

# Conference Report

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**CONFERENCE TITLE:** SENSES OF THE EMPIRE: MULTISENSORY APPROACHES TO ROMAN CULTURE

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Senses are the way in which we understand the world around us, and archaeologists have recently begun to reconsider the ways in which this can help us in understanding past societies. Although, perhaps originally considered immaterial, ephemeral, or impossible to reconstruct archaeologically, sensory approaches are in fact both grounded in the material and reflected in material culture, and as such can make a valuable contribution to archaeological study. Sensory approaches to the past have so far mostly centred on prehistoric contexts, while sensory approaches to the Roman world have focused on literature. This one-day conference, organised by Dr. Eleanor Betts and Dr. Emma-Jayne Graham of the department of Classical Studies at the Open University, aimed to utilise these approaches within the context of the material culture of the Roman world. In particular, one of the main aims of the day was to consider and develop methodologies to recreate experiences of the Roman world. The conference comprised of ten papers which covered the spectrum of the senses. All ten papers also covered a wide variety of topics, ranging in focus from specific urban locales to distinct activities and individual artefacts. This breadth of topics and approaches reflects the wide application of sensory studies, and its potential.

**Eleanor Betts** (Open University) started the day with her paper entitled '*The Multivalency of Sensory Artefacts*', which set out a framework for a multisensory approach to the study of ancient Rome. An excellent introduction to the conference, her paper outlined the importance of removing a 'hierarchy' of senses, and instead insists on focusing, where possible, on the full range of sensory experiences.

Utilising Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body as 'the universal measurement' as a reference point, Betts considered biological similarities as a tool for accessing the past, but also urged caution in this approach by acknowledging biological differences as well as cultural specificity within sensory responses. Betts argued that sensory artefacts have multivalency, i.e. they varied 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 aging), and the extent to which s/he had normalised the artefact's sensory stimuli. However, these issues can be incorporated into our analyses and research, and bring new and interesting research questions.

Another issue which Betts considered was the vocabulary needed for discussing multisensory approaches to the past. Unlike other areas of archaeology, where an objective voice is prioritised, sensory approaches to the past require a more personal voice – and she urged us to consider the way academics in other disciplinary fields such as sociology, anthropology and ethnography have utilised this approach.

Betts considered these issues when discussing sensory artefacts from the Roman Empire – archaeological artefacts overlaid with sensory data, such as amphorae found *in situ* in a bar in Pompeii. She argued that elements of material culture and texts can be combined with biological sensory data in order to partially reconstruct the physiological experiences of past people. Describing and contextualising these sensory artefacts enables a deeper, more nuanced understanding of life in the Roman world, but it also encourages new questions to be asked of (often familiar) data.

Following on from this introductory paper, **Ray Laurence** (University of Kent) presented '*Sensory Space: Opportunities and Challenges?*', and considered the ways in which we can move from mapping physical evidence in space to setting out an understanding of sensory space. Linking the development of understanding Roman space (in particular Pompeii) as a sensory-scape to theoretical developments associated with the spatial turn in urban analysis, Laurence considered the ways in which senses other than the visual can provide alternative readings of space. As well as considering sensual experience of locales such as the *Porticus* and the *Rus in Urbe*, Laurence's paper also considered the relationship between sensory locales and age groups – childhood, adulthood, and old

age – and considered how different stages of life would affect the sensual experience of the Roman city; specifically, the age and height of a child in relation to their ability to participate in a sacrifice at a crossroads shrine.

**Anna Foka**'s (University of Umeå) paper '*(Digital) Bread and Circuses: Reframing Ancient Spectacle for Different Screens*' focused on the potential of conceptual digital construction of a Roman amphitheatre for multiple screens. Foka argued that current 'historically accurate' digital depictions of Roman amphitheatres are limited to lifeless and sanitized aerial 3D models and proposed that we can gain a better understanding of remote social and cultural concepts by using more innovative and multisensory reconstructions of ancient entertainment sites. Foka considered the different methodological tools that add to our understanding of Roman spectacle. Examples included Matt Ratto's idea of 'critical making', a mode of engagement that is intended to bridge the gap between creative physical and conceptual exploration, as well as ideas of 'emergence sense-making' as a way of filling in gaps imaginatively, in a manner similar to conceptual art and design practitioners. These methodologies, which include participatory (peripatetic) and multisensory (particularly audio) recreations, could be utilised to create a deeper understanding of Roman popular entertainment. Foka offered examples from Plutarch, Cicero, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus regarding the sounds (hissing, applauding, music) in the shows which could be integrated with new technical methodologies and media to create a fuller, more sensorial understanding of Roman spectacle.

The fourth paper was '*Scents of Place and Colours of Smell: Fragranced Entertainment in Ancient Rome*' by **Jo Day** (University College Dublin). Her paper explored the use of *sparsiones* – fragrant sprays utilised in the games and theatres of the Roman world. In particular, she focused on the use of saffron in these practices and considered the sensory experience and importance of the use of *sparsiones*. After considering the purpose and practicalities of *sparsiones*, Day argued that both the sensory experience of scent and colour were critical to saffron's importance, and were tied to ideas of munificence and wealth. Saffron is an expensive spice and a pungent one, and Day argued that this combination added another layer of sensory spectacle to the games. Olfactory senses would evoke embodied memories, and the yellowish/orange colour would be redolent of gold, which, when sprayed onto the spectators, would provide a sensory reinforcement of social hierarchy.

