

Frontispiece 1. Sensory affect: a field archaeologist holds a group of glass bracelets discovered during rescue excavations at the medieval site of Apostolshchyna in western Ukraine. The site lies within the territory of the princely town of Volodymyr, which was violently sacked during the Mongol-Tatar campaign led by Batu Khan in 1241 CE. The objects belong to a cache of 573 intact ancient Rus glass bracelets, possibly hidden during that catastrophe. The bracelets vary in form—twisted, smooth and trapezoidal—and appear in a striking palette of colours, including deep greens, blues, violets, yellows and shimmering gold. They were found alongside dozens of precious items, including bronze and marble pendant crosses, associated with elite religious and mercantile life. Their scientific study offers the opportunity to deepen understandings of medieval glass production, exchange networks and consumer culture. Their proposed museum display also has the potential to represent their multisensory properties and sensorial cultural context. Photograph: Вікмор Баюк (Viktor Baiuk). Reproduced with permission.

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Frontispiece 2. Sensorial regimes: a conservator cleans, with fine tools held in gloved hands, part of the 'Norfolk Carnyx*', discovered during an excavation near Thetford in west Norfolk, England. This brittle object, made of thin sheets of bronze, will require extensive stabilisation before detailed research on it can begin. Deployed during the European Iron Age, the* carnyx *was a tall, S-shaped trumpet, known for its animal-headed bell and moveable tongue. Held vertically, its loud, harsh sounds would have been used in warfare to intimidate enemies and inspire and direct troops. The Romans were fascinated by carnyces and depicted them as war trophies. This rare, intact example comprises not just the bell but also the mouthpiece and pipe. It was deposited, between about 50 BCE and 50 CE, as part of a hoard of metal objects that also included a sheet-bronze boar's head from a military standard, five shield bosses and an unidentified iron object. Photograph and copyright: Norwich Castle Museum. Reproduced with permission.*

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Editorial: Sensory archaeology

The sensorial revolution in archaeology

☙ "I would be interested to hear how you think the sensorial revolution in archaeology is progressing."[1] This query was sent to me a couple of years ago by David Howes, the leading proponent of the transdisciplinary field of sensory studies. I didn't have the courage to reply that, despite a growing corpus[2], there is no sensorial revolution or 'turn' in archaeology. Yannis Hamilakis's bold call for "a paradigmatic shift based on sensoriality"[3] has not transpired. Most archaeologists continue to work and think primarily through the sense of sight. They remain less comfortable exploring other sensory dimensions of the material world, including touch, sound, smell, taste, proprioception (where we feel the position and movement of our bodies in space), the emotions and their synaesthetic interplay. Furthermore, many archaeologists would probably argue that past sensory experiences, perceptions and orders lie beyond the reach of acceptable, rigorous archaeological method and inference. Christopher Tilley's phenomenological archaeology—out of which sensory archaeology has, in part, evolved—was certainly received in this way: criticised, for example, for incautiously imposing individual, present-day bodily experiences onto changed ancient monuments and landscapes.[4] Yet, in the current issue of *Antiquity*, we are publishing a rigorously peer-reviewed article by Matthias Friedrich on 'Archaeology and sensory regimes in medieval and Early Modern Europe'. This would appear to confirm that sensory studies are gaining traction and diversifying in archaeology. Nevertheless, as more archaeologists gradually become interested in the senses, critical debate, methodological rigour and interpretative caution remain appropriate. Below, I take this discussion further, first, by briefly introducing the field of sensory archaeology, then by undertaking a sensorial evaluation of research

[1] D. Howes *pers. comm.* 2022; c.f. Howes, D. 2020. Digging up the sensorium: on the sensory revolution in archaeology, in R. Skeates & J. Day (ed.) *The Routledge handbook of sensory archaeology*: 21–34. London: Routledge.

[2] For a valuable bibliography, see Day, J. 2021. *Archaeology of the senses.* Available at: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0258.xml (accessed 28 January 2026).

[3] Hamilakis, Y. 2013. *Archaeology and the senses: human experience, memory and effect*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p.10.

[4] For example, Tilley, C. 1994. *A phenomenology of landscape: places, paths and monuments*. Oxford: Berg; Brück, J. 2005. Experiencing the past? *Archaeological Dialogues* 12: 45–72. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203805001583; Moyes, H. 2023. The life and afterlife of phenomenology in archaeological theory and practice, in J. Yoshimi *et al.* (ed.) *Horizons of phenomenology: essays on the state of the field and its applications*: 307–24. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26074-2_16

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articles published in the current issue of *Antiquity*, before offering a few concluding thoughts. I acknowledge my own positionality here, as a contributor to this field, and my gratitude to Jo Day, Margalida Coll Sabater, Sue Hamilton, Jane Lawrence, Sonia Machause López and Valentina Vulpi for helping my words make sense.

