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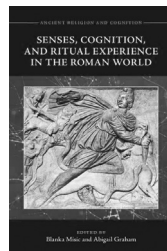
## **Blanka Misic and Abigail Graham (eds.), *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World.***

**Cambridge University Press, 2024.**

**ISBN 978-1-009-35554-4.**

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Blanka Misic and Abigail Graham's edited volume *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World* presents an ambitious attempt to synthesize theoretical and methodological perspectives of cognitive sciences and historiography to explore ancient religious practices. Organized into five standalone chapters, the book delves into various aspects of Roman religion, emphasizing cognitive and sensory experiences during ritual acts. The topics range from the relatively unknown cult of *Nutrices Augustae* to widely recognized phenomena like the Roman cult of Mithras and early Christian pilgrimage, presenting a kaleidoscopic array of subjects within the field of ancient religious studies.

The book's primary goal is to investigate how ancient religious beliefs and practices were transmitted and what enabled them to endure over time. However, this aim faces a fundamental challenge: how can we access the cognitive processes of ancient "dead minds" when the available data are both exceedingly scarce and highly unreliable? In the absence of sufficient data, the cognitive and historiographical approaches may end up operating in mutual isolation, potentially failing to fully complement one another. To address this issue, Misić developed the Religious Learning Network (RLN) model, designed to identify the key elements necessary for the transmission of religious knowledge. The success and applicability of this model were tested in the chapters that follow.

The first chapter introduces the RLN model through a case study of the *Nutrices Augustae* cult. Misić's argument hinges on the claim that the creation and transmission of religious knowledge depend on four key dimensions: people, places, objects, and events. These stimuli shape profound religious experiences that can be shared among worshipers and reinforced through repetition and emotional engagement. According to this model, the more strongly these dimensions are present in ancient cults, the more effectively their practices could have been transmitted and preserved within their communities. However, a critical question arises: does the RLN model serve as a robust theoretical framework or merely as a tool for classifying ritual elements? The *Nutrices Augustae* cult, centered on the goddess associated with the protection of children, is known solely from the Roman colony of Poetovio (modern-day Ptuj, Slovenia). Confined to a small geographical and temporal scope, the cult offers limited evidence for reconstructing its rituals or understanding its function. This lack of data severely limits the depth of analysis and prevents the RLN model from offering new insights into the cult's operations or effectively validating its applicability.

The second chapter, authored by Emma-Jayne Graham, examines the Vestal Virgins, focusing on their relationship with ritual instruments depicted on the *Ara Pacis* relief. Graham draws connections between the emotional states of the Roman priestesses and the symbolic significance of the artefacts they hold. While the historiographical analysis is well-researched and offers valuable observations, the cognitive approach is again hindered by insufficient data. This limitation reduces the analysis to descriptions of the physical properties of the instruments – such as their material or weight – and the presumed psychological effects on their users. Ultimately, the chapter's conclusions do not overcome these shortcomings, resulting in a hypothetical reconstruction that leans more on speculation than rigorous academic analysis.

The third chapter, authored by Vicky Jewell, explores the role of color in the Roman cult of Mithras, offering a unique perspective on how ancient societies understood and utilized color in religious contexts. Roman perceptions of color differed significantly from modern ones, and the topic holds great potential for bridging cognitive and historiographical approaches. By combining current cognitive insights on the psychological influence of color with historical analysis, the chapter had the chance to make a compelling case for the integration of these methodologies. However, despite its thorough historiographical investigation, the chapter ultimately underdelivers on the cognitive perspective, which leaves the findings inconclusive and the analysis feeling like a missed opportunity.

In the fourth chapter, Abigail Graham examines the lesser-known Ephesian festival called Salutaris's Procession. This ancient public festival, focused on the performative procession of statuettes representing civic and religious figures like the goddess Artemis, is primarily documented through a monumental inscription outside the theatre at Ephesus, dated to around 104 CE. Graham challenges previous "static, script-based" reconstructions of this religious event by emphasizing the emotional dynamics, unpredictability, and potential for failure inherent in lived religion. This approach offers a refreshing perspective, shifting focus from rigid frameworks to the experiential aspects of the procession. While the chapter is well-researched and includes valid reformulations – such as a more realistic estimate of the procession's duration – it stands out for its nuanced observations rather than any transformative new revelations. The historiographical analysis remains the strongest aspect of the chapter, with the cognitive approach serving more as an extension of existing ideas than as a central framework.

The final chapter, written by Steven Muir, provides the most effective application of the RLN model, focusing on the fourth-century Christian pilgrimage of Egeria to Jerusalem. Muir examines the role of religious artifacts – such as the ring of Solomon and the wood of the "true cross" – in shaping religious experience. While the authenticity of these objects may be questionable, their significance in the ritual context is undeniable. They functioned within a network of intertextual meanings, allowing pilgrims to engage with biblical events and bridge the past with the present. Although the cognitive approach serves more as background support, Muir's chapter successfully demonstrates how objects and places can reinforce religious experiences and enhance their memorability – an aspect somewhat absent from earlier chapters. This grounded analysis of the interplay between cognition and ritual makes Muir's contribution the most closely aligned with the declared concept of the volume.

To conclude, while *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World* presents a series of thoughtful essays that strive to integrate cognitive science with the study of Roman religious practices, the overall result is mixed. The book successfully highlights the sensory and emotional dimensions of ancient rituals from the standpoint of historiography but struggles to justify the practical applicability of its cognitive theoretical background. This imbalance and the underdevelopment of the cognitive science approach in some chapters prevent the volume from achieving the groundbreaking impact it sets out to accomplish. Though valuable for those interested in the intersection of cognitive science and ancient religious studies, the book ultimately leaves room for further refinement and exploration in future research.



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**Pavel Horák,**  
*Návrat starých bohů:  
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 k modernímu pohanství.*

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Kniha religionisty Pavla Horáka je rámována zájmem o současné pohanství a jeho stav v České republice. Už v tomto ohledu představuje na poli české odborné produkce monograficky jedinečný počín.<sup>1</sup> Horákově však nejde jenom o mapování moderního pohanství v ČR v kontextu současné alternativní spirituality. Navzdory svému jasně definovanému předmětu se v podloží jeho zájmu nachází ještě mnohem širší otázka po dějinách pojmu pohanství obecně: Jak koncept pohanství vznikl v prostředí

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