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Sensus corporei, sensus spirituales: The Sensory Community of Paulinus of Nola*

Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine Paulinus of Nola's treatment of the senses in the context of Christian devotional practice. The framework of this research is defined by the assumption that the group of people to whom Paulinus addressed his works – particularly in the *Natalicia* – constituted a sensory community: a group that shared a basic set of perceptions and values associated with sensory experience. In a manner typical of early Christian authors, Paulinus believed that humans could rely on two complementary but essentially distinct sensory apparatuses, which can be broadly described as physical and spiritual. According to this view, the spiritual sensorium should serve to perceive a reality that is inaccessible to the physical senses. In this context, we will analyze the ways and means by which Paulinus attempted to teach his sensory community about entering into the presence of God through the use of the spiritual senses and through the intercession of the saints – especially St. Felix.

Keywords: Paulinus of Nola, senses, sensory history, sensory community, spiritual sensorium, St. Felix.

The two central concepts in the title of this article – *spiritual senses* and *sensory community* – have been mostly developed in different disciplines. The former is studied primarily by theologians, while the former mainly by anthropologists, sociologists and historians. The growing research field of sensory history – which has essentially emerged from anthropological studies of the senses and cultural history – could thus serve as a framework for approaching these two concepts together.[1]

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[1] It is important to distinguish between the terms *history of the senses* and *sensory history*. The former refers to a field concerned with the historicization of a single sense – its development and interpretation, especially in a medical context – while the latter focuses on the study of the social and cultural construction of that sense and its role in the past. For a further discussion, see Smith 2007, 841. On the growing body of scholarly work on the senses, see Howes 2022, in which one of the pioneers of sensory studies offers a synthesis of his decades of research.

Some terminological clarification is required to demonstrate that bringing these two concepts together is interpretively useful. The first term refers to the early Christian concept of spiritual senses (*sensus spirituales*), an umbrella term that encompasses all the expressions with which Christian authors attempted to describe contact with the transcendent through the language of the senses (Gavrilyuk / Coakley 2012, 2–3).[2] These are linguistic formulations which, depending on the context, refer to a genuine encounter with God based on the senses or are used as figurative expressions – metaphors and allegories – to describe supersensible spiritual experiences.[3] The concept of sensory community, on the other hand, refers to a group of people who are thought to share a set of basic beliefs and values about sensory experiences.[4] The use of this analytical category is based on the need to clearly delineate the group to which conclusions about the cultural dimension of perception apply. In practice, this helps avoid a twofold methodological risk: first, it eliminates the danger of reducing the study of attitudes to the senses to the level of the individual, as can be the case in a "sensory biography";[5] secondly, it minimizes the risk of drawing conclusions about an entire society within a single specific historical period.

Thus, taking all these aspects into account, how can the spiritual sensorium and the sensory community be meaningfully connected? There are numerous examples of their possible intersections that can be examined through a variety of cases. In this paper, I propose to explore their convergence in the social dimension of Christian thinkers' efforts to promote the "opening" of the spiritual senses among members of their communities. Namely, ever since the first centuries of

[2] In this article the terms *spiritual senses* and *inner senses* are used interchangeably.

[3] The earliest studies that explored the spiritual sensorium in Christian authors established a clear analytical framework for its interpretation by defining its boundaries through the terms *metaphor* and *analogy*. The term *metaphor* refers to the use of the spiritual sensory apparatus as a linguistic expression for understanding the divine – in practice, this did not mean that a Christian could perceive God with the senses, but rather comprehend him on an intellectual level, a process described in terms of sensory perception. In contrast, the concept of *analogy* refers to a correspondence between the spiritual and physical senses, allowing for the possibility of perceiving the Lord directly. See the study analyzing Origen's approach to the spiritual sensorium in this framework: McInroy 2012, 20–35. The first studies to use these terms are: Poulain 1922 and Rahner 1932.

[4] The concept of sensory community has been proposed as a possible framework within the sociology of the senses, as in Vannini et al. 2012, 7–8. Its application to historiography has been suggested by Newhauser 2015, 1573. Similarly, Rosenwein 2006, defines emotional communities as groups that directly shape the way individuals express their emotions and condition them through shared norms and expectations.

[5] The concept of sensory biography has been mentioned by Tullett 2021, 812 as a possible approach to sensory historiography. He cites, albeit with some reservations, Jenner 2010 as a representative example. On the other hand, Tullett 2021, 812 has also pointed out certain problems with earlier studies, showing that scholars have often drawn sweeping conclusions about the sensory model of an entire society based on extremely limited evidence, mainly from the upper classes of society.

Christianity – especially in the sermons of Cyril of Jerusalem and John Chrysostom – the leaders of liturgical communities have directed their efforts towards developing appropriate strategies to facilitate the mastery of the spiritual senses by the faithful.[6] In other words, those in authority within particular communities – primarily bishops and priests – sought to shape and harmonize the sensory registers of their parishioners in order to constitute the entire community as a sensory one. The decision to explore the analytical overlap between these concepts through the example of the works of Paulinus of Nola is based on the following rationale: in his poems, and occasionally in his letters (which I discuss below), there are references to a clearly structured liturgical community. At the same time, Paulinus unequivocally affirms the human ability to approach God through the senses, namely through the mediation of the saints. This study therefore has two aims. First, it seeks to offer an overview of Paulinus' complex and multi-layered approach to the process of opening up the spiritual sensorium in the members of his liturgical community, which also serves as the basis for their constitution as a sensory community. Second, it is conceived of as a contribution to the hitherto understudied analytical potential of the concept of the sensory community as a conceptual framework.

We begin with the assumption that the heterogeneous and fluid group of people who gathered every year on January 14 in the church complex at Cimitile for the feast of St. Felix can be characterized as a sensory community. Under the leadership of Paulinus, who sought to establish this group primarily as a liturgical community, its foundation rested on the communal celebration of the cult of St. Felix, the 3rd-century confessor from Nola. Felix's reputation hardly extended beyond regional borders before Paulinus finally moved to Italy in 395. Through his efforts, Felix gained great popularity across much of the Mediterranean, which in turn made Nola one of the most important centers of Christian piety.[7] Every year in January, Paulinus recited verses from the *Natalicia* written in honor of St. Felix and his "birth in heaven", attracting, it seems, an ever-growing number of pilgrims who prayed before his holy relics and asked for his miraculous assistance.[8] By creating both a suitable spiritual environment, shaped by the inspired and artful *Natalicia*, and a physical environment, represented by the meticulous architectural design of the church complex at Cimitile, Paulinus created a sensory community from pilgrims differing in culture, education and customs. Arguably, his words resonated with

[6] For example v. Frank 2001 and Cox Miller 2005.

[7] The most comprehensive biography of Paulinus is Trout 1999. Likewise useful are Conybeare 2000 and Mratschek 2002. Paulinus wrote his first *Natalicium* before he left Barcelona for Nola in 395 (Paul. *Carm.* 12). The references to Paulinus' texts follow the critical edition in *CSEL* 29–30 and the English translations in Walsh 1966–1967.

[8] For studies on the *Natalicia*, see Green 1971 and Walsh 1975, 6–13. On the cult of St. Felix and its expansion, see Trout 1996 and Guttilla 2008.

his audience, guiding them to experience the sacred space created by the presence of St. Felix's relics, and inspired them, among other things, to open their inner sensorium.

For reconstructing Paulinus' complex use of the senses, both physical and spiritual, both in his literary activity and devotional practice, one has to consult Paulinus' entire *oeuvre*. He is known to have left behind fifty-one letters, twenty-eight poems, and an epitaph for a man named Cynegius (attributed to Paulinus only later). In every respect the *Natalicia* are of prime importance for the present study, as they are programmatic, poetic compositions of a public and solemn character. Likewise relevant are the letters that Paulinus wrote to his friends and acquaintances, which often contain detailed explanations of his ideas and views that are not always explicit in the poems.[9]

It should be emphasized that Paulinus was not the first Christian writer to develop his own theology of the senses based on the existence of a double sensorium. The context in which his personal efforts should be considered is shaped by the Scriptures, with which he was in constant intellectual dialogue, and the works of other early Christian writers who influenced him directly and indirectly.