Sensory archaeology

☙ The umbrella terms 'sensory archaeology', 'archaeology of/and the senses' and 'sensorial archaeology' serve well enough in signalling this emergent sub-field. However, defining its research foci, goals, methods and key concepts is more challenging. Put simply, sensory archaeology acknowledges that our experiences of life are multisensorial; it therefore encourages us to study the human past in a more 'full bodied' manner, with conscious reference to all our senses. More specifically, sensory studies focus on 'sense' (and the associated term 'perception') through its two related meanings. One is more physiological and psychological and generalised, referring to bodily sensation or feeling of stimuli, apprehended through the sense organs (or 'the senses'). The other is more contextual, referring to mental insight or understanding, gained through the cultural, social and political dimensions of sensory communication and sensorial categorisation of those sensations by different groups of people. There is, then, sometimes a terminological (and methodological) distinction between 'sensory', referring to physical sensations, and 'sensorial' referring to their meaningful perception, although these terms, and others like 'sensuous' and 'sensual', are also used interchangeably. In recognising that the senses are, in part, culturally constructed, sensory studies therefore challenge the universality of the Western five-sense model (of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell) and the related bias towards the sense of sight (or 'visualism'). One goal of sensory archaeology is, then, to identify and challenge biases and misconceptions about past experiences and perceptions. Other goals are to broaden our research perspectives and questions on materiality and social processes, and to incorporate sensoriality into existing archaeological methods, so as to bring us closer to the lived realities of the past, and to reveal even richer and more diverse stories about humanity.

Sensory studies have been gaining significant momentum across the social sciences and humanities since the early 1990s.[5] Archaeology first converged with this movement through related thinking about material and visual culture, the body, landscape, phenomenology, experience and perception, and emotion.[6] The first explicit archaeologies of the senses produced eclectic case studies, ranging from reconsidering a decorated Corinthian perfume bottle, to drawing on ethnohistoric data to redescribe a Late Postclassic censer lid representing a god that emitted smoke breath (Figure 1), to

[5] For example, D. Howes (ed.). 1991. *The varieties of sensory experience: a sourcebook in the anthropology of the senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Rodaway, P. 1994. *Sensuous geographies*. London: Routledge; and the diverse articles published in *The Senses and Society*. https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfss20

[6] For example, Tilley 1994; Hamilakis, Y., M. Pluciennik & S. Tarlow (ed.). 2002. *Thinking through the body: archaeologies of corporeality*. New York: Kluwer Academic; Scarre, C. & G. Lawson (ed.). 2006. *Archaeoacoustics*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.

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Figure 1. Eastern Nahua ceramic deity censer (or xantil*), Mexico,* c. *1200–1400 CE. Height 575mm. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller 1969, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.10. CC0 1.0. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/309861*

undertaking an acoustic analysis of megalithic monuments in prehistoric Britain[7]. More recent milestones in sensory archaeology are represented by an even wider variety of thematic, regional and methodological publications.[8]

These studies have resulted in the development of an overlapping set of core concepts and a proliferation of keywords that inform interpretative sensorial archaeology.[9] 'Affect' refers to the sensory properties and impacts of material things on people in the past and present, ranging from portable objects to the built environment to landforms. Caves, such as Grotta Regina Margherita in west-central Italy, whose vibrant, stalactite-filled interior was repeatedly used as an evocative burial place during the Middle Bronze Age (*c*. 1650–1450 BCE) and more recently as a spectacular tourist experience (Figure 2), are particularly affective examples[10]. 'Sensoria' are the ways in which we make sense of the world around us (neurobiologically and socioculturally) and the ways in which different contexts shape our perceptions. 'Sensescape' is a closely related term, used by archaeologists to describe the sensory dimensions and experiences of landscapes, ranging, for example, from a small

[7] Shanks, M. 1995. Art and an archaeology of embodiment: some aspects of archaic Greece. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 5: 207–44. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774300015031; Houston, S. & K. Taube. 2000. An archaeology of the senses: perception and cultural expression in ancient Mesoamerica. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 10: 261–94. https://doi.org/10.1017/S095977430000010X; Watson, A. & D. Keating. 1999. Architecture and sound: an acoustic analysis of megalithic monuments in prehistoric Britain. *Antiquity* 73: 325–36. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00088281

[8] For example, Skeates, R. 2010. *An archaeology of the senses: prehistoric Malta*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Day, J. (ed.) 2013. *Making senses of the past: toward a sensory archaeology*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press; Hamilakis, Y. 2013. *Archaeology and the senses: human experience, memory and affect*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Skeates, R. & J. Day (ed.). 2020. *The Routledge handbook of sensory archaeology*. London: Routledge; Landeschi, G. & E. Betts (ed.). 2023. *Capturing the senses: digital methods for sensory archaeologies*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23133-9; Jordan, P., S. Mura & S. Hamilton (ed.). 2025. *New sensory approaches to the past: applied methods in sensory heritage and archaeology*. London: University College London Press. https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800088696

[9] For an overview, see Skeates, R. & J. Day. 2020. Sensory archaeology: key concepts and debates, in Skeates & Day (ed.) 2020: 1–17.

