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Total Sensory Experience in Isiac Cults: Mimesis, Alterity, and Identity

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1 Introduction

Since becoming a central topic of research in the humanities, the role of sensory perceptions as identity markers has proven to be an especially productive field of analysis. As Trnka, Dureau, and Park stress,

[...] the work of differentiation is not only expressed through discursive and juridical demarcations of rights, boundaries, and conflicting personhoods: indeed, the viscosity of feelings of cultural distance conjoins corporeality, sentiment, practice, and the senses, intensifying deeply embodied ideas. This, in turn, lends a sense of moral weight to claims of right and inclusion.¹

It is indisputable that the activation of the senses in specific contexts enhances the fixing of memories which, in turn, promote the configuration of collective identities of belonging or social exclusion, whether through the collective recognition of a social status differentiated on the basis of established sensory stimuli,² or through the association of certain sensory stimuli with particular religious or ethnic values.³ Yet the participation of the senses in identity building is not restricted to noting general binary oppositions like “the poor smell badly and the rich good”.

With this in mind, our intention here is to analyse how the senses participated in the identity-configuration processes of the Isiac cult at the end of the Republic and during the Principate. The post-Said paradigm has cast doubt on the suitability of the category of “oriental religions” for identifying a

¹ Trnka, Dureau, and Park 2013, 4–5.

² See, for example, Classen 1992, 133–166; 2005, 70–84; Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994.

³ See, for example, the contributions in Harvey and Hughes (eds.) 2018; McGuire 2016, 152–162; Taussig 2009; the compilation of papers in *Religion through the Senses, Numen* 54.4 (2007); Stoller 1997; Sullivan 1986, 1–33.

range of cults, including that of Isis, so we do not intend to use this aspect of identity formation to confront or interrogate the vague notions of “Western” and “Oriental” in their sensory dimensions.⁴ In other words, it does not seem appropriate to try to establish and systematise the sensory markers proper to the generic category of “oriental cults” as opposed to those pertaining to an alleged Roman tradition. In other chapters in this volume, the authors suggest that each one of the new cults for which a roughly oriental background can be detected has a distinct sensory output.⁵ Our approach here is different. The archaeological evidence does not reveal radical differences between the *aromata* or food offerings in the temples of the *gens isiaca* compared to those of any other cult. Of course, visualism is a clear differentiating marker, but even the architecture of temples and the aesthetics of statues generally undergo modifications that strip off the pre-Hellenistic Egyptian character of the cult, due to different artistical, technical or infrastructural reasons. On the other hand, there are sensory outputs that are without doubt exclusive to the cult of the *gens isiaca*. First, the priests are systematically described as being dressed in exotic clothing, even if we have to consider that such descriptions seem to be a *topos*.⁶ In addition, the sonority of the cult leaves no room for doubt about its character: the chants and the use of the *sistrum* were recognisable as exclusive of the cult of the *gens isiaca*.⁷ It is the double game of, on the one hand, mimesis – the adaptation of the cult to the political, social, and cultural variations of Roman imperialism – and, on the other, alterity – the preservation of a “genuine” exotic identity – engaged in by the cult of Isis and her *paredroi* that will be the subject of our analysis here.⁸

Although, as will be seen, there was a dialectical determination among some intellectual sectors of Roman society to highlight the religious alterity of the cults devoted to the *gens isiaca*, there was also an effort to stress the formal opposition – part of which was manifested in sensory terms – between foreign cults and Roman cults. The discourse aimed at exacerbating the differences

4 It is not for us to enter the discussion on the deconstruction of Franz Cumont’s category of “Oriental Religions”. Today, the notions of Oriental Religions or “Mystic Cults” are untenable in the way they were conceived (See Bonnet, Rüpke, Scarpi 2006, and Bonnet, Pirenne-Delforge, Praet 2009). Nevertheless, the presence of deities coming from “Orient” in the Roman Empire has given rise to a new perspective based on the swinging between exoticism and cultural adaptation in a process of “romanisation” (Alvar, 2008 and 2017), as well as the “orientalisation” of Roman gods (Versluys 2013).

5 Cf. the contributions of Rebeca Rubio and Rosa Sierra-Israel Campos in this volume.

6 Beaurin 2018; Bricault 2018, conclusion n° 8.

7 Bricault and Veymiers 2018.

8 This is what Alvar (2008) and Versluys (2013) have confronted from the different perspectives of Romanising Oriental Gods and Orientalising Roman Gods.

between the one and the other was not entirely successful. It did affect some socio-cultural milieus, especially the conservative circles represented in the literary tradition, but most of the population nevertheless accepted without complaint the cohabitation of the new gods with the old. At the same time, the progressive acceptance of “Egyptian” cults incited a clear intentionality of control by the authorities. Their followers or, more precisely, the officials of their cults, promoted an insertion of their rituals into actions and behaviours that were considered positively in cultural terms. It is here that we find the cults attempting to manage a difficult balancing act between keeping their attractively foreign image and successfully integrating into the established order. The central location of the temples of the *gens isiaca* in the cities of the Empire are proof of their integration into the urban structures. By the same token, their gods were also integrated within the religious pantheons of the cities. But there seems to have been no consistent approach: some temples stress their exoticism by investing heavily in Egyptianising aesthetics while others seem to be more discreet.⁹ We are, then, able to recognise and take note of cases in which worshippers clearly chose to identify their cult as something different from the other cults of the city, as well as, by contrast, other cases in which this does not seem to have been a goal that was pursued. It might well be the case that local variants respond to local circumstances, and we may, thus, be able to historicise them in the way expressed by Versluys as “making meaning with Egypt”.¹⁰ The reception of the cult of the *gens isiaca* in the Roman world gave rise to a myriad of interpretations that depended on the social condition of the devotees, the place of the cult praxis, and/or the historical contexts within which the cult was introduced.¹¹ But there are also cases for which we simply do not have sufficient information to allow us to know whether a stress on the Egyptian character of the cult was voluntary or not; the elements of religious identity differentiation may have been clear enough for the worshippers and their urban community, even if we can no longer recognise them from our historically constrained vantage point.

9 Mol and Versluys 2015.

10 Versluys 2012.

11 Cf. the recent publication, both monumental and uneven, of Nagel 2019. The reception processes during the Roman Empire are only partially dealt with in this volume, despite the title of the book. In relation to the Iberian Peninsula, the author only pays attention to pre-Roman sources, the validity of which as religious testimonies has been questioned. There is not a single word in the whole book related to the interesting introductory action to the cult of Isis in Emporion or Carthago Nova during the Republican period. On this latter topic, see Alvar 2012 and <https://www.uc3m.es › gens-isiaca>.

2 Focusing on the Cult of Isis

The different forms of appropriation of the cult nurtured diverse cultural memories to the extent of creating varied sets of information in which their exotic and distant character could coexist with another character that was more familiar and closer to home. This process depended on two essential factors, the first relating to the foundational agenda that established an architectural and decorative programme prone to transformation over time, and the second pertaining to the attitude of the cult followers, namely their willingness to evoke some or other aspect of the cult at a given time. The senses evidently formed part of the complex of elements that shaped the cultural memory of the cult and were, therefore, resorted to in a range of different ways.

