

ARTH 5252 Late Antique Art and Artifact  
Crosslisted as AAMW 5252/ CIST 7405

2024A Tues. 1:45-4:44

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akuttner@sas.upenn.edu - if you have questions about the course, email to arrange a Zoom or in-person chat.

What is 'Late Antiquity'? In 312 when Roman emperor Constantine inaugurated a Christian empire, 'Roman' culture was centuries old. The period ca. 200-650 CE saw profound transformations that launched Medieval, Byzantine and Islamic traditions. In this epoch of upheaval destruction was frequent but partial: Rome long survived, Constantine's 'new Rome,' Constantinople flourished, and around the Empire both proto-global visual culture and local forms prospered. Roman cultural models authorized both innovation and passion for tradition: we critique art-historical models for Late Antique 'decline', analyse habits of material reuse and curation, and look at new Christian and Jewish roles for Roman things as well as polytheist visual survival. Foreign allies and enemies interacted with Greco-Roman Late Antiquity; we visit them too, as in the early Islamic palaces. Media discussed include not just 'monumental' painting, mosaic, sculpture, but also silver, ceramic, ivory, figural textile, glass, painted books, jewelry, coins and more. We look too at Late Antique texts on art, objects, space and viewership. This seminar is open to graduate and undergraduate students.

***Undergraduates need permission from me to be enrolled in this class. When you write a dept. administrator to be let in, write me as well, with your explanation of your background for the course, in terms of experience with the research humanities or social sciences, and your reasons for wanting to take the class. To flourish in the course it is desirable that you have experience with writing a research paper of at least 10 pages, and can cope with reading ca. 80-100 pages a week. You will not have to read everything the grad students do, and your final research project will be shorter than theirs, but it's still going to be equivalent to a well-researched 15-page paper.***

#### **Prerequisites:**

**Fields of study:** I do not expect students to have prior experience of doing scholarship with material and visual stuff - images, objects, structures, or landscapes - in history of art and architecture or in archaeology. I do not expect students to have experience in working on pre-modern and very much past cultures, nor on those of ancient Western Eurasia and Northern Africa in particular ('Mediterranean' largely defined). No knowledge of Greco-Roman textual traditions or history, material religion, 'religious history' of the polytheisms, Christianity, Judaism, early Islam, or anything Roman or Late Antique/ Byzantine/ Early Medieval/Umayyad/Sasanian, is assumed. I don't expect that studies of the modern receptions of antiquities has entered your studies. It is, however, useful for your flourishing if you bring one of these several things to the course.

#### **Languages:**

**Ancient:** some of our material is constituted by ancient texts written in Greek or Latin. (Other ancient language sources might surface also, for a particular topic.) Because this is a highly interdisciplinary course, **texts will be taught - readings assigned - in the first instance in English translation.** If you command the ancient languages yourself, great, you can comment to features of the 'original' for our group sessions and for your class presentations, and when you write a paper give me both the original text and your own translation (or at least a Loeb one emended by careful checking).

**Modern:** No reading knowledge of any language but English is expected of undergraduates. Graduate students are expected to command one or more of the modern languages expected by their PhD program (typically French, German, Italian).

**Generative AI: See end of document.**

**Books to buy:** no assigned book purchases. All readings will be available on Canvas as pdfs/ Word documents, in the library's digital holdings, or on the open web.

People interested to build a library for Roman and Late Antique studies may wish to pick up used versions of some classic and influential texts, and standard sourcebooks: these will also be on reserve. Peter Brown, **The World of Late Antiquity**; Jaś Elsner, **Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph**; Ernst Kitzinger, **Byzantine Art in the Making**; Caecilia Davis-Weyer, **Early Medieval Art, 300-1150, Sources and Documents**; Cyril Mango, **The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453: Sources and Documents**.

**Meet the open web!** For many ancient things and sites, online open access sources will give us good information and very good images - museum databases and online exhibitions, archaeological excavation websites, and good Wiki Creative Commons image galleries, among other resources. Essays and videos from Khan Academy/ Smart History will be a learning resource for some of our material along with videos about ancient art from museums, on YouTube, etc. In this class, one skill you will work on is to get a sense of the ecosystem of the open web in which interest in, and knowledge of, and resources for our antiquity, and its arts, circulates. This includes public-facing scholarship.