[10] Skeates, R. *et al.* 2021. Rethinking collective burial in Mediterranean caves: Middle Bronze Age Grotta Regina Margherita, Central Italy. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 46: 382–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2021.1917137

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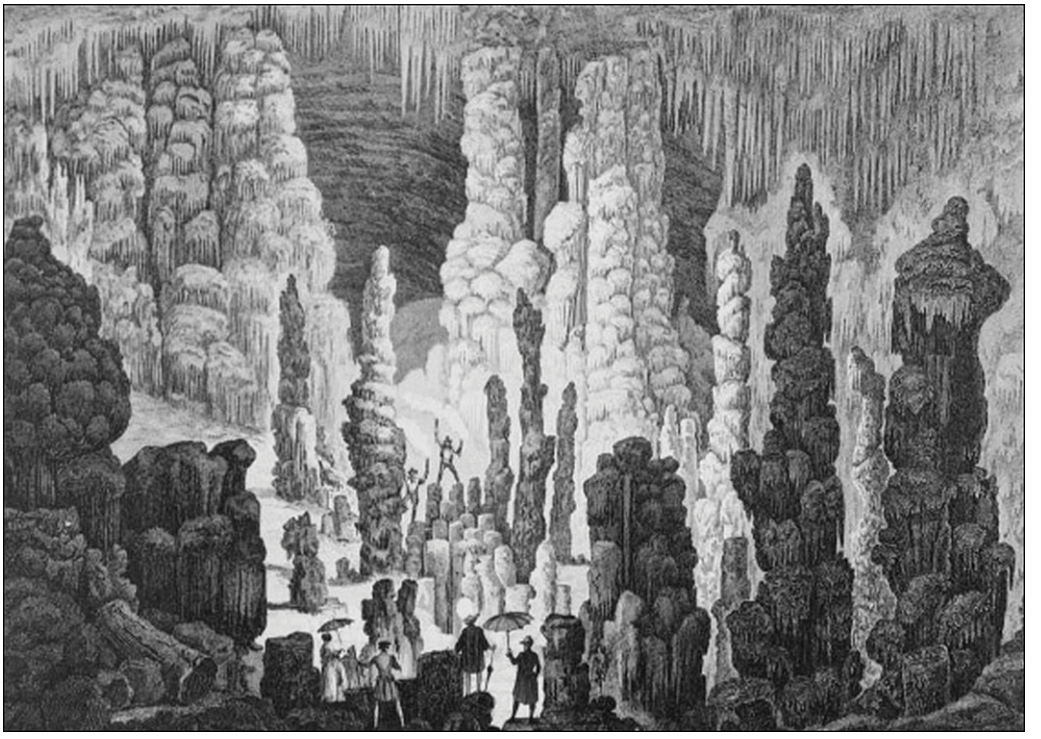


Figure 2. Visitors to Grotta Regina Margherita, west-central Italy, in the mid-nineteenth century. Original: Santucci 1846. Photograph: Jeff Veitch.

Mesolithic clearing in a forested area to a royal garden in ancient Mesopotamia, and from the paved streets of ancient Rome to the 'slimescapes' of First World War trenches[11]. The terms 'sensory order', 'sensory model', 'ways of sensing' and 'sensorial regime' then go on to refer to the basic perceptual paradigm, or worldview, composed of sensorial meanings, values and hierarchies, which is generally maintained by members of a society, but which can also be manipulated and controlled ideologically or challenged and subverted.