Before moving on to consider the details of the ways in which the senses were used, it will be useful first to clarify a number of issues concerning the concepts of identity and cultural memory on which we draw in this chapter. One of the most important aspects of both personal and collective or institutional identity-building processes is the way in which these processes are reformulated whenever they are activated in a new context or come into contact with other identities.¹² By means of an analogy with language functions, it has been acknowledged in the scholarly literature that the building of a specific identity is grounded in the relationships that the relevant individual or collective establishes with others, on the basis of which meanings are defined and attributed. In this connection, identity emerges in fields of action that require the creation of narratives, of explanations, in order to give meaning to the social context in which it develops. Insofar as each identity is defined in accordance with, or by reference to, others in each one of the social spheres in which it intervenes, the relational position occupied by each identity involves establishing a number of boundaries between other identities on the line. This implies the influence of regimes of control in the set of interactions between some identities and others, or the production and distribution of cultural devices the combination of which establishes the semantic codes that define each identity in each context.¹³

12 Baumann and Gingrich 2004; White 2008, 1–19. In this aspect it is very interesting the approach by Florence Dupont and her concept of “alterité incluse”: *phénomène d'appropriation de l'autre en conservant ou exaspérant son altérité afin de construire sa propre identité* (Dupont 2005, 257).

13 As shown by Woolf (1998) and more recently in the collective volume edited by Hales and Hodos (2009), specifically the theoretical frameworks of part I and the afterword by David Mattingly.

The creation of narratives that define identity, together with the cultural devices employed to sustain it, fosters a cultural memory that forms part of the encyclopaedia of collective knowledge. No individual is capable of embracing all the cultural knowledge generated by the infinite casuistry that provokes social interaction, so recourse is made to mental models or patterns that organise action and thought in stereotyped sequences.¹⁴ The reliance on such models leads to the creation of identity descriptors which, while appearing to be functionally homogeneous and coherent, are, in reality, so complex and ambiguous¹⁵ that, depending on the social context, some anthropologists have preferred to redefine the whole concept of culture as a repertoire of representations linked together in an imprecise manner.¹⁶ By the same token, the asymmetric capacity of the actors to access and manage cultural memory in order to establish differentiated identities means that the same signifier may have different meanings at the same time, or that these may be manipulated to settle circumstantial or local concerns, or to satisfy specific ideological interests.¹⁷

Cultural historians and anthropologists have assumed that the senses are not exclusively physiological. They are an active part of communication processes to the extent that they themselves become fields of action through which individuals position themselves as subjects in the world. Given their position as part of the communication system, it is justifiable to include the senses in the analysis of the narratives created in the construction of identity discourses.¹⁸ In this regard, the sensorium of the Isiac cults in the Roman Empire was an integral system of communication. Part of this system was constituted by the different identity-building processes that allowed a variety of levels of perception of the cult depending, for instance, on the degree of the spatial involvement of the individual who entered a temple.¹⁹

In this chapter, we have opted to employ the concept of “total sensory experience” because we take it that, in line with the claims of Renaud Barbaras and

14 Cf. Bartlett 1995 (1932), who analysed how Westerners reconstructed traditional Native American tales by adapting the structures and attributions in contrast to the expectations of their Western worldview.

15 Castells 1997; Tilly 1998.

16 Swidler 1986, 273–86; Hannerz 1996.

17 In the way of the debate concerning the ‘collective/communicative memory’ and ‘cultural identity’ (Assmann 1995, 125–133; Assmann 2011) and its development (i.e. Donald, 2017).

18 On the semiotics of the body in general, see Landowski 2005; Fusaroli, Demuru, and Borghi (eds.) 2009. Regarding the study of the body and the senses in cognitive linguistics, see Rohrer 2007, 25–47. In relation to the “mindful body”, see Çsordas 1994 and 2008, 110–121.

19 We follow here the definition of sensorium offered in the introduction to this volume, cf. pp. 1–3.

others, there is a “principle of association” of the senses, which is to say that the senses are activated in conjunction with others and interact with each other.²⁰ By choosing to engage in an inclusive analysis here, we avoid having to enter into the debates surrounding the taxonomic consideration of the senses. The discussion revolving around what can be regarded as senses, in addition to the establishment of hierarchies between some senses and others, are issues that have no bearing on our object of study. By the same token, we are aware of the significance of the study of interoceptors and proprioceptors – the channels through which individuals become aware of their own bodies – for such topics as the perception of pain in relation to the healing aspect of Isiac cult. However, in the present chapter we have focused on the study of the receptors that connect the body with the outside world, i.e. the so-called “exteroceptors”, which term groups together the five classical senses of sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing.²¹

As will be seen, the elements of the Isiac cults devoted to stimulating the senses are, to a significant extent, identifiable. They have also been the subject of interpretive speculation by observers, both ancient commentators and modern scholars, who have included them in discussions of particular approaches to the cult, mediated by a whole series of ideological, identity, experiential, and phenomenological components. The attention paid to the description of the colours of the goddess’ vestments provides a fine example of the variety of different attitudes that ancient observers might have towards the same sensory output.²² In contrast to the defining element of the cosmic nature of Isis, who is all light,²³ the chromatic formalisation of her divine radiance varies. Plutarch, for example, merely points rather laconically to the fact that the inclusive nature of the goddess, who embodies both light and darkness, day and night, fire and water, life and death, alpha and omega, is represented by her wearing different coloured vestments,²⁴ without going into further detail regarding the colours. Apuleius, by contrast, specifies how the colours of her tunic range from white through saffron to a vivid crimson, encompassed by

20 Barbaras 2009; Le Breton 2006, 19–28. A helpful state-of-the-art in Porcello, Meintjes, Ochoa, and Samuels 2010, 51–66 at 56–59.

21 In a way, we understand that references to the interoceptors are more closely related to the individual experience, even though its forms of expression are subject to collective sanctioning, while the exteroceptors contribute more to the construction and formalisation of a shared reality of the cult through its dynamic processes of alterity and mimesis.

22 Apul. *Met.* 11.3.4; cf. Alvar and de la Vega 2000, 49–60, on the Isis garment colours specifically 54; on the Isiac palette, see Grand-Clément 2018, 340–365.

23 Apul. *Met.* 11.1.2; see Philae Hymns v and vi; cf. Žabkar 1983, 115–126, and 1988.

24 Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 382C.

the black of the cloak covering the tunic.²⁵ The fact that the external cloak is specifically black has an inherent logic in the hierarchy of chromatism; the colour black, as the accumulation or combination of all other colours, serves as an ideal signifier for the epithet *myrionyma*, which qualifies the henotheistic character of the goddess.

