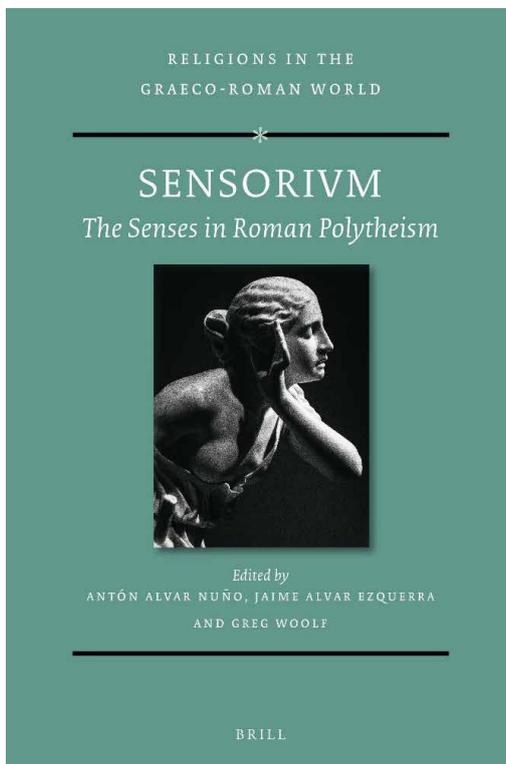


Antón ALVAR NUÑO, Jaime ALVAR EZQUERRA, and Greg WOOLF (eds.), *Sensorium: the Senses in Roman Polytheism*, Boston, Brill, 2021, 458 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-45973-1

The Institute of Historiography “Julio Carlos Baroja” at the Carlos III University of Madrid organized, in November of 2017, an international Conference titled “Sensorium: Sensory Perceptions in the Roman Religion”, a Congress about sensorial history in Roman religion. The monography, the 195th volume of Brill’s series *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, was the result of such Congress, putting into paper some of the communications that were made there.



Before diving into the contents of the book, it is important to mention its editors, renown academics in the field of ancient history. Antón Alvar Nuño is a senior lecturer at the University of Málaga and his research has been focused on Roman magic and Roman religion. Jaime Alvar Ezquerra is professor of ancient history at the Carlos III University of Madrid and his research has been mostly focused on the cults of Mithras, Isis, and Mater Magna. Greg Woolf, one of the most respected historians of our day and age, was the Director of the Institute of Classical Studies and Professor at the University of London until recently and is currently teaching at UCLA. The undisputable quality of the editors’ group is the first clue the reader gets about the quality of the book, a promise delivered throughout sixteen chapters on the various aspects of the role senses played in the religious experience of Ancient Romans.

The authors of the book’s chapters are, for the most part, specialists in Ancient Religion and Classics (with renowned historians such as Nicole Belayche, Elena Muñoz Grijalvo or Jörg Rupke, among others), with a PhD candidate of Philosophy and a researcher on Cultural Astronomy on the mix, two exceptions whose contributions prove to be rather interesting, demonstrating the usefulness of multi and inter-disciplinarity in expanding our knowledge of the past.

The book, intended as a contribution to the growing interest in senses in Classics and elsewhere, starts with a strong introduction that showcases the mastery of the subject by

the editors, providing (to specialists) pertinent reflexions on the subject, and a useful (to students and young researchers now entering the field) conceptual debate and a small historiographical review.

If the introduction argues the importance of the senses to understand how people experienced religion in antiquity, and how the different powers used that cultural sensorium to shape how people experienced and conceptualised power, the different chapters proceed to successfully prove such thesis. So that we can properly explain to the readers what the book is about, and if it is useful for the subjects they may be studying, an analysis chapter by chapter is in order.

Written by Martin Devecka, the first chapter deals with the subject of ghost sighting as it was (de)constructed by Lucretius in his (Epicurean) *De Rerum Natura*. To understand Lucretius' argument against the existence of ghosts the author proceeded to analyse the role of vision in the Roman cult of the dead, framing the discussion with the arguments and theories ancients had on the senses. The chapter is very effective in establishing that to Roman *religio* matched a specific sensorial apparatus, and that Lucretius understood that to disprove parts of Roman *religio* he had to deconstruct the sensorium of Romans.

The second chapter, by Visa Helenius, also dwells on the subject of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. In it the author, a philosophy academic, explains Lucretius' views on senses and how that relates to his understanding of the gods.

