

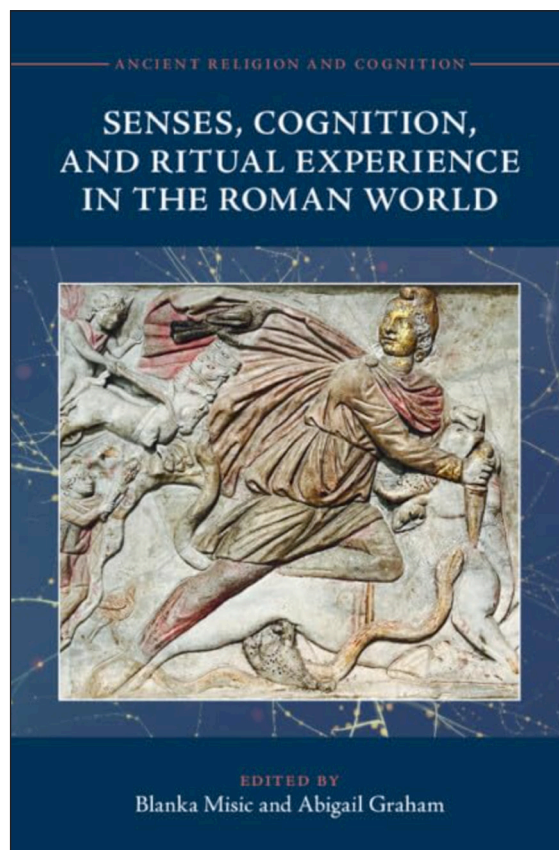
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Book Review

Misis, Blanka and Abigail Graham (eds). 2024. *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-00935-554-4 hardback £85.

The volume describes itself as an answer to Armin W. Geertz's 2017 article as a way for researchers in Classics and Ancient History to engage with cognitive approaches to religion and rituals. It provides a good nuanced critical engagement with CSR (Cognitive Science of Religion). Each chapter presents interesting case studies and employ a variety of inter- and cross- disciplinary approaches.

In Chapter 1, Misis proposes the Religious Learning Network (RLN) theoretical model: 'a new, CSR-based theoretical framework for understanding the process of learning and transfer of religious and ritual knowledge within ancient religions' (p. 27). The model is designed to bridge the gap between cognitive approaches and more



traditional methods of studying ancient rituals and has four key components: people, place(s), objects and events. The model is applied to a case study, the Roman provincial mother-goddess cult known as the *Nutrices Augustae*; the outcome is interesting and will further the study of this particular cult. Within the wider context of the chapter, it also illustrates the usefulness of the RNL model. Those of us who research rituals involving material culture will already be familiar with asking some of the questions relating to the four components, objects in particular, but having these strands brought together in a model which employs cognitive theory as well is beneficial, especially when studying rituals with large chronological and geographical scopes.

Chapter 2 by Emma-Jayne Graham builds upon the work of her earlier 2021 publication *Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy* by focusing on the haptic potentialities of material objects. This approach develops from Jöрге Rüpke's Lived Ancient Religion approach but places a greater emphasis on new materialist archaeological theories. The argument regarding the value of understanding and studying proximal forms of knowledge for the study of lived religions is extremely compelling; described by Graham as being 'highly context-specific, arising from direct embodied and sensory engagements with the physical world, rendering it continually open to change' (p. 68). It is refreshing to have analysis of the religiosity of the vestal virgins without focusing primarily on their virginity. In particular, the discussion of the burial of the bodies of Vestals found guilty of *incestum* (p. 73) is particularly interesting and develops the ideas of the enmeshment of religious agency with both the human and the more-than-human. The detailed analysis of the procession frieze of the Ara Packs Augustae is extremely interesting, making use of the aforementioned theory. It does illuminate ideas of religious knowledge and the reality of lived religion very well.

Chapter 3 by Vicky Jewell is split into three parts. The first, 'Experiencing Colour as a Viewer', uses modern cognitive theories and ancient philosophical thought to examine the way colour can influence individuals' experiences of spaces. This part makes use of good examples such as woad and coloured marble to explore Roman cultural understandings of different colours and coloured materials. Philosophical ideas on colours are pulled from Empedocles, Aëtius, and Plato — which of course leads to a brief discussion of the theory of extramission. The second part, 'Experiencing Colour in Mithraic Sacred Spaces' examines two case studies and builds upon the work of Panagiotidou and Beck (2017). The Mithraea are a good case study, as Jewell points out, because their underground nature preserves polychromy very well. Part three develops this analysis further under the title of 'Fundamental Colours in Mithraism', looking at the impact of colour on the 'lived experience of ancient royal activity' (p. 89). The

discussion is well grounded with a reminder that colour can simply be beautiful and not every object and its colour has to be imbued with special meaning. Conclusions about the use of black, white, red and yellow as the dominant colours are thoughtful and evidenced well. The analysis of the wider importance of these colours and the mythological background of Mithras as a Roman god is well constructed and compelling.

Chapter Four by Abigail Graham is a reaction against ‘script-based’ reconstructions of rituals, instead aiming to illuminate more fully the lived experiences of those participating. It makes use of the monumental inscription from outside the theatre of Ephesus (c. AD 104) combined with a fictional account of an Ephesian procession (not Salutaris’s procession) from Xenophon of Ephesus. The chapter goes beyond the directives of the foundation inscription to contemplate the cognitive experience of participants in the procession. The application of ‘Murphy’s Law of Ritual Events’ allows for a nuanced discussion of a plurality of experiences and outcomes, positive as well as negative. This chapter is again split into three parts. The first part includes an excellent literature review and discussion of the engagement with the monumental inscription, highlighting its location in relation to the procession it describes.

In Chapter Five, Steven Muir deploys an opening quote from Ovid, *Heroides* 13.155 which acts as a clever *fil rouge* throughout the piece. Muir analyses a series of objects which to the modern audience are not real, making use of theories from ritual studies, archaeology, place theory and theatre studies. The way Muir analyses objects as props in rituals and how these props impact the ritual experience of pilgrims is interesting. The analysis of networks in relation to Christian rituals adds a great deal to the volume, often examples from early Christian worship are dealt with separately from others from the ancient world which can leave us with an incomplete picture. This chapter in particular helps readers appreciate how the nature of ritual experiences may change, or not.

The conclusion (co-authored by Blanka Misic and Abigail Graham) presents the reader with a lot of useful detail concerning neuroscientific studies on religiosity, such as the issue of past tendencies to view ritual experiences as extremely individual and subjective, and the perceived difficulties of studying these events. Important questions are asked regarding how knowable ancient minds can really be. The critical point is drawn out on page 202: ‘The brains and sensory organs of ancient peoples would have, for the most part, *functioned* identically to ours, but this does not mean that they would have *perceived* the world around them identically to us’ (emphasis original). The volume as a whole is extremely cohesive and well put together. The range of examples and case studies presented makes a highly compelling case for increasing the engagement

with CSR approaches in the fields of Classics and Ancient History. The introduction and conclusion will be particularly useful for those interested in exploring CSR and its applications. I am sure the volume will become a staple on reading lists for students of ancient religion.

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