Developing acceptable research methods in sensuous archaeology remains a work in progress and a matter of debate. Participating scholars do, however, agree that sensoriality is best incorporated into existing archaeological toolkits, including digital research methods. The difficulties of undertaking sensory studies in archaeology must certainly be acknowledged. There is a risk of misrepresenting and overinterpreting incomplete archaeological assemblages as evidence of meaningful sensory affects and sensorial practices and of imposing modern sensory experiences, categories and concepts onto the past. But critique and reflexivity have always been key to the development of archaeological method and theory and are constituent elements of an evolving sensory archaeology. For

[11] Das, S. 2008. *Touch and intimacy in First World War literature.* New York: Cambridge University Press, p.35. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295575.003

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example, early archaeologies of the senses tended to study the Western five senses separately. Yannis Hamilakis subsequently criticised this unnatural sense-divided approach, advocating instead the holistic study of multisensoriality (or what he terms 'the sensorial field').[12] Other scholars have looked further back at our disciplinary history, to consider how and why the senses, other than the Western sense of sight, came increasingly to be restrained and denied by archaeologists in the scientisation of their research.[13] This tension remains with us today, as illustrated by the contrast between the sensory immediacy and excitement felt by field archaeologists and post-excavators when discovering and handling freshly excavated objects and the scientific protocols followed by conservators when cleaning and avoiding bodily contact with artefacts (Frontispieces 1 & 2).

One methodological area that sensory archaeology is currently moving into productively, especially by asking new sense-related research questions alongside applying new research methods, is artefact studies. For example, informed by Hamilakis's thinking on sensoriality and by wider critique of seeing figurines merely as artistic representations, Costas Papadopoulos and colleagues have applied a wide range of analytical methods (including digital 3D, reflectance transformation imaging and multispectral renderings) in the recording, examination and presentation of Neolithic clay figurines from Koutroulou Magoula in central Greece, dated to *c.* 6000–5800 BCE. In doing so, they have revealed new details of the sensory affordances and affective potential of the materials, and of the successive bodily stages of human labour and skill, that went into crafting each object.[14] Wider archaeological ceramic studies are likewise gaining from new experimental and interpretive studies of the sensory properties, appeal and meanings of decorated pottery vessels.[15]

Spatial and landscape studies in archaeology are also benefitting from critique of their traditional tendency towards visualism and by considering the various sensory dimensions of moving through and experiencing ancient architecture and landscapes. For example, aural data recorded across and within archaeological spaces are being used in some studies to enhance the sense history of places.[16] Like phenomenological archaeology, such work often starts with documenting the sensory experiences of fieldworkers in the present. It is, however, more reflexive—to lessen the imposition of modern sensibilities—and more integrative, working in tandem with archaeological materials and methods, and tacking back and forth between the present and past, to extend research questions and hypotheses about former people and environments. For example, Sue Hamilton and Ruth Whitehouse have innovated in researching the social and sensory

[12] Hamilakis 2013.

[13] For example, Skeates 2010: 26–75; Hamilton, S. 2025. Pathways to a new sensory past: a summative critique, in Jordan *et al.* (ed.) 2025: 1–25.

[14] Papadopoulos, C. *et al.* 2019. Digital sensoriality: the Neolithic figurines from Koutroulou Magoula, Greece. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 29: 625–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774319000271

[15] For example, Day, J. 2013. Imagined aromas and artificial flowers in Minoan society, in Day (ed.) 2013: 286–309; Balachandran, S. 2019. Bringing back the (ancient) bodies: the potters' sensory experiences and the firing of red, black and purple Greek vases. *Arts* 8(2): 70. https://doi.org/10.3390/arts8020070

[16] For example, Eve, S. & S. Graham. 2020. Spatial data visualisation and beyond, in Gillings, M. *et al.* (ed.) *Archaeological spatial analysis: a methodological guide*: 460–74. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351243858

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landscapes of Early Neolithic farmers on the Tavoliere Plain in south-east Italy (*c.* 6000–5000 BCE), by combining traditional methods of fieldwork (field walking, mapping and use of aerial and satellite photos) with phenomenological site catchment analysis, sensory mapping and the use of unconventional visualisations.[17] Compared with previous archaeological research into the Tavoliere Neolithic, the results deepen understanding of the modus operandi of its kin-based, neighbouring communities and their laboriously constructed ditched villages in the landscape. Sonia Machause López and Margalida Coll Sabater have also gone beyond the traditional mapping of archaeological remains in the Mediterranean landscape by undertaking new, sensorially informed desk-based studies and phenomenological and archaeological fieldwork at and between Iron Age (sixth to second centuries BCE) ceremonial sites in southern Iberia and on the island of Mallorca.[18] This has led them to present new, dynamic scenarios involving members of Iron Age societies participating in multisensory rites of life and death. They explain these as ritual passages characterised by movement, body ornamentation, ceremonial consumption, music and heightened emotions.

