**Senses and the embodied mind of the *mystes* in ancient mystery cults**

This paper explores the nature of the initiatory experience in ancient mystery cults by focusing on the physiological sensations experienced during the initiation rites, and their possible influence on the mental and emotional states of the initiates.

Existing research often tends to focus on the centrality of the secret doctrinal knowledge transmitted in the initiatory process. However, ancient sources, from the Classical to Imperial Roman period, imply that the essence of this process was embodied in the eye-opening experiences of the initiates, which involved many sensorial elements. For instance, Aristotle claims that those who are initiated into the mysteries do not learn anything, but rather have an experience and are put in a certain state of mind (Fr.15); Lucian emphasizes the importance of dancing in the mysteries in stating that despite their secret nature, initiation rites are commonly described in public as “dancing the *mysteria*” (*salt*.15); Aristides Quintilianus asserts that the goal of the initiatory process is to be purified from depression and anxiety through the melodies and dances of the rites (3.25). Other sources mark the importance of different elements such as darkness and light, certain smells and scents, fasts, feasts, and visual and physical interactions with material objects.

The objective of my paper is twofold: 1) To offer a brief observation of the varied functions of the senses in the initiatory experience, and 2) To begin integration of the ancient evidence with methods and results provided by studies from other disciplines – especially neuroscience and cognitive science. As I wish to demonstrate, this interdisciplinary approach may illuminate significant aspects of the initiatory experience and explain some of the ways in which sensorial elements experienced by the initiates might have influenced their mind and mental states, beliefs and memory.

Noga Erez-Yodfat

nogaerez@post.bgu.ac.il