

The Ishtar Gate

A sensescape of divine agency

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Introduction

In recent decades, the perception of space—through acts of viewing, sensing, touching, smelling, and sound—has become a cornerstone of archaeological studies (Hamilakis et al. 2002; Hamilakis 2013) and phenomenological archaeology in particular (Tilley 1994; 2004; Brück 2005).¹ Whereas the active interplay between the body and that which it perceives was once characterised as a “primitive” kind of engagement with the world (see the notion of “participation” in Lévy-Bruhl 1926 [1910] or the “Savage Mind,” Lévi-Strauss 1966), contemporary phenomenology recognises the centrality of body-space relationships to all cultures, ancient and modern. Considering landscape and environment to contain “perceived and embodied sets of relationships between places, a structure of human feeling, emotion, dwelling, movement, and practical activity” (Tilley 2004: 25), phenomenology tackles questions of inhabitation, experience, and embodiment of space.² While a phenomenological perspective acknowledges that “places gather together persons, memories, structures, histories, myths, and symbols” (Tilley 2004: 25), and modern archaeology has developed an integrated theory of material culture that combines social anthropology, cognitive sciences, psychology, and biology (Knappett 2005), these approaches are, however, primarily concerned with what places and landscapes do to the body apart from the specificities of cultural meaning and so remain ahistorical in their approach. Emotional reactions to monumentality can vary cross-culturally, and so it is highly problematic to treat the human body as universal (Brück 2005: 55).

Taking inspiration from scholarly discourse on cultural geography (Harvey 1990; Mitchell 2000; Atkinson 2005) and on architecture as a coded sensory experience that has been created by a group of skilled craftsmen under the supervision of ancient scholars (Parpola 1995; Thomason 2016; Neumann 2018), this chapter develops a cultural-historical approach to the bodily engagement with the built environment in ancient Mesopotamia. Although there are limitations in our ability to recreate the ancient experiences of monumentality, we can at least glimpse these experiences by considering all of the sources available to us, including textual, pictorial, and archaeological evidence. The choice of particular depictions, for example, as well as the lustrous shine of metal coatings and the scintillating colours of glazed bricks were all aimed at sparking an image in the mind that was rooted in cultural knowledge and experience (Winter 2010; Benzel

2015; Fügert and Gries 2019; Thavapalan 2019).³ Such knowledge is preserved in the textual sources and can be gleaned from comparative material within the same culture, and so I posit that we can at least approach to some degree ancient experiences. Embracing the insights of contemporary archaeological and phenomenological studies in a broad way, this chapter therefore additionally draws upon the rich textual documentation that provides insights into the construction, perceived agency, and symbolic meaning of landscapes and monumental architecture and Babylon's Ishtar Gate in particular. In working with the premise that "the patterns and meanings of built environments reflect fundamental cultural concepts of distinct cultural and social groups" (Neumann 2018: 182), the chapter offers a more comprehensive approach to the famous monument, exploring how it was constructed and experienced as material artefact, how it was a representation in itself, and how it is represented in cultural discourse.

Monumental architecture lies at the core of the present investigation of the sensory experience of Babylon's Ishtar Gate—a monumental gateway located along the northern inner-city wall of the sacred city. Palaces and temples have been the focus of excavations and research since major archaeological expeditions started in ancient Mesopotamia (for important recent studies, see Margueron 1982; Heinrich 1982; 1984; Novák 1999; Kertai 2015a; 2015b; Kaniuth et al. 2013; Wicke 2019). City gates, however, have received more consideration only recently in archaeological studies (Miglus 1982), as well as investigations into the role of the city gate with regard to jurisdiction (Niehr 1987; Crüsemann 1992; Otto 1995; Schmitt 2000), cultic practices (Mazzoni 1997; Bernett and Keel 1998; Waetzoldt 2004), and royal ideology (Pongratz-Leisten 1994; 2015; Battini 1998; 1999; 2003; 2009). As these studies show, city gates represent an essential component of a city's monumental architecture and urban life. Indeed, they offer a materialised expression of power and social control and, as I want to discuss in this chapter, also a means to exercise an active force on behalf of divinities and/or the king (Osborne 2014: 3).

This chapter will explore how the agency of monuments was conceived of and materialised through performance in the ancient Mesopotamian cultures. The immense scale of urban monuments like city walls and city gates, temples, and palaces was one of many aspects that impacted individual viewers. Form and structure were equally important in shaping social interaction (Moore 1996: 116–118). Visibility—often achieved through raising the monument on a platform—and permanence—attempted by the use of fired bricks—played a role in engraving the monument into the cultural memory. However, monumentality is more than the size, shape, visibility, or permanence of the monument. "Monumentality lies in the meaning created by the relationship that is negotiated between object and person, and between object and the surrounding constellations of values and symbols in a culture" (Osborne 2014: 13). Movement through the cities of ancient Mesopotamia, and the capitals of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings in particular, offered not only an experience of enormous monumental scale but also of meaningful pictorial decoration as well as a chance to engage with archetypes of social memory and building blocks of collective imagination revolving around the role of the city (Nora and Kritzmann 1996–1998).

The affect of architecture and the protective powers of city gates

The notion of architecture as an active force and agent in its own right—capable not only of directly affecting the emotions and cultural knowledge of the beholder, but also of taking action in the city life—has its roots in ancient Sumer. The Sumerian *Hymn to the Temple of Kesh*, for example, demonstrates how the description of temple architecture relies especially on the agency of fauna, natural phenomena, and fabricated tools of civilisation to create an embodied temple. Beyond directly affecting the emotions of the beholder, by implicitly referencing its

occupants—humans engaged in the sustenance of the cult and divinities determining the destinies of the land—the temple also takes on the role of an active agent in the life of the city (Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature t.4.80.2: 47–58Q, 58A–58Q; Wilcke 2006):

House, at its upper end a bison, at its lower end a stag; house, at its upper end a wild sheep, at its lower end a deer; house, at its upper end a dappled wild sheep, at its lower end a beautiful deer! House, at its upper end green as a snake-eater bird, at its lower end floating on the water like a pelican! House, at its upper end rising like the sun, at its lower end spreading like the moonlight; house, at its upper end a warrior mace, at its lower end a battle-axe; house, at its upper end a mountain, at its lower end a spring! House, at its upper end threefold indeed! Will anyone else bring forth something as great as Kesh?

