

ARCH B313:
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EMPIRES IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
Fall 2026

Instructor

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Office: Old Library 233; Office Hours: Wed, 1:00-2:00, Fri, 12:00-1:00

Class Meeting

Fri, 1:10-4:00, Old Library 224

Imperialism has long been a central topic in archaeological research, with the Roman Empire in particular occupying an especially prominent place. Yet the earliest empires in recorded history emerged in the ancient Near East (including Egypt), and the region was very often either an imperial core or subject to foreign rule. It is thus an especially fascinating place to consider how archaeologists study empires. Earlier generations of scholars tended to see ancient imperialism as either a civilizing force or as Oriental despotism, depending on who was dominating whom. Since the era of modern decolonization, however, scholars have employed a range of new approaches, drawing, for example, on landscape archaeology, world-system analysis, entanglement and globalization, that go beyond the simple dichotomy of ruler and ruled. Instead, they focus on how imperialism transformed social, economic and political structures and how various imperial subjects experienced and reacted to empire in diverse ways. In this course we will examine Egyptian, Hittite, Assyrian, Achaemenid, Greek, Parthian and Sasanian imperialism in light of these new approaches, with a view towards understanding what archaeology can teach us about ancient empires.

Goals

The goal of this course is for students to learn the following:

- A general knowledge of the major empires of the ancient Near East and Egypt from the Late Bronze Age to Late Antiquity;
- An understanding of how ancient empires cohered and operated, and of how they affected the regions under their control;
- Familiarity with how archaeologists study empires, including a range of current and past approaches;
- Facility with the different types of evidence used by scholars to understand ancient empires, including texts (literary and epigraphic), excavation data, architecture and standing remains, landscape approaches, and works of art, among others;

- To analyze different types of evidence, including art, literature, documentary sources, and architecture, and to use them to address research questions;
- To distinguish between interpretations of evidence and the evidence itself;
- The ability to present information and ideas orally and in writing to a scholarly audience.

Class Format

Each class will include an introductory lecture explaining the empire under study, including historical and geographical overviews and presentation of sources of evidence. The rest of the class will be comprised of discussions. The undergraduates should read all of the Required Readings and one of the Optional Readings and come prepared to discuss them. You are encouraged to read any of the other optional readings that interest you (the more you read, the smarter you get). The graduate students in the course will be assigned specific optional readings to present in discussion; you are encouraged to engage in these discussions, even if only to ask questions, especially regarding the reading you have chosen. There will typically be a break halfway through class.

Reading Assignments

There is no textbook for this course. All reading assignments are posted on Moodle, under the course period by which they should be completed. The following abbreviations are used below in the course schedule:

AE = A. L. Boozer et al. (ed.), *Archaeologies of Empire: Local Participants and Imperial Trajectories* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2020)

AIL = B. Düring and T. D. Stek (ed.), *The Archaeology of Imperial Landscapes: A Comparative Study of Empires in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

CAANE = D. T. Potts (ed.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2012)

CPSE = C. Fischer-Bovet and S. von Reden (ed.), *Comparing the Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires: Integration, Communication, and Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

OWHE = P. F. Bang et al. (ed.), *The Oxford World History of Empire, II: The History of Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

Assessment

Grade Breakdown

<i>Contributions to Class</i>	25%
<i>Paper 1</i>	15%
<i>Paper 2</i>	20%
<i>Paper 3</i>	25%
<i>Presentation</i>	15%

Contributions to Class

Students are expected to attend each and every class and to contribute to the course as much as possible. There is, however, no explicit attendance policy. Instead, you are graded based on your contributions in class; the fewer classes you attend, the less you can participate meaningfully. Contributions include (but are not limited to) making substantive comments in the lectures and discussions, asking questions, responding intelligently to the instructors' questions during lectures and discussions and participating in group discussions among students. You are excused from attending class in the event of religious observance, a commitment to an athletic team, or sickness; all such absences must be accompanied by suitable documentation where appropriate. Furthermore, even excused absences will make it difficult to properly internalize this material and students who miss class the least have the best expectation of succeeding.

Paper 1 (600-700 words)

Briefly describe an example of a non-ancient empire, explaining how it fulfills the criteria we have discussed in class.