For the informed observer, the chromatic palette that makes it possible to identify the goddess also evokes accounts that describe the cult's belief system. In this respect, the palette constitutes a differential marker in comparison to the mythical tenets of other deities. That said, the highlighting of some colours to the detriment of others implies the existence of connotations that enable their comparison with the symbolic meaning of those same colours in the hegemonic cultural system.²⁶

So, then, and as will be stressed below, the identification and description of the Isiac sensorium simultaneously combines different interpretive levels that engender the dynamic, variable, and situational condition of its identity, bringing together apparently contradictory opposites. In the present chapter, our goal is to highlight two of these levels: the alterity and mimetic capacity of the sensorium.

Depending on the intentionality of the observer-participant in the rituals devoted to the *gens isiaca*, the perception of sensory stimuli makes it possible to stress the foreign, exotic, and oriental character of the sensations or, alternatively, to emphasise that this sensory ecosystem is adapted to the religious realities of the Empire. A number of descriptors form part of what might be called the "cultural memory" of the Isiac cults, or, following Versluys' view, its 'mnemohistory'.²⁷ The selective recourse to some aspects of the poly-sensoriality of the cult as opposed to others can be explained by reference to the socio-cultural context in which they are highlighted. At the same time, just as the recipients of stimuli make a biased selection among these aspects, which they then reinterpret in accordance with their own existential experience, so too are the messages conveyed by the regimes of control reinterpreted by cult followers who are educated in the framework of their local environments, into which Isiac sensoriality was integrated. These modes of interpretation and reinterpretation all form part of the complex process of the marginalisation and integration of the cult at Rome and elsewhere in its

25 Apul. *Met.* 11.3.20–4.7: *Tunica multicolor, bysso tenui pertexta, nunc albo candore lucida, nunc croceo flore lutea, nunc roseo rubore flammida et, quae longe longeque etiam meum confutabat optutum, palla nigerrima splendescens atro nitore [...]*.

26 Alvar and de la Vega 2000, 49–60.

27 Versluys 2017, 274–293.

empire. This dialectical and non-linear process is affected by a multiplicity of factors, such as individual action, gender and dependency relations, social pressure, social networks, political power, and the historical contingencies of different cities and territories.²⁸ As a consequence, the intentionality of the religious agent is determined by the relational action of their context, which has an impact on the individual's preferred choices or their perception of reality.²⁹ There is no incongruity in the variability; the phenomenon of localisms has to be analysed in a way that goes beyond the limits of their specific geographical situations. What is required is a more totalising perspective.³⁰

3 Sensory Experience and Alterity

One of the defining elements of Roman morality, deeply rooted in the collective memory since the Republican era, was the virtue of austerity (*frugalitas*). For Roman historiography, moral decline with regard to *frugalitas* began with the expansion of Roman political control in the Mediterranean and, above all, in the East. For Livy, “the seed of foreign luxury was introduced into Rome by the Asian army”³¹ on the occasion of the celebration of Gnaeus Manlius Vulso's triumph on March 5 186 BCE. However, he goes on to add that “those details that began to stand out at the time were merely the seeds of the luxury to come”.³²

The Roman propaganda campaign against fatuous and dissolute Hellenistic luxury stretched out from the capital to reach Egypt. This took place with particular force from the moment the land of the Nile became embroiled in the confrontation between Mark Anthony and Octavian in 41 BCE, but the process may have begun as early as the time of Pompey the Great.³³ With the goal of shaping public opinion at Rome so as to undermine support for his political rival, Octavian famously launched a campaign aimed at the exaltation of traditional Roman values while simultaneously decrying the seduction of Mark Anthony by the charms of an “Egyptian” queen who had driven him to vice and perversion. Ovid's sentence linking illicit sex with Isis is paradigmatic of

28 Alvar 1991, 71–90; 1994a, pp. 73–84; Alvar 1994b, 275–293.

29 Alvar 2018, 221–247.

30 This has been the aim of the Isis conferences organised by Bricault and Versluys (Bricault, Versluys, Meyboom 2007; Bricault and Versluys 2010 and 2014) and, more recently, by Gasparini and Veymiers (2019).

31 Liv. 39.6.7: *luxuriae enim peregrinae origo ab exercitu Asiatico invecta in urbem est.*

32 Liv. 39.6.9: *Vix tamen illa quae tum conspiciebantur, semina erant futurae luxuriae.*

33 As suggested by Gasparini 2018, 79–98.

Octavian's programme: *nec fuge linigerae Memphitica templa iuvencae: multa illa facit, quod fuit ipsa Iovi* (*Ars am.* 1.78).³⁴ Anti-Egyptian propaganda takes shape in the image of the gluttony of the priests of Isis and her followers, the exact opposite of Roman *frugalitas*, an image that becomes a repeated object of mockery.³⁵ The insatiability of Isis' followers is still present nearly 400 years later in the writings of Jerome (CVII, 10), who depicts them as devouring pheasants and doves while avoiding the pollution of Ceres' fruit.³⁶

During the military clash between Rome and the Hellenistic monarchies, and the parallel identification of a *romanitas* that was contrasted with oriental values, the senses played a role in shaping the differentiation between *religio romana* and *aliena superstitio*. Despite the fact that there is no precise doctrinal apparatus of Roman religion, its most conservative representatives presented a polarised picture of the cultural complexity of the Roman world in order to stress values such as austerity, discipline, self-control, and *gravitas*.³⁷ The ideal Roman citizen was supposed to be sparing in "the use of ointments, the dressing of food, and the refinement of the body",³⁸ and had to conduct his interactions with the gods in a like manner. The heavy *aromata* coming from overseas, the excess of wine in rituals, noise, dancing and shouting at night, showy and exuberant offerings, or excessive physical contact with the divine images – which could lead to incestuous or promiscuous relationships in the form of an epiphany – were also the archetypical sensory descriptors of foreign religions and moral *exempla* of what lay beyond the bounds of acceptable religious behaviour.³⁹ Ultimately, the overburdened apparatus of sensory stimulation that foreign cults were said to exploit could be held up as representative

34 Hekster 2017, 47–60 against the term 'propaganda'.

35 Alvar 1993, 129–140.

36 By Jerome's time, this image was just a *topos*. We do not have contemporary self-representations of Isis followers, who certainly would not depict themselves in such terms. In relation to the Isiac ethic and its perception by Roman intellectuals, see Alvar 2008, 177–192; Orlin 2008, 231–253; Malaise 2011, 185–199. Malaise established the foundations of the relationship between the cult of Isis and political power during the Principate of Augustus.

37 Skidmore 1996, 53–84.

38 Cic. *Nat. D.* 2.146: *ad quos sensus capiendos et perfruendos plures etiam quam vellem artes repertae sunt; perspicuum est enim quo compositiones unguentorum, quo ciborum conditiones, quo corporum lenocinia processerint*. An overview of the Roman system of values can be found in Alvar 2008, 149–154.