House inspiring great awe, called with a mighty name by An; house ... whose fate is grandly determined by the Great Mountain Enlil! House of the Anuna gods possessing great power, which gives wisdom to the people; house, reposeful dwelling of the great gods! House, which was planned together with the plans of heaven and earth, ... with the pure divine powers; house which underpins the Land and supports the shrines! House, mountain of abundance which passes the days in glory; house of Ninhursaga which establishes the life of the Land! House, great hillside worthy of the purification rites, altering (?) all things; house without whom no decisions are made! House, good ... carrying in its hands the broad Land; house which gives birth to countless peoples, seed which has sprouts! House which gives birth to kings, which determines the destinies of the Land; house whose royal personages are to be revered! Will anyone else bring forth something as great as Kesh?

Another beautiful example is offered by a hymn from the time of Gudea (end of third millennium BCE), who ruled over the city-state of Lagash/Girsu at the end of the third millennium BCE, and so was a contemporary with Ur Nammu, founder of the Ur III Dynasty. This hymn celebrates his renovation of the temple of Ningirsu at the city of Girsu. In a lengthy passage describing in mythologising terms Ningirsu staffing the temple, one section is dedicated to the temple gate divinised as the divinity Ig-alim (RIME 3/1: Gudea E3/1.1.7. Cyl. B, vi, 11–23):

That he (Ig-alim) might guide the hand of the righteous one and force the evil-doer's neck into a neck stock, that he might keep the door safe, keep it in harmony, that he might give instructions to his city (and) the sanctuaries of Girsu, that he might establish a throne of firm promise, hand over a scepter for long days, that he might make the shepherd called by Ningirsu lift high the head as if it wore a blue crown, that he might appoint to (their) offices in the courtyard of Eninnu the “skin-clad”, the “linen-clad,” and the “covered head” – he (Gudea) brings along with himself (and introduces) to the lord Ningirsu, the Great Door, the Pole of Girnun, the chief bailiff of Girsu, his beloved son Ig-alim.

Gudea's description of Ig-alim, the temple gate, with its first lines in particular, is evocative of the jurisdiction generally performed either in the temple gate or in the city gate, but inscribes the human agency into the architectural structure itself. And so, the gate as embodied jurisdiction manifests the civil order otherwise performed by human agents.

As suggested by such references, architecture was perceived to be an active intentional agent within the city's life (see Chapters 4, 10, and 12, this volume).⁴ Though temples are often the focus of evocative building descriptions, other elements of the city—including palaces, city walls, and city gates—also played an affective role in urban life.

City walls and city gates in Mesopotamia

City walls helped demarcate the economic and political uses of urban space and served as defensive barriers against enemy attacks. Together with the walls, city gates and the streets that led to them were part of the urban architectural as well as ritualistic and cosmological delineation of the city and represented essential components of urban monumental architecture. Sumerian debate literature and dialogues created in the context of the ancient training of the scribes (Reinink and Vanstiphout 1991), as exemplified by the *Debate between the Bird and the Fish*, teaches us that, in the ancient world view, cities were considered to have been created by the gods. In the *Gilgamesh Epic*, the wall of Uruk carries this element of sacred construction, even as the monument is associated with the ruler Gilgamesh (George 2003: 539):

He built the wall of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
of holy Eanna, the pure storehouse.
See its wall which is like *a strand of wool*,
view its parapet which nobody can replicate!
Take the stairway that has been there since ancient times,
and draw near to Eanna, the seat of Ištar,
that no later king can replicate, nor any man.
Go up to the wall of Uruk and walk around,
Survey the foundation platform, inspect the brickwork!
(See) if its brickwork is not kiln-fired brick,
and if the Seven Sages did not lay its foundations!

In the epic, the wall is said to be “without rival”—its construction of kiln-fired bricks, its height, and its placement in the city’s deep foundations all being evidence for the wall’s technological refinement. What is more, the epic claims that the wall’s foundations are not man-made, instead, they were laid by the Seven Sages of the Apsu, the fresh water ocean. The Apsu was considered to be the realm of the god Sumerian Enki/Akkadian Ea, and the Seven Sages acted as Enki/Ea’s helpers, and therefore represented the epitome of purity. Thus, although the king is allowed to tell about his construction and restoration of city walls, by associating their foundations with the pure freshwater realm of Enki/Ea, the notion of divine authorship is maintained.

While the *Gilgamesh Epic* cites the role of the Seven Sages in the construction of the monument, other textual genres gesture to the sacralisation of city walls and gates by putting them under the surveillance of the gods. As is evident from their names, they were put under divine control and so were supposed to ensure the inviolability of the city, and thereby the cosmic order. At Babylon, the two inner citadel walls were associated with the god Enlil, and known by the names “Enlil-Showed-Favor” (*Imgur-Enlil*) and “Bullwark-of-Enlil” (*Nīmīt-Enlil*) (George 1992: 66–67). As such, city walls and city gates in the ancient Near East and in Mesopotamia, in particular, need to be considered in the larger framework of the ancient world view and royal ideology. The notion of the divine origin of the city explains why Mesopotamian societies made a strong distinction between the city as the epitome of civilised order and the areas that lay outside the city walls. It is this strong distinction between the inside and the outside, civilisation and wilderness, order and anti-order that places the city gate as a threshold (Latin *limen*) between the two realms at centre stage. Here, the outside and the inside met: city gates often functioned as a place of trade between pastoralists and merchants as well as the city dwellers and as a locale of jurisdiction, and ritual performance. However, being a vulnerable spot in the city wall, such

gates also needed protection. They were strongly fortified with towers on both sites to prevent the invasion of the enemy during times of war. These physical aspects of fortification were complemented by the names of the walls and gates evoking the protective agency of the gods.

Seeing the city of Babylon from a distance surrounded by moats must have created a vision of the city as a mound that had arisen out of the water in primordial times, which positioned it firmly within the cosmic order (Maul 1997; George 1999; van De Mieroop 2003: 262). King Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BCE), by contrast, in his inscriptions, emphasises the destructive force of the waters of the ocean rather than the freshwater domain of Enki: “Alongside Babylon great banks of earth I heaped up. Great floods of destroying water like the great waves of the sea I made flow around it; with a marsh I surrounded it” (Langdon 1912: 93, col. 2, 10–14). Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar II seems to use the motif of flooding the city in order to destroy it,⁵ by transforming the waters into an aggressive destructive force against the invading enemy and so elaborating on a well-established metaphor. Beyond the moats stood the immense city walls that in their tripartite outline protected the citizens of Babylon and their ordered civilised life from the chaotic forces roaming the countryside including enemies, marauding nomads, wild animals, and ghosts.

