

Cultures & Contexts: Early States in Mesopotamia & Egypt – MAP-UA.501
Professor Rita Wright
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Course Description:

Egypt and Mesopotamia are the homeland of the world's first and most spectacular early states. Each represents a cultural solution that has influenced the development of western thought and its history. Yet each is distinctive in its own way, having produced different religious systems, art styles, political and economic organization and historical trajectories. Study of these early states reveals not only the common thread in the human condition but also the astonishing variability in human behavior and culture. This course explores the prehistoric periods to the early use of writing in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Egypt. Working with archaeological and textual sources, we will trace the unique and important transitions from a life as hunters and gatherers to settling down in villages, and the development of cities and states.

Student and Course Goals

This course provides an introduction to two major civilizations for which there are no living people – ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Still, both cultures live in our memories and are well known to us from the buildings, cities, objects and writing they have left behind. We continue to be fascinated by them. These two unique cultures built magnificent pyramids, produced works of art and wrote poetry that many students may know from films, television, magazines, newspapers or courses they have taken elsewhere. Their history matters because they provide us with two examples of how state level societies first came into prominence. From an archaeological perspective they are case studies with which to assess how material remains and written sources can be used as complementary forms of evidence.

1. In the course we will use the “things” they produced to examine what it was like to live in ancient times. Some of the questions to explore are: How did people interact with, and shape their environment? Why did people live in cities or build pyramids? What activities did people living in cities or pyramid towns take part in on a day-to-day basis? What religious conceptions did they hold? How much is the weight of our evidence based on the actions of elites? To what extent was the ancient state or city, the same or different from their modern counterparts? Our attempts to answer these questions will be based upon archaeological evidence and written sources.

2. A major emphasis will be on the unique histories of the two civilizations, although they developed almost simultaneously. The Mesopotamians (present-day Iraq) “invented” the idea of a city and built the city, Uruk, five thousand years ago; it was a focal point of markets, trade and religious activities. In contrast, during the periods covered in this course, most Egyptians did not live in cities and if they did, they were different from the ones in Mesopotamia. For example, large numbers of artisans and religious experts lived in towns that functioned primarily for the production of burial goods and performance of funerary rituals. The historically contingent nature of these civilizations raises important questions that we will examine throughout the semester. We also will examine the wider world in which they developed. Viewed from the perspective of the Near East and North Africa, they were interconnected with many other contemporary cultures with whom they traded and interacted in other ways.

3 In view of the major disruptions currently occurring in many parts of the Near East and Egypt, we will discuss the importance of prehistoric monuments to national heritage and ask the questions: Who needs the past? How is knowledge of the past structured? Do we have a responsibility to preserve it? What responsibilities do archaeologists and private citizens have to protect cultural heritage?

Course Readings: Three books are available at the NYU Book store for purchase. Pollock, Susan (1999) Ancient Mesopotamia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Wenke, Robert (2010) The Early Egyptian State. Cambridge University Press.
Jacobsen, Thorkild (1976) The Treasures of Darkness. Yale University Press.

The books by Pollock and Wenke will be our main texts; additional readings will also be assigned. The Jacobsen book will be used primarily in the Recitations.

This syllabus and reading assignments will be posted on NYU Classes during the next few weeks. The access to additional readings also will be posted there. You need to consult NYU classes weekly for any new assignments or changes.

Course Requirements and Grading:

Requirements and percent of grade follow:

- 1.Short map and chronology quiz – 10%
- 2 Essay exam. The exam covers the course materials from Weeks 1 to 8. – 25%
- 3.Workshop. The workshops are a team effort in which you will work with other students in your recitations sections and in-class workshops. They will involve presentations and writing assignments. – 20%
- 4.Recitation. A syllabus for the recitations will be posted on NYU Classes next week. 12.5%
- 5.Final Paper. This 10 page paper will be structured around the class lectures and workshop and will be described in more detail later. – 20%
- 6.Class attendance and Participation. – 12.5%

The lectures and recitations are designed to provide you with direction and analytical skills associated with the writing assignments. Specifics on each of these assignments

will be forthcoming. The grading is a team effort, split between the professor and the preceptors. Any complaints about a grade should be addressed to Prof. Wright. Papers must be turned in on time; you will lose points if you do not do so. Still, we are reasonable people; if there is a problem, discuss it with us ahead of time.

The College Core Curriculum Goals

In addition to the goals described in the above paragraphs, this course, in accordance with the College Core Curriculum is designed promote critical reasoning are to promote the development of critical reasoning, argumentative structure and the use of evidence in writing and oral work. Critical assessments demonstrate the ability to engage in insightful commentary of the material under study. Critiques, whether positive or negative, must demonstrate an argumentative structure in support of a point of view. Forms of support must always include the use of evidence as a primary consideration as it shows mastery of the material at hand. Whether written or oral, grammar, diction and clarity of expression are required.

