

MELC, NELC 0001/HIST 0730/ANCH 0100
Fall 2024
Monday & Wednesday 3:30-5
Classroom: TBD

Instructor: Emily Hammer
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Office Hours: TBA

INTRODUCTION TO THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST

Course Description

The great pyramids and mysterious mummies of Egypt, the fabled Tower of Babel, and the law code of the Babylonian king Hammurabi are some of the things that might come to mind when you think of the ancient Near East. These are only a few of the many fascinating, and at times perplexing, products of the civilizations that flourished in the region from 10000 to 300 BCE. This is where hunter-gatherers first settled down into villages and transformed into agriculturalists and pastoralists, where communities first congregated into cities and developed writing, and where people discovered how to determine the length of the hypotenuse a thousand years before the Greek Pythagoras was born. During this course, we will learn more about these and other achievements and discover their place in the cultures and civilizations of the region.

This is an interdisciplinary survey of the history, society, and culture of the ancient Near East, in particular Egypt and Mesopotamia. It draws primarily on archaeology but also on visual art and texts. In lectures and course activities, we will explore archaeological reconstructions of ancient environments, cities, and buildings; examine ancient images; and read excerpts from ancient texts in translation. The texts will include literature (such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the great masterpieces of world literature), myths, royal inscriptions, and diplomatic letters. Throughout the course, students will gain an appreciation of various ancient Near Eastern societies, understand some of their greatest achievements, become acquainted with some fascinating historical personalities (such as Hatshepsut, “the woman pharaoh,” and Akhenaten, “the heretic king”), and begin to appreciate the rich heritage that they have left us.

We are lucky to hold this course at Penn, as the Penn Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology boasts world-class collections of Mesopotamia and Egyptian material that enhance our study of these important regions. In the course you will have the opportunity to work with some of the Museum’s collections (in-person and digitally).

General Education Curriculum

This course fulfills Sector II (History and Tradition) and the Cross-Cultural Analysis Foundational Approach. It is also a requirement for the NELC major/minor. Other majors may accept the course—check with specific departments.

Course Aims

By the end of the semester, students will:

- Have a broad and comparative understanding of the social and political history, art, and culture of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt and how these fit with those of surrounding societies in ancient Anatolia, the Levant, Central Asia, and the Indus Valley
- Gain an appreciation for the uniqueness of the ancient Near East, including its role in early sedentism, agriculture, urbanism, writing, and empires and its long-term historical legacy in the realms of science, mathematics, religion, language/literature, art, and cuisine
- Understand the methods by which ancient history is reconstructed and by which competing conclusions are evaluated, using archaeology, scientific dating and analysis, written texts, and visual art
- Be familiar with the ancient Near Eastern archaeology collections of the Penn Museum and the historical significance of key objects in the collections
- Have gained skills in reading and interpreting ancient Near Eastern texts in translation

Course Format

The course meets twice per week. The first meeting (Monday) will always be devoted to a lecture on the topics covered by that week's readings. Students will complete Canvas quizzes on their own time to test their knowledge of the most important topics covered by the lecture and the reading. During the second course meeting (Wednesday), students will meet with the instructor and other Penn-affiliated experts to engage in a variety of activities, including peer-to-peer discussion, digital map making using Google Earth, and close examination/interpretation of ancient artifacts and ancient texts. The course incorporates several class visits to the galleries and artifact viewing rooms of the Penn Museum, as well as use of the Museum's Digital Collections.

Evaluation and Activities

Student evaluation will be based on:

- Canvas quizzes on material from lectures and readings (10%)
- Participation in class activities, including annotation of ancient texts using Perusall and contribution to Canvas discussion boards (10%)
- An annotated Google Earth map of archaeological sites discussed in the course (5%)
- Short writing assignment of 3-4 pages on a museum object (10%)
- Essay of 6-8 pages on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor (20%)
- Midterm exam (20%)
- Final exam (25%)

Materials and Equipment

Students should purchase the following textbook, from which the majority of the course readings will be drawn. Please make sure you purchase the fourth edition and not earlier versions:

Stiebing Jr., William H. and Susan N. Helft. 2023. Ancient Near Eastern History and Culture, Fourth Edition. New York: Routledge.

Supplementary readings drawn from other sources and translations of ancient texts will be uploaded to the Canvas course site in pdf, alongside links to videos and other resources.

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.