

Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing a Sensory Profile: Sensory Stimulation, Deprivation, and Recalibration in the Temple of Aesculapius

Whatever the occasion or purpose, ancient Roman religious practice stimulated the senses. Music was played, prayers were said, chaplets containing fragrant flowers and leaves were worn, incense was burned, wine was drunk and cakes were eaten, and animals ranging from doves to oxen had their throats slit, entrails examined, and flesh burned on the altar. All of these things combined to create a very specific sensory experience.

Using ancient literary, documentary, archaeological, and topographical evidence, it is theoretically possible to create a sensory profile of a temple, for example the Temple of Aesculapius on Tiber Island in Rome, and thus reconstruct this experience. Yet by their very nature sensory profiles constantly change according to the time of day, week, month, season, even year, and the sensory profile of a healing temple is even more changeable, being experienced by individuals whose own bodies are in flux, and so even more difficult to reconstruct. Supplicants might arrive unconscious or semi-conscious, blind, deaf, mute or lame, and all of these factors need to be taken into account if an appropriate sensory profile - or even a selection of contrasting yet still appropriate sensory profiles - is to be constructed.

My aim with this paper is to trial a methodology suitable for developing a more sensitive sensory profile, involving first constructing, then deconstructing, and then reconstructing a sensory profile with certain variables in mind, appropriate for future use in medical historical contexts.