

**Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture**  
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**ABSTRACTS**

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**The Multivalency of Sensory Artefacts**

**Eleanor Betts** (Open University)

A sensory artefact is a place or object interpreted through a (multi)sensory lens. For example, a perfume bottle is an artefact, but the scent emanating from that bottle is a sensory artefact. How someone in ancient Rome would have perceived that sensory artefact presents a methodological problem for archaeologists keen to incorporate a sensory approach. This paper will explore the extent to which Merleau-Ponty's concept of the human body as 'the universal measurement' is valid for the study of ancient Rome. I shall argue that sensory artefacts have multivalency, varying according to the temporal and spatial conditions in which they existed and the individual(s) who experienced them. An individual's response to a sensory artefact would be affected by several factors, including their cultural context, degree of sensory sensitivity/deprivation (perhaps caused by disability or ageing), and the extent to which s/he had normalised the artefact's sensory stimuli. The smell of fish waste rotting in the sun in the Vicus Tuscus may have turned the stomach of the passer by, but have been normalised by the vendors to the extent that they noticed instead the scent of perfume on a neighbouring stall.

Brief consideration will also be given to the overlap of senses. When taking a multisensory approach to the past, we must not only combine the individual senses, we should also give consideration to where one sense blurs into another: 'We hear with the cranial box, the abdomen and the thorax' (Serres 1998, p. 180). The visceral sound of clashing metal as gladiators fought in the arena?

In conclusion, to what extent do these types of analyses enhance our knowledge and understanding of the people of Rome and their experience of the city?

**Scents of Place and Colours of Smell: Fragranced Entertainment in Ancient Rome**

**Jo Day** (University College Dublin)

Developments in the field of sensory archaeology have led to an increased awareness of the value of studying bodily perception in ancient societies, albeit mediated through our modern sensorium. Investigating olfaction perhaps remains the most difficult challenge, as smells, by their very nature, are ephemeral phenomena. The Roman world, however, has left a vast body of material, both archaeological and textual, that can help make sense of Roman production and consumption of perfumed substances. Literary sources make clear that the deliberate

fragrancing of environments was a key element in entertainment. Visitors to the games or theatre, or those with an invitation to a dinner party, could expect to be sprayed with perfumed liquids. Seneca mentions a system used in amphitheatres to disperse these scented liquids, although supporting archaeological evidence has not, to date, been recovered. But why was the creation of a secular aromatic environment so important? And why was it almost always saffron that was apparently used in these practices? This paper will explore the roles of fragrant environments as sensory indicators of munificence and of access to costly spices. Drawing on the link between olfaction and memory, it is suggested that perfumes were not just to mask the unpleasant smells of bodies or death, but that these events created somatic memories for the participants. Moreover, considering saffron's attributes as a colourant, it is proposed that these yellow-hued liquids (and occasionally powders) were deliberately reminiscent of gold, adding a meaning-rich layer of visual stimulation to a multisensory entertainment experience.

### **Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing a Sensory Profile: Sensory Stimulation, Deprivation, and Recalibration in the Temple of Aesculapius**

**Jane Draycott** (University of Wales, Trinity Saint David)

Whatever the occasion or purpose, ancient Roman religious practice stimulated the senses. Music was played, prayers were said, chaplets containing fragrant flowers and leaves were worn, incense was burned, wine was drunk and cakes were eaten, and animals ranging from doves to oxen had their throats slit, entrails examined, and flesh burned on the altar. All of these things combined to create a very specific sensory experience.

Using ancient literary, documentary, archaeological, and topographical evidence, it is theoretically possible to create a sensory profile of a temple, for example the Temple of Aesculapius on Tiber Island in Rome, and thus reconstruct this experience. Yet by their very nature sensory profiles constantly change according to the time of day, week, month, season, even year, and the sensory profile of a healing temple is even more changeable, being experienced by individuals whose own bodies are in flux, and so even more difficult to reconstruct. Supplicants might arrive unconscious or semi-conscious, blind, deaf, mute or lame, and all of these factors need to be taken into account if an appropriate sensory profile - or even a selection of contrasting yet still appropriate sensory profiles - is to be constructed.

My aim with this paper is to trial a methodology suitable for developing a more sensitive sensory profile, involving first constructing, then deconstructing, and then reconstructing a sensory profile with certain variables in mind, appropriate for future use in medical historical contexts.