The following chapter deals with the Hirpi Sorani and other ancient fire-walkers. There is a very useful survey of the main sources concerning such rites, and a successful attempt to understand those ancient rituals from the perspective of contemporary neuro-psychological research. It is a helpful contribution by Yulia Ustinova to the study of ancient fire-walking rituals and how they worked in binding the community, both performers and viewers, in a single shared collective experience.

Written by Attilio Mastrocinque, the fourth chapter is a non-exhaustive but useful overview of ancient magic surrounding tongues as a medium to strengthen communication with the sphere of the divine.

The fifth chapter, by Maik Patzelt, addresses the debate surrounding the phrase *favete linguis* and its ritual function in ancient Roman religion. It is an original take on the subject, with the author refusing to reduce the phrase to a mere functionalist ritual act, trying, instead, to relate it to individual practice and cognition. It is an attempt to search for the motivation of historical agents, focusing on the ritual process which originated the ritual expression.

The sixth chapter, by Mark Bradley, examines the role of the sensorium in ancient Roman public spectacle, focusing on how the senses were used and exploited to facilitate communication between gods and men, providing a well-executed reconstruction of the sensory stimulation during the Roman triumph.

By Adeline Grand-Clément, the seventh chapter is a more theoretical and conceptual discussion of the relationship between the Roman sensorium and ancient religious experience. It draws from anthropological notions, methods and case-studies, and particularly from the concept of cultural synaesthesia, to argue the importance of understanding Roman senses and the construction of the divine in ancient societies.

In the eight-chapter Rocío Gordillo Hervás analyses the daily and nightly rituals carried out in the Isthmian games of Corinth. Rocío Gordillo focuses particularly on the rituals in honour of the heroic founder of the games, Melikertes/Palaimon, and how their nocturnal setting helped to fabricate an appropriate sensory context for the audience to fully experience the symbolic presence of the dead hero among them.

Chapter nine offers an analysis of the multisensorial experiences in Mithraic initiation rituals. In it Rebeca Rubio explains how Mithraism would use the neophytes' senses to

induce a sensorial experience that lead them to the necessary emotional state for the initiation ceremony.

In the tenth chapter Elena Muñoz Grijalvo studies the religious experience of Imperial mysteries. Elena Muñoz uses other mystery cults that existed in Imperial Rome to argue that imperial mysteries included in their cult practices specific sensorial outputs to prompt specific emotions in the worshippers. The chapter does not attempt to reconstruct the rituals of the mysteries, focusing instead on how the sensory experience was constructed to stimulate a specific conception of the emperor and of imperial power, mostly based on the notion of the emperor as a *deus praesens*.

Chapter eleven continues to address the subject of imperial cult and the ways it developed to enlist the Roman sensorium into a tool for the propagation of its ideology. It analyses how Augustan urban constructions and architecture were meant to exploit the alignment of the sun with certain public structures at specific moments of the religious calendar.

The twelfth chapter of the book has Jörg Rüpke devoting himself to analyse the poem at Propertius 4.6. from a sensorial standpoint. Rüpke uses his concept of “lived ancient religion”, introduced and developed by him throughout these last few years, to analyse the sensorial dimension of the description of the ritual and of the religious dimension at the beginning and end of the poem.

Chapter thirteen analyses, through textual and iconographic sources, the sensorial experiences in the cult of the goddess Cybele, focusing particularly on the musical instruments (drum, cymbal and the flute) used to convey specific emotions.

The fourteenth chapter, by Valentino Gasparini, provides a very encompassing analysis of the body of evidence for the Petrosomatoplyphs dedicated to Isis, showcasing how those footprints dedicated to the Egyptian goddess were an expression of presence, to maintain a channel with the divine sphere.

Chapter fifteen, written by Nicole Belayche, attempts to reconstruct and analyse the role played by music in three religious processions: the *pompa circensis* and the processions of the cult of both Mater Magna and Isis. The convincing thesis of Belayche is that musical ambience was key in creating a specific religious identity, creating a deliberate sensory ambience specific to each cult.

The last chapter of the book continues on the same note, analysing how Isiac worshippers created a specific identity for their cult through a complete and specific sensorial experience.

If there is a criticism that could be made is the lack of a proper conclusion to the book. But the absence of a final chapter synthesizing its findings does not detract from the quality of the book and from the ease with which all chapters contribute to provide proof and arguments in favour of the thesis defended at the introduction. When we finish the book and start to think about what we just read, it becomes clear that the “sensorial turn” of Classics is capable of providing a good starting point for a better understanding of ancient Romans and how they understood the world around them, or, at the very least, it is capable of providing a good starting point for further discussion.

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