39 Verg. *Buc.* 404; Ov. *Fast.* 1.337–347 and Arn. *Adv. nat.* 7.26 recreate an ancient Roman religion in which only local herbs are burned. De Romanis 1997, 221–230 shows through a semantic study of the term *tus* how the use of incense coming from the Arabian Peninsula was already commonplace in archaic Rome. Pers. *Sat.* 2 is a clear example of what was to be expected of an upright Roman citizen.

of the moral laxity that had spread through the *Vrbs*.⁴⁰ For the advocates of the *mos maiorum*, it was embarrassing that a magistrate of the Roman people donned the vestments of the *gens isiaca*,⁴¹ or that a Roman matron broke her marital vows of chastity and obedience because of the fraud of an alleged epiphany of the god Anubis,⁴² or that she might bring her husband to financial ruin in order to travel to Egypt, collect water from the Nile, and carry it back to Rome.⁴³

Nonetheless, the accounts that make an effort to present an austere, clean image of a Roman religion with a distinct and differentiated sensory ecosystem of its own constitute only one of multiple competing and overlapping identity narratives based on religious alterity. Thus, at the same time as a canonical discourse of *religio romana* was being created, an attraction to the so-called “foreign cults” spread its way throughout society. In the specific case of the cult of Isis at Rome, there may have been private chapels in the city from the middle of the 2nd century BCE, although the first archaeological record of Isis worship in a temple is dated around 71–64 BCE.⁴⁴ However, the real proof of the Roman attraction to the cult of Egyptian deities was the foundation of the Temple of Isis and Serapis, built on the Capitoline Hill in the time of Sulla. This temple was not granted the status of a public sanctuary but it already had a formally constituted *collegium* of priests as far back as the time of its foundation.⁴⁵ The *Iseum Capitolinum* and, more generally, the Egyptian cults at Rome, suffered several episodes of repression before the definite destruction of the Capitoline Temple of Isis in 48 BCE.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the popularity of the cults made them resilient to every attempt at eradication and, ultimately, a new public Iseum was founded in the Field of Mars, outside the bounds of the city, five years later

40 Ovid’s (*Ars Am.* 1.78) invectives against Isis and her followers are overwhelming. See Alvar 2008, 183–184.

41 Val. Max. 7.3.8. The story is also included in App. *B.C.* 4.47. For an analysis of this episode, see: Bricault and Gasparini 2018, 39–50. Another analogous episode is related to Domitian disguised as an Isiac priest, as attested by Tac. *Hist.* III 74 and Suet. *Dom.* I 2. Cf. Bricault and Gasparini 2018, 46–48.

42 Joseph. *AJ* 18.65–80. Cf. Gasparini 2016, 385–416.

43 Juv. *Sat.* 6.513–541.

44 This was the *Iseum Metellinum*, probably built by Quintus Caecilius Metellus. Its Republican chronology was established by Coarelli 1982, 33–66. His proposal has been largely accepted, see Kleibl 2009, 265–266. On the propagation of the cult of Isis in Italy, cf. Gasparini 2007, 65–87.

45 *RICIS* 501/0109–0110.

46 Tert. *Ad nat.* 1.10.17; Tert. *Apol.* 6.8; Dio Cass. 40.47-3-4; Val. Max. 1.3.4.

in 43 BCE. This is the moment at which Isis truly becomes part of the Roman pantheon.⁴⁷

The desire among a part of the Roman oligarchies to create a conservative image of *religio romana* was accompanied by a full-blown campaign of “Egyptomania”, especially during the time of the Flavian dynasty.⁴⁸ This not only involved the adoption of Egyptian cults in the *Vrbs* but also a change in the cityscape as Rome was adorned with obelisks and the use of Egyptianising elements in the decorative arts became fashionable.⁴⁹ The spectator had recourse to a comprehensive panoply of visual, olfactory, and sonorous devices linked to the circulation of Egyptian news, which gave him an informed idea about the country of the Nile. These developments also enabled spectators to construct their own images of Egypt by contrasting what they knew of this foreign land with their own personal worldview, influenced in one way or another by the narrative elements deployed by other regimes of power, such as that which exalted traditional Roman religion over and in contrast to the so called “oriental cults”.⁵⁰

We can imagine the visual impact that the Egyptian cults might have caused out of the Nile valley. The material culture produced for the temples dedicated to Isis in the Late Republic and High Imperial era have survived to enable us to recognise in them a programme that aimed to synthesise in the cramped space of the sanctuary the most iconic elements of what the Roman mind identified with Egypt. Sculptures of Isis, Osiris, Anubis, Apis, Horus, or Harpocrates, just as any other *aegyptiaca*, doubtless summoned up an idea of Egypt in those who saw them, despite their reinterpretation in accordance with the canons of Hellenistic art. But the infiltration of this foreign land extended beyond immobile images. In some extreme cases, Ethiopian dancers were also included in

47 Dio Cass. 47.16.1.1; Arn. *Adv. nat.* 11.73. There is an on-going debate on this issue. The date we follow is Coarelli’s proposal, based on the literary data. Even so, a majority of researchers prefer the flavian chronology (Scheid 2004, 308–311; Scheid 2009, 173–186; Versluys 2004, 421–448; Versluys 2018, 15–28). It is an interesting matter, but only secondary regarding our argument.

48 On the specificities of the Flavian appropriation, cf. Versluys, Bülow-Clausen, and Capriotti Vittozzi 2018.

49 Curl 1994. On the Egyptianising monuments of Rome, see the still-classic work of Roullet 1972 and the renewed vision by Capriotti Vittozzi 2013; see also Gasparini and Gordon 2018, 571–606, especially point number 5, 584–586. Needless to say, the Egyptianising fashion extended beyond the limits of Rome. Cf., for example, MacDonald and Pinto 1995, 109–111, and Barrett 2019. We recognise that the term ‘fashion’ is not the most appropriate term to refer to a more complex process of identity marks. Cf. Swetnam-Burland 2015 and Versluys 2015, 127–158.

50 See now Barrett 2019.

the cult personnel, as represented in the famous fresco from Herculaneum.⁵¹ More specifically, the ceremonies known as *Isia*, which took place between October 26 and November 3,⁵² consisted of dramatic representations of the Isiac myth, and were sufficiently familiar to be referred to in Suetonius' account of Caligula's murder. According to this source, the night before Caligula's assassination, the city was preparing a performance "in which issues of the netherworld were to be represented by Egyptians and Ethiopians".⁵³

More often than not, a conventional architectural space was altered by including Egyptian or Egyptianising decoration. Some sacred spaces related to Isiac cults have revealed pollen residues from tropical plants, such as the palm tree, lotus, or papyrus, which can be interpreted as the result of Egyptianising gardening.⁵⁴ The presence of ponds and nilometers contributed to a sensation of displacement in the devotee, who was symbolically transported to the birthplace of the goddess.