### **(Digital) Bread and Circuses: Reframing Ancient Spectacle for Different Screens**

**Anna Foka** (The University of Umeå, Sweden)

Digital reconstruction is the process of graphically representing ideas and objects (Wileman: 1993). This process, however, requires a conceptual picture to be transferred to in a graphical

medium. This paper focuses on the potentials of a conceptual digital construction of a Roman Amphitheatre for multiple screens. Screen-based communications – i.e. TV, cinema, computer screens and ubiquitous devices are continuously mediating cultures (Galloway 2004, Giaccardi et al. 2012). However, I argue that current ‘historically accurate’ digital depictions of Roman amphitheatres are limited to lifeless and sanitized aerial 3D models. I propose a more innovative, multisensory and participatory reconstruction of entertainment sites for multiple screens can elucidate our understanding of historically and geographically remote social and cultural concepts.

I will discuss methodological tools for generating discourses that add layers of understanding to our contemporary knowledge of the Roman spectacle. A participatory (embodied- tangible computing) and multisensory (sound and vision) digital recreation of a Roman amphitheatre (along the lines of Betts: 2009, Drucker: 2009, and Favro: 2006) can engineer deeper and constructive analyses of the dynamics and systemic operations regarding [ancient and current] popular entertainment. It can generate questions about the cultural and emotional context of ancient spectacle as well as the potentials and limitations set by our current technological grasp. It can further be applicable in research and education in order to anchor both ‘traditional’ research questions, as well as the importance of multiplicity within institutional material infrastructure.

## **Babes in Arms? Sensory Dissonance and the Ambiguities of Votive Objects**

**Emma-Jayne Graham** (Open University)

Recent studies of the sensory worlds of antiquity have stressed the importance of materiality as a stimulus for sensory experience. What is more, studies have sought to break away from the sensory hierarchies of the modern world in order to consider the role of the sensorium as an integrated whole within human experiences. As a consequence the emphasis has fallen on studies which allow for the senses to be brought together, their compatibility and complementary perspectives on the world making it possible for archaeological interpretations to take full account of the multisensory dimensions of ancient material landscapes. Studies which unite touch, taste, sight, sound and smell are thus considered capable of providing a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the role of the senses in the construction of ideas about, and experiences of, space and place, identity, performance and other aspects of ancient culture. Taking as a case study the votive models of newborn infants which were dedicated at sanctuaries in central Italy during the Roman Republic, this paper seeks to advance the nuances of this multisensory approach by considering instances in which multisensory feedback might in fact provide contradictory information or, at the very least, introduce an element of uncertainty into readings of particular activities and materialities. By exploring the significance of encounters with objects which might prompt competing sensory experiences, it will ask what the implications might be when the senses do not agree with one another or when individual senses offer internally conflicting information. To what extent might sensory dissonance contribute towards the attribution of multiple possible meanings to an object, and what were the consequences for the activities in which these sensorially ambiguous types of object were implicated?

## **A Sense of Grief: the Sights and Sounds of Roman Mourning**

**Valerie Hope** (Open University)

In the ancient world grief was written onto the bodies of the bereaved. Tear stained cheeks, dishevelled hair, bloodied breasts and dark clothing transformed the body to give physical representation to the altered emotional state and societal position of the mourner. This paper explores these mourning behaviours in the Roman context, giving special focus to the senses of the bereaved and those who came into contact with them. Funeral rituals were carefully structured performances involving dramatic gestures, loud noises and unforgettable smells. But to what extent can we re-create the physical, emotional and sensory experiences of the mourners? And how did the mourning performance affect the senses of others, those who were not directly bereaved? Literary evidence, of diverse genres, and some visual depictions of death scenes, will be used to explore these questions of how personal grief and public mourning were both shaped by sensory experiences.

## **‘Common Sense’ and the Lives of the Roman Non-elite**

**Heather Hunter-Crawley** (University of Bristol)

The Roman non-elite are often understood to have had only a ‘silent’ role in Roman history (as we are able to interpret it). Since they were not able to express their ideas through, or commission, art and literature, the assumption is that we cannot know anything about these people from their own perspectives. However, this assumption is based on the idea that participation in Roman culture or society was dictated by levels of wealth and literacy. This paper argues that before anything can be expressed, it has to be experienced. Embodiment comes before its own articulation, and all members of a culture or society are embodied actors, whether or not they are producers of cultural capital. This experiential level of non-elite lives is, I suggest, accessible through the source materials we already have available to us.

