

The sensory worlds of ancient Egypt

une Egypte qui n'est pas dans les livres savants

(Derchain, 1996, [1])

Introduction

European views of Ancient Egypt have frequently imagined an (over-)sensuous and sensory 'oriental' culture, a 'realm of unrestrained voluptuous excess' (Boone, 2014, p.164). Perhaps partly in reaction to this, academics have frequently adopted a more restrained, logocentric style of analysis (e.g. Riggs 2017), although any academic tendencies towards abstraction are often modulated in part by personal experiences of archaeological fieldwork and artefacts. Despite a rich and varied data-set, theories of phenomenology with their 'interrogation of lived experience' (Johnson, 2012, p.272) have had as yet relatively little impact on Egyptological academic writing as a whole.

In general, the roles of ancient audiences for material cultures have been prioritised in approaches that are anthropologically informed, as in John Baines' work on the elite display of culture (e.g. 2007, 2013). Baines has often highlighted the sheer irrecoverability of ancient experience: 'the position of the designer of the first pyramid ... can never be recaptured' (Baines and Malek, 1980, p.12). The unusual levels of preservation of organic materials in the Nile Valley has a richness which is daunting to inventory (overview: Nicholson and Shaw, 2000): potential data is preserved in tomb and temple contexts, and in some exceptional settlement suites, with a plenitude that has often hindered a detailed and fully theorised analysis. There has also often been a scholarly tendency to value the ideological and symbolic aspects of visual art at the expense of direct experiential reality and materiality (in terms of New Critical literary theory, a 'heresy of paraphrase': Brooks, 1949, pp.176-

196): even in highly iconographic tomb-chapel scenes of the deceased hunting in the marshes, a butterfly is arguably in part just an aesthetically painted butterfly, as well as an exclusively theological or cultural signifier (e.g. Parkinson, 2008a, p.128; on aesthetics and concepts of art see e.g. Baines, 2015) <FIGURE 1 HERE>. One can, however, attempt to move towards the ‘sensory profile’ of the culture (Skeates, 2010, p.5), drawing on the rich variety of surviving data-sets. Egyptological approaches to an inclusive range of archaeological, artefactual and textual sources can work towards a sense of the totality of lived experience, as in for example the ‘Amara West Project’ on the material practices of the New Kingdom administrative capital in northern Sudan (e.g. Spencer, Stevens and Binder, 2017).

I here sketch possibilities and academic tendencies very briefly, providing a thematic and diachronic approach to ancient perceptions of the various senses in order to suggest the potential of the surviving evidence; I consider some physical environments in order to suggest possible approaches and the value of personal experience for modelling ancient sensations. I then present a case study in more detail on the sensory aspects of literary texts from the 12th Dynasty (1938-1755 BCE). In some respects, poems might seem the least material and most autonomous of cultural artefacts, but even they are material and social practices whose experiential reality can be modelled in experiential terms; the arguments that are made for literary texts could be made still more extensively for more obviously material cultural products. The surviving data derives from predominantly elite spheres, but includes material, visual and textual cultures which can complement each other to enable an integrated analysis. I conclude with a brief discussion of the well-documented colossi of Memnon in order to evoke simultaneously the potential and also the limitations of the data in modern attempts to imagine the lived sensations of earlier periods and the ‘inner world’ of the ancient

actors. I write as a philologist and concentrate on those periods with which I am most familiar, meaning that this is a subjectively perceived and partial glimpse.

Ancient perceptions and interactions

High cultural works derived from a very small portion of the population (e.g. Baines, 2013, pp.19-20), and thus consistently embody a discreet, highly restricted world view. In most cases, the experiences of the ancient audiences are documented only by implication. Elite art and architecture involved the prestigious display of materials, suggesting that such things were subject to social control and limited access, resulting in an ‘aesthetic deprivation of the non-elite’ (Baines, 2007, p.305). A similar decorum apparently structured social experiences and behaviours, such as types of motion and bodily cleanliness (e.g. Maitland, 2015, pp.68-90, 123-87; Quack on illnesses and restricted entrance: 2005). Much of this data implies that sensory experiences were highly valorised among the elite. As one example, religious texts often describe the creation of the cosmos through sensory actions, such the pleasure of orgasm (e.g. Hare, 1999, pp.111-118), and physical embodiment was central to concepts of identity (as explored by e.g. Nyord, 2009; Nyord and Kjølby, 2009). Many aspects of society, such as status, operated through the senses, and pleasure was framed as an elite activity (e.g. Assmann, 1996, pp.25-28). Sensory pleasures were explicitly thematised in even highly formal contexts, as in a Third Intermediate Period temple statue of the priest of Amun Horakhbit (c. 850 BCE) which says:

roaming the marshes is what I did,

intoxicated with wine and beer. (Frood, 2013, p.170; earlier example: Backes, 2008)