The same effect was also obtained through depictions of Nilotic landscapes, even if they may not be directly related to the cult of Egyptian gods. Surviving examples include the telling paintings of Herculaneum (e.g. Fig. 16.1); a frequent range of pictorial works, such as the small painting fragment of unknown provenance (although a Campanian origin is plausible) preserved at the J. Paul Getty Museum (Fig. 16.2);⁵⁵ and mosaics depicting extravagant Nilotic scenes, with plenty of dwarfs, crocodiles, ibis, palm trees, and so on (e.g. Figs. 16.3, 16.4, and 16.5).⁵⁶ Reliefs such as the so-called "Nilotic Campana Reliefs" (Fig. 16.6), in fashion in central Italy between the mid-1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE, also provide clear examples of visual forms that sought to evoke Egypt.⁵⁷ A good example of this kind of relief in the Altes Museum, Berlin, shows a genuinely Roman arcade opening up onto a Nilotic scene as a meta-representation of the experience of cult followers entering the Egyptianising sacred space

51 Tran tam Tinh 1971, 39–49, Fig. 41; Moormann 2018.

52 There are doubts about the establishment of these celebrations. Luc. 8.831–3 is the oldest literary document related to the *Isaeum Campensis*. On the creation process of Isiac festivals, cf. Wissowa 1902, 292 ff. (351 ff. in the 2nd ed. 1912, with slight modifications). See also Lembke 1994, 67. This sanctuary would have been the remodelled version of the one demolished under Tiberius. It seems to have been destroyed by a fire in the year 80 (Dio Cass. 56.24.1), hence Lembke's study focuses on this phase (69). Cf. Takács 1995, 90.

53 Suet. *Calig.* 57.10. Joseph. *AJ* 19.24 and 106 seem to insist on the same idea. As for *Isia* and dramatic performances, see now Gasparini 2018, 714–746.

54 Cf. Barrett 2019.

55 Delson 1999.

56 The famous Palestrina mosaic merits a special mention. Cf. Meyboom 1995.

57 Borbein 1968; Perry 1997; Rauch 1999.



FIGURE 16.1 Isiac ritual in an egyptianising atmosphere

SOURCE: *WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE WHEN ROME RULED THE WORLD*, TIME-LIFE BOOKS, 1997. UNKNOWN AUTHOR / PUBLIC DOMAIN {{PD-ANON-70-EU}}

from their strictly Roman reality (Fig. 16.7). Another procedure that aimed at stimulating the observer's visual translation involved the use of objects, such as canopic jars adorned with the head of Osiris, Anubis, or Isis; lamps decorated with deities belonging to the *gens isiacae*;⁵⁸ or antiquarian items imported

⁵⁸ Podvin 2018, 609–627, who, nevertheless, does not analyse the extraordinary document of *Pratum Novum (Igabrum, Córdoba, Baetica)* preserved at the Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba (n° inv 7170). This is a representation of a reclining water deity with an



FIGURE 16.2 Nilotic landscape (c. 70 CE), fresco, 45.7 × 38 cm, Getty Villa, Los Angeles
GETTY VILLA / PUBLIC DOMAIN {{PD-ANON-70-EU}}

from Egypt, such as ancient pharaonic relics, which were deemed to confer prestige, authenticity, and legitimacy on the sanctuaries that housed them.⁵⁹

A modern viewer of a “Campana” relief has an experience not unlike that of an inhabitant of the Empire as he or she entered a temple of the *gens isiacca*. It does not matter how accurate the representations of Egypt were in each Isiac sanctuary; what was at stake was the association of the temple’s cult with

inscription on its base: *T(itus) Flavius Victor colleg[io] | illychinariorum Patri Novi d(ono) d(at)*. See Alvar 2012, n° 117.

59 Cf. Versluys 2002.



FIGURE 16.3 Mosaic of the House of Neptune, Itálica, with nilotic scene in the border. The image shows various hunting activities and the escape of a pygmy who climbs a palm tree while defecating in fear. 2nd century CE. Archaeological site of Itálica
 © 2018 JUNTA DE ANDALUCÍA <http://www.museosdeandalucia.es/web/conjuntoarqueologicodeitalica/elementos-muebles>

an appropriate, exotic, imagined space that differed from the ordinary urban landscape of any Roman city. The sensory transition from street to temple was not limited to a purely visual impact. On the contrary, it affected religious experience, the perception of the gods and their apparent alterity, and, consequently, the way in which individuals communicated with the *gens isiaca*. The Nilotic scene of the “Campana” reliefs attests a dialogue between *romanitas* and exoticism, a dialogue that is only evident from the standpoint of the observer, for whom both registers were part of a coherent language in its process of invention, appropriation and integration, up to the point of becoming par of the observer’s discourse of cultural identity.⁶⁰ The audience would have

60 Mol 2013, 117–132.



FIGURE 16.4 Nilotic mosaic with men and women on river boats fighting animals, making music, and having sex. Museo Nazionale Romano – Palazzo Massimo alle Terme.
 AMPHIPOLIS / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0>)

found itself undergoing not so much a physical change but, rather, a mental dislocation directed towards the achieving of a total, all-encompassing, religious experience. The body, via the senses and cognitive processes, stands as the intermediary in the dialogue between reality and religious experience.⁶¹

To put the experience in more analytical terms, these types of visual representations could manage to transport worshippers to a heterotopia embodied by the original setting of the goddess Isis.⁶² The places of worship that were decorated in this way achieved a dual displacement. First, when worshippers physically entered the sanctuary, a real transition from the Roman world to an Egyptianising simulacrum took place, a spatial journey completed in a few

61 It is not necessary to assume that the “Campana” reliefs were originally located in an Iseum, but they do allow us to imagine what kind of decoration might have been found in these sacred spaces, as is the case with the paintings and mosaics.

62 Of course we do not think that this kind of religious experience was systematically achieved by all the *cultores* approaching the goddess. See: Versluys 2016, 57–61.



FIGURE 16.5 Detail of the Nile mosaic at the National Archaeological Museum of Palestrina
 PHOTO: CAMELIA.BOBAN / CC BY-SA (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)

steps. Then, once inside the sanctuary, the decorative motifs made them experience a new mental journey from their local sensory ecosystem to another environment that reproduced the goddess' dwelling place in an idealised fashion.

The play on sensory representations with which the spectator was confronted included olfactory and aural devices that also greatly contributed to the development of the identity markers that comprised the Isiac cult.⁶³ While the *sistrum* was the object most frequently used by initiates, and was the most ubiquitous instrument in the *Iseums* of the Late Republic and High Imperial era, sound language could vary enormously. The column from the *Iseum* of the Field of Mars represents several musicians whose instruments are indicative of the goal of creating an acoustic setting that differed from that of the rituals performed in other temples. The imaginary reference to Egypt is illustrated by some of the instruments represented, like the harpist playing an angular harp – typically Egyptian and depicted in the Italic territory on this column and in the Nile mosaic of Palestrina. Other instruments, like drums

63 Cf. Vendries 2005, 383–398; Bricault and Veymiers 2018, 690–713.



FIGURE 16.6 “Campana” relief with Roman Nilotic landscape. 1st Century CE. H. 48.3 cm; W. 51.3 cm; Th. 4.1 cm. Gift of Edward Sampson, Class of 1914, for the Alden Sampson Collection (y1962-143). Princeton University Art Museum. <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/28899>

or flutes, frequent in Isiac representations, were also common in other cults.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the kind of music played with them created a soundscape that was clearly identifiable and different from that of other cults.⁶⁵ Moreover, the sources distinguish types of personnel that were exclusive to Egyptian cults, such as the *tibicines magno Serapi* mentioned by Apuleius,⁶⁶ or the chorus that might be identified with the college of *Peanistae Serapidis*.⁶⁷ Of course, the abundance of musicians depicted on the columns of the Iseum of the Field of Mars and in the detailed description of Apuleius are an idealisation – not

64 For drummers represented on Egyptian terracottas, see, for example, Museo Egizio, Turin, Inv. Number 7246. Cf. Gasparini and Veymiers (eds.) 2018, vol. 11, 1126, Fig. 25.6.

