Ancient Constructions of the World and its People

FYSEM-UA 808 (Spring 2021)

Instructor: Dr. Jeremy Simmons
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Meeting Time: W 2:00–4:30pm
Location: TBD
Office Hours: TBD or By Appointment

Course Description

How did ancient societies envision the wider known world? In this seminar, we will examine how ancient cultures throughout the Afro-Eurasian world, including ancient Egypt, the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, India, and Han China envisioned the world in which they lived and the diverse peoples that inhabited it. We will explore a variety of visual representations and textual sources—from ancient works of medicine and science to canonical texts of scripture—which all participated in ancient intellectual exercises of geography, ethnography, and cosmography. We will investigate not only how different ancient cultures understood the mechanics of the universe, but how they envisioned and represented “the Other,” those who dwelled beyond the rim of the recognizable world. We will also consider how these intellectual constructions became fossilized, just who learned and benefited from them, and how they could be used to legitimize systems of oppression from antiquity to today.

Course Objectives

- To explore how ancient societies envisioned the world.
- To develop research and writing skills, including the collection and analysis of original source material.
- To consider a historical subject from an interdisciplinary perspective and evaluate a range of methodologies within these disciplines.
- To gain familiarity with material sources and become competent in deploying art historical and archaeological material when studying the past.
- To acquire presentation skills applicable in academic environments and beyond.

**Required Textbooks**


***I will provide PDF versions of all other required readings for the course.***

**Course Requirements**

**Attendance and Participation [10%]**

*Attendance and active participation are mandatory.* This portion of your grade will be based not only on physical presence in the classroom, but also your ability to demonstrate your preparation of the material (i.e., having completed the required readings in advance; contributing meaningfully to discussions in sections). **Participation is required on a non-volunteer basis,** though volunteering is always welcome.

More than two unexcused absences will adversely affect your grade; more than four will result in a failing grade in the course. That being said, absences for religious or medical reasons can be accommodated. Except in the case of sudden illness or emergency, you are required to inform me beforehand of your anticipated absence. Proof of medical services will be necessary in order to be granted an excused absence.

In-class sessions are your opportunity to engage more intimately with the course material and to voice your opinions. Discussions are meant to encourage various readings of a text or other forms of evidence rather than to champion a singular interpretation. Therefore, I want the discussion to be a comfortable space for students, not one of ridicule.

**Four Short Responses [2.5% each, 10% total]**

Roughly every two weeks, you will be required to submit a short response (~250–500 words) to a prompt designed to inspire in-class discussion. These assignments will be due at **6:00pm on Tuesdays**, and prompts will be distributed roughly one week in advance. Responses should comprise a brief analysis of an object, reading, or phenomenon in question, with a focus on elements that you found particularly interesting and questions that you would like to explore further. The prompts and your responses will be facilitated on the website associated with this
course and should be completed outside of class and submitted online. You should consider these responses as good practice for the kind of writing you will be expected to provide in your papers.

**In-Class Presentation [10%]**

Starting in Week 4, one to two students will be responsible for briefly presenting an element of reading for the rest of the class each session. A sign-up sheet for these presentations will be distributed after the first class meeting.

**Two Source Analyses [15% each, 30% total]**

You will be assigned to write two 5-page papers analyzing an ancient source, whether textual or material. More details about the nature of this assignment will be provided well in advance of the due dates (tentatively at the start of class on Wed., Mar. 3 and Wed., Apr. 21).

**Final Paper [40%]**

As the final assessment for this course, you will be expected to write a research paper of approximately 10–15 pages. Students can write on a subject of their choosing, but one that must be related to this course, whether it be textual or material, confined to a particular culture or a comparison between multiple societies. Students are required to discuss their paper with the instructor to receive approval before undertaking their topic; they must also submit a detailed outline of their paper (with preliminary bibliography) by Wed., Mar. 31 (this will account for 10% of the final course grade). The paper will be due at the last class on Wed., May 5 (30%).

**Et cetera**

*Break:* We will have a ten-minute break roughly halfway through each class.

*Course Website:* This course will make use of a course website to host course materials. Be sure to check the site periodically, as I will be uploading very helpful documents from time-to-time, including additional readings, lecture slides, and study guides. All other communications will occur via email.

