



SACRED SKIES

Seminar 1

Images of the Sky as
Primary Source
Documents



Dr Darrelyn Gunzburg

ASSIGNMENT 2: 4500 word essay on a topic in the subject area.

Essay title: A Critical Examination of the Sky in Relation to Material Culture

Contemporary
primary source:
Fieldwork and notes

Primary source from
another time period:
artwork

YOUR ESSAY



ESSAY 2:

IMAGE BASED REPRESENTATION OF THE SKY

Observe a sky phenomenon (sunrise, sunset, the moon, a sky constellation) and either draw it or photograph it. Write down what it is as completely as you can, what drew you to it, how it makes you feel, what it says about your environment, and what it says about your culture. Keep it personal and phenomenological.

Then select one other piece of two-dimensional art of the same sky phenomenon. This can be a painting, a piece of stained glass, or a mural. Make sure that this is from a different time period to now and, using the same parameters, compare it with yours. This is your field work.

Your essay will consist of an Introduction to both works and then, using themes, compare and contrast these two images and draw conclusions about what these two images say about the sky from the perspective of two cultures in which they have been created.



‘It looks like X, therefore it is X.’

An idea you have is just that – an idea – and is the beginning of a research project, not its end. A speculation built on a speculation leads to a house of cards and the academy does not concern itself with houses of cards.

What would we need to know to help us understand what the image or object was and what part it played in the life or the culture in which these people lived?



Any primary source is a **dialogue** from the maker to the user.

Unless it is a contemporary piece of art, then it was created for a **purpose** in an era that was **different** from ours.



In attempting to understand why they were created these sky images and artefacts give us a way of appreciating what that culture thought about the sky in relation to the world around them. This is useful they inform us about the lifeways and mindsets different for our own. The familiar and the strange is what is interesting about other cultures.

OBSERVE, QUESTION, RESEARCH

1. **LOOK CLOSELY** at the image or artefact (**OBSERVATION**)
2. **GENERATE QUESTIONS** of the material.
3. **RESEARCH.** Substantiate your claim in the oral, material, or textual record through other evidence.