Ancient abstract discourse about the sensory orders is lacking, although texts provide a selection of terminology; the prominence of some senses in the preserved official record

gives them a potentially unwarranted importance in modern analyses. In general, ‘hearing’ and ‘seeing’ seem to have been priorities, as in the 12th Dynasty Annals of Amenemhat II (c. 1876-1842 BCE) at Memphis, where the divine ‘lady of writing Seshat’ is accompanied by two attendant deities ‘Hearing’ and ‘Seeing’ (Altenmüller, 2015, pp.125-126, 128-129; see Budde, 2000, pp.161-163). ‘Seeing’ was often shown as an activity redolent of status and social control, as in tomb-chapel scenes where the deceased office-holder views ideal landscapes full of workers (e.g. Widmaier, 2009, pp.60-61); in literary texts, such ‘seeing’ could also be a source of erotic entertainment, as in the fantastic *Tale of King Kheops’ Court* (Parkinson, 1997, pp.110-111). As a more specific example, the experience of colour was valorised in cultic rituals, in which ‘radiance is a divine attribute ... and that it is transferred [to mortals] by application of radiant dress, paraphernalia, and ointments’ (Goebis, 2011, p.83). Similarly, certain stones were favoured because of their colour and texture, such as red or yellow quartzite with its solar associations (overview: Baines, 2007, pp.264-278). Nevertheless, the restricted nature of extant colour terminology (Baines, 2007, pp.240-262), compared with the variety of actual pigments and stones, reminds us that words and texts cannot delimit the complexity of actual perceived sensations.

The sense of ‘hearing’ featured in many elite texts as an act signifying obedience and cultural continuity, with a wisdom poem being ‘the words of the hearers, the counsels of the ancestors who once listened to the gods’ (*The Teaching of Ptahhotep*: Parkinson, 1997, p.250). Texts often emphasised the sensation of words in particular, including those spoken by statues and by gods (Emerit, 2011). There are severe constraints on studying other types of sonic experience such as music: there was apparently little or no written musical notation (but see von Lieven, 2002), and surviving instruments are only rarely playable, for example the exceptionally intact trumpets from the tomb of Tutankhamun (c. 1322 BCE; e.g. BBC 2011;

overview: Manniche, 1991). However, as in the case of ritual rattles (*sistra*), a combination of visual representations in two and three dimensions, surviving instruments, and textual descriptions of the intended significance and effect of its sounds can build up a sense of possibilities (e.g. Elwart, 2011). The presence of landscape features such as rock gongs at Sudanese sites near the fourth cataract shows the potential for the shaping of whole soundscapes (e.g. Kleinitz, 2008). An inscribed temple statue of the priest Hor (c. 870 BCE) extols its own location and such sense-worlds explicitly:

How good is it to see (the god) Amun!

I sit in the shade of his temple

so that I may hear the acclamations in the mouths of the priests,

like the chattering of the Souls of the East (mythological baboons).

(Jansen-Winkel, 2007, p.301)

Conversely, texts also described the symbolic or cultural aspects of silence, implying that certain social situations and physical contexts required quietness, such as showing respect before a superior or being in a tomb (e.g. Frandsen, 1998); in many contexts the ‘silent man’ was a type of social virtue (e.g. Parkinson, 2011, pp.15-18). In terms of larger soundscapes, one word for cemeteries and the land of the dead was Igeret, ‘The-silent-place’ (Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae, 2017, lemma no. 32770), and a peak overlooking the cemeteries at Luxor was personified as a goddess Mereseger, ‘She-loves-silence’ (e.g. Andreu, 2002, pp.275-281; recent overview Yoyotte, 2003). These concepts presumably expressed not only the silence of death and the uninhabited nature of the desert-edge burial grounds, but also modes of social behaviour that were considered appropriate in these spaces.

Environmental changes have altered these aspects of the landscape to an almost incalculable extent. At the southern town of Elephantine, the early soundscape must have included ‘the

murmur of the cataract' that was still audible in the 1870s before the Aswan dams were constructed (Edwards, 1888, p.181). The noise of this nearby cataract—termed 'the rebellious water' (Franke, 1994, p.193, pp.198-199)—was perhaps almost proverbial: a storm is described on a royal stela as raging 'more than the noise of the cavern which is in Elephantine' (the supposed source of the Nile inundation; Helck, 1983, p.106 l.13).

Archaeological surveys show that the town was probably also dominated for much of its history by the noises of the granite quarries in the surrounding hills (e.g. Klemm and Klemm, 1993, pp.289-324; Bloxam and Storemyr, 2005). Such sensory aspects have been increasingly included in academic descriptions of ancient localities and situations (e.g. Parkinson, 2009, pp.21-30; Vischak, 2015).