*Cell Phones, Laptops/Tablets, and Food:* Cell phone use in class is prohibited—please keep these electronics turned off or on silent mode. Laptops and tablets are welcome, and in fact, encouraged for certain class sessions. Food is not allowed during class (but you are more than welcome to snack during the break). Beverages (i.e. water, coffee, or tea) are perfectly fine.

*Visit to the Met:* For Week 8 of this course, instead of a typical class meeting, we will visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Wed., Mar. 24, 2:00–4:30pm, where we will explore works of
art particularly relevant to our studies. The assigned Week 8 reading must be completed before the visit. There should be no admissions fees for this excursion.

**Academic Honesty:** It is your responsibility to know the university policies on academic honesty. The various statements regarding academic honesty (e.g., the NYU Academic Integrity Statement) can be found at the following link: [https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html](https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html). Cases of academic dishonesty must and will be reported.

**Disabilities Accommodations:** In accordance with the aims of New York University, I strive to provide equal access to all aspects of this course to individuals with disabilities. In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, you must first be registered with the Moses Center for Student Accessibility ([www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd)); you can contact the Center directly at 212-998-4980 or [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information on this process. You must present me with an accommodation letter and any other necessary documentation before exams are administered or other accommodations can be provided. Please do not come to me directly with accommodation requests—I will honor accommodation requests from ADS, but cannot evaluate and accommodate students myself.

**Support for Students at NYU:** Your years at university are often a quite understandably volatile time. If you are struggling or feel that you are in any way a danger to yourself, immediately contact Counseling and Wellness Services at 212-443-9999 (more information at [https://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/services/counseling-services.html](https://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/services/counseling-services.html)).

**Course Outline**

**Week 1 (W, Jan. 27) — Introduction: What is Geography? Ethnography? Cosmography?**


**Week 2 (W, Feb. 3) — Cosmogony: Metaphors of World Formation**

*Enuma Elish* Tablets 1–4

Hesiod *Theogony* ll. 116–232

*Book of Genesis* 1–4


**Week 3 (W, Feb 10) — Remaking the World**

*Epic of Gilgamesh* Tablet XI

Hesiod *Works and Days* ll. 1–201

*Book of Genesis* 5–9


**Week 4 (W, Feb. 17) — Constructing the Universe I: the Near East, Greece, and Rome**

*Enuma Anu Enlil* Tablet 14

Cicero *De Re Publica* Book 6 (“The Dream of Scipio”) [Excerpts]

Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 2.242–248


**Week 5 (W, Feb. 24) — Constructing the Universe II: India and China**


**Week 6 (W, Mar. 3) — Environmental Determinism**

RECW Chap. 3 (“Environmental Theories”), pp. 35–51.


***FIRST SOURCE ANALYSIS DUE***

**Week 7 (W, Mar. 10) — Genetics, Culture Wars, and the “Other”**

RECW Chap. 4 (“Genetic Theories”), pp. 53–64; Chap. 5 (“Custom or Cultural Theories”), pp. 67–70.


**Week 8 (W, Mar. 24) — Depicting Difference (***at the Metropolitan Museum of Art)**


Week 9 (W, Mar. 31) — Encounters I: Romans, Celts, and Germans

RECW Chap. 15 (“Europe: Gaul, Germany, and Britain”), pp. 341–388.


***ANOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE

Week 10 (W, Apr. 7) — Encounters II: Nomadic Peoples

Herodotus Histories 4.1–44 [Excerpts]

Ammianus Marcellinus Roman Antiquities 31.1–6

Han Chronicles on the Xiongnu [Excerpts]


Week 11 (W, Apr. 14) — Encounters III: Timeless India


Week 12 (W, Apr. 21) — Encounters IV: Explorers and Traders

Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablets IV–V, IX–X

Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor [Excerpts]

The Suppāraka Jātaka [Excerpts]

Strabo Geography 2.2.3
Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 6.24.84–85

*Hanno’s Periplus* §1–18

*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* [Excerpts]

***SECOND SOURCE ANALYSIS DUE***

**Week 13 (W, Apr. 28) — Medieval Responses to Ancient Knowledge**

*The Travels of Marco Polo* [Excerpts]

*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* [Excerpts]

Ibn Battuta *Book of Roads and Peoples* [Excerpts]


**Week 14 (W, May 5) — Modern (Mis)appropriations**


***FINAL PAPER DUE***
TWO VIEWS OF THE WORLD