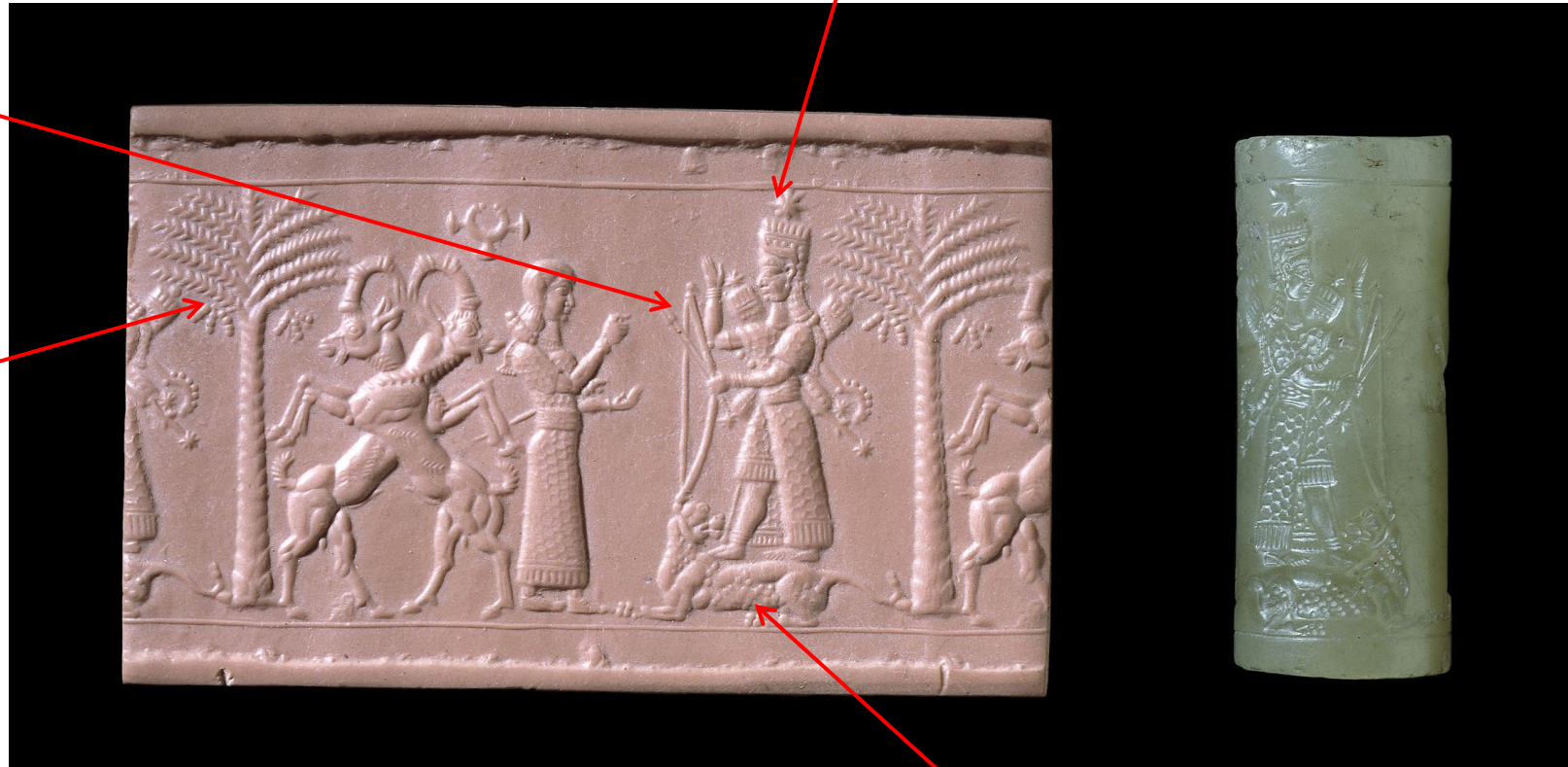




The star above her crown indicates the planet Venus.

Peaceful warrior:
the bow is reversed.

Symbol of
fertility:
date palm.



Symbol of aggression: lion.

Green garnet cylinder seal of Ishtar. Neo Assyrian 720-700 BCE. From Mesopotamia. Height: 4.3 cm. Diameter: 1.8 cm.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1835-0510-2

Ishtar, Mesopotamian goddess of sexuality and warfare who could be worshipped as male and female, reflecting her dual role of sex and war, as well as the evening and morning aspects.

Other primary source material:

Other seals with the same or similar sky/star symbolism from the same time period and region as comparators? Other regions? Other time periods?



Top left: cylinder seal depicting the goddess Ishtar. Below left: the eight-pointed star, symbol of Ishtar at the base. Above: Clay imprint of cylinder seal, priest and priestess bowing down before the goddess Ishtar, actual seal height approx. 27mm.

Other primary source material:

