

Review

Making sense of the Greek past

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YANNIS HAMILAKIS. *Archaeology and the senses: human experience, memory, and affect*. xiii+255 pages, 26 b&w illustrations. 2014. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-0-521-83728-6 hardback £60 & \$90.

CLAIRE NESBITT & MARK JACKSON (ed.). *Experiencing Byzantium*. xvi+390 pages, 39 b&w illustrations, 5 tables. 2013. Farnham & Burlington (VT): Ashgate; 978-1-4724-1229-4 hardback £85.



At first glance, these appear to be two very different books, one focusing on the pomp and splendour of Byzantium, the other using case studies from Minoan Crete to support the author's call

for a paradigm shift within archaeology. Yet a shared concern underlies both volumes: how to explore the embodied experience of being human in the past. The recent development of sensory archaeologies (e.g. Skeates 2010; Day 2013) has shown that closer attention to past corporeal experiences can pay dividends. Archaeology is not alone in this interest, and sensory studies are now flourishing in the humanities, influenced at least initially by the seminal work of members of the Concordia Centre for Sensory Studies (e.g. Classen 1993; Howes 2003). Hamilakis provides a thorough discussion of this background and of key theoretical developments in Western understandings of the senses in the first three chapters of his monograph, important context that is surprisingly lacking from the editors' introduction in *Experiencing Byzantium*.

A key issue is raised by Ashley in *Experiencing Byzantium*: "how can a place be experienced that neither you nor anyone else has either been to, or even seen?" (p. 214). The thirteenth-century Icelandic

sagas that he discusses blended imagination and folk memories of earlier visits to Byzantium to present a picture of a distant and exotic land; can today's archaeologists do any better? Both of the volumes under review suggest we can, by using the physical fragments of past sensory engagements to explore the diversity of experiences in ancient cultures. A major theme of sensory and affective archaeologies is that Western modernity occupies a visually dominated sensorium; when interpreting past societies, we must take care not to project our own sensory regime, and remain alert to the potential for other ways of bodily interaction with artefacts and places. While some of the chapters in *Experiencing Byzantium* focus on one or more of our canonical five senses (touch, taste, vision, hearing, olfaction) to draw attention to neglected aspects of artefacts and monuments, others include movement, memory and emotion. Hamilakis, in contrast, seeks a more synaesthetic understanding of the past, rightly reminding us that all human experience is multisensory and need not be divided into individual sensory modalities. Both of these approaches work and the resulting volumes illustrate past human experience through a blend of vigorous theorising and case studies.

Anyone familiar with Hamilakis's output will recognise recurrent themes in this book: memory, personhood, commensality, reflexivity, politics and, of course, the senses. Pulling these topics together, the book represents a significant statement by one of the leading thinkers within archaeology. Although the author suggests that this is a "post-theoretical book" (p. 9)—with the aim not of promoting yet another archaeological sub-discipline but rather calling for a major paradigm shift in how we practise archaeology—there are still plenty of Hamilakis's own theoretical views and neologisms, interspersed with genealogical vignettes.

Chapter 4 sets out guiding principles and a new framework on sensoriality. The most interesting of these are the concepts of 'sensorial flows' and 'sensorial

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assemblages'. Thinking in terms of flows shifts emphasis from a subject/object dichotomy to seeing the body and world as a non-hierarchical combination of materials, movements, memories and ideas—a constant, unpredictable process of becoming. A sensorial assemblage, then, connects the material with the sensorial and mnemonic. For example, Hamilakis suggests of an assemblage of pottery: the food once cooked within the vessels, the hearths and food preparation equipment, the smells and tastes, and the memories past and future evoked by the meal.

Chapter 5 applies these ideas to the funerary rites of Early Bronze Age Crete, commencing with a kind of thick description of the sensoriality of burying someone in a communal tomb. Changing burial practices, including single interments in *larnakes* (clay coffins) and *pitthoi* (storage jars), have been related to emerging notions of the individual at this time, but Hamilakis uses the archaeological evidence to suggest a “fluid corporeal landscape” (p. 154) that witnessed continual interplay between communal and individual. Forgetting is as important as remembering, and strategies for doing both are proposed as the funerary arena became a locus of “necro-politics” (p. 129).

The following chapter tackles the so-called palaces of Minoan Crete, considering whether a sensorial and mnemonic approach can help to explain their emergence as well as functions. Mass commensality and performance were hallmarks of these court-centred structures, and Hamilakis questions why such practices developed and their social consequences. In a nutshell, he proposes that the palatial phenomenon on Crete can be seen as “the materialisation, glorification, and celebration of ancestral time, of long-term, sensorial, and mnemonic history” (p. 168). The chapter explores how the archaeological features of palaces and the diverse material culture produced and consumed within them can be interpreted in this light. In particular, his ideas on wall-paintings—as multi-sensorial phenomena that regulate movement and are co-participants in ceremonies—reinvigorate a long-established debate.