Craftsmanship and the affect of monuments

Beyond stirring cultural memory though, the “technology of enchantment” (Gell 1992) achieved through materials and the skilful work of the craftsmen was also meant to affect the senses and emotions turning the palace into a locale of multisensorial experience, as is beautifully illustrated by an inscription of the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE) dedicated to the building of the new palace in Kalḫu/Nimrud, of which a snippet is provided below (RINAP 1: Tiglath-pileser III 47, r. 26’–34’):

(r. 26’–27’) I roofed them with long beams of cedar, which are sweet to smell as the scent of the *hašūru*-wood, a product of Mount Am[anus], Mount Lebanon, (and) Mount Ammanāna, thus I demonstrated appropriate care (for their roofing). In order to splendidly provide appropriate decorations (*ana šurruḥ simātī*) for the locks [...] ... I fashioned stones of the stonemason’s craft and (thus) made (its) gates befitting (a royal palace).

(r. 28’–29’a) I fastened bands of shiny silver (*zahālū*) and *ešmarū*-silver on double doors of cedar (and) cypress-wood, which bestow (great) pleasure on those who enter them (and) whose fragrance wafts into the heart, and I hung (them) wherever there were gates.

(r. 29’b–30’) I set up in its entrances (statues of) lions, *šēdu*, (and) *lamassu* (protective genii), whose features are very skillfully wrought (*ša bināte ma’diš nukkulū*) (and) which are clothed with attractiveness⁶ (*hitlupū kuzbu*), and I erected (them there) as objects of wonder (*ana tabrāte ušazziz*) (for the people). ...

(r. 32’) To put the finishing touch on them (the palatial halls), I arranged knobbed pegs of gold, silver, and bronze around them, (and) thus made their appearance bright (*ušanbiṭa bunnīšin*).

(r. 33’–34’) For my royal abode, I set up therein a glittering chamber inlaid with precious stones. I named them “(The) Palatial Halls of Joy (*ekallāt hidāti*) Which Bear Abundance (*našā hegallī*), Which Bless the King, (and) Which Make Their Builder Long-Lived.

The emphasis on the materials used to fabricate the various architectural parts of the palace is noteworthy. They are not only mentioned for their particular usefulness in the construction of

specific parts of the building such as the cedar beams for roofing; they are valued also explicitly for their effect on the olfactory perception of the beholder by choosing them for their fragrance and scent, an aspect that equally applies to the immense doors made of cypress wood providing access to the various halls and chambers of the building. Coatings of various metals applied to the surface of the doors and decorations of the walls with precious stones contributed to the visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic experience when walking through the halls and intensified the overwhelming impression of splendour and glamour of the palace (see Thomason 2016; see also Chapter 30, this volume). Moreover, royal artistic skill as propagated in this inscription, is rewarded with the palace acting in favour of the king by blessing him with fame generated by the joy it produces in its occupants, abundance, and a long life. Again, also in this first-millennium text, architecture is taking on agency in its own right to effect in return a beneficial life for the king.

Decorating the walls and infusing them with agency

In antiquity, the defensive character of the city walls and/or city gates due to their strong fortified architectural structure was enhanced by means of decoration. Archaeological evidence from the Assyrian capital of Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin), for instance, has revealed that parts of the city wall were decorated with glazed bricks below the battlements (Reade 1995). Glazed bricks as architectural element were used for the first time in a royal palace by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BCE) who reports on the completion of the palace his father had started to build at Nineveh (RIMA 2:A.0.87.63–66):

[The palace] which Aššur-rēša-iši (I), my father, vice-regent of the god Aššur, had built (but) not completed—this palace I constructed (and) completed. I raised its walls and towers and made (them) fast, with a façade of bricks glazed (in the colour of) obsidian, lapis lazuli, *pappardilū*-stone, (and) *parūtu*-alabaster.⁷

All these various materials destined to affect the passers-by were acquired from afar thus metaphorically standing in for Assyrian control of either the trading routes or the territories themselves, from which they originated. In addition, these stones were used for their particular range of colours, which had cognitive effects as well as cultural meaning. The Assyrian evidence demonstrates that, when talking about the Ishtar Gate of Babylon, we have to be aware that, while it stands out due to its huge dimensions of glazed brick walls, Nebuchadnezzar II's decision to use glazed bricks for sections of the procession street and the Ishtar Gate was not a new invention, although the way the figures were fabricated in high relief was new (Thavapalan 2019: 132). And still, for us as for the ancient visitor to Babylon, the Ishtar Gate with its choice of radiant blue for the walls and red, yellow, and white for the decorative and figurative elements offers an impressive sensory experience.

In the following, I will explore what exactly leaves this stunning sensorial impact and inquire into how the decorative features form a unity with the architecture and evoke the transitional context and liminal character of the city gate. Particular attention will be paid to the emotional affect of colour, the arrangement of the mythological figures, and how the material experience effectuated the act of naming the Ishtar Gate and the procession street. By focusing on the “enchantment” achieved through technical virtuosity (Gell 1992) in combination with cultural knowledge of the names, a “sensescape”⁸ will emerge that reflects the synaesthetic experience of the visitor to Babylon.⁹

Colour and affect at Babylon

Modern techniques, including Raman spectroscopy, polarised light microscopy, and scanning electron microscopy, revealed an extensive use of painting in Mesopotamian temples and palaces from the earliest periods of monumental architecture. Thus, detected traces of yellowish colour in the pillar building at Uruk (fourth millennium BCE) allowed for a reconstruction of a façade decoration that combined mosaics of cones coloured in black, white, and red with yellow plaster (Eichmann 2013: 124, fig. 16.9). Equally, the examination and analysis of pigments on reliefs from Ashurnasirpal II's (883–859 BCE) palace in Nimrud revealed an extensive use of colour (Thavapalan and Warburton 2010), creating a landscape of floral, faunal, and figurative elements that in their sensorial effect can be at least partially experienced in the reconstruction of the wall paintings from Til Barsip, the modern Tell Ahmar, set up in the Musée du Louvre (Tomabechi 1983–1984; Abbate 1994; Albenda 2005). Except for the example in the Louvre, ancient architecture and mural decorations in form of reliefs thus had an appearance that was very different from the aesthetic experience with which we view them today in their museum settings with the colouring long gone in antiquity.