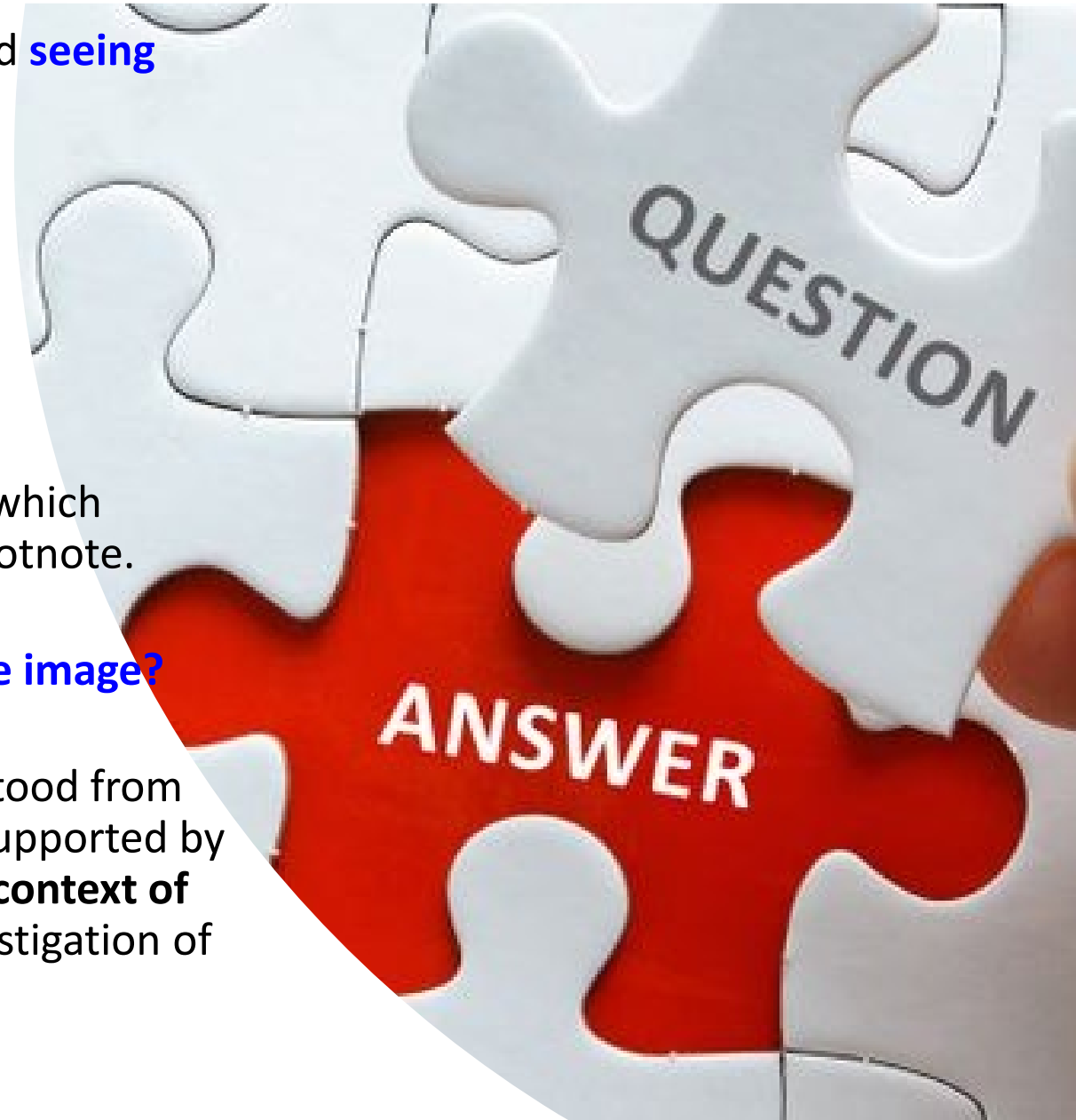
Other seals with the same or similar sky/star symbolism from the same time period and region as comparators? Other regions? Other time periods?

Cylinder seal with cultic scene.
Neo-Assyrian, late 9th–early 8th
century BCE, Mesopotamia. Flawed
neutral Chalcedony (Quartz).
Height: 1 1/4 in. (3.1 cm). Gift of
Martin and Sarah Cherkasky, 1989.
Photo: Metropolitan Museum of
Art, New York.



Investigating the document: Your field notes

- How would you **describe** what you are **observing** and **seeing** (not what you think you are seeing)?
- What does close looking **reveal**?
- What **questions** can you now ask of the image?
- **Context:** In what **year** was the image created?
How might you know this? = REFERENCE MATERIAL which must be acknowledged in the essay and cited in a footnote.
- **What does secondary source material say about the image?**
- Can you add an **insight** about what you have understood from both your examination of the primary sources and supported by what the secondary source material is saying **in the context of the essay question?** This will emerge from your investigation of all your images or artefacts.



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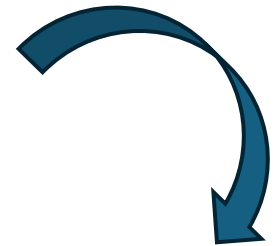
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Example

The aim of this essay is to critically examine the sky in relation to material culture. Specifically, this essay will examine the cultural expression of (sunrise, sunset, the moon, a sky constellation)

The primary sources being examined are **my oil painting of the moon (Fig.1) / my watercolour artwork of sunset (Fig.1) / my photographs of sunrise (Fig.1)** and William Blake's etching *I want! I want!* Created in 1793 (Fig. 2).

By comparison, this essay will examine what these two images say about the sky from the perspective of the two cultures in which they have been created through the following themes:...



These themes emerge out of your examination of the two pieces.

