

Mesopotamia Between Science and the Senses

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Abstract: Did people in ancient Mesopotamia perceive the world in the same way as we do today? Which truths about nature and the cosmos did the Assyrians and Babylonians seek to know and what role did their language and customs play in representing this knowledge?

This talk seeks to explore these questions by looking at a very narrow slice of Mesopotamian social and cognitive cultural history: colors. By exploring how colors and colorful materials were used, categorized and valued in society, I aim to show that color was much more than an ocular phenomenon of ancient art and architecture. It was understood as a sense—merging and synchronizing with other senses—through which ancient man engaged with and related to his world. The second part of this talk will turn to the relationship between science and magic and show how appreciating the particularities of the Mesopotamian sensory landscape can help us better understand their epistemic worldview.

Biography: Shiyanthi Thavapalan received her PhD in Assyriology at Yale University. She was a Postdoctoral Research Associate and then a Visiting Assistant Professor of Archaeology and Assyriology at Brown University before being awarded the Humboldt Postdoctoral Fellowship. She is the author of *The Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Brill, 2020) and the editor of *The Value of Colour. Material and Economic Aspects in the Ancient World* (Edition Topoi, 2019). Her research focuses on the Akkadian language as well as on Assyrian and Babylonian cultural, economic and technological history.