The choice of particular colours for the decoration of the walls can be illuminated by texts concerned with ritual performance, as colour played an important role in purification rituals, in particular. These used strings of coloured wool and semi-precious stones in various colours (Haas 2003). It is this magic context, in particular, which teaches us about the symbolic meaning of colours. In Mesopotamian culture, colours frequently took “their meaning and value not from perceptions of hue, but rather from the brightness and lustre characteristic of particular materials” (Thavapalan et al. 2016: 198; Schuster-Brandis 2008: 453). The colour red (Sumerian: **sa**, containing the sign **SI** for “horn” and vertical *gunû*-strokes/Akkadian: *sāmu*) has a positive but also repellent meaning: the exorcist is wearing a red cloak (CAD N/1: s.v. *nahlaptu*, 1) as well as a red garment (*šubātu*) meant to ward off evil forces. The same was true for a *lahmu* figure discovered in the foundation at Khorsabad which still shows traces of red colour (Roaf 1991: 184). The faces of Marduk and Nanâ are said to have a reddish-shining appearance (*zīmē ruššūti*) designed to evoke terror and fear (*puluhtu*) to repel the enemy (Tallqvist 1938: 95). However, the reddish-shining face of Marduk may also have had a propitious effect as told by the procession *omina* in the omen series “When a City on High”: “When (Marduk) his face is red: Enlil will bestow wealth onto the country (the south wind will blow)” (Sallaberger 2000: 236, l. 11). There existed no term for the colour blue; instead the term for the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli (Sumerian: **za-gin**/Akkadian: *uqnû*) could designate a range of blue gemstones, and even faience and glass (Thavapalan et al. 2016: 202). It could be used to ward off the evil eye. In cognitive studies, the colour blue, by contrast, is said to affect the human being mentally rather than physically, and its positive properties include communication, trust, serenity, and calmness. However, it can also have negative effects of coldness, unfriendliness, aloofness, and a lack of emotion. As evidenced by entries in omen compendia and medical compendia, the colour yellow/green written with the sign **SIG₇** = *arqu* could have an unfavourable meaning. Thus, yellow water of the river is said to provoke jaundice in the land. White (Sumerian: **babbar**/Akkadian: *pešû*) often has a positive meaning: decorative elements of the palaces are said to be made of white stone fit for royalty and the god Assur receives white horses (Fales and Jakob-Rost 1991: 74, no. 33, r. 5).

The symbolic meaning of colours was not restricted to the human realm. One of the Assyrian cultic commentaries that provides exegetical explanations for the ritual performance during state rituals is concerned with cosmic features and describes the heavens as being constructed of three layers that are made of a variety of stones in different colours including: the Upper Heaven made of *luludānītu* stone, a reddish stone with white and black patches, probably banded agate;



Figure 15.1 Mark Rothko, “No. 3,” 1967. Yale University Art Gallery, Katharine Ordway Collection.

the Middle Heaven made of *saggilmud*-stone, which is violet-blue and has been identified as amethyst; and the Lower Heaven made of chalcedony, which has a greyish, light blue colour and translucent quality associated with the clear as well as cloudy sky (SAA 3: 39; Horowitz 1998: 3–15; Schuster-Brandis 2008: 14; Ataç 2018: 78–79).

The culturally specific meaning of colours in Mesopotamia can be linked with observations that have been made in cognitive studies. Cognitive studies have demonstrated that colour perception “is actually visual information, providing some sort of detail about the object or idea it is associated with. Colour adds characteristics to the world around us, and perception of the external world can affect thought processes” (Caschera 2015). By researching the effect of exposure to certain colours in task performance, either as approach orientation or avoidance orientation, results showed that the mere perception of the colour red, for instance, can inhibit cognitive performance (Caschera 2015). While the psychological property of red can produce warmth, strength, and energy, in its negative effect it can also produce aggression and defiance. Both effects can be experienced in paintings by Mark Rothko. While Rothko’s painting “No. 3,” 1967 (Figure 15.1) produces a warming effect, the combination of red with white in Rothko, “Untitled,” 1968 (Figure 15.2) by contrast, elicits alertness, and, indeed, has something threatening to it, an effect reiterated in our modern stop sign (Figure 15.3).

While these inherent properties of materials and colours have the potential of provoking certain cognitive reactions that apply to any human being, materials also possess subjective qualities that are culturally assigned, as shown by the material discussed above. Thus, when Sargon II (722–705 BCE) claims that he wrote his name on tablets made of gold, silver, copper, tin, lapis lazuli, and alabaster, he was certainly not only thinking of them as precious objects but also of their shining, lustrous, and resplendent appearance which the ancients associated with purity and sacredness.¹⁰ Not only were these materials imbued with purity and sacredness, when applied to



Figure 15.2 Mark Rothko, “Untitled,” 1968.

Source: © 2020 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 15.3 Standard North American Stop Sign.

Source: United Nations, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

the walls of temples, palaces, and city walls, in their glaring effect they irradiated awe-inspiring and terrifying splendour (*melammu*), as reflected in Shalmaneser III's (858–824 BCE) choice for the name of the inner wall in the city of Assur: “Whose Terrifying Splendour Covers the Land.”¹¹

A major tenet of sensory studies is that some aspects of the human body—especially sensory organs—are universal, and, therefore, we can attempt to “feel” as ancient people felt. The distinction between sensing and perception in psychology is also useful here. We all sense similarly, but perceive differently (Howes and Classen 2014). One could posit that, in addition to the culturally specific meaning of colours, psychological effects also played a role in the choice of colours the ritual experts and building masters made for the building of palaces, city walls, city gates, and temples, and that ritual usage of colour might have impacted the choices made for their decorations. How the combination of red and white plays out on the reliefs of the ancient Assyrian palaces has been recently illuminated by digital installations in the exhibition



Figure 15.4 Sebetti figures from a doorway at the North Palace of Ashurbanipal, Nineveh, Exhibition, *I am Ashurbanipal*, at the British Museum.

Source: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

I am Ashurbanipal at the British Museum (November 8, 2018–February 24, 2019). On the basis of traces of colours on the relief, the curators restored the original appearance of Sebetti figures watching over gateways in Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh (Figure 15.4).¹² These guardian figures or demons were clad in white garments holding in their left hand a dagger and smiting any intrusive and hostile force with an axe held in their right hand.¹³ This depiction of the Sebetti in the relief comes very close to the description transmitted in the so-called *Göttertypentext*, a text that lists a variety of gods and demons, for the lion-man (*ugallu*). Here the lion-man appears in the following terms: “[the representation/statue?] has a lion's head and lion's ears, it holds a ... in its right hand and carries an ax in its left, it is girded with a dagger, its name is *ugallu*” (Köcher 1953: 68; Wiggermann 1992: 170).