Right at the outset, it is necessary to examine the works of Paulinus in search of his understanding of the concept of spiritual sensorium, since the meaning of the term varied to some extent during this period. In a letter that he sent to his long-time literary friend Sulpicius Severus around the year 400,[10] Paulinus – true to his distinctive poetic spirit – reflected on the relationship between the physical senses, which turn to earthly stimuli, and the spiritual senses, on which a Christian should rely in order to "see a clear image of God". Using well-known examples from the Holy Scriptures, Paulinus placed these two modes of perception in an irreconcilable, antithetical relationship. Those who wanted to lift their eyes above the profane world and focus them towards the Lord first had to "blind their bodily eyes" by turning away from sin (Paul. *Ep*. 23.22). By playing with the metaphorical contrast between sight and blindness as binary opposites, Paulinus – like many Christian authors before him – called for a detachment from the fleeting nature

[9] The critical edition contains thirty-three poems attributed to Paulinus. Modern scholarship, however, has rejected up to five of them on the grounds of questionable authenticity; see Trout 1999, 271–272. Cynegius epitaph was first published in *CIL* 10.1370 and later as an addendum in Walsh 1975, 345. Since Paulinus did not keep his letters, all that remains of his correspondence has been discovered in the collections of his addressees. More on this in Trout 2017, 255–258.

[10] No fewer than thirteen letters are addressed to Sulpicius Severus, which puts him at the top of Paulinus' correspondents in terms of frequency of communication (Walsh 1967, 3). An exceptionally close friend, Paulinus turned to him for comfort in difficult times (*consolatio*) and advice on the interpretation of disputed scriptural passages, but he also reproached him for persistently refusing to move to Nola in Campania and join him in the monastic community. Letters that are representative for the analysis of their relationship are Paul. *Epp*. 5, 11, 17, 23.

of everyday sensory experience and the cultivation of an inner sensory apparatus that not only complements the physical senses but is also capable of perceiving what untrained senses would otherwise fail to grasp.[11]

As Paulinus reminded Jovius in the tone of a self-confident teacher, before the Fall Adam could behold the Lord clearly with his own eyes in the Garden of Eden: he was allowed to do so as long as his eyes remained closed to sin. But as soon as he had defiled them by his transgression, he lost the purity of vision that was guaranteed by a good conscience, and he turned his gaze to earthly things, eventually losing his "true sight" (Paul. *Ep.* 23.22). If we take the spiritual sensory apparatus to which Paulinus attributed the ability to approach God directly as identical to the physical one before original sin, we detect a single sensory apparatus, which was later split by the Fall. Elsewhere, in a letter to Severus from the year 403 or 404, Paulinus implicitly hints at this.[12] When the ancestors of mankind ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes were opened; from this Paulinus concluded that they must have been blind beforehand (Paul. *Ep.* 30.4).[13] The attainment of physical sight brought with it a spiritual blindness that was a harsh punishment for their sin, so that people could no longer have the image of God before their eyes. And yet Paulinus emphasized in his works that it was possible to regain this long-lost privilege – one only had to learn to master the spiritual senses again.

Particularly revealing in this context is a passage from a letter to Sanctus, an old friend of Paulinus from Aquitaine, with whom he was probably already in contact before he renounced the world and adopted an ascetic lifestyle.[14] As it was not easy for Paulinus to convey the essence of his message directly – which probably explains why he used vivid metaphors in line with his poetic inclinations – he chose the New Testament parable of the Ten Virgins waiting for the Bridegroom (Matt. 25:1–13). According to the story, five wise virgins prepared oil for their lamps in

[11] The division of the sensorium into five senses goes back to Aristotle, who not only listed them but also defined their hierarchical value. More on this in Classen 1993, 1–2. On the Christian appropriation of Aristotle's hierarchy of the senses, see Jütte 2005, 61–71.

[12] Walsh 1967, 326 reconstructs the chronology of Paul. *Epp*. 30–32 and places them in the same year, since they are connected with the construction of a new building in Primuliacum by Severus.

[13] This is also discussed by Conybeare 2000, 103–104.

[14] Paul. *Ep*. 41. Walsh 1967, 342–346 dates it to the time after 397. It seems that Paulinus gradually adopted the ascetic life. Together with his wife Therasia, he left his native Aquitaine for good in 389. Before he traveled to Hispania, where he remained until he moved to Nola in 395, he was baptized by Bishop Delphinus of Burdigala (Bordeaux), with whom Paulinus was still in contact later on. In Hispania, he devoted himself to the study of the Holy Scriptures and an ascetic lifestyle, which ultimately led him to renounce his possessions in 394 and devote himself entirely to the spiritual path. On Christmas Day of the same year, he was ordained a priest in Barcelona, although he was not bound to a particular diocese during his ministry. A detailed account of these events in Paulinus' biography can be found in Trout 1999, 63–95.

advance, while the other five, deemed "foolish", hesitated until the Bridegroom had already arrived and were therefore not admitted to the wedding feast. The lesson is clear: only those who remain vigilant and prepared, living in constant anticipation of Christ's Second Coming, will be ready to meet Him when the moment comes.[15]

We can note, however, that Paulinus' allegory goes far beyond the original semantic framework of the New Testament. Not only did he find in this parable an effective stylistic device to compare those who are not worthy of meeting the divine Bridegroom with the five foolish virgins, but he also identified the five wise ones with souls that are "not stained by sins" (Paul. *Ep*. 41.1). The symmetrical number of virgins – five in each group – enabled him to develop an ethics grounded in sensory experience – what we might call a *sensory ethics* – by drawing a parallel between the morally opposed virgins and the five human senses. In this way, Paulinus made it clear that the human sensorium stands at the crossroads of virtue and sin, confronting each individual with the choice of which path to follow through the senses. To choose the right path, Paulinus asserted, one must close the windows "through which death enters" (cf. Jer. 9:20) – a clear allusion to the senses as mediators of the external world and porous boundaries of the self. In order to persevere on this path, it was necessary to

> block them up with fear of God, that we may be both deaf and blind to all the shapes and voices of this world. Let us hedge in our ears with thorns against a wicked tongue and enticing melodies. Let us turn away our eyes that they may not behold vanity. Let us stop our nostrils that we may get no whiff of the corruption of the world's death. Let no taste entice us to gluttony, so that disease steals over us and weakens the strength of our self-discipline with the food of lusts. Let us not caress the flesh with soft garments, so that our limbs may not be evilly titillated by luxurious coverings and long for the touch of the flesh and forbidden embraces (Paul. *Ep*. 41.2).

The passage is quoted *in extenso* to emphasize the vividness which would be diminished by paraphrase, but also to highlight the ascetic undertone of the letter, interspersed in the rhythmic breath of Paulinus' prayerful murmurings. In keeping with the ascetic tradition of his time, Paulinus observed his earthly surroundings with caution: pleasurable sensory stimuli lacking spiritual significance posed a serious danger to the ascetic who could easily stray from the right path should he desire them. For Paulinus, exerting the will, rejecting the physical world, and embracing a life of restraint constituted the necessary precondition for perceiving and compre-

[15] Paulinus was not the first to invoke this biblical episode to justify sensory access to God. Beginning with Origen, who initiated the interpretation of New Testament parables through a sensory lens, early Christian authors used appropriate narratives – especially those based on the number five (e.g. Luke 14:15–24 or John 4:16–18). See Gavrilyuk / Coakley 2012, 11.

hending the divine. In other words, only consciously disciplined senses, "wise as the five virgins", could ensure an encounter with the divine Bridegroom when the appointed hour arrived (Paul. *Ep*. 41.2–3).

