

Ancient Empires

taught live online Summer 2021

July 12–August 13

NELC S119/CLCV S419

Yale University

The History and Cultures of the Empires
of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Armenia, and Afghanistan
from Cyrus to Muhammad

Lectures TTh 9:00a–12:15p



Professor Kevin van Bladel (kevin.vanbladel@yale.edu)

Office hours held via Zoom at regular time TBD

Course Description

This course will be conducted entirely online. It is not made up of pre-recorded lectures, but will be delivered live via Zoom, so that you can interact with the instructor and with each other on the spot.

“Ancient Empires” is an introduction to the history and cultures of the ancient empires of the Near East (Middle East), focusing on the period from the Assyrian and Persian Empires to the establishment of Islam (ca 900 BCE–ca 750 CE). Students will learn how to use ancient primary sources critically to create

a historical narrative and to understand the modern appropriation of ancient history for political and other purposes. We will also discuss the role of ancient empires in the formation of modern religions.

Extensive readings in primary sources composed in ancient Persian, Armenian, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, ranging from royal inscriptions to chronicles of war and strife. Many of the events covered in this course contributed decisively to the demography of the present-day Near East and the social characteristics of its people, from the distribution of language communities to the variety of Near Eastern religions. Therefore, students will gain some understanding of the makeup of the modern Near East, including how the population of the region became predominantly Muslim. Two major themes will be the nature of empires and the use and interpretation of primary written materials to reconstruct past cultures.

This course fulfills a Yale College distribution requirement in the **Humanities**. It also counts as a **Foundations course** for the major in Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations.

Goals

Students will develop extensive **knowledge** about human societies over a thousand years of Near Eastern history as well as **understanding** of that history through various critical methods of interpretation.

Readings

Readings for this course are available in different formats: a published book, web sites, and readings for download as pdf files via Orbis or Canvas.

The readings assigned for a given week are to be read prior to the lectures of the week under which they are listed.

Required Course Book for Purchase

1. Dignas, Beate, and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals*, Cambridge University Press 2007. Estimated cost: \$41.99

Course Opportunities and Grading

Final grades are assigned on the following point scale:

A = 93 or higher, A- = 90–92, B+ = 87–89, B = 83–86, B- = 80–82, C+ = 77–79, C = 73–76, C- = 70–72, D+ = 67–69, D = 60–66, E = 0–59

The opportunities to earn points contributing toward your point total are listed below. I recommend doing every assignment to the best of your ability.

Opportunity	Max. Points Possible
1. map quiz: modern Middle East (session 2)	1
2. map quiz: ancient Middle East (session 3)	1
3. short tests every session but first and last	5 each (40 total)
4. movie report (2–3 pages): Aug 5	3
5. participation in discussion and analysis in class sessions	20
6. analytical essay (6–8 pages): Aug 12	15
7. final examination: Aug 12	20

Study Guides and Short Daily Tests

This intensive course requires students to digest a large amount of written material and orally presented material from lectures in a short time. To facilitate this, the instructor will provide a study guide for every session, given out each Thursday for the sessions in the following week. These study guides provide prompts for learning in the form of questions and topics to be understood. These should structure the student's reading and investigation of sources assigned.

Every class session will begin with a short test (or long quiz) to activate the student's knowledge of the materials prompted by the study guide. These eight short tests cumulatively comprise the largest single portion of the student's grade.

Class Attendance Policy

Online attendance of lectures and discussions is mandatory. In this intensive course, one session is equivalent to at least one week of class in a regular semester. Experience shows that students who show up and pay attention do well in class. Participation in class discussion and analysis is also a major opportunity to earn credit in this course.

Minimize Use of Other Applications and Smart Phones during Class Sessions

Students are asked to avoid using other programs and applications and smart phones during lecture or discussion. Readings made available electronically may be consulted on such devices during class (not during quizzes or exams, unless otherwise stated). If there is an emergency call that you must have, please make sure that you are on mute and go off camera.

Research amply shows that students learn better if they take notes by hand and avoid the distractions of the internet. You may also have a fewer interruptions to your Zoom app if you close your other applications! Please comply with this request.

Check Your E-Mail and the Canvas Site

I will communicate with you via Yale e-mail and the Canvas site.