In the imagery of the Ashurbanipal's North Palace, instead of carrying the dagger in a girdle, the Sebetti figures raise it in their left hand. The contrast between the red dagger and the white garment in a powerful way reinforces and intensifies the lion-man's threatening and aggressive gesture of raising his dagger to any unwanted intruder to the palace. Such guardian figures in doorways are already attested in Sennacherib's (704–681 BCE) Southwest Palace at Nineveh, where the lion-man (*ugallu*) is paired with Lulal, another demon in smiting poise, as well as the six-locked hero holding a standard in external gates and the doors leading to ablution rooms used for ritual purification (Battini 2014). These figures are rendered with a frontal body and their faces in profile, but as in the case of the Sebetti figures in Ashurbanipal's North Palace, their eyes again are directed frontally so that in the combination of their marching action and their gaze directed outward they are directly meeting and warding off any unwanted intruder (Kertai 2015a: 342; Neumann 2015: 90). This specific action is also reflected in a ritual text which teaches

us that the *ugallu* was supposed to “turn away the breast of the evil one and the enemy” (*KAR* 298; Wiggermann 1992: 49, text II, o. 42). The particular sculpting of the eyes in high relief and their being painted in white with Egyptian blue to render the iris, and black carbon to accentuate the eyebrows intensified the interaction with the viewer (Neumann 2015: 91). Moreover, even when the visitor or the intruder had passed the doorway, the sense of the glaring gaze of the demons would have lingered accompanying the person into the succeeding chamber (Neumann 2015: 91).

The choice of colours is an important aspect to think of when we investigate the function and meaning of the Ishtar Gate. One could posit that the colour blue of the lapis lazuli, which pervasively dominates the walls of the Ishtar Gate together with the procession street, had been chosen deliberately for its protective and repellent quality. In addition, however, it also evoked a notion of purity and sacredness associated with lapis lazuli (Pongratz-Leisten 2009). It is interesting to observe that the colours chosen for lions marching towards the outside of the gate warding off any kind of unwelcome intruder is the same combination—white and red—as the one for the guardian figures in the palaces of the Assyrian kings. The glazed bricks used for their bodies are white while their manes and peritoneum are coloured in shades of yellow and red, producing a glaring and nearly blinding effect when hit by the blazing sun. This affective experience of the lion’s colour is intensified by the reddish bands framing it above and below, which have a decorative element of a brick glazed in a black-white-black pattern set into the band in a regular design evoking the representation of a glaring eye (Figure 15.5). One could posit, consequently, a commonality for guardian figures in gateways, whether demons in palace gates or lions in city gates, both being depicted in this particular set of colours—white and red—to enhance their protective and repellent force. The blue background of the gate and its gateway would have disappeared in the darkness of the night leaving the lions protruding from the walls almost like a “reflector” effect used on the edges of signs set up on the side of roads so that cars pick them up in the dark.

Lions in gateways have a long history in Mesopotamia usually being placed at the entrance of temples (Battini 2009). The first evidence comes from the reign of Enannatum I (twenty-fifth century BCE) who tells us about having installed wooden guardian lions at the gateway of Ningirsu’s temple (*RIME* 1: E1.9.3.4). Such guardian lions made of wood, copper, stone, or clay have been found in various sites of the Early Dynastic period and of the Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian periods (second and third millennia BCE). Their number diminishes in the first millennium BCE to be replaced by the composite *lamassu* figures.¹⁴ The archaeological and textual evidence reveals that lions generally come as a pair crouching, sitting, or standing at either side of the gate, as for example at the entrance to the shrine room of the goddess Nisaba in her temple at Old Babylonian Shaduppum, modern Tell Harmal. This kind of pairing equally applies for colossi and winged *genii* set up in the gates of the Neo-Assyrian palaces.

Lions, while the emblematic animal of the goddess Ishtar, could be set up at temples of a variety of divinities, and so had a much more universal presence which even extended into its metaphorical function as standing in for the king to celebrate his physical might and vigour as discussed further below. In the context of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon, however, we can safely assume that it was chosen as a medium to presence the deity, who herself, in her bellicose agency, in particular, might be compared to the lion. In contrast to earlier kings setting up pairs of lions in the gateways of temples, Nebuchadnezzar II, when planning the doorway of the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, chose a different way of depiction and showed Ishtar’s lion in multiplicity. Multiplicity has been defined as a “production of presence that for the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians is a continuous process of becoming that has no end” (Bahrani 2014: 118–119). The fact that the lions are represented in a walking gait reinforces this continuous kinaesthetic perception.



Figure 15.5 Portion of the Reconstructed Processional Way, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin. Brick glazed in a black-white-black pattern set into the band in a regular design evoking the representation of a glaring eye.

Source: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo by Olaf M. Tessner.

While in Mesopotamian art typically the lion is normally shown crouching below Ishtar or with the goddess standing on it, here, in the Ishtar Gate, it is represented multiple times on both sides. Its depiction runs beyond the actual entrance of the gate, that is to say in the gateway protruding into the outer world, and forming the transitional context and interface from the open country into the urban space. This passage has a length of about 200 metres, thus emphasising in its immense monumentality the transitory passage from civilised order within the city into the region beyond the city walls which, in the ancient world view, was perceived as belonging to anti-order. The defensive character of the gate and even the street leading up to it comes across in their names. The street passing along the Esagila temple (dedicated to the patron god Marduk) and through the Ishtar Gate, was known under two names: “May the Arrogant Not Flourish!” (*Ay-ibūr-šabū*) and “Ištar is the Guardian of her Troops” (*Ištar-lamassi-ummānī-šu*), which are used in an alternating way in the royal inscriptions (George 1992: 360). The progressive movement of the lions marching in lines one after the other equally evokes metaphorically the advancing of military troops. The aggressive character of the name as conveyed in the street names also applies to the Ishtar Gate itself, which was called “Ishtar Overthrows its Assailant” (*Ištar-sākipat-tēbīša*).