We now turn to one of the fundamental prerequisites for the development of the spiritual senses. For Paulinus, as for his contemporaries, the opening of the spiritual sensorium was closely linked to sacramental purification – through baptism, immediately followed by anointing and first communion, which together essentially constituted a unified rite of initiation.[16] For example, the conversion of the esteemed Bebianus is described in a poetic composition that can almost certainly be attributed to Paulinus. Towards the end of his life, Bebianus was baptized and freed himself from "the bondage of the fleeting world".[17] When he realized his mortality and the futility of riches in the world beyond, Bebianus "turned his weary eyes in search of God" and found both enlightenment and renewal in Christ (Paul. *Carm*. 33.1–20). He was baptized by the bishop – "sprinkled with pure water", as Paulinus says, "a man thirsting for the flood of life" – and then, awed by the majesty of the rite, received Holy Communion and inhaled the sweet fragrance of holy chrism (Paul. *Carm*. 33.21–27). In the fragrance, that healed him spiritually and indicated his transformation, he recognized – guided by the words of his wife – the breath of life that emanated from Christ himself. At the moment of death, a "sphere of light" appeared before Bebianus' altered sense of sight – it must have seemed to him as if he had caught a glimpse of eternity (Paul. *Carm*. 33.55–60).

From this it can be concluded that Paulinus found the guarantee for transformation through the holy sacraments in the Passion and Resurrection of Christ – after the Parousia, he emphasized, Christians who were deemed worthy of salvation would be resurrected in the same way, their form transfigured to resemble that of the angels (Paul. *Carm*. 31.200–204). This too can be seen as proof of the existence of a spiritual sensorium. In this context, the Incarnation of the Lord lifted the veil before the eyes of the Christians – a veil that had clouded the vision of the Jews, who were considered unworthy to behold the hidden divine essence because of their sins.[18] As foretold by the prophets, Christ as the incarnate Son appeared to

[16] This idea goes back to Origen, but was also adopted by other church fathers such as Ephrem the Syrian and Ambrose. See Frank 2001.

[17] This text is preserved in a Carolingian *florilegium*, which contains Paulinus' poems as well as works by other authors. In the manuscript, the work is clearly attributed to Paulinus. Walsh 1975, 419–421 argues that this attribution cannot be made with certainty. However, the opinions of earlier scholars and the style and subject matter of the poem argue for Paulinus' authorship.

[18] The idea that the Incarnation played a role in the acquisition of the spiritual senses was widespread among early Christian authors. Ephrem the Syrian, for example, saw the Incarnation as a kind of heavenly sanction to interpret the world – the work of the Creator – in the same way as Scripture, and thus to recognize the traces of the divine presence in the created world. See Ashbrook Harvey 1988, 112–113.

the apostles in bodily form, and they were able to recognize him with eyes purified by true faith (Paul. *Carm.* 31.363–373). Their initial doubts about the truth of the Resurrection were not without deeper meaning. On the contrary, by directly refuting the Apostles' skepticism – especially through the personal assurance to Thomas – the hope of a resurrection like that of Christ in a glorified body was physically manifested and affirmed in each of them (Paul. *Carm.* 31.143–174; cf. John 20:19–31). What was available to Christ's disciples, however, was not possible for later generations of Christians, who had to seek the Lord in a different way – through the deeds of the saints. Paulinus was convinced that their authenticity had been confirmed by the senses of sight and touch and transfigured by the power of faith (Paul. *Carm.* 31.375–376). But this required a life of fervent prayer and patient anticipation that Christ Himself would pour out his light on the hearts of the believers (Paul. *Carm.* 31.379–380). "Enclosed in the silent house" and devoted in the solitude of prayer, the ascetic could begin his search for God on the contemplative path in the hope that his spiritual senses would be opened to the realm of the divine (Paul. *Carm.* 24.725–735). Elevated by faith and prayer, the eyes could perceive a new light in the sky that heralded the quiet movement of the Holy Spirit to the hidden places of the soul, giving it the power to go beyond what was visible to the physical senses (Paul. *Carm.* 22.6–19).[19] In short, man was able to come closer to God.

From passages discussed so far, it would seem that Paulinus' understanding of the spiritual sensorium was essentially based on establishing a clear analogy with the physical senses. Paulinus did not regard the spiritual senses as a mere metaphor to describe noetic contact with the transcendent – on the contrary, for him the search for God and his revelation was inherently sensory and therefore largely non-discursive. In other words, when he spoke of encountering the divine in the form of sensory experiences, he did not do so merely in a metaphorical sense to articulate his mysticism through language. At the same time, this does not mean that every sensory expression he used to describe the encounter with the divine is to be understood literally. In a considerable number of instances, Paulinus employed sensual metaphors to denote his contemplative path to the Lord, a path that did not necessarily involve a direct sensorial pursuit. Ultimately, Paulinus's ambivalent use of language – wavering back and forth between the literal and the metaphorical – must be seen as a key element in any attempt to understand his complex theology

[19] It should be noted that the term *sensus*, as used by Paulinus, has a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the senses, but in the given context it also denotes a state of consciousness and conscious thought. De Nie 2005, 73–74, traces the development of Paulinus' approach to the encounter with God and emphasizes that in his poetic narrative about John the Baptist, one of his earliest poems, Paulinus stresses that concepts of God are received from heaven (Paul. *Carm.* 6). In the passage analyzed in the main text, a clear departure from this understanding can be seen. Instead of passively receiving God's revelation, Paulinus begins to advocate actively seeking him.

of the senses. If we follow the already established typology of texts dealing with the role of the senses in religion – those describing specific rituals and important cultic sites on the one hand, and those explaining abstract spiritual concepts through the language of the senses on the other – then it is safe to say that Paulinus' works belongs to both.[20]

Having identified a broader framework for understanding the concept of the spiritual sensorium in Paulinus' works, we now turn to examples where he employs it in a metaphorical sense. In this context, Paulinus traced – or, more precisely, mapped – his spiritual progress, which he had achieved through devoted prayer and constant ascetic striving, with a colorful sensory poetics.[21] This approach, as we see it, proved suitable for expressing complex spiritual experiences – which, by their very nature, elude material form – through language. Through specific examples, one can observe how the prayerful rhythm of Paulinus' works – more poems than letters – sometimes condenses into symbolically charged images or narratively developed *vignettes*, in an effort to convey powerful experiences of spiritual reality within discursive boundaries and through sensory language.[22] One possible reason for Paulinus' method lies in the inherent difficulty of articulating experiences that transcend language. The feeling of literary inadequacy resulting from the gap between experience and expression – what J. Elkins refers to as "visual despair", drawing his conclusion from the works of writers who turned to visuality as a means of expressing spiritual experience – we can aptly describe in Paulinus' case as a kind of "sensory despair".[23]

This can be illustrated by two remarkable examples. In his fourth *Natalicium*, written in 398 to commemorate the feast of St. Felix in the form of a short hagiography in verse, Paulinus began with a prayer asking for strength to find the right words as the representative of the holy Nolan confessor before the assembled faithful.[24] Invoking the name of Christ and attempting to harmonize the otherwise dissonant elements of his inner being, he prayed for the unity of his soul and vocal cords –

[20] Caseau 2014, 89–90, notes that a second group of texts uses the senses primarily to represent good and evil as binary opposites – for example, through the opposition between God and Satan or between heaven and hell.

[21] This topic – albeit for the late Middle Ages – is treated by Caseau 2014, 108–109. Of course, this does not mean that such practices did not exist earlier.

[22] On the development of prayer and its role in the first centuries of Christianity, see Van Loon et al. 2018, 227–300, which contains studies on the Western Church Fathers that are particularly relevant to the present discussion.