Other senses that were given importance in elite discourse include smell and taste. Smell was variously and intensely valorised in the 12th Dynasty poem *The Dialogue of a Man and his Soul* (c. 1850 BCE) where an alienated individual says that his name reeks

look, more than the smell of fishermen,
than the creeks of the pools they have fished,

but also that death appeals to him

like the smell of lotuses,
like sitting on the shore of Drunkenness. (Parkinson, 1997, pp.157-160)

Lotuses were frequently shown in visual art, apparently in part for their symbolic aspects, but also simply because of their decorative beauty and scent (in general e.g. Manniche, 1999; 2003; Meskell, 2002, pp.153-158). Perfumed ointments were often redolent of cultural activities, and one standard epithet in self-presentations was 'a man of festivity, beloved of myrrh, united with a happy day' (e.g. Seidlmayer, 1991, pp.332-333; Frood, 2013, p.172). Such sensory experiences were integral to communal ritual events such as funerary banquets

(Harrington, 2016). These also reveal the high value placed on food and drink, and in poetry ‘taste’ was a general metaphor for the whole experience of life (albeit often traumatically: e.g. Parkinson, 2012, p.74). Iconographic representations of food were shaped by factors including artistic choice and the symbolic aspects of different food-types, so that a correlation between visual art and experiential reality is problematic (e.g. Robins, 2016; Kahlbacher, 2016), even though organic remains and food-related artefacts can enable studies of ancient foodways on a more material level (e.g. Hendrickx, et al., 2002; compare Villing and Spataro, 2015). Such different and potentially conflicting data-sets inevitably pose interpretative dilemmas for many aspects of cultural production. Despite this, experimental reconstructions of clothing have drawn effectively on the remains that survive in burials or settlements, as well as on representations in iconography and on textual sources (e.g. Vogelsang-Eastwood, 1999; see also Kemp and Vogelsang-Eastwood, 2001). <FIGURE 2 HERE>. Integrated studies of material practices from both ancient and modern perspectives can enrich the analysis of, for example, the multivalent issues of wrapping and unwrapping (e.g. Riggs 2014).

The sensory awareness of temperature is explicit in the *Hymns to Senwosret III* (c. 1836-1818 BCE) which eulogise the king as ‘a warm corner, dry in the wintertime’ (Lichtheim, 1973, p.200). Touch features less in texts, but the smooth polish of bowls, walls, and statues argues for an intense awareness and valorisation of such sensations. The usage of plain stone architectural surfaces in the valley temple of Khafre in the 4th Dynasty (c. 2575-2430 BCE) suggests an aesthetic appreciation of such aspects at that period (e.g. Baines, 2007, pp. 314-315). The patterns of wear from human hands in the so-called pilgrim marks on monuments and in the polishing of parts of statues also attest to touch as an active and ritualised process (e.g. Traunecker, 1987; Delvaux, 1992, p.47). The relevance of touch to social behaviour is

evoked in the Old Kingdom funerary self-presentation of an official Rawer (c. 2430 BCE). This narrates how he accidentally touched or tripped over the numinous staff of the king during a ritual, which proved dangerous and possibly fatal to him (Allen, 1992; Strudwick, 2005, pp.305-306 [no. 227]). Touch, motion, and gestures are frequently depicted in art, but as with food and clothes, the visual repertoire was highly standardised by conventions and traditions. There is thus little data to analyse kinetics, despite studies of depicted gestures in iconography (e.g. Dominicus, 1994) or of dance (e.g. Kinney, 2008). Nevertheless, a sense of the sensory impact of such things is conveyed in a caption in the tomb-chapel of a Vizier's wife, Waattetkhetot (c. 2320 BCE), which says that the high stepping chief of a dancing troupe

gives sweet pleasure to whom she likes,

her agility is a jackal's ...

she has seen that they (the audience?) are wild for her. (Kanawati and Abdel Raziq, 2008, pp.25-26, pl.26; McDonald, 2009, pp.369-370).

It thus remains surprisingly hard to position any individual's sensory experience within this ostensibly well-documented world. One example of this is eroticism. Glamorised depictions of semi-naked men and of ithyphallic deities were displayed in official contexts where the intended audiences were apparently predominantly male. This raises the possibility of homoeroticism and of a specifically 'male gaze' among ancient viewers (Parkinson, 2008b).

