Introduction

Jessica Hughes

In front of the image is a hearth made of stone, with bronze lamps clamped to it with lead. He who would inquire of the god comes at evening and burns incense on the hearth, fills the lamps with oil, lights them, lays a coin of the country called a copper on the altar to the right of the image, and asks his question, whatever it may be, into the ear of the god. Then he stops his ears and leaves the marketplace; and when he is gone a little way outside, he takes his hands from his ears, and whatever words he hears he regards as an oracle. (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 7.22.2, second century CE)

Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring,
and from the depths of the cave a startled bat
hit the light as an arrow hits a shield:
‘‘Ἀσίνην τε ... Ἀσίνην τε ...’. If only that could be the king of Asini
we’ve been searching for so carefully on this acropolis
sometimes touching with our fingers his touch upon the stones.
(George Seferis, *The King of Asini*, 1938–40)

Ancient religions were – just like contemporary religions – the causes and contexts of an extravagant diversity of sensory experiences. One striking example is described in the extract from Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* cited above: in a marketplace shrine of Hermes Agoraios, the worshipper’s fingers meet stone, bronze and shiny copper; he lights lamps, burns and savours incense, then moves away to listen carefully (after a period of enforced silence) for the god’s prophetic message. This god, too, is sensate: he hears the whispered question, feels the warm breath on his ear, smells the incense and sees the lamp fire, which casts its flickering shadow over his marble body.

Affiliation

The Open University, UK.
email: jessica.hughes@open.ac.uk

Studying the sensuality of religion from a distance of two thousand years is a fragmented, difficult process. Pausanias' twenty-first century reader can draw on her own embodied experiences (of marble, metal, incense), but she also needs to confront her distance from the ancient world – a world with radically different ways of understanding bodies, senses and environments. Historians of ancient religion are faced with a patchwork of disparate sources created many decades and hundreds of miles apart, which make it hard to draw a unified and coherent picture of any ancient cult and its sensory architecture. Nevertheless, over the past decade many scholars have embraced the challenges of writing about the sacred past from a sensory perspective. Prominent recent publications dealing with the Greco-Roman world include the Routledge Series of edited volumes on *The Senses in Antiquity*, which covers the five 'conventional' senses (Bradley 2015; Butler and Nooter 2018; Purves 2018; Rudolph 2018; Squire 2016), in addition to *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses* (Butler and Purves 2014), as well as *Archaeology of the Senses* (Hamilakis 2013), *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity* (Toner 2016) and *Senses of the Empire: Multi-sensory Approaches to Roman Culture* (Betts 2017). Each of these edited volumes addresses a wide range of historical topics, including explicitly religious themes such as, for example, early Christian attitudes to seeing (Heath 2016), fragrance in the Rabbinic world (Green 2015) and the tastes and smells of Roman animal sacrifice (Weddle 2017).

The articles in this issue of *Body and Religion* draw on this earlier work on the senses, while simultaneously reaching across (as some of their predecessors have also done) to the closely related fields of Lived and Material religion (e.g. Harvey 2013; McGuire 2008; Morgan 2009; Plate 2014). We take the reader on a journey from the temples of ancient Palestine through the sanctuaries of the Greco-Roman world to the churches and private homes of Byzantium. Each of these ancient spaces is populated by bodies that not only experience things sensually, but also *record* these sensations, either deliberately, by writing or drawing, or unconsciously, via the organic and inorganic traces they leave behind. To make the most of this evidence, we draw on a range of different methodologies, including the close reading of Hebrew, Greek and Latin texts, the analysis of archaeological isotopes and plant remains, and the iconographic scrutiny of 'sensual bodies' represented in the visual arts. Our articles are wide ranging but they are also united by a common approach: we all attempt to answer the very broad question of *what it was like* to smell, taste, see, touch or hear in a particular ancient religious context.