[23] Cox Miller 2005, 51–52 bases her analysis on Elkins' concept of "visual despair" (v. Elkins 1999, 51–52).

[24] On the relationship between Paulinus and St. Felix v. Trout 1999, 160–197. On the figures, especially the bishops, who in late antiquity claimed the prerogative of mediating between the flock and the holy protectors – P. Brown aptly calls them impresarios of cults – v. Brown 1981, 50–68.

which are compared to lyres in the text – and his tongue, which was to play the role of the stylus. In glorious harmony, they were to convey to the audience the silent music of Paulinus' heart, inspired by the presence of St. Felix (Paul. *Carm*. 15.26–29).[25] A similar allegory was used to describe the prayer in his last *Natalicium*, the thirteenth, which he wrote in 407 and in which he underlined the importance of praying together.[26] Spiritual unity was realized through the union of Paulinus with nine close friends into a ten-stringed lyre played by Christ, the divine musician, with a plectrum, St. Felix (Paul. *Carm*. 21.272–343).

In both instances, in addition to the metaphors of the sense of hearing, one should also note the distinct metatextual dimension. In his poems, Paulinus describes prayer, but the writing and later recitation of the *Natalicia* was also an act of prayer.[27] When it comes to his reliance on sensory language to describe the process of prayer and to emphasize its importance in bringing Christians closer to God through the saints, his texts are to some extent self-referential: Paulinus simultaneously created and used the semantic framework of his own sensory poetics. As an instrument in the hand of God, played by Christ himself with the help of the saints, Paulinus also diminished the ontological distance between the earthly and the heavenly by dissolving the boundaries between text and reality. This process of approaching God was characterized by prayer, a practice that by its very nature has no sensory dimension, but is paradoxically rendered through the language of the senses.

Paulinus also resorted to sensory allegories to describe complex spiritual concepts and ideas. In some especially vivid examples he depicts Christian salvation after Christ's Second Coming. Paulinus was firmly rooted in the ascetic tradition and had no doubt that one should renounce material wealth.[28] Instead of longing for earthly riches, he admonished, one should covet treasures in heaven. Those who heed this warning will be rewarded with the heavenly abundance of streams of milk and honey, the sweetness of which they will enjoy indefinitely when the time comes (Paul. *Ep*. 34.8). Delivered from their corruption and strengthened in faith, Christians will be drawn to the fragrance of God's anointing, for only the Lord can decide upon their salvation. Having become the pleasing fragrance of Christ

[25] For the chronology: Walsh 1975, 369.

[26] Walsh 1975, 385–386, concludes on the basis of relative chronology that this refers to the year 407.

[27] Krueger 2004, 1–14 shows that writing and praying were closely linked in the early Christian period. Writing was not just a means of recording spiritual experience – it was itself an act of devotion, a form of disciplined prayer and self-formation that enabled writers to participate in divine creativity, to imitate the humility of Christ, and to form a holier self through the composition of sacred texts. In this sense, Paulinus' literary activity corresponds entirely to this practice of prayer.

[28] On Paulinus' specific attitude to wealth, see Trout 1999, 133–159 and Brown 2012, 208–240.

to God,[29] believers earn the right to drink fragrant wine – namely, the words of Scripture – from the vessel of salvation, in which the Lord, like a perfumer, mixes sweet aromas and distributes them to men according to his will in order to spread the fragrance of his knowledge (Paul. *Ep.* 40.9). Paulinus' allegories go beyond mere exhortations and instructions – through sensory metaphors, he enters the realm of eschatology in his tenth *Natalicium* and offers his listeners a vivid depiction of the state that will follow the Last Judgement. After the return of Christ, he assured his flock, the resurrected will be clothed in radiant garments, so that their once submissive appearance will resemble the image of the Lord and bear the image of Christ himself (Paul. *Carm.* 28.223–228).

Apart from the pronounced didactic dimension of these passages, aimed at reinforcing appropriate ethical boundaries among Christians gathered in a sensory community, Paulinus strives to explain complex eschatological and soteriological concepts through sensory references and *enargeia*.[30] By comparing Scripture to fragrant and sweet wine, he created a self-evident moral compass on the sensory level, which was essentially a fundamental element of early Christian education. Although Paulinus was not referring to the literal use of the senses, his recourse to sensory metaphors to grasp the abstract was just as important as actual sensory perception in the process of opening up the spiritual sensorium. A Christian who was able to translate spiritual reality – which is inherently beyond the senses – into the register of the sensory was also able to perceive the world around him in an appropriate light and to seek in it the presence of the Lord through the deeds of the saints.

Pertinent to this discussion is the social and cultural composition of Paulinus' flock. It seems reasonable to assume that the majority of people belonging to Paulinus' liturgical community – who, as emphasized above, were heterogeneous in composition and probably mostly illiterate – would not have been able to fully grasp the allegories of complex and abstract Christian concepts.[31] Under such circumstances, it seems that appealing to the physical senses in order to awaken spiritual perception was one of the strategies Paulinus might have chosen as a *pedagogue* of the sensorium. Comparison is always welcome. Unlike Cyril of Jerusalem,

[29] Paulinus here quotes St. Paul (2 Cor. 2:15).

[30] *Enargeia*, well known in antiquity, is a rhetorical technique that relies on vivid description to elicit an intense response from the audience – in this case, primarily a sensory response. *Enargeia* had the power to stimulate the imagination and, through a kind of mental spectacle – by transferring sensory pleasures to an inner register – encourage the Christian listener to actively participate in the colorful narrative being presented. See Cox Miller 2004, 391–392 and Carruthers 1998, passim.

[31] The Christian leaders were well aware of the limited education of the communities they were addressing. This is why Augustine used a simpler form of language than usual in his sermons (*sermo humilis*); Caesarius of Arles later wrote his sermons with similar considerations in mind. On Augustine, see Brown 1968, 88–91; on Caesarius, see Klingshirn 2001, 146–151.

for example, whose proximity to recognizable holy sites allowed him to easily draw the gaze of his catechumens to them during his sermons,[32] Paulinus faced a different challenge when he arrived in Nola. The sacred space of the church in Cimitile, consecrated by the relics of St. Felix, had to be adapted to the needs of an ambitious preacher and advocate of an increasingly powerful cult.[33] A stimulating sensory environment – filled with a rich palette of colors, diverse scents and varying textures – allowed Paulinus to elevate his sensory community beyond the mundane world and guide them to a way of perceiving the sacred.[34] Therefore, we now focus on examining his strategy based on the use of a carefully crafted and stimulating sensory atmosphere.

In keeping with the ancient tradition that many early Christian writers had adopted from the outset, Paulinus used vivid spatial descriptions – known in classical rhetoric as *ekphrasis* – to evoke emotional and spiritual responses in his sensory community.[35] In this particular case, however, the description served an interpretative function: by emphasizing certain architectural and decorative elements, Paulinus sought to underscore their symbolic significance. Of particular importance in this context is the letter he sent to Severus in 403/404, which is largely devoted to a detailed description of two newly constructed and spiritually connected sacred buildings – the basilica in Cimitile and the baptistery in Primuliacum.[36] Although it was not a public or ceremonial text but intended for Severus and probably for a small circle of his associates, Paulinus clearly articulated his understanding of sacred space, its adaptation to the needs of sensory piety, and his use of verse in the form of inscriptions (*tituli*), a kind of textual marker with a didactic function, placed at all key points of the two buildings (Paul. *Ep.* 32).

After Severus had completed the construction of a new baptistery on the open space between the two churches in Primuliacum, he turned his attention to the decoration, about which we are well informed thanks to his correspondence with Pauli-

[32] To those who wanted to deny the truth of Christ's passion and resurrection, Cyril, for example, simply pointed to nearby Golgotha, an irrefutable material proof. See Cyr. *Cat.* 4.10, 13.4.