Modern reactions are often confused by cultural alterity, as with the unexpected use of erotic language: in one hymn where a 13th Dynasty male official addresses the god Min-Amun

may your heart cleave to the king,

like Horus' cleaves to his mother Isis

when he has had sex with her. (Assmann, 1999a, no. 212; Franke, 2003, p.108 [§15]) Although this is perhaps partly neutralised by drawing on a mythical event (von Lieven, 2015, pp.202-205), it is still a strikingly sexualised expression for modern academics, blurring the distinction between homosocialism and homoeroticism, especially given that the god addressed is usually represented as ithyphallic. Later audiences' interactions with phallic iconography has been multiple, ranging from scholarly silence and censorship (e.g. Parkinson, 2008b, pp.116-117) to more sensory appropriations: the Mamluk era historian Al-Maqrîzî (AD 1364-1442) describes how the images of the god's phallus were removed from the walls of a temple at Akhmim and suspended from men's belts as an aphrodisiac for the wearer (Bouriaunt, 1900, p.213); the same iconography has also fed into modern orientalism and gay male pornography (Boone, 2014, pp.171-189). A similar dilemma is posed by the representational motif of young naked women in both funerary and domestic art; this embodies a heteronormative framework, apparently evoking eroticism and fertility for various purposes, but again some of these domestic cosmetic items were intended to be used by women and not only men (Robins, 2015, pp.132-136). While the intended audience (and often subject) implicit in elite cultural production was an idealised male official, the experiential reality will have been much more varied and contingent. Responses are inevitably multiple.

Responding to physical environments

The limitations inherent in visual and textual sources are clear in their treatment of the most extreme environmental change, the annual flooding of the Nile (recent overview of environment: Butzer, 2016). Texts described this as mysterious and almost invisible: 'of secret ways, a darkness by day' (Lichtheim, 1973, p.205). The event was personified as the god 'Hapy' who is shown as a plump naked figure bearing plenty, as with other bodies of

water (a ‘fecundity figure’: Baines, 1985), <FIGURE 3 HERE>. The annual flooding was only rarely depicted in more immediate ways, as in the temple of Satet at Elephantine where scenes show a ceremony of wading priests and some runners bringing news of the flood beside a watercourse (Kaiser, et al., 1987, pp.85-88, pl.8a; Kaiser, 1998, p.51). The annual inundation ended with the completion of the Aswan dam in 1970, and despite a range of academic approaches (e.g. Willems and Dahms, 2017), modern documentation remains necessary to imagine fully the actual experiential impact and to flesh out the ancient representations (e.g. Feeney, 1969; 2006).

An ancient sense of the physical environment as numinous is embodied in monuments such as the Ramessid shrine of Ptah and the snake goddess Mereseger close to the New Kingdom royal craftsmen’s village of Deir el-Medina, in a grotto beneath a rock-formation resembling a rearing snake (e.g. Andreu, 2002, p.33-34) <FIGURE 4 here>. The existence of tree shrines, such as that of the sycamore at Giza (mentioned in texts but not archaeologically identifiable; e.g. Parkinson, 2016a, pp.11-12), suggests that numerous other more localised sensations were possible in less formalised monuments. Kings and high officials dedicated strangely shaped stones or fossils in temples, revealing an engagement with curious natural forms (e.g. von Lieven, 2016; an inscribed fossil urchin: Ray, 1998, pp.16-18; Aufrère, 1999, pp.71-74), and fossilised bones at Qau el-Kebir were incorporated into local mythology (Welvaert, 2002). Similar practices are found in Deir el-Medina (Keimer, 1940), suggesting that such interactions extended beyond the highest levels of elite society. These small items document rich possibilities of individuals interacting with their physical environments, as do the multiple graffiti on desert rock faces and valleys at Luxor left by known individuals such as the scribe Amennakht of Deir el-Medina (around 1170 BCE: e.g. Dorn, 2014).

New technologies such as GIS have increased understanding of the changing landscape, and landscape studies of the Nile valley have extended to areas such as desert roads (e.g. Förster and Riemer, 2013). Broader views have also been taken of monuments in their environments and the ways in which ‘placemaking’ occurs over centuries (e.g. Garnett, 2013 on the Wadi Mia and Wadi Hellal). The desert plain at Abydos was occupied by temples and cemeteries, and zoned areas created shifting hierarchies and meanings, often centred around individuals’ desire to participate in performative temple rituals on the plain. Such evolving sacred landscapes have increasingly been approached in an experiential manner by scholars including Janet Richards (2005; 2010; 2015). Particularly well documented is the royal city of Akhetaten (c. 1347-1332 BCE), with its inscribed boundary stelae and ritual monuments, settlement areas, cemeteries, and a detailed archaeological investigation (e.g. Kemp, 2013; Amarna Project, 2017). The thick descriptions of scholars such as Barry Kemp, who draws on his personal experience of the site, show the extent to which ‘there can be no substitute for the human experience of place—of being there’ (Tilley, 2004, p.221). These sites offer an immense potential for the ‘close and particularist analysis of small-scale and local landscapes’ (Johnson, 2012, p.272). Here, ‘the quality of life’ in settlements can be documented (Kemp, 2013, pp.197-229), the waste disposal strategies can be assessed, and even the smell of household lamps can be deduced (Kemp, 2013, pp.206-207). An analysis of the excavated material ‘debris of life’ combined with the excavator’s experiences can enable analysis to move beyond the scientific ‘limits of academic research’ and consider

a whole range of lost experiences; the smokiness of house interiors in the winter, mingling with the smell of incense and, at different times in the year, of lily blossoms, in turn competing with the pungent smells of human waste. The experience of night when the city was hardly ever fully dark but lay faintly visible in shades of silver-grey from the light of stars in a clear sky, but never silent, for

night was the time of barking dogs, sometimes those on the city fringes developing an unearthly dialogue with the jackals and hyenas of the desert. Firelight visible through cracks in house doors; the arousal of a young man on seeing a neighbour's daughter; the grief of constant bereavements. (2013, p.195)