The first article, by Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme, is 'A pleasing odour for Yahweh: the smell of sacrifices on Mount Gerizim and in the Hebrew

Bible.' The article begins with a contemporary Samaritan Passover sacrifice on Mount Gerizim, before moving back in time to observe the ancient rituals which took place on the site from c. 450–110 BCE. Epigraphic and archaeological data help us to imagine some of the smells that would have assailed ancient visitors, including oil, wood smoke, roasting lamb and incense, which (just like the incense burnt in front of the Hermes statue described by Pausanias above) emphasised the sacred space and the divine presence as well as pleasing the deity. De Hemmer Gudme then moves on to propose an 'olfactory cultic theology' for the Hebrew Bible, which incorporates perfume and incense as well as the 'pleasing odour' of animal sacrifice. Smell, we learn, has the power to create hierarchies between gods and men, men and women, royalty and ordinary citizens; at the same time, we are reminded of how odours can rise above and *cut across* social divisions – as on Mount Gerizim today, where the tourist onlookers and the Samaritan participants are physically separated, but nevertheless access the same pungent odours. The article demonstrates how Yahweh is pleased by his incense and sacrifices, and how he 'eats' these lovely odours with his nose, by smelling. This raises the broader issue of how deities consume differently from mortals, and *why* this might be (one suggestion made in this article is that the raw anthropomorphic image of a chomping, chewing god was unpalatable to ancient worshippers).

In the next article, entitled 'Resounding mysteries: sound and silence in the Eleusinian soundscape', Georgia Petridou discusses the role of auditory stimuli in the Mysteries at Eleusis in the classical and post-classical periods. She begins by pointing out that scholarship on the Mysteries has traditionally emphasised the visual aspects of the cult – a bias which can be attributed, in part, to the ancients' own emic emphasis on visuality, as well as to the nature of the extant evidence (visual representations survive, while auditory experiences are ephemeral). Nevertheless, Petridou demonstrates how inscriptions, texts and artistic representations can help us to reconstruct the cult's own unique 'soundscape', in which noise *and* silence were integral aspects of both the public and secret parts of the celebrations. Participants would have heard the instruments like the aulos, as well as singing, clapping hands, dancing, and the cries of humans and animals. And just as bodies are 'ensounded' (Ingold 2007:12), so sound itself is 'embodied' at Eleusis by a wooden statue which was worshipped and carried in procession: this was Iacchus, the personification of the cry that Persephone emitted on her abduction by the god Hades. Eleusis therefore ceases to be a silent and mysterious place, and becomes a noisy – at times even raucous – place of celebration, in which auditory stimuli are at least as important as the visual. This raises the question of *why* the Mysteries have

conventionally been associated with silence: here, Petridou draws attention to work on Plato and Christian authors, who may have appropriated and re-interpreted mysteric silence by using it as a discursive tool. This is not the only time – even within this journal issue – that we find sensory elements of older religions being co-opted by later ones, and being subtly transformed in the process.

The third article returns to consider the question of consuming gods, this time in the Roman Empire. Zena Kamash opens her exploration of ‘The taste of religion in the Roman world’ with introductions to biological taste and bio-archaeological evidence. The article then addresses two main subjects: the food that gods consumed, and the food that their worshippers ate during religious feasts at temples. Through the case studies of Mercury and Mithras, Kamash demonstrates that not all Roman gods had similar tastes, and that a deity’s cultic identity was often tightly linked to his or her diet. Mercury, for example, consumed a diet of young male goats, while Mithras consumed meals rich in chicken but *lacking* in cattle – an absence which makes sense when we consider the prominence of bulls in Mithraic sacred iconography. Meanwhile, we learn that the feasts eaten by worshippers were distinctive from their god’s food, and that these cultic feasts were also distinctive from the more mundane foods that the same worshippers consumed *outside* the temple. The sense of taste was thus used to construct and maintain the boundaries between religious spaces and everyday life, and between different gods and their communities of worshippers.