The cultural practice of presencing the agency of temples, statues, cultic paraphernalia, streets, city walls, and gates through naming is a strategy that is pervasive in Mesopotamia, and is particular to its culture; it is not to be found in Hittite culture, for instance.¹⁵ It reveals the ancient world view that the materialised presence of a divinity could extend into anything that was associated with her or him and could act on her/his behalf including the name. The particular placement of Ishtar's lion and the fact that it is depicted in infinite repetition marching towards the world of anti-order suggests that, in its striding aggressive movement towards the hostile world, ferociously roaring, snarling, and marching towards the intruder, the lion similar to the image (*šalmu*; Bahrani 2003: ch. 5; Sonik 2015; Pongratz-Leisten forthcoming) of Ishtar performs the defensive and aggressive action conveyed in the name of the Ishtar Gate. Repetition, here, conveys constant and perpetual movement warding off the hostile and chaotic forces from outside. Thus, the depiction of the multiple lions rather than being understood as a decorative feature must be seen in unity with the architecture (Hamilakis 2013: 182–194) forming an arena of constant bellicose performance and imaginary soundscape¹⁶ to bring the outsider under the political control of the city. For the visitor to the city passing through the seemingly endless flow displayed in the gateway, this encounter with the infinite image of Ishtar's aggression that was meant to generate fear and anxiety must have been a powerful sensorial and affective experience. Ishtar's lion can be perceived as a mnemonic device, evoking and re-enacting perpetually her protection of the king and the city.

The street leading up to the Ishtar Gate as well as the gate itself also had a prominent role in religious ritual. The architectural emphasis on the transitory aspect of the gateway and its defensive character elicited by means of the marching lions with no end would have been especially significant in the moment of the performance of the New Year festival, when Marduk, patron deity of Babylon and chief god of the Babylonian pantheon, together with the king performed the procession towards the *akītu* house situated outside the outer city walls. Descriptions of Marduk in the Babylonian directory known under the title Tintir (TIN.TIR^{ki} = Babylon) mention him as being seated in the *akītu* house on top of the defeated chaos monster Tiamat. This entry together with hymns performed during the procession suggest that the procession itself was perceived as reiterating Marduk's battle against Tiamat (Pongratz-Leisten 1994; Zgoll 2006; van der Toorn 1991; 2018) known from the Babylonian creation epic, in which the patron deity of Babylon defeats the older generation of gods (Lambert 2013). Various inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar II report on using the street for the procession of Marduk during the New Year festival (*akītu*), which he also referred to as the “road to the Akītu (Temple)” as well as the construction work carried out for embellishment. Thus, Nebuchadnezzar II refers to the work of his father (Nabopolassar) in the following terms (East India House Inscription [I R 55, v, 12–20], quoted after George 1992: 360):

From Du-ku Kinamtarrede, the Dais of Destinies (located in the Esagila Temple), to Ay-ibūr-šabû, the Street of Babylon, opposite Ka-sikilla, (Nabopolassar) beautified (*ubannâ*) the roadway (*sulê*), the procession-way (*mašdaha*) of the great lord Marduk, with slabs of breccia.

Nebuchadnezzar II himself continued the work of his father up to the Ishtar Gate (I R 56, v, 38–54, quoted after George 1992: 360):

(On) Ay-ibūr-šabû, the Street Of Babylon, I made a massive filling for the procession-way of the great lord Marduk, and embellished it with slabs of breccia and mountain quarry-stone

from Ka-sikilla to Ištar-sākipat-tēbīša (Ishtar Gate), for his divine procession-way; I joined it with the part my father had treated, and beautified its roadway.

Breccia is composed of fragments of minerals and has a shining appearance which was well suited as architectural stone for a procession-way. Additionally, one also has to keep in mind that during the festival this road normally used for daily activities was sanctified by additional magic actions such as the sprinkling of flour. This ritual act was performed by the king as he was preceding the god during his procession towards the *akītu* house outside the city. The sprinkling of flour is a performance typical of purification rituals and was meant to sacralise and purify the road and turn it into a sacred procession-way. Thus, choices in architectural construction and ritual performance both aimed at making the road suitable to be used by Marduk on his way out to the festival house.

Once arrived at the gate itself, the visitor encountered two other guardians: the *mušhuššu* dragon and the bull both also represented to scale in moulded brick (Figure 15.6). All three animals—bull, lion, and *mušhuššu*—represented on the walls of the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way have a long history of protecting gateways in the ancient Near East.¹⁷ In palaces and temples, bulls and *mušhuššu*-dragons were found positioned at entryways possibly as early as the middle of the third millennium BCE.¹⁸ Moreover, these three beasts—the bull, the lion, and the *mušhuššu*-dragon—were associated with deities: the bull with the Storm God Adad; the lion, as



Figure 15.6 Reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate, Neo-Babylonian period (reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, 604–562 BCE), moulded and glazed baked clay, Babylon, Iraq. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (VA Bab 01409–01412, 01414–01417, 01435–01438, 07661).

Source: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo by Olaf M. Tessner.

already discussed with Ishtar; and the *mušhuššu* in later Mesopotamian history with Marduk. In the creation epic *Enuma elish* (“When above”), the *mušhuššu* is listed among the eleven monsters that form the army of Tiamat against whom Marduk goes into battle to regain the tablet of destinies epitomising the exercise of power by the supreme god. Once defeated, the *mušhuššu*, probably under the impact of older mythical traditions, became Marduk’s emblematic animal (Wiggermann 1993; Pongratz-Leisten 2018). Texts inscribed on a pair of lions found at a city gate in the city of Til Barsip, modern Tell Ahmar, evoke the notion of the protective force of these animals on the Ishtar Gate exemplified by their names: “Furious storm demon, whose onslaught is irresistible, feller of the subordinate, who helps achieve one’s desires,” and “Repulser of battle, overwheeler of the enemy land, who drives out evil, who brings in good” (Watanabe 2015: 220 with references).

The selection of the bull, lion, and *mušhuššu*-dragon was particularly meaningful, as these three animals could be envisioned in a concert of action. For example, Nebuchadnezzar II’s inscriptions from Wadi Brisa in Lebanon, which discuss the construction of the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way, mention explicitly these three divinities—Adad, Ishtar, and Marduk—passing along this street in procession (Langdon 1912 = VAB IV, 156 no. 19, v, 49). By drawing upon the very ancient apotropaic function of these animals as well as their direct association with particular divinities, Nebuchadnezzar increased and intensified the defensive forces of the gate.

Once the protection of the gate is recognised as a fundamental concern, strategies used to represent the animals of the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way become clearer. In particular, the manner in which the divine beasts are portrayed was probably designed to underscore the protective nature of the animals. Bulls, lions, and *mušhuššu*-dragons emerge from the walls into the space of the viewer, becoming part of the human world. Lions are shown with extended claws, and the horns of the bulls and *mušhuššu*-dragons gleam.