Paper 2 (800-1000 words)

Select one of the optional readings listed below on the syllabus and write a summary of the author's argument and an assessment of that argument. What point does the author make? What evidence does he/she use to support it? Is this argument convincing? Why or why not?

Paper 3 (1000-1250 words)

Select an archaeological site in the Near East or Egypt and describe how one can identify the effects of imperialism there. You are welcome (and encouraged) to choose a site we have discussed in class. Your site must be approved by the instructor (this is for your own safety).

Presentation

Present your chosen archaeological site to the class, explaining what role it plays in ancient imperialism. You should prepare a PowerPoint presentation and plan to speak for up to (but not more than) ten minutes.

Grading Policy

Revised 9/1/26

I will not normally change grades after the fact, save in cases of calculation errors. It is your responsibility to maintain your grade average at the level you desire. In exceptional cases I will consider offering an extra credit assignment, but poor performance in class does NOT constitute an exceptional case. Late work will be accepted for partial credit (determined at the instructor's discretion) until December 18 at 11:59.

AI

Students are explicitly prohibited by the Bryn Mawr honor code from using AI in any way unless instructed to do so. In this course, the use of any form of AI is not permitted. Violations will be treated as plagiarism.

Equal Opportunities and Title IX

Bryn Mawr College is committed to providing equal access to students with a documented disability. Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first register with Access Services. Students can call 610-526-7516 to make an appointment with the Access Services Director, Deb Alder, or email her at dalder@brynmawr.edu to begin this confidential process. Once registered, students should schedule an appointment with me as early in the semester as possible to share the verification form and make appropriate arrangements. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice to implement. Any student who has a disability-related need to tape record this class must first speak with the Access Services Director and to me, the instructor. Because of laws within the State of Pennsylvania, class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded. More information can be obtained at the Access Services website (http://www.brynmawr.edu/access_services/).

All BMC employees (including TAs) are Title IX "Responsible Employees" and therefore are required to share a report of sexual misconduct with the Title IX Coordinator. For further details see <https://www.brynmawr.edu/inside/policies-guidelines-handbooks/title-ix/am-i-responsible-employee>

Schedule of Classes and Assignments (for the first half of term)

This class meets on Fridays from 1:10 to 4:00 in Old Library 224. Reading assignments are listed under the class by which they should be completed. All readings are posted on Moodle. This schedule is subject to change.

Fri 9/4: What Is an Empire (and How Do We Think about Them)?
Required Reading (if you are able before the first meeting)

- S. Howe, *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Ch. 1 (“Who’s an Imperialist?”), Ch. 5 (“Studying and Judging Empires”)
- G. Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant,” (1936),
<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/shooting-an-elephant/>

Optional Reading

- M. Gehler and R. Rollinger, “Imperial Turn: Challenges, Problems and Questions,” in M. Gehler and R. Rollinger (ed.), *Empires to Be Remembered: Ancient Worlds through Modern Times* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2022), 3-39

Fri 9/11: The Archaeology of Empires

Required Reading

- C. Sinopoli, “Empires,” in G. Feinman and T. Price (ed.), *Archaeology at the Millennium* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Press, 2001), 439-71
- R. Matthews, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia: Theories and Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2003), Ch. 5 (“Archaeologies of Empire”)
- T. N. D’Altroy, “Empires Reconsidered: Current Archaeological Approaches,” *Asian Archaeology* 1 (2018), 95-109

Optional Reading

- B. J. Parker, “Toward an Understanding of Borderland Processes,” *American Antiquity* 71/1 (2006), 77-100
- D. J. Mattingly, “Identities in the Roman World: Discrepancy, Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Plurality,” in Gail L. Hoffman and Lisa R. Brody (ed.), *Roman in the Provinces: Art on the Periphery of Empire* (Chestnut Hill: McMullen Museum of Art, 2014), 35-59
- M. J. Versluys et al., “Understanding Objects in Motion: An Archaeological Dialogue on Romanization” (with responses by R. Hingley, T. Hodos, T. D. Stek, P. van Dommelen and G. Woolf), *Archaeological Dialogues* 21/1 (2014), 1-64
- M. Fernández-Götz et al., “The Dark Side of the Empire: Roman Expansionism between Object Agency and Predatory Regime,” *Antiquity* 94 (2020), 1630-39