65 Concerning the sound of the sistrum, see Saura-Ziegelmeier 2015, 215–235.

66 Apul. *Met.* 11.9. See Alvar 2008, 295, n. 350.

67 Cf. Apul. *Met.* 11.9 and Bricault and Veymiers 2018, 710–712.



FIGURE 16.7 “Campana” relief with Roman Nilotic landscape. Altes Museum Berlin
 PHOTO: ANGORIA. ALTES MUSEUM / CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>)

all Iseums could afford the same personnel as the grand temple at Rome. Yet that idealised acoustic image nurtured and, at the same time, contributed to the establishment of the perceptual referents that distinguished Isiac performances from those of other cults in the Roman cultural memory. A good example of this distinct character can be found on a cameo that has recently been studied by Bricault and Veymiers. Here we find a hybrid scene of musicians and dancers depicted in a typical Roman iconographic language but complemented by the addition of instruments and people with physical traits that are authentically Egyptian.⁶⁸

68 Bricault and Veymiers 2018, 690–691, Fig. 25.1.

A related issue is the question of how the sense of smell was articulated in the Isiac sensorium. We lack archaeological evidence that proves that the ingredients used to prepare perfumes for Isis were specific to her worship and different to those used in any other cult. Far from there having been a homogeneous smell, defined and ubiquitous throughout the cult, it is sensible to assume that the Isiac *aromata* depended on the local perfume supply. The mixture of different ingredients might create specific perfumes, as is the case with the *kýphi*,⁶⁹ a compound of fragrant resins, spices, and aromatic herbs, but we cannot be certain how generalised its use was or to what degree it made for a unique and recognisable olfactory atmosphere. However, literary sources tended to stress the existence of olfactory experiences specific to Egyptian cults. In his *Metamorphoses*, Apuleius narrates the encounter between Isis and his protagonist. As the goddess is about to address Lucius, she exhales aromas of Arabia Felix,⁷⁰ creating associations which mentally place her in an imprecisely drawn Orient by creating a contrast with the supposedly more local fragrances of the Roman pantheon as described by traditionalist authors such as Virgil, Ovid, and Perseus.⁷¹ The stimulation of the spectator's sense of smell in Isiac rituals, to the extent of saturating and overwhelming the olfactory capacity, does indeed appear to have been a literary *topos*. In Apuleius' description of the *Navigium Isidis*, he depicts the way in which certain women perfumed the goddess drop by drop with balm and other fragrant products that ended up impregnating the surrounding streets.⁷² Similarly, in the Third Hymn to Isis of Philae, an allusion is made to an Isis who is the "fragrance of the palace" and "whose face enjoys the trickling of fresh myrrh".⁷³ It is not, then, difficult to imagine the effigies of Isis being permeated with penetrating perfumes, a procedure that seems to be reflected in a text of Plutarch in which he describes the image of the Egyptian goddess drenching her servants with the fragrance emanating from her body.⁷⁴

69 Cf. *infra* n. 64.

70 Apul. *Met.* 11.4.3.

71 E.g. Ov. *Fast.* 1.337–53; Pers. *Sat.* 2; Ath. 6.274F.

72 Apul. *Met.* 11.9.3.

73 Žabkar 1983, 115–137, and 1988, 42.

74 Isis' skin breathed ambrosia and wonderful fragrance emanated from her, says Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 357 a–b. It is interesting to note that recent studies have assumed that divine statues and reliefs in Pharaonic Egypt were painted with scented varnish in order to give off fragrances that would allow for the identification of individual deities, cf. A. Den Doncker and H. Taviers, "Peindre l'odeur, purifier l'image. Usages des vernis picturaux dans les chapelles privées de la nécropole thébaine", presentation at the Journée d'Étude organised by D. Elwart & N. Belayche at the EPHE (Paris) 5 June 2019, text unpublished (<https://calenda.org/622637>).

This brief look at the sensory inventory of the Isiac cults enables us to appreciate how the senses, together with other types of descriptors that have already received greater scholarly attention – such as literature, epigraphy, or material culture – also participated in the clash between representations of cultural practices devoted to the *gens isiaca* and those of other Roman religious cults. The success of the poly-sensory stimulation of Isiac cult resided in its capacity to evoke, in the confined space of the sanctuary, the allure of what Roman cultural memory regarded as Egyptian.⁷⁵ And this regardless of whether the visual scenes, sounds, and aromas inhaled in Roman sacred spaces were genuine Egyptian imports or, on the contrary, constituted an imaginary reconstruction, an Egyptianising miniaturisation of what the country of the Nile signified for the average Roman mind.⁷⁶ Since the emulation of Egypt could be achieved through a variety of means, ranging from the more basic and simple to the sophisticated and extravagant, the difference and variety in the sacred spaces of the *gens isiaca* throughout the Empire must have been great. The economic capacity of each community was a critical determining factor in resolving potential conflicts concerning the degree of “Egyptianisation” of the Isiac space. As a result, on some occasions and in some spaces there was a necessary recourse to more metaphoric representations, which could seem rather odd or feeble to observers who were used to spaces with ornamental resources that were more genuinely Egyptian. Nevertheless, we have to recognise that a mimetic emulation was not always needed. Examples of sacred spaces devoted to the *gens isiaca* but without an Egyptian or Egyptianising character are so frequent that we have to admit that on many occasions there was no mimetic action at all.⁷⁷ There are a number of different reasons that might explain the absence of mimesis, including simple matters of economics. There were, no doubt, sanctuaries with economic resources available to invest in the creation of an Egyptian atmosphere (furniture, Egyptian sculptures, architecture, etc.), but this mimetic process did not necessarily have to do with the search for the reproduction of a real Egypt. Rather, what was at stake was the reproduction

75 Concerning the concept ‘cultural memory’ see above note 18. For the construction of the ‘cultural memory’ around Egypt in Rome, see in addition to the already quoted literature: Leemreize 2016; Merrills 2017; van Aerde 2020.

76 See Müskens 2017.

77 In this regard, it seems odd that a recently published infographic recreation of the sanctuary of “el Molinete” at Carthago Nova proposes a group of pillars in the façade of the entrance, despite the lack of any archaeological evidence at all for such features. None of the material findings suggests any Egyptianising intention in either the iconographical or the architectural lay-out. Cf. Noguera et al. 2019, 89, Fig. 32.

of the cultural concept of Egypt produced in the Roman Empire.⁷⁸ Another reason that might explain the absence of mimesis, regardless of economic limitations, was the desire to create an inverse mimesis, that is, a desire to integrate the cult of Egyptian deities into the Roman cultural ecosystem, with the purpose of facilitating its acceptance in its new cultural environments. As a consequence, direct references to Egypt were avoided for the sake of prioritising a sort of *alterité incluse* in a new Roman identity. In what follows, we will delve into this kind of inverted mimesis.