Sensory archaeologists have also pushed at the boundaries of established conventions in archaeological writing and illustration. In producing their sensuous studies of past people and practices, they have mobilised thick descriptions, evocative writing, empathy and the archaeologically informed use of imagination and artistic creativity. For example, Katariina Vuori organised a series of maritime archaeology conference workshops that worked creatively through a combination of archaeology, the senses and poetry to verbalise the biography and heritage values of a previously undocumented seventeenth-century shipwreck discovered in Oulu, Northern Finland.[19] Compared to academic language, this creativity increased the diversity of descriptive vocabulary and metaphors, allowing the shipwreck to be described beyond its more obvious archaeological materiality. There is scope for collaboration with artists. Sensory possibilities have also informed representations of the past at some museums and heritage sites. The replacement of traditional 'Do Not Touch!' signs with 'Please Touch!' invitations, for instance, has sought to render displayed materials more accessible to visitors, including those with sensory impairments, by appealing to more than their sense of sight. Behind the scenes, collaboration with members of Indigenous communities is also helping to incorporate into catalogue records the multisensory and affective relationships between people and objects.[20] Heritage legislation is even catching up, notably in France with a 2021 law aimed at

[17] Hamilton, S. & R. Whitehouse. 2020. *Neolithic spaces. Volume 1. Social and sensory landscapes of the first farmers of Italy*. London: Accordia Research Institute, University of London.

[18] Machause López, S. & R. Skeates. 2022. Caves, senses and ritual flows in the Iberian Iron Age: the territory of Edeta. *Open Archaeology* 8: 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2022-0222; Coll Sabater, M. 2024. Death happened, what now? A multisensory approach to funerary practices in Late Iron Age Mallorca. *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 37(2): 189–219. https://doi.org/10.1558/jma.33473

[19] Vuori, K. 2024. In the beginning was muteness: approaching an anonymous shipwreck via poetry, in Kristin, I. *et al.* (ed.) *Delivering the deep: maritime archaeology for the 21st century: selected papers from IKUWA 7* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 3170): 309–25. Oxford: BAR. https://doi.org/10.30861/9781407361475

[20] Krmpotich, C. 2020. The senses in museums: knowledge production, democratization and indigenization, in Skeates & Day (ed.) 2020: 94–106.

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defining and protecting the sensory heritage of the French countryside (initiated by a second-home owner's litigious attempt to silence a neighbour's crowing cockerel).[21] But where do such sensory propositions stand in the pages of a global archaeology journal?

Making sense of *Antiquity*

☙ With one exception, the research articles published in this April issue of *Antiquity* were written with other, entirely valid non-sensorial research agendas in mind. However, from the perspective of sensory archaeology one could regard these writings as a series of opportunities to consider the multiple sensory dimensions of archaeological remains and the diverse sensual cultures and sensorial strategies of the human groups that originally created them. The following discussion is, then, intended to be constructive.

Sensorial regimes

Matthias Friedrich's article is the only one to engage explicitly with sensory archaeology.[22] It moves beyond previous approaches in medieval studies, which have tended to study the five canonical senses separately, by thinking about material remains through the lens of sensorial regimes. It argues persuasively that people actively used material culture in sensory practices in medieval and Early Modern Europe (*c.* 500–1800 CE) to maintain or challenge the power of religious regimes. Case studies include: spectacles found in the choir of Wienhausen Abbey in Germany that enhanced the Cistercian nuns' visual and spiritual experiences of reading religious texts during liturgy; gates regulating sensory interactions between Christian and minority Jewish religious communities in Vienna; and the Exeter Puzzle Jug, a wine jar depicting naked bishops, which appealed to senses of sight, touch, taste and humour while ridiculing the Church. This article represents a good example of a sensory study that goes beyond simply adding the senses to known archaeological materials by also considering how groups of people could have used related sensory experiences for diverse religious and political ends.

This frame of mind would also have complemented Laura Rindlisbacher and colleagues' excellent bioarchaeological study of the life histories of plague victims in Basel, Switzerland.[23] Their bodies were buried in the grounds of a hospital during an outbreak of the epidemic in 1665–1670 CE. Documentary records indicate that the hospital only accepted patients with full citizenship status, or those financially backed by an employer, while domestic servants were expelled from the city if they fell sick. In contrast, the city council facilitated the spread of the disease by refusing to close the city gates to traders. Archaeological evidence also indicates the relatively high mortality of working-class children. By adding a sensory standpoint, these socioeconomic conditions, as well as

[21] Bendix, R.F. 2021. Life itself: an essay on the sensory and the (potential) end of heritage making. *Traditiones* 50(1): 43–51. https://doi.org/10.3986/Traditio2021500104

[22] Friedrich, M. 2026. Archaeology and sensory regimes in medieval and Early Modern Europe. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10290

[23] Rindlisbacher, L. *et al.* 2026. All equal in the face of death? Life histories of confirmed victims of the last plague epidemic in Basel (Switzerland). *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10297

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contemporaneous understandings of disease transmission and prevention and individual vulnerability,[24] can also be regarded as components of a sensory regime in Early Modern Basel that directly impacted the categorisation and treatment of the bodies of the sick and deceased.