Please check both regularly.

General Instructions for Writing in this Course

- Format anything written outside of class double-spaced with Times New Roman, 12-point font, 1" margins at top and bottom, 1" margins on sides. These margins are not the default setting for new documents in Microsoft Word. Make sure you proofread and spell-check. Spelling and grammar are considered in the evaluation.
- All material written outside of class must include references to any primary sources and a bibliography of works consulted. This includes assigned readings. Cite everything scrupulously.
- Avoid hyperbole about the greatness or significance of ancient objects, texts, or persons. Focus instead on the substance of your argument. Your essays are not to persuade others to take an interest but to show what your analysis can produce.

A Word About Plagiarism

You must document all of your source material in any writing done outside of class. If you take any text from somebody else, you must make it clear the text is being quoted and where the text comes from. You must also cite any sources from which you obtain numbers, ideas, or other material. If you have any questions about what does or does not constitute plagiarism, ask! Plagiarism is a serious offense and will be treated severely. Fortunately, it is also easy to avoid and if you are careful about giving credit where credit is due you should not run into any problems.

Yale's Center for Learning and Teaching provides resources for avoiding plagiarism here.

Movie Report: *Agora* (2009), directed by Alejandro Amenábar.

Due at beginning of Session 8 (Aug 5).

The film *Agora* is rare among high-budget feature films about the Roman Empire. It is about a woman scientist rather than a gladiator or emperor, it is rooted in known historical sources rather than wishful fiction, it features questions about religion and epistemology rather than arena fights and legions at war, and it takes place the later Roman Empire, circa 400, rather than in an earlier period of Roman conquest.

The film has received polarized reviews. Some love it. Some hate it.

Your tasks for this assignment:

1. Read the primary sources about Hypatia, the protagonist of the film, posted on Canvas.
2. Watch the film. Observe your own reactions as you watch.
3. Write a 2–3 page response to the film. You can present it in the mode of a film review, an analysis of its workings, or a reflection on the adaptations of historical sources in the film.

Note that *Agora* is rated R. It features violence, including the depiction of sexual violence, and religious intolerance. If you know that these things upset you to the point that the assignment is not feasible, let me know and I will gladly present an alternative assignment.

Of course, everybody is a critic, but criticism is not enough. You need analysis. If you criticize the movie, suggest reasons for the shortcomings you discuss.

Analytical Essay Topic: The Historiography of the Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite.

Due at the beginning of Session 10 (Aug 12).

The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, written in the Syriac dialect of Aramaic in the early sixth century CE, describes life in Mesopotamia and Syria during the wars between the Sasanian Persian and Roman Empires. Basing your analysis on a close reading of the text, discuss in 6–8 pages the author's purpose in writing this chronicle and describe his method as a historian. How does he interpret the events he describes in order to construct a narrative? How does he make sense of his own society's history? Explain your answers with specific examples from the text.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Schedule subject to change. All changes will be announced in class.

WEEK 1: Empires of ancient Iraq

Session 1, July 13: Introduction. Geography. Tradition, recovery, and archaeology.

Session 2. July 15. The Assyrian and Babylonian empires. The beginnings of the Persian Empire.

- Reade, J. E., "The History of Assyria," from *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995, pp. 17–31, available on Canvas.
- Grayson, A. Kirk, "Assyrian Rule of Conquered Territory in Ancient Western Asia," pp. 959–968, available on Canvas.
- Read the "Nabonidus Cylinder" from Sippar at livius.org:
www.livius.org/sources/content/nabonidus-cylinder-from-sippar/

- Read the “Nabonidus Chronicle” at livius.org:
www.livius.org/sources/content/mesopotamian-chronicles-content/abc-7-nabonidus-chronicle/
?
- Read the “Cyrus Cylinder” at livius.org. (There are two tabs to click: “Introduction” and “Translation.” Read both.)
www.livius.org/sources/content/cyrus-cylinder/?

Online assignment this week:

Explore the British Museum website “Mesopotamia”

www.mesopotamia.co.uk/menu.html

Here you will find a lot of hyperlinked pages with information and images about ancient Mesopotamian cultures. Some of it is pretty basic, but you should get a sense of the materials available to historians to tell what life was like in this region in antiquity.