This paper will present my theory of ‘common sense’, as the habitual mode of embodiment that is specific to the culture in which an individual is conditioned. It will also introduce my archaeological method for analysing material evidence according to the Roman ‘common sense’. The non-elite co-inhabited environments with the elite, and these are spaces and places for which we have evidence. I will show that this evidence can be interrogated for its sensory effects, and their impact on the lived experience of the non-elite as legitimate and important participants in Roman culture and history. For example, a slave might not have commissioned a particular silver table service, but her physical interaction with it was probably more regular than its owners’, through the activities of cooking, serving, and cleaning. The sensory experiences afforded by interaction with the set, its weight, texture, or tactility, can tell us something about what it may have felt like to be a domestic slave in the context of the Roman household. Through selected applications of ‘common sensory archaeology’, this paper will show that sensory methodologies can challenge the myth of non-elite silence in Roman history.

## **Olfactory Maps: Odour, Health, and Medical Mapping of Imperial Space**

**Daniel King** (Exeter University)

This paper investigates the role of odour in the medical treatment of domestic, urban, and non-urban space in the second century AD. I show how medical writers - Galen, Antyllus, and others - used odour to construct and then map the salubrity of different locations within the domestic setting, various cities (Rome, Pergamum, Alexandria), non-urban areas such as swamps, and the Roman empire in general. There are three conclusions which I seek to draw from this analysis. 1. This process of mapping constructed an intricate relationship between the body, its sensory capacities, and the spaces in, and through, which the body moved. 2. Smell, and odour, were critical factors in the individual's ability to negotiate their embeddedness in the world around them and through this their physical and psychic health. 3. This process was underwritten by, and served to reinforce, political, social and cultural assumptions about the relationship between space and the individual's identity.

## **Sensory Space: Opportunities and Challenges?**

**Ray Laurence** (University of Kent)

The methodologies associated with the study of space tend to place an emphasis on physical access and a visualisation of functional activity. This is in tune with traditional mapping of activities in Pompeian spaces and processes of visualisation that have emerged within the broad umbrella of Digital Humanities. Shifting our perception of the past from one that has sought to map and place an emphasis on the visual reconstruction presents a challenge to researchers. This paper draws on earlier mapping of Pompeian spaces to suggest alternatives to current orthodoxies based on a primacy given to the visual and seeks to suggest how other senses: of smell, of heat, of humidity, and of taste may provide alternative readings of space. The changing locales of the senses will also be explored with reference to childhood, adulthood and old age. The paper will also, briefly, consider how we might begin to define: how sensory perception was changed over time to contest the possibility of a single set of 'Roman senses'.

## **All that Glitters: Signet Rings, the Senses and the Self**

**Ian J. Marshman** (University of Leicester)

Roman engraved gemstones and signet rings are generally studied by archaeologists for their iconography and accordingly are usually represented in publications as photographs of their impressions, with a few token black and white photographs of the ring itself. By preferencing their motifs and their art historical significance it is easy to overlook the other aspects of the materiality of signet rings.

In the Roman period a signet was both a personal object worn upon the body and also a very public symbol of its wearer's status, entwined with their identity and sense of self. A sensual approach to studying these objects can offer a deeper understanding of their function in

society, and what they meant to the individuals who owned them. For instance gemstones were believed to possess different magical properties depending on their colour and translucency. The gleam of precious metals and the sparkle of different gemstones would also have had an important role in how visible they were when worn. Beyond vision, we can consider how it would have felt to wear an iron ring, for those who could not wear gold. Even taste had its part in the use of these objects. Their role in sealing also meant that signet rings had the ability to extend a wearer's authority and sense of self beyond the reaches of their senses, wherever they impressed their seal in the world around them.

## **Motion Sensors: Perceiving Movement in Roman Pantomime**

**Helen Slaney** (University of Oxford)

When considering sensory input, it is most often the five static senses that come to mind. In terms of processing information about one's surrounding environment, however, the brain also uses a system of senses that perceive and regulate motion: proprioception, or proximity to other objects; the vestibular sense, or balance; and kinaesthesia, or the sensations produced by movement (Paterson, 2007). Broadly, this category of senses may be defined as haptic, as they are associated with the palpable placement of the body in space, but as this body travels and its co-ordinates constantly change, their interplay forms an important and often overlooked subset of human experience.

One activity which expresses this interplay with particular vitality is dance. This paper examines the popular imperial Roman performance genre *tragoedia saltata*, or tragic pantomime, in terms of the dancer's mobile sensorium. Using the terms applied by ancient authors to the choreography of pantomime, we can develop an impression of its movement vocabulary, and consider how these movements depend upon balance, proximity, and kinaesthesia for their execution and effect. Dance is a notoriously difficult medium to capture in language. The dancer's sensory world is dominated by the production of movement, albeit synchronised with auditory data such as musical rhythm and visual data such as spatial awareness; by describing pantomime in appropriate sensory terms, we can therefore gain a more tangible appreciation of this most elusive and significant Roman art-form.

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