Other sources can complement such empathetic archaeology: the architecture of surviving palaces can be combined with texts referring to the hierarchy of palace etiquette to reveal that throne rooms were often surprisingly intimate places of deep anxiety, being highly charged in terms of both emotions and senses as well as ideology (Spence, 2007; Gnirs, 2009). All such spaces will also have been highly gendered, as in Lynn Meskell's analysis of the houses of Deir el-Medina (Meskell, 2002, pp.110-121), and much room usage will also have been seasonally configured (e.g. von Pilgrim, 1996, pp.205-218). Moving further into 'le monde intérieur' (Yourcenar, 1991, p.523), a combination of texts, images and archaeological environments offers potential for future psycho-geographical studies of locations, charting the associations and resonances of places in actual and imaginative worlds (see e.g. Baines, 2013, pp.21-150 on represented landscapes; Parkinson, 2016a).

On the level of individual artefacts, visual art is increasingly being re-embedded in its physical landscapes and studied in terms of its materiality, despite artworks often having been decontextualized by early collecting practices (e.g. Arnold, 1999 on Old Kingdom statues and architectural ritual settings). New scientific studies are revealing the usage of glazes and gilding on tomb-chapel walls that will have had significant impact on the intended ancient audiences (Hartwig, 2013; Middleton and Uprichard, 2008). Although 3D modelling offers ways of experiencing artefacts and sites remotely (as with the models of a neighbourhood of Amara West: Spencer and Green, 2017), there remains little substitute for primary experience: the shallow painted relief in the tomb of Queen Nefertari at Luxor (c. 1250 BCE;

e.g. McDonald, 1996) is intensely engaging in shifting light to a moving viewer, and more so than any publication can capture. Elite funerary monuments self-consciously aimed at producing exactly the immersive and a multisensory experience that is now so hard to convey remotely: an inscription in the tomb of the High steward of the God's wife Ibi at Luxor (c. 650 BCE), addresses the contemporaneous visitor in evocative sensory terms:

as you descend to the stela in this tomb-chamber,
and understand the writings which are in it,
you will see the Beatifications of the ancestors on their seats ...;
you will hear the dispute of those who are speaking loudly with their companions;
you will hear the singing of the musicians,
the laments of those who are mourning;
you will find the name of every man above him
in every office by its name ... (Kuhlmann and Schenkel, 1983, p.72, pl.23)

As with the erotic iconography mentioned earlier, such a text posits an idealised and generalised reader who was male and official, and it remains hard to assess the pragmatics of access to spaces over time. For example, distinct architectural areas of temples were apparently open to different audiences but there is little consensus about the levels of accessibility (compare e.g. Bell, 1997; Froot, 2016). Such spaces did not exist in isolation: archaeological remains and visual representations imply that temples were arenas for occasionally noisy and kinetic ritual performances: as such they will have been visible or audible to more than the immediate actors in the ritual (e.g. Cabrol, 2001 on temple causeways; Baines, 2006; Meyer-Dietrich, 2010). Many temple spaces will also have been occupied by temporary installations and cluttered with items. There are well documented ritual clearings of even imperishable statues and cultic equipment (e.g. Coulon, 2016 on Karnak) and of deposited votive offerings (e.g. Pinch, 1993, pp.13-25): in the Hathor shrine

of Tuthmose III at Deir el-Bahri ‘many basketsful of roughly-carved wooden phalli ... had been placed on the floor around the statue’ (C.T. Currelly, quoted in Pinch, 1993, p.236), and at Mirgissa, even the remains of garlands were preserved in the Hathor shrine which ‘suffered from chronic overcrowding’ (Pinch, 1993, p.47). Spaces will have been (over)-peopled with objects as well as people and sensations.

Although such all elite cultural products imply audiences to experience them, they need not have had actual audiences; some spaces were almost entirely inaccessible, statues were created for chambers where they were invisible, and stones were chosen for their appearance which was made invisible under pigments (e.g. Baines, 2007, pp.315-316). Nevertheless, such practices assume a central role for sensory perception that had acquired a self-sustaining autonomous function: the sensory experience may have been abstracted but arguably remained integral to the concept of elite culture and its values.