Make sure you click “Time” → “Story” (follow story on early archaeology)
 “Writing” → “Story” (follow development of cuneiform writing)
 “Assyria” → “Palaces” and “Warfare”
 “Babylonia” → “Astronomers” and “Trade”

Feel free to explore the rest of the site, take your time, and have fun!

- Read Herodotus, Book 1: section 1 and sections 95 to 216 (section 95 to the end of Book 1). Freely available here in the translation of G. C. Macaulay: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/> . [Here Herodotus gives the story of Cyrus and an account of Persian culture.]
- Read Pierre Briant, “History of the Persian Empire (550-330 BC),” and Matthew Stolper, “Achaemenid Languages and Inscriptions,” in *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia*, ed. John Curtis and Nigel Tallis, University of California Press 2005, pp. 12-24.

WEEK 2. The Persian Empire

Session 3, July 20: The Achaemenian Empire.

- Read Herodotus, excerpts from Book 3: sections 1–38 and sections 61–160. Freely available here in the translation of G. C. Macaulay: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/> . [Here Herodotus gives the story of Cambyses the son of Cyrus and of Darius’ advent to power.]

Online assignment: Read the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenids.

(This is in addition to the readings listed above!)

www.livius.org/category/persia/?

This website is a mini-encyclopaedia on ancient Persia. You'll find it useful as a reference throughout the course. There are well-informed articles on important places and people we will survey.

Go to "Achaemenid Royal inscriptions" (www.livius.org/sources/content/achaemenid-royal-inscriptions/). Here you will find a list of the royal inscriptions of the Persian kings, along with many images of the originals. Your job is to study them and read the English translations of the following.

1. Read DB (columns #1–#5) and DBa–k. Pay close attention; this is the most important document written for any Achaemenid king. Take a good look at the accompanying photographs of the reliefs.
2. Read DSf at the palace of Susa.
3. Read DNa and DNb on Darius' tomb at Naqš-i Rostam.
4. Also explore the links to the sites of Persepolis, Susa, and Naqš-i Rostam. Pay special attention to the photos of the inscriptions.
5. Now move on to the inscriptions of Xerxes I at Persepolis. Read XPa and XPh.
6. Finally, read some of the inscriptions of later Achaemenids. Take your time.

Questions to answer: Where were the inscriptions made? Locate them on a map. What messages do they offer? Why did the kings inscribe them? For whom were they written?

Session 4, July 22: The workings of the Achaemenids' empire. Alexander's invasion.

- Read Josef Wiesehöfer, "The Achaemenid Empire," in *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*, edited by Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 76–105. **Freely available to you through Orbis. Look up this book and, using an on-campus connection or an off-campus connection with Yale VPN, download the book chapter or read it online.**
- Read "Conquering and Ruling Pre-Modern Afghanistan," from Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, pp. 66–89. This reading does not deal with the Persian Empire per se, but it consists of comparative and theoretical material essential for understanding the contents of this course. **Find the right pages through the e-book as made available through Orbis, using a Yale VPN connection.**
- Read Xenophon's *The Anabasis of Cyrus*, pp. 37–120 (books 1–4), translated by Wayne Ambler. You can read the first four books in another edition if you have access to one, but this edition is free via Orbis. **Freely available to you through Orbis. Look up this book in this translation (by Ambler) and, using an on-campus connection or an off-campus connection with Yale VPN, download the book chapter or read it online.**

WEEK 3. Warlord dynasties and new empires

Session 5, July 27: Alexander's successors. The Seleucids and Arsacids.

- Winthrop Lindsay Adams, "The Hellenistic Kingdoms," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*, edited by Glenn R. Bugh, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 28–51. **The text is freely available to you through Orbis. Look up this book and, using an on-campus connection or an off-campus connection with Yale VPN, download the book chapter or read it online.**
- *2 Maccabees* (New Oxford Annotated Bible 2nd ed. rev., on Canvas)

- Read “An Incidental Annexation,” from Kevin Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East*, pp. 19–31 (one section of the pdf).

Online assignment this week: Browse Parthia.com.

www.parthia.com

This is essentially a scholarly fan site for the ancient Parthian kingdom. It contains maps, essays, and extensive bibliography. Start by browsing the site to see what’s there.