We have included information you received on Class Participation Guidelines. You should read guidelines for evaluation. In short, core courses require consistent attendance in class. Students come to class “thoughtfully prepared and ready to participate, engage actively in classroom activities, and contribute to making the best educational experience you can for yourself and your classmates.” The guidelines provide a list of expectations employed for the assessment of students’ class participation.

Other logistics:

I request that you do not use cell phones, laptop computers or other electronic devices during class as the presence of electronics and screens creates a distracting barrier between yourself, the professor, and your fellow students, and hampers class discussion. If you require a computer for note-taking purposes, please come see me during my office hours so that we can make alternative arrangements.

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-49870 for further information.

Office Hours:

The preceptors and I have office hours scheduled every week; see above for specifics. We like to see you in our offices, so don’t be shy. Come with questions, observations, or any other matters pertaining to the course. If you cannot make it to the allotted times, please email us to schedule an appointment.

Plagiarism:

Papers must include citations and bibliographies. Plagiarized papers will **not** be accepted and the student will receive a zero for that assignment. A plagiarized paper is not just one that is copied from printed sources (publications, web sites and other students) – plagiarism includes the use of facts, quotes, and ideas that are NOT cited. Anything that

is not a student's idea or general knowledge requires citing. Students who plagiarize face severe penalties.

Course Schedule by Week. If any changes are necessary, you will be informed.
[Readings are in Brackets]

January 27 -29 – Week 1 - Introduction to the Course.

Comparative Studies of Civilizations, Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt; City States and Territorial States, Chronologies.
[Pollock, Chapter 1; Wenke, Chapter 1]

February 4 – 6 – Week 2 - Geographic Setting, Environment, Natural Resources and Agricultural Origins

Alterations of Water Courses and Settlement Patterns in Mesopotamia
[Naomi Miller and Wilma Wetterstrom – The Cambridge World History of Food; The Beginnings of Agriculture in the Ancient Near East and north Africa.]
[Pollock, Chapters 2 and 3]

February 11- 13 – Week 3 - Mesopotamian Economies – Tributary and Oikos

What is a city state? What are the Archaeological Correlates
[Pollock, Chapters 4 and 5]

February 18 - 19 - Week 4 – Mesopotamian Ideology and Images of Power

Death and the Ideology of Community
[Pollock, Chapters 7 and 8]

QUIZ on February 18th at beginning of class. [Includes all material from Weeks 1 and 2].

February 25 – 27 – Week 5 – The Growth of Bureaucracy

Akkadian and Ur III Warfare, Diplomacy, Social Inequalities and the End of a Cycle of Rise and Fall.
[Pollock, Chapter 6]

March 4 – 6 – Week 6 – Egypt's Physical Environment, Natural Resources, Upper and Lower Egypt, Agricultural Origins, Cultural Geography, the Predynastic, Before Pyramids and Dynastic Kings.

[Wenke, Chapter 2, Chapter 4, 136-152, 157-180;

Chapter 5, 196 – 238.

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March 11 – 13 – Week 7 – Ritual and World View.

**Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom Ideologies.
[Wenke, Chapter 5, 237-239; Chapter 6, 262-273]**

March 25 – 27 – Week 8 – Lords of the two Lands. Dynastic Kings

[Wenke, Chapter 5, 181-256]

**April 1 – 3 – Week 9 - Old Kingdom Pious Foundations, Inequalities and
Dispersal of Wealth. Pyramid City at Giza and a Pious Foundation at
Kom el-Hisn**

[Wenke, Chapter 3, 111-135, Chapter 6; selected Aeragrams]

**April 8 – 10 – Week 10 –The First Intermediate Period, Cycles of Rise and
Fall, Comparative Studies of Egypt and Mesopotamia**

[Pollock, Chapter 9, Wenke, Chapter 7] and Review.

In-Class Essay Exam April 10.

April 15 – 17 – Week 11 Interconnected Worlds – [Readings: TBA]

**Mesopotamia, Egypt and Beyond
The Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia, South Asia and Sudan**

April 17 – *In-Class Workshop*

April 22 – 24 – Week 12 . April 22 In-Class workshop

April 24 – *Workshop presentations*

April 29– May 1 – Week 13 –

April 29 – *Workshop presentation*

May 1 – *Who Owns the Past?*

May 6 – May 8 – Week 14 – Looting and Ethical Issues in Times of Conflict-