In contrast to the single clear vision for a sensorial methodology provided by Hamilakis, *Experiencing Byzantium* is an edited volume of 17 diverse chapters derived from the 44th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, held in 2011. The book is divided into six sections, focusing in turn on the experience of art, faith, landscape, ritual, self and stories. Such divisions appear arbitrary but only because there are

many common themes across the chapters. Material culture aficionados may be disappointed at how few of the contributions are overtly archaeological, but the rich Byzantine textual tradition is shown to enhance interpretations of artefacts and places, and ultimately the reader is left with a heightened understanding of this fascinating culture. Mullett's chapter on experiencing Byzantine texts and tents can be seen as a microcosm of the whole volume, enabling her to weave textual, iconographic and archaeological evidence into a picture of colourful, scented and sensual portable audience chambers that demanded certain bodily responses from owners and guests.

The stunning visual impact of Byzantine artefacts, especially those related to Christian worship and the imperial family, provides several of the contributors with their starting point. James queries the experience of art in Byzantium, examining how the functional aspects of icons (as miracle workers) were integral to their appreciation. The materiality of these, and of the Late Antique silver casket she also discusses, demanded physical interaction that can easily be overlooked if we treat them simply as ‘art’. Questions raised by James are developed by Hunter Crawley in an impressive exploration of sensory affordances of liturgical equipment for the sixth-century Syrian Eucharist. In particular, she draws attention to the blurring of tactile and visual boundaries through imagery of the cross and reflected light, making the Eucharist a physical encounter with the divine. A very different type of material culture, the funerary shroud, is considered by Moore as a way of approaching Byzantine emotions, and the progression from clothed body to hidden corpse is seen as an affective technology of mourning.

Other textiles, this time featuring imperial portraits, were given as gifts across the Byzantine world and beyond; Woodfin suggests that the resulting physical encounters with the image of the emperor reinforced his wide dominion. From Hatzaki, we learn more about the manipulation of the imperial image and the importance of physical beauty as an attribute of rulers. Texts and portraits were crafted to present the perfect image—expected by subjects as much as desired by the imperial family. Working with documentary texts provides the opportunity to examine places and monuments from multiple ancient perspectives. Karydis compares and contrasts the accounts of Procopius and Ibn Battuta of their visits to the Church of St John at Ephesus with the extant physical remains of the building. Meanwhile, Smythe's study of three

middle-Byzantine historians examines how and why these writers placed themselves and their first-hand experiences into their texts: “one writes about what one knows but also by writing makes oneself known” (p. 266).

Experiencing space and place is the focus of several contributions. Green’s study of the physical organisation of rural landscape in Byzantine Cyprus combines archaeological survey data and historic landscape analysis to investigate how the landscape was ordered and what this can tell us about the perceptions and experiences of people living and travelling there. Her emphasis on daily life and rural population is a welcome contrast to the studies of rituals and the Byzantine court found elsewhere in the volume. Movement, especially processions and pilgrimages, unites the three chapters by Louth, Bakirtzis and Manolopoulou, while Caseau’s broad study of multisensory experience in a church, especially touch, helps to counter the traditional emphasis on vision.

Most archaeologists will be familiar with archaeo-acoustics, the study of sound in ancient contexts (e.g. Scarre & Lawson 2006), and two chapters of *Experiencing Byzantium* are dedicated to Byzantine soundscapes. Frank looks at how psalmody facilitated Christian navigation of the emotional landscape of biblical events: a correspondence between the sung or chanted words and the physical actions of the congregation (e.g. raising eyes, outstretching arms) creating a somatic identification with the sacred. The nuances of Lingas’s detailed study of the changing musical soundscape of Byzantine liturgy may be lost on non-musical scholars, but reminders of the variability of musical experience are embedded in his contribution: daily *vs* special rites; cathedral, monastic or ascetic environment; full choirs or single singers.

Although Nesbitt and Jackson’s edited volume is less overtly about the senses as opposed to experience more

broadly, commonalities with the book by Hamilakis can easily be found. Both publications challenge the notion of monolithic or universal experience and refer, instead, to competing discourses and sensory encounters. Whether dealing with Byzantium or Minoan Crete, one must not assume a dominant mode of perception and must, therefore, allow for multivocality and temporal change. Movement, kinaesthetic experience and the social construction of space also feature prominently, as do the links between corporeal experience and memories. It might seem easy to adopt a sensorial approach when dealing with the rich material record of Minoan palaces or Byzantine churches, but Hamilakis’s work with the Early Bronze Age funerary customs, or Green’s focus on daily life, demonstrate that these methodologies can also illuminate less glamorous remains. These books show that affective and multisensory approaches can contribute valuable insights into past human experience, regardless of time or place. Whether archaeologists will take up Hamilakis’s call for a paradigm shift, however, remains to be seen.

References

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