[33] It should be emphasized that Paulinus was already interested in Cimitile and the cult of St. Felix in 380/381, during his term of office as *consularis* of Campania. Following the example of Pope Damasus (366–384), who dedicated several hexameters to St. Felix during his brief stay in Nola – a gesture that in some ways anticipated Paulinus' own efforts – Paulinus ordered the construction of a road from Nola to the complex at Cimitile with public funds, followed by the building of shelters for the poor and pilgrims nearby. He himself writes about this – Paul. *Carm.* 21.379–385; see also Trout 1999, 43–44.

[34] On the role of the senses in Christian liturgy, especially with regard to synaesthesia, see Caseau 2014, 89–91.

[35] On *ekphrasis*, see Webb 2009, 13–38. We also refer to a more recent study by Ćipranić 2022, 29–55.

[36] On the basis of relative chronology, Walsh 1975, 329 concludes that the letter cannot be dated with certainty to the year 404, as earlier scholars had done, but that the possibility that it was sent a year earlier should also be considered.

nus during those years. In the central part of the baptistery, he had two portraits painted – one of St. Martin, whom Severus regarded as his patron saint and whose cult he wanted to promote, and the other of Paulinus.[37] Without further guidance, the gaze of a neophyte falling on these portraits after the baptism could open up an undesirable space for free interpretation of their role within the decoration. For this reason, Severus asked Paulinus – trusting in his poetic skills – to compose some verses that would provide an interpretive framework for the portraits and direct the gaze of the newly baptized towards them, in order to teach them what they should see in them (Paul *Ep*. 32.2). Paulinus thus took upon himself the "burden of the sin of immodesty" so as not to commit an even worse offense by betraying his friend, and he set about the task of composing the verses (Paul. *Ep*. 32.3).[38] He placed himself and St. Martin in a contrasting relationship. Martin's holiness, which he had acquired through a life of perfection and obedience to the Lord, was to serve as an example, while the neophytes, whose (spiritual) eyes had only just been opened by baptism, were to recognize in Paulinus merely a warning – the figure of an unworthy sinner asking for forgiveness (Paul. *Ep.* 32.3–4).

Paulinus sent more verses than Severus had requested, although he always hid his literary activity behind the virtue of Christian modesty – he feared, as he put it, that his lack of skill might make him the target of ridicule (Paul. *Ep.* 32.3, 32.9). Thus he composed lines intended for the portal of the baptistery, allegorical verses based on a symbolic identification of the relationship between the two churches and the baptistery with the Holy Trinity, and messages characterized by a pronounced sensory sensitivity and dedicated to the area of the basilica where the holy relics were kept (Paul. *Ep*. 32.5–8). Fearing that his "clumsy verses" might diminish the achievement of Severus, Paulinus later took the opportunity in his letter to point out that his own "basilica was subjected to the same treatment" (Paul. *Ep*. 32.9). In his *ekphrasis* of the church complex in Cimitile — which can rightly be described as architectural exegesis due to its spiritual dimension in the reading and interpretation of sacred space – Paulinus described in detail his plan to connect the two basilicas. Next to the old basilica (*basilica vetus*), in which the relics of St. Felix had rested for more than a century, Paulinus built a new basilica (*basilica nova*) between 401 and 403, which extended from south to north and in which he housed the holy relics he had received from various places during his years in Nola. With the intention of transforming the two churches into a single sacred space, he ordered the demoli-

[37] Sulpicius Severus was a disciple of St. Martin and wrote most of the texts dedicated to him with the aim of glorifying Martin's life and deeds after his death. The establishment of Martin's cult – which manifested itself in the writing of his *Vita*, among other things – was of the utmost importance to Severus. For this reason, he chose the image of Martin specifically for the baptistery. On the relationship between Sulpicius Severus and Martin, see Stancliffe 1983, 15–107.

[38] On Christian friendship (*amicitia*), see White 1992, 146–164.

tion of part of the north wall of the old basilica so that the altar of the newly built church could be clearly seen from the place where the relics of St. Felix rested. This created a fundamental visual unity between the two churches.[39] As at Primuliacum, Paulinus marked the entire sacred complex with his verses to clarify the importance of his architectural project and to communicate it clearly to his sensory community – or at any rate to those who could read them (Paul. *Ep*. 32.13, 32.15–16).

The paraphrased letter to Severus invites an analysis of the important role that the carefully defined sacred space played in Paulinus' efforts to constitute his liturgical and sensory community as a unified whole. The portraits in the baptistery at Primuliacum – portraits to which Paulinus objected only because his own image appeared on the wall – were not merely decorative. As a kind of reminder that a piece of paradise was present on earth during the baptismal rite, the ornate baptistery played a role in teaching the neophytes how to navigate their newly awakened spiritual sensorium (v. Caseau 2014, 93). The figures depicted were chosen for this purpose: A quick glance at their monumental portraits was enough for the viewer to recognize in them, conceived as two extremes of the Christian life, the symbolism of the transformation guaranteed by baptism.[40] The *tituli* were written for educated Christians; as N. Bock notes, they were intended to frame the portraits with meaning and to highlight a contrast among the painted figures as idealized models similar to that between catechumens and neophytes (Bock 2013, 19–20).[41] The verses were also relevant to the architecture of the complex at Cimitile, where they served not to emphasize the decoration but to highlight the role of the architecture itself in creating a sacred space. By uniting the two basilicas into a spiritual whole, Paulinus enabled his sensory community to contemplate the relics of St. Felix and other sacred relics simultaneously. Given the attention he paid to light in his sensory poetics, it was crucial for him to establish visual contact between the most precious material relics of sanctity – an endeavor that ultimately led to the literal elimination of the physical distance between them.[42] Taking all this into account, we can conclude that Paulinus created a spiritually stimulating sensory environment on both a spatial and textual level. The architecture and decoration accessible to the physical sensorium were reinterpreted through verses in the form

[39] Paulinus describes his intentions in Paul. *Ep*. 32.10–13. Trout 1999, 150–154, summarizes the results of Paulinus' years of building activity.

[40] Lehmann 1997, 63 comes to the conclusion that the portraits of St. Martin and Paulinus were originally planned as part of the monumental decoration of the baptistery in Primulacium. As they have not survived, Lehmann compares them with the mosaic depicting St. Ambrose in San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro. Bock 2013, 15 agrees with this conclusion.

[41] Conybeare 2000, 95–96, also came to the conclusion that the images were intended for the illiterate, while the verses were intended for the educated.

[42] Conybeare 2000, 93–94, emphasizes the importance of light in the works of Paulinus. On the tactility of vision in ancient optical theories, see Frank 2000, 122–124.

of inscriptions, with the intention of transforming the sacred space into a *classroom* and a *stage* for contemplation. In such an environment, the acquired spiritual sensory apparatus – awakened and strengthened by the holy sacrament of baptism – could perceive what lay beyond the reach of the physical senses.

Once we have identified some of Paulinus' efforts to open the spiritual sensorium among the members of his liturgical community, we now turn to the next central point in this inquiry: the use of the cult of St. Felix in this context. The feast of St. Felix on January 14 was marked in the local liturgical calendar as one of the most important days of the year for the Nolan community, which was led by Paulinus, first as a priest and later as a bishop.[43] As a sort of an *impresario* of the cult of Felix, Paulinus sought to unite the assembled Christians – the inhabitants of Nola and the surrounding area as well as the pilgrims who arrived on the eve of the feast – through a stimulating and sumptuous atmosphere, which, as we learn directly from the *Natalicia* and his letters, had a distinctively sensory character. Preparations for the feast began the night before, when the first pilgrims arrived in Cimitile.[44] Paulinus described their arrival with a rich visual vocabulary, depicting it as a kind of overture to the feast – before them "the monotony of the night was dispelled by fervent prayers, and the torches with their flames overcame the darkness" (Paul. *Carm*. 14.47–48). The pilgrims spent the festive night in huts near Felix's shrine and awaited the feast with longing and harmonious singing (Paul. *Carm*. 21.91–94). According to Paulinus, the voices of the pious Christians from the nearby lodgings seemed strong enough to lift the roof of St. Felix's basilica (Paul. *Ep*. 29.13). In it rested the holy relics, and most pilgrims had come to Nola to approach them – to see them, to inhale their fragrance of incorruptibility, but above all to touch and venerate them. In his third *Natalicium* from 397, Paulinus described what the members of his sensory community could perceive: the golden threshold of the old basilica, where the immortal relics of St. Felix lay in a tomb, was adorned with snow-white curtains, while the altar was lit by numerous fragrant wax lamps that burned day and night and illuminated the entire church (Paul. *Carm*. 14.97–103).