Texts and performances: a case study

The Egyptian hieroglyphic scripts retained a distinctly pictorial aspect, meaning that monumental inscriptions were conceived of in visual terms, including e.g. sportive writings and decorative functions, in a close connection with representational art. The levels of visual iconicity, however, varied with different styles of script (convenient overviews: Parkinson, 1999; Bazin Rizzo, Gasse and Servajean, 2017; survey of one period: Baines, 2012), and in the 12th Dynasty, poems were almost invariably written in a cursive form (‘hieratic’), which reduced the level of pictorial representation. This suggests that poetry was a largely aural art-form. These literary texts have often been considered to be propaganda or normative ‘cultural texts’ (e.g. Assmann, 1999b), but many poems express culturally divergent attitudes and so raise questions of subversion and its containment within court culture (e.g. Parkinson, 2002).

Scholarly attitudes have ranged from programmatic ones that deny any role for pleasure to ones that suggest a social phenomenon that is parallel to that of more modern ‘literary’ enjoyment (compare the approaches of e.g. Roeder, 2009 and Parkinson, 2009). The detached perspective of many modern commentators to a poem such as *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* contrasts sharply with the filmed version by the Egyptian director Shadi Abd el-Salam (1970) which presents the poem as a powerful and emotionally engaging work (Parkinson, 2009, pp.258-259). The radically different receptions by descendants of the source community and by modern academics signals a need for mediating approaches (overview in Parkinson, 2009, pp.236-259). <FIGURE 5 HERE> A relatively recent ‘material turn’ in Egyptological textual studies (Parkinson, 2009, pp.273-276) has been helpful in resolving such interpretative issues, above all perhaps in its ability to communicate the ‘touch of the real’, so much valued by Cultural Materialist critics (e.g. Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2000, pp.20-48; overview: Parkinson, 2016b). ‘Material philology’ has focussed on issues of textual production, variation and transmission, approaching the text as a material and sensory artefact (e.g. Hagen, 2012; Ragazzoli, 2015), and philology has become more (to evoke Johnson’s description of phenomenological fieldwork) ‘engaged, empathetic, emotive’ (2012, p.278), interrogating the surface of a manuscript for signs of the scribe’s engagement and attitudes (e.g. Parkinson, 2009, pp.84-119).

In verbal terms, these poems raise questions of immediacy, as with the imagery of animals. These can seem remote to an academic audience, but probably drew on the ancient audience’s direct familiarity with animals. For example, the description of a crocodile as ‘the face of fear’ in *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (Parkinson, 1997, p.61) can seem a piece of poetic diction to modern readers, but the crocodile was often shown as a danger to fisherman in representations (e.g. Harpur and Scremin, 2010, pl.222-223), and was presumably close to the

experiences of even the literate elite in a riverine culture. The animal was probably a relatively common danger, to judge by modern parallels: according to Robert Hays' diary for 1826, at Luxor a person was snatched at the riverbank on June 10th and again on July 15th (BL Add mss 31054 f. 135v, 139v). The phrase is thus arguably an emotive and vivid evocation of the fatal final moments of a crocodile attack. Likewise, when the hero of the same poem is beaten by the villain with a 'fresh tamarisk' (Parkinson, 1997, p.60), the fact that a tamarisk's branches are whippy, and that their freshness would add to the pain, is integral to the meaning. Tamarisk grows everywhere, meaning that the villain's act of aggression is also an improvised act; he implicitly does not carry a stick with him, as did men who were authorised to police people, but grabs whatever is to hand. The poet also provides him with a patronym alluding to the tamarisk (Parkinson, 1997, p.58), thus presenting this viciousness as his defining characteristic (Fischer, 1977, p.159; Morenz, 2000, p.63). The tree's symbolic associations with Osiris, that are more prominent in many modern philologists' minds, are probably irrelevant (Parkinson, 2012, p.53). An awareness of the sensory immediacy of the actual plant informs the reader's reaction to the passage, and creates the meaning. Such considerations argue that the words of a poem should be considered not only in the 'cold culture' of their modern academic reception but also their original 'hot culture' of passionate expression, as defined by Florence Dupont in her discussion of Athenian symposium poetry (1998, pp.21-22, *passim*).

One can also consider the physical experiences of encountering the text. The purely aural qualities of this poetry are lost because of the lack of vowels in the script, and the visceral impact of these cantabile qualities cannot be assessed in detail, but factors such as wordplay and assonance were clearly integral parts of the aesthetic. Audiences probably, as James O'Hara has suggested for Vergil, 'paid more attention to the sound and beauty of the

language than to what was being said' (1997, p.246). And the experiential reality of a poem will not have been restricted to the sound of the words: Bruce Smith's study of the acoustic world of early modern theatre offers a model for assessing the gaps in our knowledge of the poetic environment (1999). What formed the sound-world of their reading: silence, a background of human voices, or birds and animals? Did they read or were they read to? In shade or torch-light, day or evening? In an office, a domestic space or a chapel? Alone or surrounded? With what smells and physical sensations? What memories of voices and contexts linked the poem to their experienced worlds? These factors, as well as those traditionally considered by philology, created and create the meanings.

