

# The Mediterranean Senses. Sensual Knowledge and Perceptive Culture in the Early Modern Mediterranean

Berlin, Freie Universität, 8 September 2023

## Outline

Whether one gives preference to “nurture” or “nature”, at least how we interpret our sensual perception is shaped culturally. Yet, while the senses are a prominent topic in current historiography, studies of the Mediterranean as a cultural world have not yet been affected by the ‘sensual turn’. What do Early Modern Mediterranean dwellers think about their senses? What is the role of sensual perception in intellectual and material cultures and how do actors connect this to ‘knowing’ the Mediterranean world around them? Such a focus on the senses could provide a new perspective on our conceptions of Mediterranean cultural interconnectedness, shared material culture, and peculiarities be they nutritional, religious, or environmental in nature. This workshop aims to bring together practitioners from the History of Knowledge, Intellectual History and the History of Material Culture under a Sensory History approach. Its aim is to explore the potential of a Mediterranean History of the Senses. Can it reveal a new dimension of the Mediterranean as a cultural region, that goes beyond the lines drawn by languages, religions, and regional cultures?

## Venue

Freie Universität Berlin, Villa Engler, Altensteinstr. 2, 14195 Berlin

Bus: Königin-Luise-Platz/Botanischer Garten (Lines X83 and M83)

Subway: ten minutes’ walk from *U-Dahlem Dorf* or *U-Podbielskiallee* (Line U3)

This workshop is funded by the *Cost Action 18140 People in Motion* and the *International Office of Freie Universität, Berlin*



## Program

- From 09:30 Arrival of the participants at Villa Engler
- 10:00 *Introduction* by Giovanni Tarantino, Daniela Hacke & Luc Wodzicki
- 10:30 Vera-Simone Schulz (Florence):  
*Multisensual Mediterranean Exchanges: Object Encounters at the Crossroads between Africa, the Middle East and Europe*
- 11:15 Esther Voswinckel (Istanbul):  
*Ziyaret-i evliyâ: multisensorial encounters at saint shrines in Istanbul*  
Chair: Luisa Simonutti
- 12:00 Lunch-Break
- 13:30 Marina Inì (Cambridge):  
*The Role of the Senses in Early Modern Quarantine Practices*
- 14:15 Beyza Uzun (Lucca):  
*Ottoman Olfactory Traditions in an Imperial Residence: Incense Burners from the Topkapı Palace Collection*  
Chair: Luc Wodzicki
- 15:00 Coffee-Break
- 15:30 Keynote by Christian Lange (Utrecht):  
*Islamic Sensory History in the Early Modern Period*  
Chair: Daniela Hacke
- 17:00 *Open final discussion* moderated by Sarah Bellows-Blakely and Franziska Hermes (Berlin)
- 19:00 Dinner (Location tba)

## Abstracts

### **Multisensual Mediterranean Exchanges: Object Encounters at the Crossroads between Africa, the Middle East and Europe**

Vera-Simone Schulz (Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz, Max-Planck-Institut)

Mobility, processes of exchange and the role of portable objects have been of key interest in Mediterranean and transcultural art history during the past two decades. This paper contributes to these discourses by focusing on metalwork and textiles with regard to their multi-sensory dynamics in a trans-Mediterranean setting. Shedding new light on object encounters and artistic interrelations between Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean, and West and West Central Africa during the early modern period, the paper does not only discuss the ways how objects moved across longest distances, thus challenging the boundaries of traditionally established sub-disciplines such as Islamic, African, and European etc. art histories, but also how these mobile objects were sensually perceived in relation to each other.

### **Ziyaret-i evliyâ: multisensorial encounters at saint shrines in Istanbul**

*Esther Voswinckel Filiz (Orient-Institut Istanbul)*

Istanbul is a „territory of grace“ (Horden/Purcell 2000: 403-460): a religious landscape that is scattered by more than thousand saint tombs. Many of these places have not ceased to be foci of urban pilgrimage up to the present day. They attract people from different layers of society and often even from different religious communities. In my paper, I wish to shed light on the experience of pilgrimage (ziyaret) as a special kind of encounter in which particular forms of sensibility and attentiveness (engaging hearing, smell, taste, and touch) are vital. By focusing closely on the ritual, oral tradition, and material culture related to some famous Sufi saint shrines (türbe) in Istanbul, I wish to suggest that a particular culture of „refinement of the senses“ used to be taught at saint shrines and in their vicinities.

