

BOOK REVIEW

Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture. Edited by ELEANOR BETTS. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xiv + 227. Hardcover, \$149.95. ISBN 978-1-4724-4629-9.

Classicists have only recently begun to appreciate the rich possibilities which sensory approaches to culture can offer the study of antiquity. Sensory studies, a field which has been developing at the intersection of anthropology, sociology, history and archaeology since the 1980s, suggests that sensing is a cultural act as much as a biological one and that understanding how a society constructs, experiences, and prioritizes sensory inputs is of fundamental importance. This offers new angles to classicists, but also a somewhat different set of interpretive challenges than those faced by researchers who study living cultures.

This volume explicitly sets out to spark a debate about sensory studies and antiquity. In her introduction, Betts lays out two goals: to begin to develop sensory methodologies for classics, and to demonstrate ways these can be applied by ancient historians and archaeologists (8). To this end, papers on different senses are deliberately interwoven rather than separated into sections on taste, touch, smell, etc. The introduction ends with encouragement to take a synthesizing approach to both senses and methodologies.

Ray Laurence considers sound and movement in a series of musings on the soundscapes of Rome, ancient and modern, and how the kinesthetic experience of the scholar may contribute to their work. Eleanor Betts continues this survey of the sensory character of particular locations of Rome, paying particular attention to scent and using the neighborhood of the Vicus Tuscus as a case study, while Miko Flohr narrows the frame of urban sensescapes to discuss Roman fulleries. Flohr considers all the sensory experiences found there, but is particularly concerned with whether fulleries actually smelled—literally or metaphorically—in a reminder that no matter how accurately we try to reconstruct ancient spaces, Roman perceptions of them were also conditioned by culture.

Jeffrey Veitch's chapter acts as an interesting companion to the preceding pieces on the sounds of urban life as he gives an introduction to architectural

acoustics and the technicalities of reconstructing the sounds of Ostia. Together, these papers work to suggest a new way of perceiving urban spaces as networks of visual impressions, sounds, scents, tastes, and other experiences.

Thomas Derrick moves to Vindolanda, using scent to complicate our understanding of culture and class differences among the inhabitants of a place where a Roman smellscape meets a British one, as well as the role of odor in fort planning and usage. Valerie Hope analyzes mourning and burial practices with an eye towards sensory experiences and oppositions, making a particularly interesting case for sensory distinctions between the corpse and mourners, and animal sacrifice is treated from a similar perspective by Candace Weddle.

Emma-Jayne Graham looks at infant *ex-votos* as objects whose tactile properties mediated religious experiences, and Ian Marshman at signet rings and their visual and tactile role in social interactions. Alexandre Vincent reconstructs both the sounds of ancient trumpets and how Romans evaluated trumpet music.

In a contribution notable for its playfulness, Helen Slaney explains some of what we know about ancient pantomime choreography and invites the reader to experiment with it as an avenue to recreating the kinesthetic experience of ancient dancers, with sensible cautions on the benefits and limits of this approach. This is not the only exhortation in the volume to draw on our own experiences, but it is the most experimental, and breaks the frame of a normal Classics article in welcome ways. Last, Jo Day discusses perfume sprays, *sparsiones*, at Roman games, and their role in creating and recalling festive occasions.

This is in many ways a book with the virtues of its flaws. It attempts to import a broad and vigorous field of theory to Classics, and inevitably does so imperfectly. Perhaps the best feature of the book is its encouragement to experiment with sensory methods and its positioning of itself as the beginning of a conversation rather than a definitive statement. It is ultimately more successful at showcasing a variety of possible methods than it is at linking them into an overarching theoretical statement; this open-endedness works for the volume, but hinders individual papers. The chapters vary in quality, but the weaker contributions share a tendency to catalogue sensory data without demonstrating how this advances our understanding of ancient society, while the best acknowledge the wider possibilities inherent in their topic but also say something concrete.

Archaeological and socio-historical topics are prioritized. Given the volume's stated aims, the lack of papers on ancient literature feels like an oversight; many of the papers mine ancient texts for sensory impressions which expand our picture of an ancient street or dinner party, but none incorporate sensory theory

to better understand a text in depth. What might a focus on sound or taste, for instance, illuminate in the *Eclogues*? Sensual attention to texts will require a different technique than a textual approach to the senses.

Given Betts' goal of introducing more classicists to sensory studies, the introduction would be strengthened by a more comprehensive look at the existing bibliography, which is substantial and spread across a number of disciplines. Betts notes some of the highlights of the scholarship since 2000, but the discussion is very brief and likely to confuse those not already conversant with the field. A classical scholar interested in taking up Betts' challenge to use sensory methods is offered little sense of where to start.

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