The procession during the *akītu* festival also allowed for the display of the king’s political and military achievements, which fits well with an epithet of the Ishtar Gate: “Entrance of Kingship” (*nēreb šarrūti*). Given the symbolic meaning of Marduk’s return to the city as annually celebrated *adventus* to his cultic centre Babylon and divine abode Esagila, this name could function to celebrate Marduk’s kingship over the gods. As, however, the earthly king is the main participant in the festival, taking the god by his hand and leading him in procession, the name could equally refer to human kingship and so refer to the ideological function of the *akītu* festival which in addition to celebrating Marduk’s triumph over Tiamat also reconfirmed the king in his office. Ambiguity in this regard could well have been intended to evoke the concert in action performed by god and king to secure and maintain the social and cosmic order.

Returning to the image of the lions in the Ishtar Gate, an alternative reading of the lion has been suggested recently in the context of the discussion revolving around the use of astroglyphs in the palace of Sargon II in his newly built capital Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad) (Figure 15.7) and in one of Esarhaddon’s inscriptions known as the Lord Aberdeen’s Black Stone to write the king’s name (Figure 15.8).

In these contexts, the lion has been interpreted as standing in for the king, based on the equation of king and lion as attested in lexical texts; here, the sign for lion PIRIG₃ = *nēšu* might be used to write *šarru* “king” (Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 289; Rochberg 2019). Moreover, the king’s star (^{mul}LUGAL) “corresponds to the star Regulus and is part of the Mesopotamian lion constellation” (Roaf and Zgoll 2001: 280–281), which appears on later Seleucid tablets (Figures 15.9 and 15.10) and again merges the agency of the king with that of the lion. Such conflation of the lion standing in for Ishtar and the king might have been intended with the stamp impressed on baked bricks from the time of Nebuchadnezzar II showing a lion in addition to the alphabetic Aramaic (Figure 15.11; Baker 2019: 59, fig. 3c).

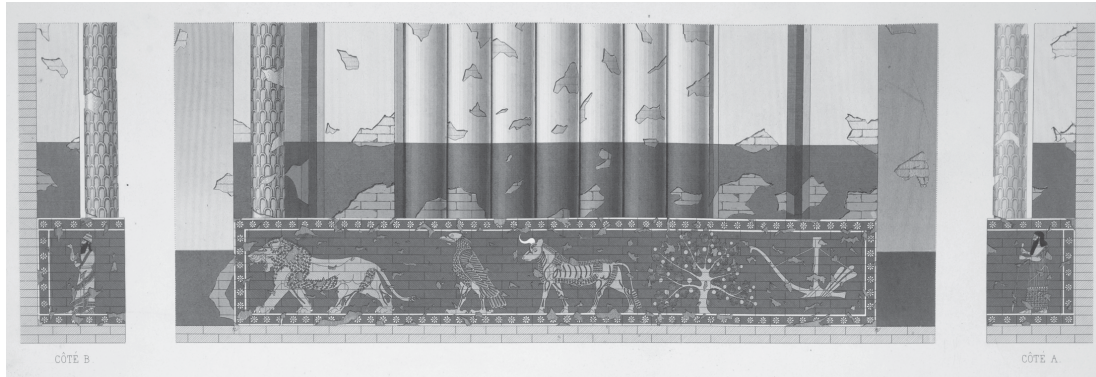


Figure 15.7 Astroglyphs on the wall of the Sin Temple at Khorsabad.

Source: Place 1867–1870: fig. 104.



Figure 15.8 Astroglyphic inscription on Lord Aberdeen's Black Stone.

Source: Roaf and Zgoll 2001: fig. 1; © Michael Roaf; drawing Cornelia Wolff.

Literary texts might compare the king with the lion or the wild bull to praise his virile strength and royalty. That the king or warrior divinity assimilate the nature and features of their opponents and then can be compared to the wild bull, lion, and even the ferocious lion-eagle Anzû after having heroically vanquished them, is a common motif in Sumero-Babylonian literature.¹⁹ These motifs show that the theme of the divine hero smiting the rampant lion inspired the iconographic choice of the royal seal of the Neo-Assyrian kings, which symbolised royal authority and was pervasively stamped onto important tablets in administrative and cultic spheres (Radner 2008). The association of king and lion also gave rise to the famous hunting scenes depicted on the reliefs of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) at Nimrud and in Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh (668–627 BCE) as well as the pictorial choice for the Neo-Assyrian royal seal (Herbordt 1992; Maul 1995).

In Babylonia, by contrast, the *topos* of the king confronting the lion is not depicted until Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BCE)—the builder of the Ishtar Gate—who, when campaigning in the area of Lebanon decided to put up his rock relief in an area where formerly the Assyrian



Figure 15.9 Seleucid astrological tablet showing a lion (= Leo) standing on a winged dragon-snake (= Hydra) with eight-pointed star. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (VAT 7847).

Source: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo by Olaf M. Tessner.



Figure 15.10 Seleucid astrological tablet showing a group of seven stars (= Pleiades), a man in the moon holding a crouching leonine creature by the tail, and a bull in jumping posture (= Taurus). Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (VAT 7851).

Source: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo by Olaf M. Tessner.



Figure 15.11 Stamp seal impressed on a baked brick from the time of Nebuchadnezzar II. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin (VA Bab 4389).

Source: © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo by Olaf M. Tessner.

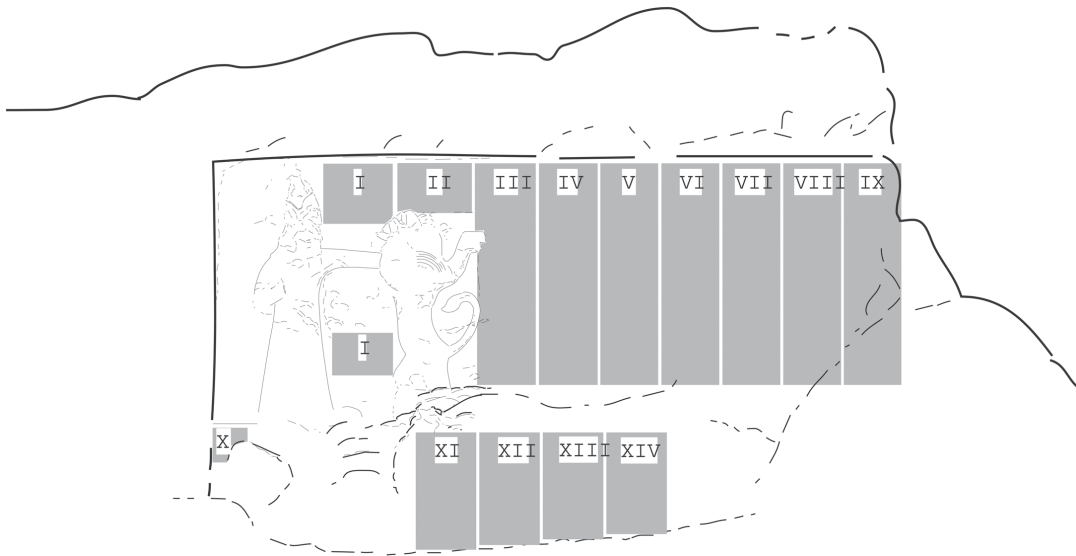


Figure 15.12 Drawing of the rock relief from Wadi Brisa, Lebanon, showing Nebuchadnezzar II stabbing a rampant lion.