### **Skills to practice in this course:**

All are means to critical thought: close and slow looking, and close reading; the arts of skimming and looking quickly; comparing what images do to what texts and performances do (a very important skill, as so many of our images have some relationship to a work of literature in their culture of origin); using the digital domain to get and make knowledge; and finding your own voice, to make and grow ideas, in oral and written form. There is an art to describing, and every good interpretation is in the end a good description. You will practice the skills of disciplined visual imagination of original wholes (we have a lot of fragments), settings and itineraries. You will learn to keep in mind actual viewers and patrons and users and inhabitants for things and places. You will be introduced to some models and theories of analysis and interpretation from several disciplines: art history and archeology, of course, and material religion, but also other kinds of history (social, political, and literary) and anthropology. The silent conversation you have with what you read or listen to (and in your readings themselves are embedded many such conversations) has as its pendant conversation with the group in the room; you will practice at a polished oral presentation, and you should practice the skills of close listening. Taking generative notes is also a skill to hone.

An important skill is at thinking about the life of things in time. This can apply to antiquity itself, where objects might last long past their origin point, move around, get reused - and in Late Antiquity there was a lot of reshaping, reusing, and ostentatious destruction of older things. It also involves thinking about how early modern and modern understandings, contexts, needs and biases have constructed and still constructed binaries like Roman/- or Classical/Late Antique, Roman/Early Christian, etc. Any ancient stuff that you meet by definition has a long life in time: as we reconstruct the ancient settings of our images and the ancient experiences of them, we will also think about the modern settings of our artifact evidence: its ongoing use or reuse as a place or worship, congregation and tourism, or place in an archaeological park, or its removal to a museum and its curation in a gallery, its history of collecting, and sometimes, its history of being looted - and its place, too, in the digital museum and the ecosystems of the open web. Importantly, some of what you see is caught up in complex early modern and modern myths of imperial and of national and religious identities, still or again; what 'cultural heritage' means is an issue for this course.

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### **Tasks and Structure:**

**Attendance** is mandatory.

**Participation**: 10%

A seminar is a workgroup. You are expected and encouraged to ask and answer queries or suggest comments as we brainstorm, and and respond to presentations, not least those of your peers. Some of

this will emerge organically, unstructured, as you and I say or ask something; depending on the size of the class, there may be some structured participation also (ie student small-group brainstorming then report). People uncomfortable with discussion (and those who are comfortable) can also write me their thoughts outside of class. I will take care to bring everyone into the conversation at one point or another. People will not be penalized for being reserved, but generative and fruitful contribution to conversation can raise a grade that is on the half-point cusp.

Students are expected to be prepared for the session by completing assignments to read and look at things. If you have one bad week and cannot get to the readings, come to class anyway, and just let me know that in that week you have not been able to get to readings.

### **Creation:**

#### **Oral: 20%**

Students will give **one sizable oral presentation** of ca. 30 minutes, to be followed by discussion. These will be based on some extended research, and typically they generate the final paper project.

**One or more short presentations (5-10 minutes)** will be given also by each student; these shorter meditations complement the main presentation and, while they take thought, do not call on extended research.

#### **Written: 70%**

**A final research project**, for at least 60% of the grade,.

This is usually on the topic of the large oral presentation, but it is not required that it be so. As traditional expository prose: ca. 22-25 pages of text, plus apparatus. (Undergrads, estimate 15 pages.) This project might be adapted to incorporate non-narrative elements, and we will discuss as a group what role generative AI could or should not play in its creation.

**Short tasks of one-three pages:** probably two or three of these, depending on class size. If I do set these, they will be graded as a portfolio.

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### **Reading and Looking**

Students will be asked to do two kinds of things in preparation for class:

**Read:** read closely/ skim articles and book chapters, reviews and exhibition catalogues, and sometimes online text.. This included online museum aptions and essays, Khan Academy/ SmartHistory text as reference, even the occasionally quite decent wiki (wiki critique is an art form), and also primary (ie ancient) text excerpts in translation.

**Look:** in advance of class, look at the things we will discuss, in sources besides your assigned reading. I will often set such a preparatory task. This means scholarly and museum database and Creative Commons image sets, or sometimes prequel orientation PPTs I make for you. Good photographs and drawings are everything in a course on images, and I will often send you to sources with colored images for ancient colored things, sharp large photographs you can pull for your files, multiple views of 3D things to supplement the single-photo conventional essay illustration, images of X place or things with people the shot, for scale, sometimes plans and models to orient you in space, etc.

-- Looking might also include **short video**.

#### **Amount/ time:**

**Looking** tasks per session, 10-40 minutes

**Readings**, per week: ca. 100-180 pages of secondary reading, more for primary text in translation. Much will be in English. Instructions will often tell you to read X closely, skim other bits. Skimming is an art. See comments to pdf readers below.