To be present at this time and place – on the feast of St. Felix, in close proximity to his relics – was to truly feel holiness, and this experience was enhanced by a carefully crafted sensory environment. At the center of this spiritual event was the pilgrim's body, and Paulinus, in order to stimulate the spiritual sensorium, relied

[43] Paulinus begins his *Natalicium* from the year 398 with a praise of St. Felix and emphasizes that his "heavenly birthday" is more important to him than his own (Paul. *Carm*. 15.1–3).

[44] Although in a different context, Paulinus emphasizes in one of his letters (Paul. *Ep*. 49.14) that the pilgrims who went to Jerusalem did so to see and touch the places where Christ had been physically present, i.e. to personally experience the space in which he had lived and dwelt. It can be assumed that he understood the intentions of the pilgrims who came to Nola in a similar way, as they sought contact with the relics of St. Felix.

on various stimuli corresponding to the physical senses to bring his flock closer to the Lord through the presence of the holy patron saint of Nola. Here are the stimuli Paulinus emphasizes to create such an environment: a play of light and color unfolded before the eyes of the assembled Christians;[45] their hands touched the cold marble covering the holy relics (Paul. *Ep*. 32.17); hymns and the words of Paulinus echoed in their ears; and the fragrance of the wax candles and the incorrupt body lingered in their noses (Paul. *Carm*. 18.125–129).[46] In this particular setting, purposely designed to fully engage the senses of the liturgical community, Paulinus recited the carefully composed *Natalicia* year after year – texts that not only glorified St. Felix, but also served as a didactic device to educate the faithful through the mental reproduction of a sensory experience. How, then, did he implement this in practice?

Since, as we have already emphasized, the body was at the center of the entire spiritual experience – understood here as the intersection between external sensory stimuli and culturally conditioned internal responses – Paulinus programmatically devoted his *Natalicia* to themes based on bodily sensuality. This, in turn, allows us to conclude that they were carefully composed to elicit a desired emotional response, which could eventually lead the audience to open their spiritual sensorium. For this reason, in the four-year cycle of the *Natalicia* from 398 to 401, he chose to base his narratives about the life of St. Felix – his sufferings during the brutal persecutions of Christians in the mid-third century and his first posthumous miracles – on two central early Christian themes: martyrdom and miracle-working.[47] In both cases the body served as both *agens* and *locus*. Paulinus in his poems provoked a physical response in his audience, seeking to transform the entire community into a unified corpus that participated in the narrative through sensory imagination and a desire to identify with the subject. This, I suggest, is one of the key strategies he employed to promote the opening of the spiritual sensorium among the members of his flock.

Let us consider this within a broader context. As has long been known, the authors of the earliest early Christian *passiones* had already made the martyr's body the core and vertical axis of their narratives – the humiliation, suffering and mutilation of this body served not only as a means of characterizing the action and structuring the stages that inevitably led to the climax of martyrdom, but also underscored the process of his transformation from nothingness to holiness. In this

[45] On the use of light and the "polychromatic poetics" of Paulinus, see Cox Miller 2000, 231–234. On the role of visual decoration in late antique churches in the context of sensory studies, see Caseau 2022.

[46] On the role of smell in Christian devotional practice and its significance, see Ashbrook Harvey 1999 and Roch 2010.

[47] These are the 15th, 16th, 20th and 23rd *Natalicia*. For the chronology, see Walsh 1975, 6–7.

respect, Christian authors deliberately placed the sensory dimension of suffering at the center of the narrative, which, especially in the presence of holy relics or on great feast days, could awaken in the audience the desire to identify with the martyr and thus participate in the complex psychodrama that was playing out *before* them and *within* them as they listened to the story (Cox Miller 2000, 215–216). In this way, the empathy triggered by identification with the martyr's pain enabled the internalization of the narrative through the sensory imagination – that is, the humiliations and torments endured by the sufferer were made his own and became a physical, sensually accessible testimony to the disintegration and eventual reintegration of the sacred body.[48]

Paulinus continued this tradition in a manner distinctly his own. Standing before the relics of St. Felix – the holy body transfigured by suffering – he called on his flock not to fear pain and death, but to trust their senses and see that St. Felix, like other martyrs, was alive in the Lord in his mortal remains (Paul. *Carm.* 15.68–70, 15.144–152). To convince them that what lay before them was a living saint and not just an ordinary corpse, Paulinus directed the gaze of his flock to the body only apparently dead. In truth, he reminded them, Christ had triumphed over death precisely through the appearance of death (Paul. *Carm.* 15.159–160). Before the living body of the martyr, Paulinus began to describe the sufferings that Felix had endured during his earthly life in order to make those present identify with him. By imaginatively reproducing the sensory experience, this identification could then serve to strengthen them in their pursuit of a righteous Christian life.

In this respect, Paulinus' particularly vivid and detailed description of Felix suffering in prison merits closer analysis as a metatextual strategy. Locked in a dark cell, his hands and feet bound with cold iron chains, his legs numb from the posture he was forced to adopt, and lying on a bed strewn with shards of clay so that he could find no rest in sleep, Felix endured torments that would drive any man to despair (Paul. *Carm.* 15.183–186). Yet even in this darkness, he was not deprived of the light – which was Christ himself – and his soul wandered freely through paradise, while his tormented body remained imprisoned, afflicted by every kind of suffering (Paul. *Carm.* 15.187–193). As we learn later in the first *Natalicium* dedicated to the life of Felix, he miraculously escaped from prison with the help of Christ, only to find himself in a similar situation when a new wave of persecution of Christians began. Fleeing from his persecutors, he hid – again by the grace of God – in a dark cistern, cut off from all human contact, condemned to loneliness and suffering. And once again, his only consolation was Christ himself, who visited him, spoke to him and fed and refreshed him with his own hand (Paul. *Carm.* 16.155–157, 16.195–201).

[48] On the concept of sensory imagination in anthropological studies, see Howes 2005, 4–5.

There is no doubt that the descriptions of Felix's suffering could have provoked a strong reaction in the assembled Christians. The intense emotional reaction that each individual was to feel in his own body was undoubtedly part of Paulinus' strategy. One factor that significantly shifts the perspective on the range of possible reactions, however, lies in the complete inversion of cultural sensory codes – a feature that characterizes both the earliest texts devoted to Christian martyrdom and Paulinus' *Natalicia*. In other words, anything that would have been unusual or unacceptable in a profane context unmistakably signaled holiness in the context of martyrdom. The descriptions of the martyr's naked and humiliated body were not intended to arouse shame, but rather to remove the body from the secular frame of reference and establish it as an indisputable symbol of the sacred (Ashbrook Harvey 2014, 107–108). A body oppressed and humiliated by pain, which reached the limits of human endurance, was simultaneously transfigured by a borderline experience, so that the sensory stimuli associated with pain and misfortune could be transformed into signs of joy and salvation (Cox Miller 2005, 42–43).

