

Reading the Sky: Divination, Hermeneutics, and Documentation in Ancient Mesopotamia

Date:

19 January 2026 (Mo.)

Location:

LMU Munich, Event room in the Philologicum (Ludwigstraße 25, 80539 Munich)

In ancient Mesopotamia, celestial phenomena were regarded as divine signs predicting the fate of kings and their lands. By the early seventh century BC, Assyrian kings commissioned celestial experts to observe and report these signs as guidance for decision-making.

The long tradition of celestial divination and its specialized training cultivated the vigilant observation skills of Assyrian celestial experts, directing their attention toward significant phenomena in the night sky. Most celestial reports centered on omen quotations used to interpret the divinatory significance of observed events. However, interpretation often went further. Multiple omens could be attached to a single observation, or additional commentary could be provided. Statements like "the moon is seen on the 14th day" may appear straightforward observational records. However, as Wainer (2016) has shown, some are actually commentary, making it difficult to determine how observations were documented and reflected. This suggests that not only divinatory texts but also hermeneutic rules and techniques shaped the practice of celestial observation.

This workshop will examine the relationship between observation, interpretation, and documentation, focusing on the role of hermeneutics in celestial observation and report-making. Topics include the function of hermeneutics in Mesopotamian scholarship, the use of quotation sources, the narrative and physical structure of documentation, the nature of specialized training, and the social networks and status of the experts involved.

Workshop of the CRC 1369: Cultures of Vigilance

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09:00-09:10 Opening

Session 1: Communication with Letters

Chair: Saki Kikuchi

09:10-09:50 Sara Manasterska (Heidelberg University): *Manners good and bad: the communicative game of Neo-Assyrian scholars*

09:50-10:30 Mary Frazer (LMU Munich): *tbd.*

10:30–11:30 Coffee Break

Session 2: Materiality and Documentation

Chair: Sara Manasterska

11:30–12:10 Saki Kikuchi (LMU Munich): *Observation, Interpretation, or Citation? Rethinking the Documentation of Neo-Assyrian Celestial Reports*

12:10–14:00 Lunch Break

Session 3: Interpretation and Commentary

Chair: Mary Frazer

14:00-14:40 Maria Teresa Renzi-Sepe (DFG/FU Berlin): *Reading the Sky: Signs and Phenomena in Celestial Divination*

14:40-15:20 Parker Zane (Yale University): *Celestial-Divinatory Commentaries and the Language of Observation*

15:20-16:00 Coffee Break

16:00-17:00 Discussion and Closing Remarks

18:00 Workshop Dinner