Writing about the Past in the Ancient Near East
FYSEM-UA 760—First-year seminar—Spring 2020

Instructor: Odette Boivin
Email: TBA
Office hours: TBA

Class Meeting: Tuesday 9:30am—12:00pm
Class Location: TBA
Office: TBA

From writing one’s own résumé to chronicling political events, piecing together and presenting the past in written form is a complex combination of factors: availability of sources, conventions and tradition, audience, interpretation, intention, and unconscious bias.

Shortly after the invention of writing in the Near East in the late 4th millennium BCE, scribes of the most ancient full-fledged writing system, cuneiform, started couching their own recent or remote past in written form. The texts they left behind include annals, king lists, (pseudo-)biographies, historical omens, and chronicles. These earliest historiographic sources offer a fascinating glimpse into preclassical Antiquity, into the events recorded but also into the way people perceived time, and how they may have understood their own place in it.

This seminar provides an overview of various forms of ancient Near Eastern historiography. Students will read a number of primary sources in translation. The texts studied will be principally Babylonian and Assyrian; a number of Hittite, Biblical, and Greek sources will also be discussed.

Course Objectives

• Gain an introductory understanding of theories of collective memory, historiography, and history writing
• Gain an overview of the main textual genres which Ancient Near Eastern individuals and collectivities developed to record and pass down memory, interpretations, and messages about the(ir) past
• Situate these genres within a broader context of recording of the past and historical investigation
Graded Work

Written assignment: short analysis of a primary source (5 p.) 15%
Written assignment: short critique of a secondary source (5 p.) 15%
Annotated bibliography for research paper 10%
Written assignment: research paper (10 p.) 30%
Presentation of assigned reading & leading discussion 20%
Active participation in class 10%

Course Schedule

January 28th  Introduction to the Ancient Near East
February 4th  Memory and writing, antiquarianism, propaganda
February 11th  King Lists and Genealogies: conceptions of time, place, and legitimacy
February 18th  Historical Omens: predicting the past...and the future
February 25th  City Laments: coming to terms with catastrophic events
March 3rd  Neo-Assyrian Annals: the valiant king
March 10th  Field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art
March 17th  Spring recess—no class
March 24th  Hittite historiography: the past as justification for political action
March 31st  The statue of Idrimi: an (epic) autobiography from Bronze Age Anatolia
April 7th  Divine intervention on historical events: a comparative approach
April 14th  Babylonian chronicles: from barley prices to dying from eating hot soup
April 21st  (Pseudo-)biographies and birth legends: Sargon, Moses, the commoner
April 28th  The trope of the calamitous ruler; subversive accounts.
May 5th  Last presentations. Authorship, sources, audience; keeping track of time

** Weekly readings, bibliography, details on the assignments, and other information will be added in a later version of this syllabus. **