Similarly, Alice Rose and colleagues' well-designed stable isotope analysis of dietary differences in Cambridge, England, *c.* 940–1538 CE, has the potential to shed light on the sensory regime of a medieval town and its rural hinterland where food consumption, particularly of meat and fish, varied between individuals depending on wealth, social status and religious affiliation.[25] Notably, friars buried in the prosperous Augustinian Friary in the town centre were distinguished from the rest of the local population by higher and tightly clustered isotopic values, indicating that they enjoyed a beneficial and institutionally prescribed diet that regularly included marine and terrestrial animal proteins.

Visualism

Inadvertently, three articles perpetuate the traditional visual bias of archaeology. One does so by focusing on a distinctive ceramic style; the other two in discussing how the living used tomb architecture, human bodies and grave goods to negotiate the identities of the deceased.

Rafael de Almeida Lopes and colleagues make a valuable contribution to Amazonian archaeology by modelling the routes and timing of the dispersal of the Polychrome ceramic tradition, and its related Indigenous producers and archaeological sites, across the Central Amazon between the fifth century CE and the early twentieth century.[26] This pottery style features red, brown and black painting over white slip, grooved anthropomorphic and snakelike motifs and distinctive vessel forms that include anthropomorphic burial urns. Evidently, this richly decorated pottery was visually expressive, but its other sensory dimensions need not be overlooked. These include the bodily techniques required in making, handling and breaking the vessels, the feel of the finished surfaces, the ring of the pots when tapped, the smell, taste and memories of the food and drink stored in and served from them, and the emotions stirred by them, particularly when used ritually and exchanged—all of which contributed to the appeal and durability of this ceramic tradition.

Vicki Cummings and colleagues describe the monumental stone tombs placed strategically by small kin groups in the landscapes of Caithness and Orkney in northern Scotland during the Early Neolithic (*c.* 3800–3200 BCE).[27] In developing their

[24] c.f. Turner, C. 2023. Intersensory experiences of the plague in seventeenth-century London. *Social History of Medicine* 36(1): 42–61. https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkad006

[25] Rose, A.K. *et al.* 2026. Detecting social differences in diet in medieval towns: isotopic evidence from Cambridge, England, *c.* AD 940–1538. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10284

[26] de Almeida Lopes, R. *et al.* 2026. From margins to mainstream: understanding the Amazonian Polychrome Tradition Expansion through spatial and chronological modelling. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10286

[27] Cummings, V. *et al.* 2026. Building tombs and entombing the dead as technologies of descent and affinity in Neolithic northern Scotland. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10291

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important new argument about the construction of different forms of Neolithic kinship, they highlight the intervisibility of aggregated tombs in Caithness, in contrast to the dispersed tombs of Orkney. In a previous study, Cummings has acknowledged the visual bias of the modern Western world and therefore intentionally highlighted the significance of texture in multisensory experiences of Neolithic objects, monuments and environments[28]. For the present study, then, it is appropriate to add that in and around these tombs other senses and memories would also have been stimulated by material and immaterial things during ritual performances, as hinted at by the architectural textures, acoustics and contrasts between darkness and light[29] (all of which can be measured scientifically), by the deposited remains of possible mortuary feasts and by the haunting presence of ancestral remains.

Mohamed Bashir also writes about mortuary practices and materials contributing to the negotiation of identities, in this case at Kedurma on the Middle Nile in Sudan during the Meroitic period (third century BCE to fourth century CE).[30] Here, in a large cemetery situated adjacent to a settlement, tombs accessed via ramps and steps were found by archaeologists to contain bodies interred in textile shrouds and palm coffins, accompanied by grave goods. Pottery vessels had been placed near the head of the deceased while personal ornaments such as rings and anklets were worn on the body. A few kohl pots and sticks were also deposited. Luxury goods, which were both artfully crafted and probably imported from Egypt, included pottery decorated with Greco-Egyptian iconography. A short interpretative step on from these patterns in the archaeological data is to conceptualise what the related mortuary rites would have felt like for mourners, both physically and emotionally. Imagine them preparing the deceased for burial, accompanied by multisensory materials placed in intimate association with the body, then processing to and descending into the restricted tomb spaces, carrying and depositing the coffin and gifts to be used in the afterlife, before returning to their dwellings with memories. This does not deny the physical and cultural significance of sight, which the use of kohl would have accentuated and protected (Figure 3).

