

# Divine Sensations

*by Kevin Bouillot*

---

**In ancient Greece, religious rites were designed to produce a unique state of receptivity. This book, which focuses on the tools used in sensory encounters with the gods, contributes to the sensory turn that is currently revitalizing historical studies.**

---

Reviewed: Adeline Grand-Clément, *Au plaisir des dieux. Expériences du sensible dans les rituels en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, Anacharsis, 2023, 416 pp., €26.

What role did the senses play in ancient Greek rituals? How did the Greeks feel when making sacrifices to their gods? What music, smells and tastes excited their senses? These are the kinds of questions that Adeline Grand-Clément sets out to address, based on a straightforward but highly promising hypothesis: the specific combination of sensory stimuli that accompanied these rites was intended to produce a heightened state of receptivity in participants, enabling them to feel the divine presence.

## Sensory contexts

The author does not claim to cover the subject exhaustively, but rather to open up new paths in a field that is still relatively unexplored, and to contribute to the sensory turn that has been revitalizing historical studies in recent years. Although anthropologists have paved the way, historians of ancient religions are unable to fully

immerse themselves in the sensory universe they are studying: they have to make do with the puzzle provided by an ancient author, a religious regulation written on stone, or the ruins of a sanctuary.

Adeline Grand-Clément proposes "a partial and biased selection" of these elements. Like anthropologists, she chooses to adopt an emic and comparative approach. On the one hand, the categories used by the Greeks themselves are retained by the historian, who understands a ritual as "a singular act aimed at establishing a form of communication with invisible entities", echoing the definition formalized by Angelos Chaniotis.

On the other hand, comparisons with other civilizations allow us to examine ancient documents in a new light. The book offers an "escape into Tamil country", putting ancient Greek rites into perspective alongside the Hindu rites of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. But the question remains: where and when did the Greeks perform these rites, and why did they make these choices? The author's four case studies show that these spatial and temporal dimensions were conditioned by myths.

## **Sensual, too sensual**

The portrait of the "superstitious man" painted by the philosopher Theophrastus (370-265 B.C.) in his book *Characters* defines such a person as one who feels the presence of the gods to excess and, in turn, responds with excessive rituals. The author describes the superstitious individual as a "ritual hypersensitive" and associates this portrait with the contempt of certain Greeks for divinities of foreign origin, whose cults were deemed too noisy, too sensual, too sensory.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, written in the 7th century B.C. and recounting the wanderings of the goddess of agriculture, raises the question of the choice of the sanctuary of Eleusis, a village south of Athens where the goddess was worshipped, as studied by Jan Bremmer and Kevin Clinton, among others. Adeline Grand-Clément shows that Eleusis owed its evocative title of "fragrant" to the mythical sojourn the goddess made there and the plants and aromatics she brought with her, according to legend.

In the Pitsa cave, near Corinth, one of the painted panels dedicated to the nymphs depicts a sacrificial scene emphasizing the sounds (flute and lyre players) and

smells (smoke rising from the altar) of the rite. In a *mise en abyme*, the scene and the cave illustrate the importance the Greeks attached to the sensory rupture caused by rites, which involved unusual places, smells, sights and sounds.

The author also takes a look at theater, in particular Euripides' *Ion* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, both set inside a temple, confirming the sense of strangeness that these places inspired in the Greeks, be it the beauty of the Delphic sanctuary in Euripides, or the fear inspired in Sophocles' characters by the Eumenides goddesses, associated with dread and divine vengeance.

## **Rites: objects and substances**

Greek rites involved substances and objects that were contextually sacred yet belonged to everyday life. Their properties therefore depended on the way they were used, their multiple symbolic meanings and the context that gave them their unusual qualities.

The rules governing rituals posted at the entrances to temples prohibited the use of various ordinary objects or the placement of certain offerings, often according to local beliefs. Despite the recommendations of Marcel Mauss, historians have paid too little attention to the materials of these objects, often explaining their exclusion on the grounds of impurity. However, the sensory dimension was never absent, as shown by the example of the flute, preferred to the more sonorous bronze instruments that would have covered prayers or songs.

The question of psychoactive drugs and their use in ritual contexts has long been addressed by anthropologists, especially since Mircea Eliade began to analyze certain Greek rituals through the lens of shamanism. But close examination shows that the Greeks made no use of psychoactive substances in ritual contexts, not even at Eleusis, where the *kykeon* drunk by participants seemed to have more of a symbolic value. The same was true at Delphi, where laurel fumigations served no other purpose than to mark the time of the consultation of the god by his prophetess.

Although omnipresent in Greek rituals, wine did not play the role of a psychotropic drug. It remained an everyday drink, serving as an offering to the gods and a means of socializing with them. The inebriation it could produce was not, therefore, a means of making contact with the divine. Euripides' *The Bacchae* show this,

with their heroines "taken by Dionysus" and obeying the god's orders not because they have drunk his wine, but because they have joined his cult.

## **Gestures, voices, clothes**

The bodies of the Greeks themselves were at the heart of these rites, contributing to their unfolding and contextualization, distinguishing from everyday life these moments of contact with a divine world that exposed them to extraordinary sensations.

The gestures performed in a ritual context were also everyday ones, since the functions of priests and priestesses were not performed by trained professionals. Yet simple gestures could take on symbolic and sensory significance in a ritual context.

The removal of shoes prescribed by many ritual rules was of course explained by the perceived impurity of the shoe or its material, but it was also accompanied by a ban on wearing a belt, headband, scarf or any other real or symbolic tie that impeded the body's freedom to move and feel the divine presence.

Likewise, silence was imposed during certain phases of animal sacrifice, and the author uses Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge's framework of analysis. The seeming opposite, the *ololugè*, was a ritual cry raised collectively by the women present when the sacrificial animal was killed. Cries and silences were part of the same logic: they punctuated the ritual and marked its successive stages, so as to make the associated sensations collective and simultaneous.

The clothes worn for ritual purposes were also those used in everyday life, but with greater emphasis on color. The prescribed shades—of which the author focuses particularly on red—did not seem to have a unique meaning common to all contexts. Rather, they constituted a kind of visual break with the everyday, and thus another sensory means of distinguishing the actors and different moments of the rite.

## The pleasure of the senses

Adeline Grand-Clément notes the rich diversity of contexts, modes and sensory tools for ritual encounters with the divine. But she also points to one constant: the break with ordinary, everyday sensations that facilitated contact with these inherently different entities.

She believes historians have overlooked the sensory pleasures that the Greeks derived from encounters with their gods. A pleasure that the author proposes to describe as "synesthesia" in the Greek sense of the term: the shared perception of a set of simultaneous sensory stimuli. Common to humans, but perhaps also to the gods, who were also thought of as sensory beings.

Studying the history of sensations requires us to think of other aesthetic systems and other ways of experiencing the world and making it present. The author sees it, in her conclusion to this sensory journey, as another way of responding to one of the urgent needs of the contemporary world: the need to restore our sensitivity to the natural world around us, which our dulled senses have led us to neglect.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), July 7, 2023. Translated by Susannah Dale, with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info). Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), October 29, 2024.