In a way, it would be appealing to follow the path indicated by Taussig in his famous work *Mimesis and Alterity*, and to elaborate an explanatory discourse that underscores the Roman capacity “to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become other”.⁷⁹ This would involve developing an account according to which, as has been proposed by a number of scholars in the last decades, the cult of Isis, after leaving its original ecosystem, underwent a variety of transformations in order to adapt to the preconceived idea of Egypt that existed in the Roman world.⁸⁰ However, as with the concepts of identity and alterity, the notion of mimesis is situational and dependent on its formulation of the stance that the observer decides to take, which is to say that it is fundamentally relational.⁸¹ For this reason, we have chosen to use the concept of mimesis to refer instead to the capacity of the Isiac cults to reshape and adapt themselves not only in relation to the cultural memory of the Roman world, but also to its micro-structural, locative dimension.

4 Sensory Experience and Mimesis

There is no doubt that the followers of the *gens isiaca* were capable of creating an identity of their own that contrasted with the identities of other cults.⁸² Moreover, the self-proclaimed alterity of the *gens isiaca* served in some cases

78 The presence of nilometers in the sanctuaries of the *gens isiaca* in the Roman West is proof of the construction of an imaginary Egyptian space (Wild 1981, 25–40; Meyboom 1995, 51–53). Nonetheless, there were occasions on which the sacred water was purposely brought over from Egypt (Juv. *Sat.* 6. 512–41), showing a desire for authenticity in the connection of the cult to the country of the Nile (cf. Alvar 2008, 314).

79 Taussig 1993, xiii.

80 See Alvar, 2008; Versluys 2010, 7–36.

81 Hollway 2010, 216–232. This is an appropriate way to understand local or regional peculiarities or their absence. See Alvar 2012; Bricault, Müskens, and Versluys 2015, 427–435.

82 See now, Sfameni Gasparro 2018, 74–107.

to establish the limits of a *religio romana* that was becoming increasingly diffuse in an imperialist political space that required the integration of the huge cultural diversity existing within its frontiers. Yet the reception process of the cults of the *gens isiaca*, and their redefinition based on the expectations raised by the idealised image of “the Egyptian” in Roman cultural memory, also produced a process of mimesis, of imitation and adaptation to local sensory ecosystems, as a result of the daily praxis of their followers. The adaptation of the institutional structure of the cult, which offered a number of different sensory stimulation devices for the creation of a self-identity in the cramped religious marketplace, to individual experience, which was shaped in turn by local material and cultural resources, evinces the multidimensional and kaleidoscopic character of religious identities.

Despite the universalistic characteristics of the goddess, the nature of the Isiac cults was exotic and foreign yet, in turn, familiar and local. The sensory perception of the goddess was also multiple: she was Egyptian but Roman; she was Roman but Egyptian. We have already mentioned how the heady aroma of oriental perfumes enveloped her in Apuleius’ account of the procession of Isis in Cenchrea. The aroma that Plutarch, for his part, associated with the Egyptian goddess and her servants on their arrival at Byblos was not a marker that identified her Alexandrian origin but, rather, a product that stressed her adscription to the Greek pantheon: ambrosia.⁸³ However, when describing the use of aromatic products in the Egyptian temples of Isis and Osiris, he specifies precisely which types of incense were burned at different times during the day and explains why each was used at that particular time: in the morning, a stimulating resin is burned which cleans and purifies the air, and revitalises the body that has been dulled by slumber; at midday, they burn myrrh in order to dissipate pestilent diseases that might be caused by the strength of the sun; and at sunset, they burn a mixture of sixteen ingredients called *kýphi*, which has a calming effect and helps the body to release the tensions of the day.⁸⁴ Therewith, in addition to underscoring the local specificity of the cult of Isis, Plutarch intended to confirm the old *topos* that held that the Egyptians were

83 Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 357B. In this passage, Plutarch probably intended to emphasise its divine nature, since *ambrosios* can also mean “divine”. Cf. Levin 1971, 31–50.

84 Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 372D and 383A–384B. In all likelihood, Plutarch witnessed this custom when visiting Alexandria. Cf. *Mor.* 678C, although he took the recipe for *kýphi* from Manetho (Jacoby, *FGH*, 609 F 16).

the healthiest people on earth.⁸⁵ This is just one of the multiple examples that allows us understand the tension between local and global.⁸⁶

Beyond the desire of certain authors to indexicalise the Egyptian or Greek or even Roman character of the goddess through her association with specific smells, her identification with particular aromas depended on other factors. These included the access that both the temple and the individual had to the transoceanic market in aromatic resins and other types of offerings relating to the senses of taste, sight, and smell. In the absence of individual experiences like those of Apuleius and Plutarch, archaeobotanical analyses have been able to provide revealing insights into the sensescape of Isiac cult practice.

The charred remains of seeds and fruit recovered from the Temples of Isis in Mainz, *Baelo Claudia*, and Pompeii include offerings that can be linked to the landscape of the Nile Valley – dates (*phoenix dactylifera*) – alongside other types of products. Depending on their place of discovery, these other products can be considered autochthonous or as coming from exotic areas of production like Egypt. Prominent among them are cereals cultivated in many geographical areas, such as different types of wheat (*triticum aestivum*, *durum*, and *turgidum*); fruit of a markedly local character, including cherries (*prunus avium*) found at the Temple of Isis at Mainz; hazelnuts (*corylus avellana*), as discovered at Mainz and Pompeii; or products supplied through long-distance trade networks, such as the pine nuts (*pinus pinea*) and olive oil (*olea europaea*) at Mainz.⁸⁷

Based on these results, the question has been raised as to whether or not there were institutionalised preferences guiding the type of offerings made to the deities of the “oriental” cults during the Principate.⁸⁸ What can be seen is a transfer of sophisticated human tastes, owing to the consumption of a large variety of imported products, to temple altars, regardless of whether these were dedicated to Isis or to another divinity. In this context, we can note that while the remains of dates may have been discovered in the Temples of Isis at Mainz, *Baelo*, and Pompeii, they have also been documented in the Temple of Fortune

85 This appreciation is already to be found in Hdt. 2.77, who claims that, after the Libyans, the people most concerned with their health are the Egyptians. For his part, Diod. Sic. 1.21.2 and 1.82.1 stresses the medical character of the cult of Isis, something well attested elsewhere.

86 See Bricault and Versluys 2012.

87 Zach 2002, 101–106.

88 Note, for instance, that some of the offerings that could be considered “exotic”, such as the *phoenix dactylifera*, are also relatively common in other contexts, such as funerary offerings. Cf. Preiss, Matterne, and Latron 2005, 362–372 at 365–366; Bouby, Marinval 2004, 77–86 at 81–84.

and Mercury at Nijmegen (Holland). Examining the issue from the other direction, we can note that despite the stress in the literary testimonies on Isis' unusual preference for the sacrifice of geese,⁸⁹ the west roman archaeological record nevertheless stubbornly insists on the fact that the most frequent offering was chicken, readily available anywhere and relatively cheap.⁹⁰ Local supply predominated, making some products more accessible than others, as did the desire of individuals to flaunt their status by offering exotic products that called for a deep purse, regardless of which god was receiving the sacrifice.