Taste and smell

Steven Ashby and colleagues come close to the biological and cultural sense of taste in reporting the results of their unusually large-scale lipid residue analysis of Viking Age (*c.* 800–1050 CE) ceramic cooking vessels.[31] Their research reveals a relative lack of aquatic food products and a predominance of terrestrial animal fats in pottery across England, in contrast to Denmark, where fish comprised a significant part of

[28] Cummings, V. 2002. Experiencing texture and transformation in the British Neolithic. *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 21(3): 249–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0092.00161

[29] For example, Dowd, M. & R. Hensey (ed.) 2016. *The archaeology of darkness*. Oxford: Oxbow; Was, J. & A. Watson. 2017. Neolithic monuments: sensory technology. *Time and Mind* 10: 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/1751696X.2016.1267922

[30] Bashir, M. 2026. Mortuary practices and social organisation of the Meroitic State: Kedurma, Third Cataract region of the Nile. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10278

[31] Ashby, S. *et al.* 2026. Cuisine and culture-contact: lipid residue analysis reveals lack of aquatic products in pottery from Viking Age England. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10288

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Figure 3. Eyes outlined by kohl represented on alabaster canopic jars from the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun, who died c. *1323 BCE. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photograph: Djehouty. CC BY-SA 4.0. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1b/Ägyptisches_Museum_Kairo_2019-11-09_Tutanchamun_Grabschatz_09.jpg*

Scandinavian diet and identity. This, the authors suggest, indicates that Scandinavian settlers in England conformed culturally to local culinary traditions, cooking fish mainly by non-ceramic means and possibly restricting its consumption to elites. Following on from this emphasis on food culture and identity is to consider smell. Foods release molecules that stimulate nerve cells in our noses, mouths and throats, which in turn send messages to our brains that enable us to perceive and discriminate a multitude of odours and flavours, both pleasing and harmful. Archaeological scientists are now beginning to capture invisible, odour-bearing, volatile organic compounds from archaeological remains, including ancient Egyptian tombs.[32] Such work follows in the footsteps of museums like the Jorvik Viking Centre that have—more questionably—sought to reconstruct the entire smellscapes of places like Coppergate in York with reference to the present-day aromas of archaeological materials found there, ranging from burnt wood to fish, leather and sewage.[33]

[32] E.g. La Nasa, J. *et al.* 2022. Archaeology of the invisible: the scent of Kha and Merit. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2022.105577; Paolin, E. *et al.* 2025. Ancient Egyptian mummified bodies: cross-disciplinary analysis of their smell. *Journal of the American Chemical Society* 147: 6633–43. https://doi.org/10.1021/jacs.4c15769

[33] York Archaeology. 2024. *Jorvik Viking Centre: visual story and sensory guide*. Available at: https://www.jorvikvikingcentre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/JORVIK-Visual-Story-and-Sensory-Guide.pdf (accessed 28 January 2026).

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Sensescapes

Five articles in the current issue of *Antiquity* have the potential to evoke the more holistic sensescapes of ancient settlements and their environs, whose ecosystems the residents were immersed in and whose natural resources they increasingly came to dominate. Water is central to the first three articles and clay to the second two.

Yonglei Wang and colleagues report on their significant archaeological study of the earliest definitive water-fed paddy fields, which date from around 4750 BCE at Shiao in the Yuyaojiang Valley in eastern China.[34] These fields were composed of ridges, ditches and ditch outlets and evolved from smaller strip-like fields to larger interconnected fields to extensive fields enclosed by criss-crossing ridges. Their construction, and the cultivation of rice in them to sustain a growing Neolithic population, required sophisticated water management and substantial labour investment. Moving on in time, John Hanson and colleagues rigorously reveal the carefully planned capacity of aqueducts to provide adequate supplies of water to growing urban populations in the Roman Empire[35] (Figure 4). They focus on clean and fresh drinking water, acknowledging that citizens would have used an additional unknown quantity of water for hygiene (including communal baths), industrial production, civic embellishment and the projection of power, some of which would have been provided by other sources, such as rainwater, watercourses and groundwater. Both studies serve as a reminder, not only of the technological solutions that



Figure 4. An artist's impression of the ruins of the Aqua Claudia in 1850. Finished by the Emperor Claudius in 38 CE, the aqueduct supplied water to the city of Rome. Image: Acquedotto Claudio*, Arthur John Strutt, 1850. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Acquedotto_Claudio_-_Arthur_John_Strutt,_1850.jpg*

[34] Wang, Y. *et al.* 2026. Evolution of the paddy field under hydrological and social changes since 6700 cal BP in the Lower Yangzi River: the case of Shiao. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10268

[35] Hanson, J.W. *et al.* 2026. Settlement scaling theory, aqueducts and the Roman Empire. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10296