Paulinus' depictions of Felix's suffering should be read from that perspective. With vivid detail in his text – as if inviting the members of his liturgical community to share in the saint's sufferings – Paulinus sought to blur the ontological boundary between the faithful and the saint, with the aim that each individual could feel firsthand the agony of the saintly protector of Nola. Felix's transformation, crowned with the "wreath of glory that never fades" – a glory so omnipresent that Paulinus even interrupts the flow of his narrative to ask the faithful to look to the saint's relics – presented a sensually accessible and undeniable truth (Paul. *Carm.* 15.358–361). By participating in Felix's suffering – by mentally reproducing the painful experience through sensory imagination – the individual was to experience a transformation of his own body and senses. In the seemingly lifeless yet present relics of the saint, each Christian – and the entire community as a whole, which at that moment was transformed from a liturgical to a sensory community – was to perceive the presence of a living saint through transformative compassion and sensual identification. The opening of the spiritual sensorium was in fact triggered by a strong physical response to participation in an imaginary event, so that the new senses could finally perceive signs of life and holiness in the seemingly dead body. Through *suffering for* Christ, the awakened spiritual senses were able to perceive the foundations of *life in* Christ.

From all this we can conclude that the relics of St. Felix – which occupied a central place in the church complex in Cimitile – essentially served as a meeting place for the entire liturgical community under the leadership of Paulinus. Considering the role of first imaginary and then actual physical experience in the process of mastering the inner sensorium, it is clear that the miracles of St. Felix – in con-

trast to spiritual compassion, which remained inaccessible to the senses – further strengthened each individual's conviction that the Lord was present through his saints. This sentiment ultimately underpinned the transformation of the liturgical community into a sensory community that, through the articulation of its leader, formed and adopted its own modalities of sensory perception and interpreted their meaning within a particular cultural and value-laden framework.

Since Paulinus was one of the first Christian authors to literalize witnessed miracles – which, according to G. De Nie, he did in a particular way by integrating biblical motifs into a Vergilian aesthetic – the function he attributed to the senses and sensory perception, both within the narrative itself and beyond, in relation to the community he was addressing, will be examined below (De Nie 2005, 70–71). In this context, the 18th, 20th and 23rd *Natalicia* are important sources for examining the variety of modalities that miracle stories can possess – from the affirmation of the divine presence revealed to the senses through the body itself, to the allegorical reading of a latent sinfulness revealed through bodily suffering and then nullified through the symbolic transformation of the sensory organs.[49]

Standing before the relics of St. Felix, surrounded by his flock, Paulinus rhetorically posed the question of the nature of the power that drew so many people to the martyr's tomb. "What is this force," he asked, "that binds demons, holds them captive against their will and compels them to struggle in vain with rebellious cries before the martyr's tomb?" (Paul. *Carm.* 18.97–101). In this context, Paulinus underscored that for the human eye – here understood as physical sight – there was no living man in the tomb (Paul. *Carm.* 18.94–95). But although the mortal remains of the saint were hidden, he emphasized that the grace of God could not be extinguished or buried together with the body. Rather, it shone forth from the tomb in the form of a radiant light, serving as indisputable proof that the saint was still alive (Paul. *Carm.* 18.155–161). Yet this light – a convincing symbol of the saint's life in heaven and the grace he poured out on his flock as a protector – could only be perceived with a well-trained spiritual sensorium. In contrast, those who viewed the seemingly lifeless body with skepticism were able to convince themselves directly of the saint's undeniable *praesentia* through the miracles – and also through Paulinus' literary interpretation of these events – by entering the realm of the divine through their own spiritual sensory apparatus.

Two stories with related themes best illustrate the potential that the miracles had to confirm the real presence of the saint in his own relics through the senses.

[49] Paulinus composed the 18th and 23rd *Natalicia* in the years 400–401. In view of their characteristics, we believe that a somewhat later poem in honor of St. Felix – *Natalicium* 20 in the critical edition (406) – can rightly be included in this narratively coherent group. For the chronology, see Walsh 1975, 6–7.

In *Natalicium* 18, in which he explains that he had to select a representative episode from the many miracles performed by Felix – one that best testifies to the saint's benevolence and his constant concern for his flock – Paulinus tells the story of a poor peasant who had two oxen stolen in the night, depriving him of his only source of income and endangering his survival (Paul. *Carm.* 18.219–233). Knowing no other way out, the desperate man made his way to the tomb of St. Felix to ask the protector of Nola for help – but not without rebuking him for not preventing the crime, not shedding light on the darkness and not leaving a trail that could have revealed the thieves' escape route (Paul. *Carm.* 18.245–284). The peasant even went so far as to accuse Felix of being an accomplice to the theft – after all, the saint could see everything and extend his reach everywhere, even to what was hidden and far away. The man therefore proposed a deal: in return for the recovery of his oxen, he would entrust the fate of the thieves to Felix's mercy (Paul. *Carm.* 18.298–308). After the servants of the shrine forcibly removed him from the relics to close the church, the peasant sadly returned to his dark and desolate lodgings and spent the night lamenting the loss of his oxen. Paulinus notes that at no time did the peasant spiritually distance himself from the sanctuary of Felix, clinging to him as his only hope (Paul. *Carm.* 18.313–354). In the middle of the night, however, the man heard a knock at the door – and through the small openings it seemed as if a "white ray from heaven shone into the darkness". At his door stood the very oxen he had lost and which had miraculously returned, "led by Felix's invisible reins", all the way to his house (Paul. *Carm.* 18.355–404). Although the peasant was overwhelmed with joy, he did not forget his vow to Felix: together with the oxen, he set off to the church to fulfill his promise. The unusual scene attracted a large crowd in front of the shrine in Cimitile. The man wept with happiness, while the assembled faithful who saw him walking to the church with his oxen sang hymns to Christ and St. Felix, who had been so merciful to a man in need (Paul. *Carm.* 18.426–447). The peasant, who had almost gone blind from weeping, asked Felix to restore his sight as well. The gathered Christians laughed at his exorbitant request, but the saint, who "pricked up his ears", granted this too. When the man felt the touch of the holy hand on his eyes, he soon realized that his sight had been restored, and he wholeheartedly thanked his protector and Christ, through whom the saint performed his works (Paul. *Carm.* 18.462–468).

The second story by Paulinus has a similar theme, but presents the miracles of St. Felix from a completely different perspective. The *Natalicium* from the year 406 begins with the story of a stranger from Abella who had come to Nola to fulfill a vow and feed the poor who had gathered around the shrine of the patron saint of Nola with the meat of a pig he had brought with him for the occasion. But in his dishonest intention, he left only the head and the entrails for the poor and kept the best pieces for himself (Paul. *Carm.* 20.67–85). But the horse carrying the meat

broke loose, the man fell to the ground and remained there in pain because he felt that his legs were bound with invisible chains. Trusting in the help of St. Felix, he asked friends and relatives to carry him to the shrine so that he could pray before the saint's relics (Paul. *Carm.* 20.86–111). The unfortunate man clung to the pillars and kissed them as he lay on the ground, soaking the temple floor with his tears. Soon, Paulinus writes, he became aware of his sin and began to accuse himself of the state he had fallen into (Paul. *Carm.* 20.138–143). Paulinus then records the penitent's speech. Convinced that the agony was a just punishment for his attempt to deceive in a place where others sought blessing, the man harbored no doubt that the pain in his body was deserved. Yet the awareness of sin paradoxically made the pain sweet, for had he not been punished, he would have continued his journey, hiding in his body – a body in rebellion against the Lord – a depravity that only suffering had brought to light (Paul. *Carm.* 20.144–166). In gratitude for the punishment he deserved and as an example to others who had also broken their vows, he wept aloud in agony and begged St. Felix for forgiveness (Paul. *Carm.* 20.167–179). The hand that both punishes and absolves freed him from the invisible chains through the Lord – the man exclaimed that no one but St. Felix could have seen these chains and that no one but he could have felt them (Paul. *Carm.* 20.180–189). Paulinus described how the assembled community watched and listened open-mouthed as the unfortunate man clung to the church door, weeping. When he atoned for his wrongdoing by distributing the meat to the poor, his prayers were answered and he was healed (Paul. *Carm.* 20.190–209). Finally, Paulinus did not miss the opportunity to underscore the moral of the story: The punishment for sin had actually been a blessing for the man from Abella (Paul. *Carm.* 20.210–240). Faith and repentance, the only true remedy for a sinner, had led Christ – who was both avenger and healer, albeit invisible – to intervene through St. Felix in favor of the suffering man. In other words, the punishment and subsequent healing were an unmistakable sign that Felix was indeed present in his community and constantly intervening in their lives as their rightful shepherd (Paul. *Carm.* 20.269–276).