From estimated levels of Ancient Egyptian literacy, it seems likely that many written texts were largely intended for oral performance in a predominantly oral world (see Baines, 2007, pp.63-94). A performative aspect ran through much Egyptian culture (survey: Gillam, 2005). The processes and rituals enacted in producing statues or mummies were arguably important as well as the finished products (e.g. Meskell, 2004, pp.100-115; on mummification: Riggs, 2014, pp.77-108). The local governor Djehutyhotep had a colossal statue of himself, whose transport from quarry to funerary complex was celebrated on his tomb-chapel's walls at Deir el-Bersha (c. 1840 BCE; Willems, 2014, pp.105-108, pl.4), both in terms of its visual appearance and in terms of the local community's emotional response. The caption to the scene states that:

all the townspeople were rejoicing,
as it was very beautiful to see, more than anything;
the old man of them lent on the child ...

(Sethe, 1924, p.77 l.13-14; see Willems, 2014, pp.105-109)

Poetic performance, however, remains almost entirely un-documented both in terms of textual descriptions of its processes and in terms of any identifiable archaeological contexts. Performances were possibly closely parallel to liturgical practices (which are represented), and were probably highly codified (Parkinson, 2009, pp.30-40). Many poems thematise oral performances, often in courtly contexts, and concern individuals reflecting to an audience on their imagined experiences. Some of these fictionalised accounts of extempore recitals, such as in the *Words of Neferti*, can be used to model possible performance occasions (Parkinson, 1997, pp.134-135; 2002, pp.78-81). The terms used in such descriptions suggest a manner of spoken recitation rather than singing, but the question of possible musical accompaniment is unresolved (see e.g. Parkinson, 2009, pp.36-37). Audiences will have been shaped by factors of rank, gender and age. But how did they sit and hear, how did they face the physical performer? Any attempt to imagine such a recital necessarily involves a great deal of speculative imagination, as has been attempted for two poems at the governor's palace at Elephantine around 1840 BCE (Parkinson, 2009, pp.20-68).

What is certain is that the physical sensation of any performance is inherently complex. As

Linda M. Zaerr comments:

the sequence of aural and visual events in a community context characteristic of performance is sharply distinct from the more homogenous experience of reading a written text ... The heterogeneity of the performance experience includes infinitely variable tone of voice, dynamic volume, complex interactions between the rhythms of poetry and the rhythms of music, movement and gestures of varying amplitude and velocity, plastic facial expressions, and complex, often intuitive, communication among performers and between performers and audience. (Zaerr, 2005, p.195)

Over the past decade, such issues have led to experimental recitals of texts in translation, drawing on studies of European period performance (Parkinson, 2011). Given that such recitals are undocumented and irrecoverable, these have not attempted any ‘original practices’ performance (see Carson and Karim-Cooper, 2008). The results are inevitably unverifiable, but a review of some recent exercises in experimental philology has suggested that performance can still transform traditional philological treatments in several respects (Parkinson, 2011). Firstly, the performing voice has implications for questions of textuality. The variant versions of some poems, such as *Sinuhe* and *The Eloquent Peasant*, that are attested in roughly contemporaneous Middle Kingdom manuscripts are arguably not deviations from a single authorised original (the philologist’s *Urtext*); such different versions could presumably occur in a performative culture without any breach of textual authority (e.g. Parkinson, 2006; 2009, p.126). Secondly, the traditional philological virtue of ‘objectivity’ is virtually impossible in performance. The inherent variety of ways in which even a single verse, such as ‘It is really he’ in *The Tale of Sinuhe* (Parkinson, 1997, p.41), can be delivered in different performances shows how multiple readings and enactments are possible (Parkinson and Ewing, 2014). Even in a carefully regulated tradition, performance choices can reshape the work and subvert any ostensibly intended meanings; in this sense, ‘actors are the original poststructuralists’ (Orgel, 2002, p.10). Thirdly, the physical voice raises questions of sensuality and response. In recital, *Sinuhe* can strike an audience as violently swift and impactful, moving from incident to incident with vividness and emotional directness, and creating a sense of pleasurable excitement and trauma (e.g. Parkinson and Ewing, 2016). One such moment is when Sinuhe’s royal patroness sees her old servant returned to court dressed as an Asiatic after his life abroad. Instead of welcoming him in the expected ceremonial manner:

she gave a very great cry,

and the royal children shrieked as one. (Parkinson, 1997, p.41)

This intensity arguably has a destabilising effect on the presented meaning, and embodies the scene as more open-ended and potentially subversive than some critical paradigms have envisaged (Parkinson and Ewing, 2014). Emotional complexity is arguably inherent in many of these works, which present themselves as intensely personal and subjective. Within such an emotionally charged perspective, the poems operate and test assumptions of normativity, and modern experiential approaches can thus open up subaltern, even ‘queer’, readings (e.g. Parkinson, 2009, pp.275-275). Just as material philology can move texts away from a single text into shifting embodiments and multiple perspectives, so empathetic, performative approaches can destabilise monolithic treatments of the texts, and embed them in a direct sensory and emotional world that corresponds to many modern individuals’ sense that human experience is invariably ‘varius multiplex multiformis’, and that ‘tout nous échappe, et tous, et nous-même’ (Yourcenar, 1991, p.307, 527).

