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, information, and interpretations about their past
- Situate these genres within a broader context of recording of the past and historical investigation

Graded Work

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

Short assignments (Nr. 1 & 2): Students will write two short papers (5 pages each). One paper (assignment 1) will focus on a secondary source; students will present and criticize briefly the scholarly article/book chapter chosen from the assigned readings. One paper (assignment 2) will focus on a primary source seen in class and/or in the assigned readings (presenting and discussing one ancient text/object); students will present, describe, and analyze briefly the source in a scholarly fashion.

Final paper (Nr. 3 & 4): Students will research a topic of their choice related to ancient Near Eastern historiography. Students will have the choice to write for a scholarly/informed audience or for the general public (e.g., for a museum’s publication); this should define the type of bibliographical research they will conduct and the tone of their paper. An annotated bibliography (assignment 3) will be handed in first (selected literature with notes on their contents and use in the research); students will then receive feedback from me before they write/finalize their paper (assignment 4). Possible topics and approaches will be discussed in class.

Students are also encouraged to submit to me informally their ideas for a paper topic and choice of approach; I am happy to discuss them on a one-on-one basis with them.

→ Students who wish to receive feedback on a draft version of a written assignment must send/submit it to me one full week prior to the final deadline.

Presentation of assignment reading (Nr. 5): Each student will need to sign up to present one source or all of the assigned readings for a given week (this will be determined at the
beginning of term, depending on the number of students); the student will then lead the discussion related to the reading(s) presented.

**Active participation (Nr. 6):** Weekly attendance is required but not sufficient to obtain full marks. Active participation in the discussions is expected; this participation should reflect familiarity with the assigned readings.

Written assignments must be handed in (hard copy) at the beginning of class in the week specified in the course schedule. Please write assignments using 12-point Times New Roman font, double-spaced, with standard (1-inch) margins. No cover page is required. Specifics, including the grading criteria, will be provided in class.

Late submission will have a negative impact on the student’s grade. Extension may be granted in exceptional circumstances and must be discussed with me prior to the deadline. Students should be aware of NYU’s policy on academic integrity, outlined here: [https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html](https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html)

**Disability Disclosure Statement**
Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the

**Course Schedule & Required Readings**
Classes have a duration of 2.5 hours. They include short units of lecturing, but mainly discussion—including the in-class analysis of primary sources—and short student presentations.

There is no textbook for this class. PDFs of assigned articles and book chapters will be made available on NYU Classes.

Disclaimer: some ancient texts contain graphic descriptions of violence.

**Week 1: January 28th — Introduction**
- Course overview
- Writing about the past: we’ve all done it! Approaching the question
- Short introduction to the Ancient Near East: period, places, peoples, sources
Week 2: February 4th — Memory and writing, antiquarianism, propaganda

- Memory, culture, history
- What past do you remember, and how?
- Approaching (ancient) historiographic sources

Required readings


Week 3: February 11th — King Lists and Genealogies: conceptions of time, place, and legitimacy

- The power of the list: situating one’s rule in time, space, and in a system of power
- Legitimacy through the past
  - The fiction of continuous kingship: the Sumerian King List (SKL)
  - The fiction of a continuous family line: the Assyrian King List (AKL)

Required readings


Week 4: February 18th — Historical Omens and Prophecies: predicting the past...and the future

- Legitimizing or explaining the present as the future of the past
- Oracular “Pious Fraud”?: The present as divine will
Required readings


Week 5: February 25th — City Laments: coming to terms with catastrophic events

***PAPER 1 DUE***

- The city lament as a search for meaning of a traumatic past
- The city lament as an act of commemoration
- Death and rebirth; the city as a representation of the cosmos

Required readings


Week 6: March 3rd — Neo-Assyrian Annals: the valiant king

- Royal deeds recounted as heroic narratives
- Epic elements in a chronographic structure
- The Annals as element of a program of imperial propaganda
Required readings


Week 7: March 10th — Field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Information on the museum visit will be provided in class.

Required readings

- Familiarize yourself with the collection of Ancient Near Eastern Art of the museum https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/ancient-near-eastern-art; or the (somewhat dated) catalogue: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Guide_to_the_Collections_Ancient_Near_Eastern_Art

Week 8: March 17th — Spring recess—no class

Week 9: March 24th — Hittite historiography: the past as justification for political action

***PAPER 2 DUE***

- Looking into the past for causes to present events
- The past as justification for royal deeds

Required readings


**Week 10:** March 31st — The statue of Idrimi: an (epic) autobiography from Bronze Age Anatolia

• First person account with transformative experience
• Comparison with Neo-Assyrian annals
• An ancient folk tale?

**Required readings**


**Week 11:** April 7th — Divine intervention in historical events: a comparative approach

***ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE***

• God/Gods and the course of events: modes of intervention, justification, explanation
• God/Gods, Fate/Fortune, Divine Providence

**Required readings**

• “Polybius” [ca. 5 pages]
**Week 12: April 14th — Babylonian chronicles: from barley prices to dying from eating hot soup**

- Chronographic accounts of...everything?
- Babylonian chronicles as “annotated lists”

**Required readings**


**Week 13: April 21st — (Pseudo-)biographies and birth legends: Sargon, Moses, the commoner**

- (Auto)biography: (wondrous) origin as legitimizing factor for the outsider?
- Wisdom literature in the guise of an autobiographical narrative

**Required readings**


**Week 14: April 28th — The trope of the calamitous ruler; subversive accounts**

- Misfortune and problematic kings: hubris, madness, sin
- The calamitous ruler as antithesis of the ideal ruler

**Required readings**


**Week 15: May 5th — Last presentations. Authorship, sources, audience; keeping track of time**

***FINAL PAPER DUE***