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### Generative AI:

In this moment, AI tools are affecting how to find and make knowledge, and how to craft a range of written forms of expression. Some of what I will ask you to do is not yet done well by most chatbots, and it looks as if, for the foreseeable future, it won't be done well. (It does a really lousy job of formal analysis and logical description, when it comes to images, and cannot cope well with assessing spatial relations between images in the physical world, once you push past nice-sounding pronouncements the chatbots have gleaned from their sources.) For other tasks, some uses of AI will be permitted or even assigned. For such a task I will ask you to journal your prompts and assessment of the results. Generative AI still constantly makes up facts (hallucinates), and there is an art in learning what to ignore in what it tells you (sometimes a huge amount).

For assigned and permitted use of generative AI for writing presentation scripts and papers: I will assume only that people are using the free versions of LLM chatbots like ChatGPT 3.5, Claude2, Bing, Google Bard, etc. I can report that ChatGPT 4, 20.00/month, really is more capable for scholarly purposes than 3.5, and that it is more useful as a stand-alone program sometimes than in the way it is folded into Bing Chat. But for many people, 20.00/ month is a lot.

You can always opt out of using assigned generative AI, and I will find you an alternative task. There are many reasons to refuse to use generative AI, from a wish to keep your data private to ethical objections. One large ethical problem is the fact that the big LLMs scraped, for their datasets, a lot of copyrighted production without credit and compensation to the authors/makers.

I look forward to learning from you and with you about how to make generative AI our tool, perhaps even a partner, rather than having it simply dominate us and replace our individual voices. I am a writer and investigator also, so these issues hit close to home for me!

\*'Approaches': one interesting use of good generative AI (like Claude2 or ChatGPT4) is to ask it to suggest scholarly approaches to this or that, taking care to sound like someone who needs good stuff. The checklist it gives you could (I hope) come up from your own brainstorming, at least after some training, but it can give a handy nudge, and provoke you also to thought of what it did not get to. For people new to archaeology and history of art, this might be a good work-out.

\*\* **The pdf-reading bots:** many grad students are already using these to probe what is in an essay or chapter pdf. Some, like ChatPDF, read and 'converse' about the article, which is mildly handy; this bot breaks down on complete indexing of what is in the text, though, which is a nuisance if you mean to use it to quickly find complete page references for a citation. (I tried out the free version.) Others hook pdf analysis to a generative AI function, like Claude2, which I have tried out several times (free version).

Free Claude2 is fairly accurate in its summaries, though not entirely, in my experience of it. But it gets into deep detail if you tell it you need to analyze an article for a seminar; and when I asked it to tell me more about the author's theoretical approaches it did quite a deep dive. (It also has surprisingly few fake citations when asked to provide additional analyses of type X.) Its dialogue (message) quota is, alas, relatively small, so don't count on being able to really profit from its analytical and generative functions in one 8hr block for a mountain of pdfs. Let me know what other pdf readers you have used - we should build a review site.

Obviously these are very handy, to get a start on research: but use them with care, because they do make mistakes and/or are artful. To some extent, go for it: I expect you to at least know what Claude2 said, as it exists, about what an article said. **When, however, I assign a reading to read/skim for our weekly session, I expect you to do that**, and in doing so have a better grasp of what is in the essay, why, how reasoned, and on what evidence, than these bots can give you. Read, as what you are: a present and future writer, estimating how-it-is-done. I want you to understand the glossing apparatus: what is in the footnotes and why, and their relation to one another and the main text. I want you to have a critical grasp of how reproduced images and ancient source texts and vocabulary (and post-antique text that is not in English) are deployed in a reading. I expect you to have a grasp of what the bots cannot yet truly convey: what is absent from, or a ghost in, that reading, and the shape and taste of the author's flow of language and reasoning. A bot cannot really tell the persuasive from the clunky, nor estimate veracity of assertion. It can't tell if X's critique of Y is generous or at least thoughtfully done, or close to pure snark/ short dismissive stab.

In the pre-bot world of reality I was trained in, getting through the mountain of reading in Berkeley seminars could be a nightmare. All scholars need to learn the art of skimming: eg read conclusion first, then intro, then skim to see what `data' and key terms are getting used, check those notes to see if that is where the evidence lives and to see if there are any juicy tangents, dive in in a few places for a close read when they seem to matter. (Judge the TOC of a book, look at its `figure list'. Take a look to see if it has a decent subject index. Look at a book review or two.) Since the pdf bots exist, now grab what they say, and deep-dive into some of it, while skimming artfully.