitally turn in your work and for you to communicate with the instructor and classmates.