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enabled past people to access essential resources such as water, but also how fundamental the infrastructure of water supply was to both the emergence of state society in eastern China and to the existence of the Roman cityscape. One small step on from both articles is to think about the sensory culture of water, including how human groups experience and interpret water of different qualities within specific cultural contexts or sensoria.[36]

Also thinking of water, Matthew Walls and colleagues' novel study demonstrates that sophisticated watercraft technology and navigational skill were essential in transporting people and materials to hunt seabirds and mammals in the remote island cluster of Kitsissut in the High Arctic of Greenland *c.* 2550–750 BCE.[37] They argue that, in the process, Early Paleo-Inuit communities became part of the dynamic Arctic environment. I suggest that the concept of 'sensescape' fits well here, by foregrounding the culturally specific sensory experiences and perceptions of that extreme environment, including the sensory qualities of material things in it.

Benjamín Cutillas-Victoria and colleagues' interesting geoarchaeological analysis of the defensive architecture of the Punic city of Qart Hadasht, situated on a peninsula in the Cartagena Bay in southern Spain and founded in 228/227 BCE, has equally significant sensory potential.[38] A strong, 10m-high wall ran across an isthmus, separating the peninsula from the mainland and comprising an inner casemate wall made of mudbrick, mud mortar (mixed with seawater) and timber that was faced with large, carefully worked and regularly placed sandstone blocks. The external face was also coated in a white plaster. The study considers the potential sources for the earthen building materials (the mud mortar from near the construction site, the mudbrick from 7–8km away), as well as the knowledge, techniques and powerful mobilisation of resources and labour required to extract and process these materials and to construct the city walls. It is easy to imagine the visual impact of the white-faced monumental defences. However, by combining the geoarchaeological approach with a sensory toolkit—especially a digital one—additional research could potentially map the contrasting textures and other physical properties of the various building materials, and experimentally recreate the diverse embodied and controlled experiences of the labourers and their overseers in working with them and moving across this vast and noisy construction site, which transformed much of the bay and its adjacent hills.

Similarly, Özlem Ekinbaş Can's documentation of the evolving mudbrick architecture of the settlement of Gre Fılla, located in the Upper Tigris region in south-eastern Türkiye and occupied during the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPN) (9300–7500 BCE), offers the potential to shed light not only on increasing architectural and social complexity but also on the sensorial transformation of this dwelling place.[39] The PPNA levels contained

[36] For example, Strang, V. 2005. Common senses: water, sensory experience and the generation of meaning. *Journal of Material Culture* 10: 92–120. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183505050096

[37] Walls, M. *et al.* 2026. Voyage to Kitsissut: a new perspective on Early Paleo-Inuit watercraft and maritime lifeways at a High Arctic polynya. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10285

[38] Cutillas-Victoria *et al.* 2026. Landscape exploitation and middle-distance supply of mudbricks for the Carthaginian rampart of Qart Hadasht (Spain). *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10276

[39] Ekinbaş Can, O. 2026. Development of Pre-Pottery Neolithic architecture in the Upper Tigris region: evidence from Gre Fılla. *Antiquity* 100. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2026.10282

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a scatter of circular, C-shaped and quadrangular buildings, whereas the PPNB levels featured a more planned clustering of domestic buildings around communal structures, a greater range of architectural forms, more frequent subdivisions of interior space and a growing use of clay plaster to finish walls and floors. Archaeologists have described these changes in typological terms, but from a sensorial perspective—that also considers materiality and spatiality—the dynamic architecture would have impacted how diverse inhabitants physically (re)constructed, used, moved through, experienced, perceived and were socialised within this habitus.

Concluding thoughts

☙ Sensory archaeology continues to lie outside the methodological and theoretical comfort zone of most researchers. Nevertheless, some archaeologists and fields of archaeological study are coming to their senses. Indeed, the expanding scale and scope of sensory archaeology's proponents, research methods and interpretative outputs indicate that it is now being taken increasingly seriously, including by archaeological scientists interested, for example, in capturing ancient smell molecules. It works best in conjunction with other archaeological approaches and methods, and by tacking between present and past material realities, to extend research questions and interpretive possibilities. Like other branches of archaeology, its materials and methods have their limitations. Proponents are advised, then, to eschew the rhetoric of revolution and paradigm change, and to invest in new research that unites documenting the quantitative sensory properties of archaeological materials and interpreting the qualitative sensoriality of diverse groups of people. Sensory archaeology does, however, respond to a need felt by many practitioners to adopt a more sensitive approach that reconnects them and their audiences to the lived and felt, personal and shared, experiences of the archaeological past and present.

Robin Skeates
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