The fourth article by Jessica Hughes addresses the role of touch in Greco-Roman religion, with a particular focus on votive offerings and other monuments set up by dedicants in ancient sanctuaries. Entitled ‘The texture of the gift: religious touching in the Greco-Roman world’, the article begins with a broad overview of touch in ancient Greek religion, which covers the themes of purification, healing and votives. After this, we zoom in on a group of marble stelai from Roman Anatolia (first–third centuries CE) which record human wrongdoings and divine punishments. Three ‘tactile themes’ emerge from the stelai’s inscriptions and images: transgressive touching by mortals, punitive touching by gods, and the touching by both mortals *and* gods of sacred objects in the sanctuary. Hughes points out that the Greek and Roman gods were routinely depicted in the visual arts as tactile, grasping beings, and suggests that worshippers visiting the sanctuary would have been keenly conscious of this anthropomorphic quality. The article concludes by proposing that votive offerings would have been designed or chosen with a tacit awareness of this future divine manipulation – a touch that could have had a transformative effect on the mortal giver, or at least bring them into a more intimate relationship with the deity.

The final article in this issue is Angeliki Lymberopoulou's study of 'Sight and the Byzantine icon.' The article begins with a reaffirmation of the centrality of sight in Byzantine worship, which nevertheless demonstrates how vision was just one strand of a complex, multisensory environment. Touch plays a particularly important role here, for example in the discourse around those icons that were held to be *acheiropoietes* ('made without human hands'), as well as in the story of the Mandylion – the cloth on which Christ left His image by pressing it to His face. Byzantine churches, too, are shown to be richly multisensory – again, vision is paramount, but never apart from the other senses; the complex arrangements of painted figures on the church walls were perceived against a background of sounds (chanting) and smells (incense) and touch (the kissing of icons). The second half of the article focuses on the fascinating case study of a small ivory icon showing the Entry into Jerusalem. Here, the central figure of Christ on a donkey is flanked by other non-canonical figures, including one that is clearly based on the Hellenistic Greek sculpture now known as the *spinario* – a young boy who sits down to extract a thorn from his foot. Lymberopoulou presents a new interpretation of this figure as a powerful symbolic reference to the events that would follow from the scene depicted on the ivory. In this Byzantine context, the thorn in the boy's foot becomes a proleptic symbol of Christ's Passion, foreshadowing the crown of thorns.

This closing example of the *spinario* holds a lesson that echoes back over the preceding pages. It reminds us that our case studies do not exist in isolation, but rather in constant dialogue, with the later historical examples building on and often reshaping the earlier ones. The meaning given to any ancient sensory experience depends on the (religious) context in which we ourselves encounter it – in other words, viewers of the Byzantine ivory may have found it impossible to 'un-see' the image of Jesus next time they encountered a version of the *spinario*, or to decouple this beautiful Hellenistic sculpture from the story of Christ's Passion. Like memory, then, sensory experiences in the past are richly layered and ultimately malleable, and are filtered and transformed through their appropriation into later religious narratives. Meanwhile, the sensation of direct contact with ancient bodies, so powerfully invoked by George Seferis in his poem *The King of Asini*, remains a deeply satisfying illusion.

References

- Betts, E. (2017) *Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bradley, M. (2015) *Smell and the Ancient Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Butler, S. and Nooter, S. (2018) *Sound and the Ancient Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Butler, S. and Purves, A. (2014) *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Green, M. A. (2015) Fragrance in the rabbinic world. In M. Bradley (ed.) *Smell and the Ancient Senses* 146–57. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hamilakis, Y. (2013) *Archaeology of the Senses: Human Experience, Memory and Affect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harvey, G. (2013) *Food, Sex and Strangers: Understanding Religion as Everyday Life*. Durham: Acumen.
- Heath, J. (2016) Sight and Christianity: early Christian attitudes to seeing. In M. Squire (ed.) *Sight and the Ancient Senses* 220–36. London and New York: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2007) Against soundscape. In E. Carlyle (ed.) *Autumn Leaves: Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice* 10–13. Paris: Double Entendre.
- McGuire, M. B. (2008) *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, D. (ed.) (2009) *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Plate, S. B. (2014) *A History of Religion in 5 ½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Purves, A. (2018) *Touch and the Ancient Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rudolph, K. C. (2018) *Taste and the Ancient Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Squire, M. (2016) *Sight and the Ancient Senses*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Toner, J. (2016) *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*. London and Oxford: Bloomsbury.
- Weddle, C. (2017) Blood, fire and feasting: the role of touch and taste in Graeco-Roman animal sacrifice. In E. Betts (ed.) *Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture* 104–19. London and New York: Routledge.