**Helen Slaney**'s paper '*Motion Sensors: Perceiving Movement in Roman Pantomime*' focused not on the traditional five static senses but instead on the body in movement (kinaesthesia), and in particular the effect of the system of senses found within the brain on the sensations produced by dance. Slaney considered first the negative cultural identity of the Roman dancer (and entertainers in general). By focusing on the haptic experience of imperial Roman *tragoedia saltata* (tragic pantomime), its costume, staging, and movements. She also discussed the ways in which neurological and vestibular processes could create a corporeal identity within the dancer themselves. Slaney considered these approaches to argue that ultimately a dancer's identity is mutable and malleable.

After lunch, the first paper was by **Valerie Hope** (Open University), on '*A Sense of Grief: The Sights and Sounds of Roman Mourning*' which examined the sensorial creation of the mourning experience. In Roman mourning, sounds and smells come into play as much as sight, and the mourning process is created through the manipulation of senses. Hope considered how the sensory experiences of people could be upturned through the mourning process, including how the living were deprived of sensory experiences such as taste (through fasting), whilst the body of the deceased was anointed with perfume, and considered the degree to which this was mediated by a person's social status. She also considered the position of the 'hired mourner', and how the experience of mourning differed amongst different social groups. By examining these questions in relation to artistic and literary representations of mourning, Hope argued that although mourning is a multisensory experience, it is not the same experience for all, nor consistent though Roman society.

Next to speak was **Jane Draycott** (University of Wales, Trinity St David) with her paper entitled '*Constructing, Deconstructing and Reconstructing a Sensory Profile: Sensory Stimulation, Deprivation and Recalibration in the Temple of Aesculapius*'. Here Draycott argued that the sensory profile of a healing temple was constantly changing – visitors suffered from illnesses of an individual nature, and the body itself was in constant flux. Draycott considered the specific example of the temple of Aesculapius on Tiber Island at Rome to try a methodology for developing a sensory profile more suitable for a medical context, bearing in mind the multiple variables inherent within such a context. She offered a series of factors – pain level, age, frequency of temple visitation, as well as the temple's location – which need to be considered in order to develop such a methodology.

**Emma-Jane Graham's** (Open University) paper on '*Babes in Arms? Sensory Dissonance and the Ambiguities of Votive Objects*' considered the sensory experience of a specific type of votive – swaddled babies dedicated in central Italian sanctuaries during the Roman Republic. Graham's aim was to consider the competing sensory reactions provoked by the handling of such objects. Traditional approaches have seen these votives as fertility offerings or petitions for infant health. However, Graham considered how the ambiguity of a heavy terracotta object creating sensorial experiences reminiscent of handling a real baby was an important aspect of the purpose of these material objects in ritual. Graham argued that this sensory dissonance was in fact crucial to the meaning(s) of such objects, thus encouraging the handler to engage with the liminal worlds in a location – the sanctuary – where these worlds came together.

**Heather Hunter Crawley** (University of Bristol) discussed '*Common Sense and the Lives of the Roman Non-Elite*', in which she applied a 'common sense' methodology to the characteristically 'voiceless' (in the sense that they are mostly absent from literature) non-elite of the Roman world. This methodology urges us to consider material culture through senses other than sight, and to consider the contextual affordances (properties and potentials for action) of the object. Hunter-Crawley illustrated this methodology with the example of the silverware from the House of

Menander in Pompeii. She considered the tactile versus visual properties of the silverware, and how these dictated bodily engagement with the objects which differed between server and served. As such, using a 'common sense' approach allows us to understand how the non-elite would have engaged with the material culture of their world, and offers them an alternative 'voice'.

The final paper was from **Ian Marshman** (University of Leicester), titled '*All that Glitters: Signet Rings, the Senses and the Self*'. In this paper, Marshman considered the signet rings and intaglios of the Roman world. However, rather than considering them from an iconographical perspective as minor *objets d'art*, as previous studies have tended to do, his focus was a consideration of the sensorial and experiential properties of these items. This approach was multisensory considering the visual and symbolic impact of specific colours and materials of the rings and their contextual properties, as well as the haptic and tactile sensation created by wearing and using the rings. As such, Marshman argued that there was a potent link between an individual and their ring, which formed part of their interaction with the world around them.

The conference ended with a final discussion which drew the themes of the previous papers together. One key area that came up here was semantics. What terminology – and how personal a voice – is appropriate for use in a discussion of sensory archaeology? Another theme that emerged was a clear desire to move past an emphasis on visual reconstructions of the past and focus as well on other bodily senses as important tools for understanding the ancient world. This is not to demote vision, but rather to promote and investigate all senses equally when possible. Finally, it was noted that not just the elites have senses, and that sensory archaeological approaches to the past can provide new avenues into understanding the world of the ordinary, non-elite Roman. Overall, the conference was stimulating and informative, and offered new and exciting methodologies for understanding the ancient world.