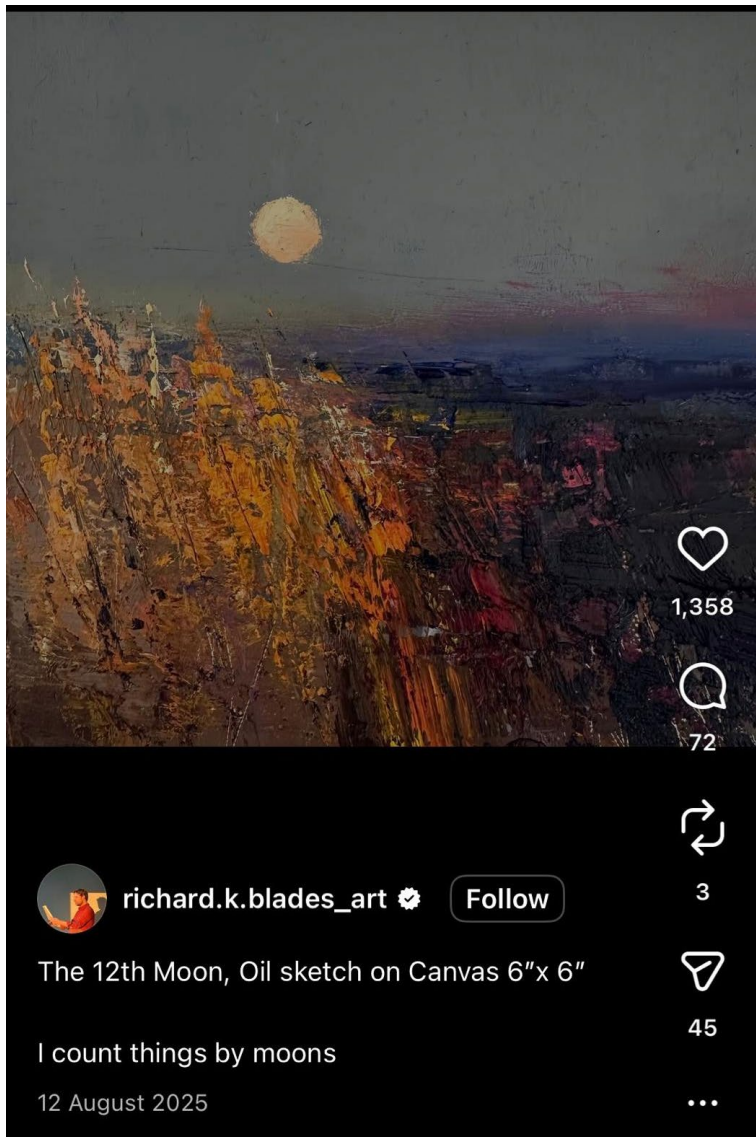


Figure 1: Richard K. Blades, August 2025.
The 12th Moon, oil sketch on canvas, 6" x 6".