Source: Da Riva 2012: 153, fig. VIII/1.

kings also had demonstrated their territorial claim in the same way. It is not a coincidence that in one of his two rock reliefs at Wadi Brisa located at one of the most important routes in North Lebanon connecting the Biqa' Valley with the Lebanon Mountains and the Mediterranean, the Neo-Babylonian king is represented in Assyrian manner, that is to say stabbing the rampant lion (Figure 15.12) (Da Riva 2010; 2014; 2015).

This inscription provides the reasoning for his campaign, namely to exploit the Lebanon Mountains for their cedars, which he used to build the temple of Marduk in Babylon (Da Riva 2010: 174), and also describes his work on the procession street and the Ishtar Gate. The pictorial and textual evidence of the Wadi Brisa rock reliefs, far away from Babylon in Lebanon, suggests that we should allow for multiple meanings for the lion in the Ishtar Gate. It insinuates that the image of the king as lion had entered Nebuchadnezzar II's ideological discourse of self-representation, although no reference to the lion as astroglyph as in the cases of Sargon II and Esarhaddon described above, either pictorial or textual, can be found in the contemporary Neo-Babylonian pictorial and textual repertoire. Nonetheless, the king and the lion as Ishtar's animal could have been blurred in the cultural memory of the ancients, turning the lion in the Ishtar Gate into a powerful agent defending civilized order against chaos.

Conclusion

Exploring the world-making (Goodman 1978) aspect and symbolic meaning city walls and city gates had in the ancient world view and social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966) from the textual perspective providing insight into the perceived agency and symbolic meaning of architecture as well as from their very materiality including their pictorial décor and use of colours both destined to enhance and reinforce their defensive character, allows us, as I would claim, at least to some degree, to relive the sensory experience of the ancient visitor to Babylon walking the Processional Way towards the Ishtar Gate.²⁰

Notes

1. Synaesthesia, the fusion of sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste, represents an important aspect of these approaches as it treats the different modes of sensory perception together, rather than separately or in hierarchical order (Tilley 2004: 14–16). This approach originated with the work of the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962).
2. In doing so, phenomenological archaeology goes beyond the notion of spatiality (Campbell 2018) as originating with the work of Henri Lefebvre (1974), which conceptualised a three-way dialectic of perceived, conceived, and lived-in space focusing on the spatial practice, representation of space and the symbolic associations that overlay geographic space. It adds the aspect of the embodied engagement of the material world, which is perceived as animate, alive, active.
3. While elements of monumental enhancement, like floral and faunal representations, may appear to be mere decorative elements, in antiquity, these representations were part of a dense image filled with symbolic meaning to be associated with fertility and abundance (Winter 2002: 256), with religious notions, and/or with agency (Pongratz-Leisten 2018).
4. On the distinction between agency and intentionality with intentionality being a fundamentally human trait in contrast to agency see Knappett 2005: 22–34.
5. Destruction through flooding was a well-established military strategy and used by Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) in his destruction of the city of Babylon (Machinist 1997: 191), the description of which interestingly is to be found in his Bavian inscription dedicated to his major construction works at the Khinnis Canal north of Nineveh (RINAP 3/2: Sennacherib 223).
6. RINAP 1: Tiglath-pileser III 47, translates *kuzbu* with “splendour.”
7. On the glazed bricks in the Assur Temple, see Andrae 1925; on the archaeological evidence dating only from the Neo-Assyrian period, see Moorey 1985: 171 and Nunn 1988: 165–173, and the most recent discussion in Gries 2017. On the glazed bricks of the Assur temple, see further Zeßlin 2019, and the ongoing Berlin Assur project, which aims to reconstruct the decorative programme of the glazed brick façades of the Assur Temple (www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/en/e/altorient/forschungsprojekte/forschung/abgeschlossene_projekte/assur/index.html).
8. I borrow the term *sensescape* from Thomason 2016.
9. For my first exploration of the Ishtar Gate, see Pongratz-Leisten 2019.

10. For the discussion of inherent properties and culturally assigned qualities of materials, see Benzel 2015.
11. See RIMA 3:A.0.102.11, ii 3, for the use of *melammu* for architecture; see also further entries in CAD M/II: s.v. *melammu*, 1. d).
12. Whether the figures were fully painted or only in select areas of the body is not clear. Various scholars have argued for a limited use of colour, intended to highlight specific features, see Neumann (2015: 90, n. 10 with bibliography).
13. In Hittite ritual the combination of red and white has a sexual as well as cathartic, that is to say cleansing and purifying function; the latter fits well with the location of these reliefs showing the lion-man (Haas 2003: 643).
14. For a survey of the evidence, see Battini 2009.
15. For examples see description of Babylon as transmitted in Tintir and the Assur Directory, both edited in George 1992.
16. Thomason (2016: 251) describes the peaceful atmosphere created by the depiction of birds flying overhead and rustling in the trees of Ashurbanipal's Banquet Scene adding to the soundscape of the event; see further McMahon 2013.
17. Watanabe (2015: 219) suggests that the entrance to the twenty-second-century BCE Eninnu Temple at the city of Girsu may have had depictions of all three of these animals, based on the text known as Gudea Cylinder A.
18. The king Gudea describes the decorative programme of Ningirsu's temple as having a *mušhuššu*-dragon hissing at a wild bull (Watanabe 2015: 219; RIME 3/1: 86). At Nineveh, a representation of a *mušhuššu*-dragon was found on a relief slab near an entryway (Watanabe 2015: 215).
19. The material has been recently discussed by Soohoo 2018.
20. Part of this chapter can be found in my contribution to the catalogue of the ISAW exhibition *A Wonder to Behold: Craftsmanship and the Creation of Babylon's Ishtar Gate* (Amrhein et al. 2019).

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