The same is true of the visual markers that tend to stand out in the identification of the worshippers of Isis. According to Apuleius' account of the Isiac procession, the physical appearance of the initiates made them easily recognisable: the women wear veils and perfume their hair, while the men parade in white linen tunics and with shaved heads.⁹¹ This depiction coincides with Juvenal's captious critique of oriental cults, which includes the description of a *linigero et caluo* herd of worshippers of Anubis.⁹² However, it is quite unlikely that all the worshippers of the *gens isiaca* adopted such a striking change in apparel in their day-to-day lives. As with the adoption of certain Southeast Asian religions in contemporary Europe (such as Buddhism, in any of its forms, or the Krishna movements), only the most fervent believers would have opted to express their commitment in such an openly unconventional way as changing their dress so as to stand out against local uses and customs. Such ostentatious displays were not a necessity; as Plutarch states, an individual is no more Isiac for dressing in linen and shaving his head.⁹³ Tolerance directed at the integration of traditional, local aesthetics within a cult is a mechanism of cultural adaptation the purpose of which is to facilitate the recruitment of new blood. The words of Plutarch, beyond their paramount religious dimension, have the didactic value of reducing the relevance of the identity marker of clothing for those of the faithful who prefer to maintain a more comfortable appearance in their social space.

89 Cf. e.g. Ov. *Fast.* 1.453–454. Juv. *Sat.* 6.539–541; *Anth. Pal.* 6.231.

90 In the *Iseum* of *Baelo Claudia* (Baetica), only four of the three hundred bones discovered came from geese. The rest came, for the most part, from chickens. Cf. Lignereux, Peters 2008, 231–234. Similarly, in Mainz most of the bones were also from chickens (up to 90%). Cf. Hochmuth, Benecke, and Witteyer 2005, 319–327.

91 Apul. *Met.* 11.10. Tib. 1.3.27–30 also mentions how his beloved Delia dresses in linen as a sign of sexual abstinence in order to venerate Isis on special occasions. On this question, see Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2012, 149–162.

92 Juv. *Sat.* 6.533.

93 Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 352C.

Lastly, stress should be placed on a still unexplored but highly significant point concerning the sensory mimesis in the context of its local deployment, i.e. its integration into both family and civic pantheons associated with other divinities that are easily identifiable with traditional Roman religion.⁹⁴ The unification of the Isiac cults with the civic religious panorama can be seen in devotional acts in which adepts manifested their willingness to include several divinities in the same offering. The case of the anonymous dedication of Nîmes illustrates this point. In it, the evergetist simultaneously offers statues of Isis, Serapis, Vesta, Diana, and *Somnus*, although the inclusion of a temple for Isis and Serapis shows his preference for the *gens isiacae*.⁹⁵ Just as significant is the inscription in which a worshipper named Privata, in the Baetic colony of Italica, offers Isis a marble plaque of the *plantae pedis* type by order of Juno (*imperio Iunonis*).⁹⁶ Another equally illustrative Italican example is that of the flaminica Vibia Modesta, who makes an offering in the city's 'Trajaneum', an Imperial cult temple, of a silver image of Victoria Augusta and three small golden busts of Isis, Ceres, and Juno Regina.⁹⁷ It can be presumed that, as the archaeological record suggests, if, in these examples, devotion took the shape of rich material offerings through which a visual landscape of the city could be configured, then the gods of the local pantheons also shared in other sensory indicators of religious veneration, such as sacrifices and aromatic offerings, especially in those cases in which Isis shared her temple with other divinities (*synnaoi theoi*).

These examples not only demonstrate the mimetic capacity of the cult of Isis to adapt to local pantheons, in order to become as familiar and local as any other god, but also the capacity of the devotee to navigate through different structures of meaning – consisting of the idiosyncrasies of each one of the city's cults – and to interconnect them according to their personal interests. It is here that we can see how the concept of identity is relational⁹⁸ and how it depends on the way in which the information packets comprising the cultural memory of the cults of the *gens Isiacae* are employed.

The type of analysis undertaken here is useful that it can help us to understand not only that the milieu constitutes a founding element in the cultural complex or that the social agency is decisive in the construction of the ecocultural niche in which the life of the individual unfolds, but also that the codes

94 See Gasparini 2014.

95 *CIL* XII, 3058 = *SIRIS* 728 = *RICIS* 605/0101.

96 *RICIS* 602/0205 = *HEp* 5, 1995, 717 = Alvar 2012, n°73. For a state of the art and a new interpretation of the *plantae pedis* offerings, cf. Gasparini's chapter in this volume.

97 *AE* 1982, 521 = *AE* 1984, 530 = *HEp* 4, 1994, 724 = *RICIS* 602/0201 = Alvar 2012, n° 83.

98 Hollway 2010.

of recognition, belonging, or alienity are mutable. This mutability finds expression both in social transformation, which provokes new discourses and references, and also in individual action.⁹⁹

Ultimately, the phagocytising of the methodology of the linguistic turn by corpus studies has led to the acknowledgement that the formulation of cultural meanings is not only discursive or reflexive, but also experiential and perceptive. Sensory stimuli suffer the mediation of the provenance of the cult and its reception in a new community. In this regard, it is essential to understand the mechanisms of mimesis/anti-mimesis (Egyptianism/Romanism) from an inclusive viewpoint in which a series of elements intervene: on the one hand, the elements of representation of the cult of the *gens isiaca* – including sensory stimuli – which generate variations caused by the interests of the agents of the cult in the different processes of its transmission; on the other hand, the expectations of every new community that receives the cult also have to be considered. The interaction of all these elements causes a tension between homogeneity and particularity in the perception of the cult, and this tension is also present in its sensory order. If we, as modern scholars, tend to stress the particularities of the cult, in doing so we neglect the other half of the picture, its homogeneity. We should not forget that any inhabitant of the Roman Empire could identify (also, or especially, in sensory terms) the cult of the *gens isiaca* anywhere in the Empire. Our purpose here has been to show how a Total Sensory Experience approach can open up the different manifestations of the tension produced by the transmission, reception, and observation of religious phenomena generally and, as we have seen here, the cults of *the gens isiaca* in particular.

A noteworthy difference of the sensorium of the cult of the *gens isiaca* in relation to other cults of the Roman pantheon is the dialectic between mimesis and alterity that we have emphasised in these pages, which is not essential in all the other cults that base their authority and legitimacy in the Graeco-Roman cultural tradition. We do not have the wherewithal to quantify the importance that sensory stimuli had in fixing the multi-faceted image of Isis, and the *gens isiaca*, in Roman society, but we *can* state that they played an active and unique role, and that there was an awareness among devotees that sensory stimuli formed part of the set of communication devices that contributed to the goddess' identity in each context.

99 Albrecht, Degelmann, Gasparini, et al. 2018, 568–593.

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