One of the main primary sources available from the Parthian kingdom is coins, together with a limited number of art objects and durable luxury goods. What can you learn by studying the online coin catalogue and other information on this website?

Write a concise summary of your findings (no more than a page) to discuss in your section meeting. What do these coins tell us about the Parthian dominion?

Session 6, July 29. The rise of Rome. The advent of the Sasanids of Persia.

- “Rome, Syria, Parthians and Persians,” from Kevin Butcher, *Roman Syria and the Near East*, pp. 31–60 (final section of the pdf).
- Read Keith Hopkins, “The Political Economy of the Roman Empire,” in *The Dynamics of Ancient Empires*, edited by Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 178-204. **The text is freely available to you through Orbis. Look up this book and, using an on-campus connection or an off-campus connection with Yale VPN, download the book chapter or read it online.**
- Read Dignas and Winter, pp. 9–32, pp. 53–88, pp. 119–130.
- Read handouts: Shapur’s trilingual inscription (ŠKZ) at Naqš-i Rostam and the inscription of Kerdir.

Online assignment this week: Study the Sasanian Rock Reliefs.

(This is in addition to the readings listed above!)

www.livius.org/category/persia/

This is the same website where you read the Achaemenian inscriptions. Now you are looking at inscriptions and rock carvings from hundreds of years later, portraying the Sasanian kings. Go to the bottom of the page and click on “Sasanian rock reliefs” (www.livius.org/articles/misc/sasanian-rock-reliefs/). Focus on nos. 50, 53, 55, 57, 60, 63, 73, 74, 80, and 81–84. (No. 57 is the site of the inscription ŠKZ on the handout.)

Questions to answer: How do these reliefs portray the kings? What are the kings shown as doing? What symbols did the sculptors use, and why did they use them? Pay attention also to the locations where these reliefs were made. Did their locations have any special meaning? Find and identify the priest named Kartir (a.k.a. Kirdir), too.

When you’re done studying the reliefs, go back to the main page and click on “Sasanian crowns” (www.livius.org/articles/dynasty/sasanians/sasanian-crowns/). This will give you some close-ups of the elaborate headgear that these kings wore. Each one had a unique crown that can be used to identify him in coins and in other depictions. There are links to images of these coins so you can see for yourself.

WEEK 4. Persian Kingdom and Roman Empire

Session 7, Aug 3: The Sasanian Persian Kingdom.

- Read Rika Gyselen, “Economy iv. In the Sasanian Period,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/economy-iv
- Read Dignas and Winter, pp. 32–37, pp. 88–99, pp. 131–138, pp. 195–209.
- Read excerpt from Ammianus Marcellinus, pp. 148–175.
- Movie report due.

Session 8, Aug 5: Countries between the two powers.

- Read Robert Thomson, “Armenia in the Fifth and Sixth Century,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Volume 14: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, edited by Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 662–677. Available as a free download through Orbis.
- Read *The History of Lazar P’arpec’i*, book 2 (trans. Robert Thomson 1991), pp. 75–157.

WEEK 5. The Great War, the Advent of Islam, and the Caliphate

Session 9, Aug 10: Persian ascendancy and the great war of 603–630. Muhammad’s movement and the collapse of the Sasanian kingdom.

- Read *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, pp. 1–119 (short pages). Available as a free download through Orbis.
- Read Dignas and Winter, pp. 37–49, pp. 100–118, pp. 138–151.

Session 10, Aug 12: The first Islamic state and its empire. Course conclusion. Final exam.

- Read Patricia Crone, “The Early Islamic World,” in *War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, Kurt Raaflaub and N. Lowenstein (eds.), Harvard University Press 1999, pp. 309–32.
- Read Patricia Crone, “Introduction,” *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, Cambridge University Press 2012, pp. 1–22.
- Read Michael Cook, “The long-term geopolitics of the pre-modern Middle East,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 26, 1–2 (2016), pp. 33–41. **You can find this article online at the database jstor.org. Use jstor.org from an on-campus connection to search for it. You can read it online or download it as a pdf file.**
- analytical essay due
- final exam in last 90 minutes of class session