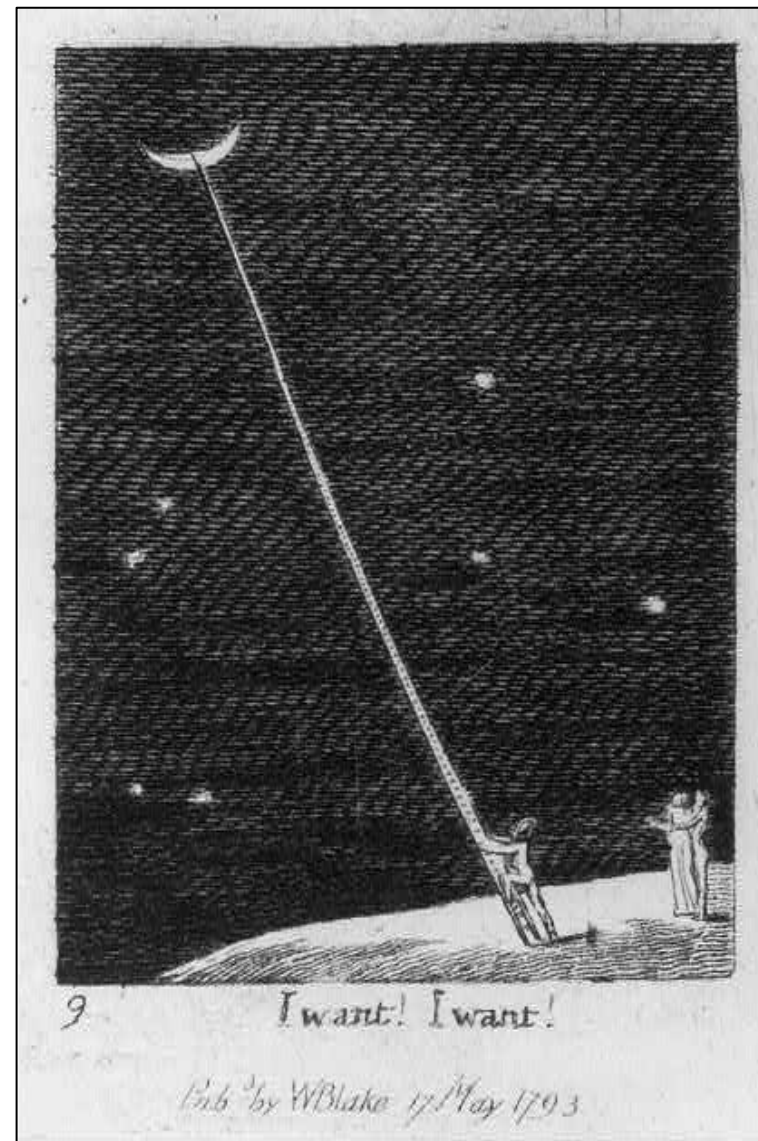


Figure 2: William Blake, 1793. *I want! I want!*, Line engraving and etching, 7.1 x 4.8 cm. Image: Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



Figure 1: Jef Bourgeau, *Sunset*, 2025, watercolour, 24" x 24".



Figure 2: Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1846-1851, *Sunset*, watercolour on grey paper, 178 mm x 264 mm. *Image:* Fitwilliam Museum.

Questions to bear in mind

What does comparison offer? Why write essays that compare and contrast two artworks?

What does commonality indicate about the sky?



Is this representation
of the sky....



.... the same as this?

What to avoid

We need **historical context** to make sense of the primary sources, but we do not need a history lesson. We can find that in books.

If you require a definition such as 'culture', offer it *briefly* in your Introduction and then refer to it in relation to the primary sources you are examining in the body of your essay.

Avoid quoting a secondary source author as if what they say is evidence. If you quote someone, make a comment of your own afterwards so we see how you are using what they are saying to add to your examination of the evidence. **Be critical about whom and what you cite.**

'Spalliera'



Sandro Botticelli (c.1485), *Venus and Mars*, c.1483, tempera on wood, 27.5cm x 68 cm, National Gallery of London. *Image*: ARTstor.

Ceiling



Giovanni Del Vecchi (1536-1615). Ceiling from Sala del Mappamondo, fresco by G. De Vecchi and da Reggio, showing the constellations, Palazzo Farnese Caprarola. *Photo*: Alfredo Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

Deep Space Photography



A dark cloud in Scorpius- image width about 32 arc min. *Photo*: David Malin, Australian-Anglo Observatory.

Illuminated manuscript



Nicole Oresme, 1377, Book of Heaven and Earth.
Livre du ciel et du monde, Paris, BNF Manuscripts,
Fr.565, f.69.



Using Images as Evidence

If photographs or images are not linked to your text, then all they do is serve as decoration, rather than supportive evidence.



Images and photographs identify and clarify points of textual argument and thus they must be **linked with the text by the use of correct annotation** – (Fig.1), (Fig.2), and so.

They must also be **clearly captioned**. In the same way as footnotes identify the source of your idea or quotation, so **captions identify the source of your image**.

Summary

Select the painting, stained glass, mural, photograph or land art from another time period that draws you. You are considering the **cultural expression and representation** of the sky, so you need material that contrasts with what you will be creating.

Use the process I have outlined here. ASSUME NOTHING. **Everything has to come from what you see and what others specialised in the field have said.**

The contrast of your images will reveal themes that you can articulate and where your insights can be placed – as long as they are **backed up by evidence.**

Exercise for WEEK 2

Built memorial



Fig.1. *Moving Memories*, The Arizona 9/11 Memorial, 2005-2006, concrete, stainless steel panels, Phoenix Arizona. Photo: LaKeidra Denay Bronner.

Outdoor sculpture



Fig.2. Julian Voss-Andreae, *Angel of the West*, 2008, stainless steel sculpture, Scripps Research Institute Florida. Photo: Christopher Fay.

**How are these two representations of the sky culturally different?
What process did you go through to get to this understanding?**