A significant rupture in this transmission of an education of the senses has taken place in the 20th century after the closure of the Sufi lodges and saint shrines in 1925. Nevertheless, once one starts listening to the voices of the elderly inhabitants of old neighbourhoods around some saint shrines, one can still encounter fragments of an old, intricate „fabric“ of multisensorial communications between the living and the buried ones, between humans and animals, and between people and things. While my presentation is mainly based on fieldwork, participant observation and enquiries into oral tradition, I will also confront this ethnographic material with written sources from the 17th and late 19th century. A focus on multisensorial encounters at saint shrines allows

for comparisons between different saint cults in the Mediterranean, past and present. Such comparisons of every practices related to saintly places and pilgrimage (including both the act of visiting and the experience of „being visited“ by invisible beings) reveal that beyond the respective state ideologies on religion, the threat of religious fundamentalisms and secularism in all its variations, local religious practitioners in many places around the Mediterranean have kept clinging to and binding themselves to saintly places in more silent and unobtrusive ways. Religious ethnography in and of the Mediterranean is thus itself a practice of refining our senses towards what may be - at first sight - unobtrusive, silent, and volatile.

### **The Role of the Senses in Early Modern Quarantine Practices**

Marina Inì, University of Cambridge

The paper focuses on the senses and plague prevention practices inside quarantine centres of the early modern Mediterranean area. Quarantine was adopted across the Western Mediterranean by several states from the sixteenth century in order to preventively isolate merchants, sailors, and travellers and disinfect goods coming from lands suspected of harbouring the disease targeting especially ships, goods and people coming from Ottoman territories. The paper focuses on different quarantine centres and their practices in the Italian peninsula, the Venetian territories, France and Malta in order to understand the role of the senses for passengers and staff experiencing quarantine. Early modern medical theories stressed the importance of both touch and miasmas, bad and putrefying smells in the propagation of plague and therefore preventative methods inside quarantine centres focused on isolation and distancing (the absence of isolation) and on fumigations, airing and perfuming (to counterbalance miasmas). This paper aims at analysing such practices from a wider Mediterranean perspective: quarantine centres were indeed part of a transnational system sharing information and uniformed procedures and practices, while the passengers quarantined and staff came from all over the Mediterranean context and beyond. The analysis will aim at understanding what impact the practices involving the senses had on the passengers and staff's experience of such peculiar institutions.

### **Ottoman Olfactory Traditions in an Imperial Residence: Incense Burners from the Topkapı Palace Collection**

*Beyza Uzun, IMT Lucca*

“As long as agallochum and ambergris burn and smoke in this censer, God shall keep sorrow away from the sovereign's fate [...] Because being connected to the Glory of the World [the Prophet] befits the honor of the



exalted Sultan Selim Khan—may his rule be continuous—he dedicated in perpetuity this silver censer to the most exalted chamber of the Holy Mantle of the Prophet, [in the] year 1208 [1793/4].”

This is an inscription from an eighteenth-century incense burner donated by Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1807) to the Has Oda (Privy Chamber), where the sacred relics of the Prophet Muhammad is kept in the Topkapı Palace since the sixteenth century. The inscription clearly shows a very strong symbolic link that olfactory practices could forge between donor and beneficiary, across vast temporal and geographical distances. Islam attributes great importance to “pleasant” scent. Similar to other Muslim societies, the Ottomans used perfume and fragrances frequently in both public and residential spaces, such as mosques, tombs, and houses. Visual sources depict censers in residential spaces such as mansions of Ottoman elites including the sultan himself. In addition, primary sources describe the olfactory practices in the Ottoman society.

Today, the Topkapı Palace Museum collection houses approximately 60 incense burners in six different sections of the collection. This study examines Ottoman olfactory traditions in residential spaces through a group of incense burners in the Topkapı Palace collections and contextualizes the objects within their multisensory settings. To explain various connotations of olfactory practice in residential spaces, this study focuses on the Topkapı Palace as a case study. Rather than presenting a quantitative survey of the censers in the collection of the Topkapı Palace, this paper offers general conclusions on the published thirty censers’ form, function, and symbolic meaning following the detailed analysis. Therefore, this research will hopefully contribute to the study of Ottoman smellscape by bringing new perspectives to the meaning of olfactory usage in residential spaces in the Ottoman world.

## **Islamic Sensory History in the Early Modern Period**

*Christian Lange, Utrecht University*

Islamic sensory history is an emerging field of study, with relatively few contributions to date that focus on the early modern period. Yet, if there is something that can be meaningfully described as an ‘Islamic’ sensory style, it is largely the product of the early modern period, or more specifically, of the intellectual and material culture of the Balkan-to-Bengal region during the time of the three so-called ‘gunpowder empires’ of the Turkish Ottomans (1281–1924), the Persian Safavids (1501–1722) and the Indian Mughals (1526–1858). It is also, arguably, during the early modern period that the European imagination of the Orient and of Islam as the negative foil – or variously, the inspirational counterpart – of the allegedly objective, rational and disembodied West takes shape. Examining the case of the olfactory imagination in a variety of Islamically coded discourses (mysticism, philosophy, traditionalism), this talk unfolds several of the challenges that research on Islamic sensory history in the early modern period is faced with.

The workshop is organized by:

Prof. Daniela Hacke and Dr. Luc Wodzicki

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*There are very few places available on site; it is therefore urgent to contact the organizers before participating.*

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