Fri 9/18: The Egyptian New Kingdom

Required Reading

- J. C. Moreno García, “Egypt, Old to New Kingdom (2686-1069 BCE),” in *OWHE*, 13-42
- S. T. Smith, “Colonial Entanglements: Imperial Dictate, Individual Action, and Intercultural Interaction in Nubia,” in *AE*, 21-55

Optional Reading

- E. Morris, *Ancient Egyptian Imperialism* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), Introduction, Ch. 5-9

Fri 9/25: The Hittite Empire

Required Reading

- T. Bryce, "The Hittite Empire," in *CAANE*, 722-39
- C. Gatz, "Negotiating Empire: A Comparative Investigation into the Responses to Hittite Imperialism by the Vassal State of Ugarit and the Kaska of Pontic Anatolia," in G. E. Areshian (ed.), *Empires and Diversity: On the Crossroads of Archaeology, Anthropology and History* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2013), 21-56

Optional Reading

- C. Glatz, "Empire as Network: Spheres of Material Interaction in Late Bronze Age Anatolia," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 28 (2009), 127-41
- E. Devecchi, "The Governance of the Subordinated Countries," in S. de Martino (ed.), *Handbook Hittite Empire* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 271-312
- M. Durusu-Tanrıöver, "Ways of Being Hittite: Empire and Borderlands in Late Bronze Age Anatolia and Northern Syria," *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 9/2 (2021), 3-27

Fri 10/2: The Neo-Assyrian Empire

Paper 1 due

Required Reading

- G. Barjamovic, "The Empires of Western Asia and the Assyrian World Empire," in *OWHE*, 73-110
- B. J. Parker, "Archaeological Manifestations of Empire: Assyria's Imprint on Southeastern Anatolia," *American Journal of Archaeology* 107 (2003), 525-57

Optional Reading

- V. R. Herrmann, "The Empire in the House, the House in the Empire: Toward a Household Archaeology Perspective on the Assyrian Empire," in A. Yasur-Landau et al. (ed.), *Household Archaeology in Ancient Israel and Beyond* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 303-20
- M. S. Rosenzweig, "Cultivating Subjects in the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 16/3 (2016), 307-34
- D. Morandi Bonacossi, "The Creation of the Assyrian Heartland: New Data from the 'Land behind Nineveh,'" in *AIL*, 48-85
- B. S. Düring, "The Assyrian Threshold: Explaining Imperial Consolidation in the Early Assyrian Empire," in *AE*, 145-65
- E. Miller, "Drawing Distinctions: Assyrians and Others in the Art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire," *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 9/2 (2021), 82-107

Fri 10/9: The Achaemenid Empire I: Structure

Required Reading

- M. W. Waters, "The Achaemenid Persian Empire: From the Medes to Alexander," in *OWHE*, 111-36

Revised 9/1/26

- H. P. Colburn (cough), “Globalization and the Study of the Achaemenid Persian Empire,” in T. Hodos (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2017), 871-84
- P. Briant, “From the Mediterranean to the Indus Valley: Modalities and Limitations of the Achaemenid Imperial Space,” in Y. Pines et al. (ed.), *The Limits of Universal Rule: Eurasian Empires Compared* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 49-78

Optional Reading

- W. M. F. Henkelman, “Imperial Signature and Imperial Paradigm: Achaemenid Administrative Structure and System across and beyond the Iranian Plateau,” in B. Jacobs, W. F. M. Henkelman, and M. W. Stolper (ed.), *Die Verwaltung im Achämenidenreich = Administration in the Achaemenid Empire* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 45-256 (no need to read past p. 186)
- M. C. Root, “Medes and Iranian Identity in the Achaemenid Social Imaginary: The Persepolis Apadana,” in M. B. Garrison and W. F. M. Henkelman (ed.), *The Persian World and Beyond: Achaemenid and Arsacid Studies in Honour of Bruno Jacobs* (Münster: Zaphon, 2023), 75-148

Fri 10/16: Fall Break (no class)

Fri 11/6: **Paper 2 due**

Fri 12/18: **Paper 3 due**

(The full schedule will be available soon, I promise.)