Mutability: the potential and limitations of analysis

The extensive survival of certain aspects of ancient Egypt’s material culture and its representations of sensory experience attest to the experiential richness of the elite, but the experiential world of the majority of the ancient population remains almost entirely undocumented. The surviving range of types of data from Ancient Egypt offers huge potential, although visual and textual aspects have often been over-privileged in the modern reception at the expense of more artefactual and sensory approaches. Landscape studies offer a way into a more phenomenological approach, but many aspects of experience nevertheless remain irrecoverable. As an image for these challenges, and as an example of both the potential and the limitations of an integrated analysis, I take the so-called colossus of Memnon at Luxor, a single statue that offers multitudinous worlds of experience of its

weathered quartzite: from the quarrying of the stone at Gebel-Ahmar in the north in the reign of Amenhotep III (1390-1353 BCE) to its installation with a companion statue at the entrance to the king's mortuary temple, where their visibility was integral to their religious function (e.g. Bickel, 2002, pp.76-79). Then, following the abandonment of the temple and earthquake damage (Sourouzian, 2014; Karakhanyan, et al., 2014), the statue became sonorous at dawn. This attracted Roman visitors, including the emperor Hadrian and his entourage in 130 CE, who left graffiti on its legs recording their visits (A. and É. Bernand, 1960). At this period, the statue—now no longer Amenhotep III but Memnon—could itself reflect on its own mutability in the graffiti by Caecilia Trebulla c. 120 (?) CE:

today the sounds that I emit in my laments are inarticulate
and unintelligible, remnants of my former fortune.

(A. and É. Bernand, 1960, pp.189-191).

This phase of the monument's experience was subsequently the site of a vivid queer re-imagining by Marguerite Yourcenar of Hadrian's visit, as the emperor mourned the loss of his beloved Antinous and carved a (fictional) graffiti as 'un nom, une somme de vie dont personne ne compterait les éléments innombrables, une marque laissée par un homme égaré dans cette succession de siècles' (1991, p.445; Poignault, 1995, pp.616-619). <FIGURE 6 HERE> This imagined experience is shaped by the subjective concerns of the modern French author, and as such differs from the equally fictionalised reimagining of the same ancient visit by the Egyptologist Philippe Derchain (1987, p.23). Nevertheless, both convey an effective 'touch of the real', that can often be lacking in academic presentations. Today, the quartzite colossus has been re-excavated, cleaned, and is subject to careful heritage management; it is now a photographic stop on standard tourist itineraries, as well as being part of a local agricultural landscape (recent summary e.g. Sourouzian, 2014; 2015). It and its environment are exceptionally well-documented from a variety of academic perspectives.

The surviving record includes named individuals who are known to have faced it at the dawnings of earlier days, waiting for the statue to speak. Now, modern visitors can stand, exactly like them, in the half-light of dawn, but nevertheless the physical material of the stone and the ecology of the surrounding flood-plain have changed, just like the various visitors' cultural identities. Ancient alterations to the statue have of course also silenced its voice, and earlier actors' interaction with the statue seem simultaneously almost palpable and impossibly distant. Despite its preservation and accessibility, the colossus retains a capacity to challenge the scholarly intellect to imagine any sensory experience of an individual facing it in any period. A modern awareness of these sensory realities as tangibly close but ultimately irrecoverable is not a barrier to understanding, but it can be an opportunity for us to begin to assess empathetically the difference and diversity of ancient possibilities.

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Images:

1. The texture on a butterfly's wig, from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun c. 1350 BCE. (British Museum EA 37977, detail; © The British Museum). <in colour>

2. The richness of preserved data: the contents of box 54 in the tomb of Tutankhamun, photographed by Harry Burton (© The Griffith Institute).
3. A fecundity figure embodying a body of water, from the ‘White chapel’ of Senwosret I c. 1900 BCE (photo: R. B. Parkinson, 2010).
4. The grotto of Mereseger under a serpent-like rock (photo: R. B. Parkinson, 2008). <in colour?>
5. Ahmed Marei as the eloquent peasant in Shadi `Abd al-Salam’s *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* (1970). © The World Cinema Foundation and the Egyptian Film Centre.
6. The Memnon colossus at dusk in 2010; the graffiti cluster around the statue’s left ankle.

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