The extensive paraphrase of the two episodes from the *Natalicia* emphasizes in detail the hidden subtleties of Paulinus' complex and multi-layered approach to the function of sensory perception in the working of miracles. First, although the already elaborate structure of the narrative clearly points in this direction, in both cases Paulinus' voice dominates the text and serves as the decisive *agens* in the choice of narrative perspective, directing the course of events and determining their rhythm and dynamics. Indeed, Paulinus offered his own interpretive framework for understanding the miracles, from the inner struggles and borderline experiences of the two protagonists to the retrospective speeches he attributed to them – speeches in which the narrative comes to a head and finally resolves at the height of emotional intensity. In his effort to awaken in his audience the desire to identify

with the participants in these stories, Paulinus interspersed the entire narrative with rich and vivid descriptions of their lived sensory experiences. In this respect, he approached the miracle from a first-person perspective – from the point of view of those who, as he repeatedly stressed, were the only ones who could bear witness to it. The credibility of their testimony within the narrative was lent precisely by the sensory experience they lived through and which, as in the case of the martyrdom narrative, Paulinus sought to convey with authenticity and reproduce among the members of his sensory community by stimulating their imagination. The way in which the miracle was felt in one's own body – or, more precisely, how it was reinterpreted in it through a sensory apparatus attuned to the register of the transcendent – was for Paulinus a reality that had to be presented as an event in which each individual could fully participate. The confirmation of the authenticity of the miracles – the return of the oxen, the restoration of sight, the revival of paralyzed limbs – should therefore point to an even greater truth: the real presence of St. Felix in his own relics.

But Paulinus was ultimately hardly interested only in proving that the holy protector of Nola was really present. If we take into account other means by which Paulinus confirmed his *praesentia*, this was a matter of course. On the contrary, Paulinus built on this fact a complex sensory ethics whose norms were directly determined by bodily and sensory experience. Thus the stranger from Abella only recognized his own sinfulness through unbearable pain. Through an inversion of cultural sensory codes – which, as we have shown, was also evident in Paulinus' descriptions of martyrdom – the sinner's suffering became sweet, and its sweetness was based on a love of truth and a desire to abolish sin. Since miracles were usually public events, the sinner's suffering was witnessed by other Christians gathered together. Paulinus was therefore faced with the question of how he could best pass on the experience of a very intimate physical pain – something that can hardly be conveyed emotionally with words alone. The answer apparently lay in externalization – in the sinner's unbearable cries, which served as an ideal vehicle for arousing compassion in the flock. Moreover, the audience in the story can essentially be identified with Paulinus' actual audience. By removing the boundary between text and reality, the criminal's lament was intended to evoke the audience's sympathy even beyond the immediate context of the events. Everyone was meant to identify with the exemplary sinner in his agony and, wounded by his pain – reproduced through sensory imagination and transformed into their own sensory experience – undergo a transformation like his. In a word, the miracle took place, was perceived and understood in the body – and the senses served as unambiguous markers in this process, acting as multivalent indicators of meaning that would lead both the actor and the observer to the correct interpretation.

The culmination of Paulinus' allegorical interpretation of the process by which the spiritual sensorium is opened in the members of his sensory community is best seen in the story of Theridius' eye. The entire narrative is built around an elaborate *vignette*: the monk Theridius, a member of Paulinus' ascetic community, was injured on the eve of the feast of St. Felix. Walking in the dark through a winding corridor of the house, he collided with a hanging lamp that was set unusually low and seriously injured his eye (Paul. *Carm.* 23.117–159). As Paulinus recounts in the *Natalicium*, the hook of the lamp pierced Theridius' eye and hit it in the most sensitive spot – where even the skillful hand of a physician would hesitate to operate (Paul. *Carm.* 23.164–169). In excruciating pain and anguish, Theridius began to cry out and invoke his holy protector Felix in prayer, trusting in his help as the only salvation (Paul. *Carm.* 23.197–200). At the same time, Theridius was concerned about the gravity of his sins that had led him to this misfortune. He repented aloud that he had committed many sins, as he had been punished on the eve of the great feast. Theridius knew that St. Felix was sitting next to the Lord at that moment and asked him to hear his cries and address his supplications directly to Christ (Paul. *Carm.* 23.201–213). Trusting in the Lord's mercy, he implored that the one who had given him sight would now lay his holy hands on his wounded eye and free him from the unbearable pain (Paul. *Carm.* 23.222–227). Paulinus goes on to emphasize that Theridius fully accepted the justice of his punishment – if Felix had truly wished to be just, he would have had to lose both eyes so that his face would correspond to the darkness of his heart. It was this inner darkness that had led to his depravity and, according to Paulinus' interpretation, had caused his sin (Paul. *Carm.* 23.228–244). But when Theridius sincerely repented, he felt the reassuring presence of Felix's hand, which encouraged his own hand to remove the hook. As a sign of healing and subsequent purification, a flood of tears flowed from the wounded eye (Paul. *Carm.* 23.255–265). Paulinus concluded the story with a highly symbolic image: a radiant light – the hand of St. Felix – streamed from Theridius's healed and sin-cleansed eye, which had finally been opened to true sight (Paul. *Carm.* 23.325–335).

The fact that the central theme of this *Natalicium* is Paulinus' allegorical interpretation of the injury to Theridius' eye – arguably the most significant and symbolically charged sensory organ among Late Antique Christians – enables us both to expand upon our earlier conclusions and bring to a conclusion our analysis of Paulinus' efforts to awaken and instruct the spiritual sensorium of his liturgical community. As in other miracle narratives, we find here the conspicuous presence of St. Felix and his willingness to act as an intercessor with Christ for the pious who ask him for help. On the other hand, the fact that the story of a man's moral transformation and repentance focuses specifically on the eye as a sensory organ speaks volumes about the complexity of Paulinus' view of the inner perceptual apparatus. As we have shown, Paulinus did not shy away from using sight and

blindness as binary opposites and interpreting them symbolically within an ethical framework to represent them as markers of a life of virtue or sin. In this case, however, Paulinus transcends these earlier boundaries and employs the eye as an abstraction – unlike earlier cases, the ethical coordinates are no longer mediated solely by the function of the eye; instead, the entire transformation of the individual brought about by repentance unfolds in the eye itself, through the miracle. In other words, the eye assumes an active role in the narrative and becomes the very *agens* of transformation, so that both sight and blindness – previously reduced to symbolic ethical markers – must now be understood in their literal sense. The radiance of Theridius' eye, in which Paulinus recognized the unmistakable trace of St. Felix's hand, became identical with the divine light emanating from the saint's tomb.

According to Paulinus, the Christians who witnessed miracles – or at least participated in them indirectly via the *Natalicia* – were not simply standing in front of the tomb of a "very special dead man" in Cimitile.[50] On the contrary, the *Natalicia* were intended to bear witness to the fact that this was a living saint and to invite the Christians gathered in the liturgical community to engage spiritually with the events they were hearing about. This intention was supported by a carefully orchestrated sensory environment designed to awaken in them the feeling that the heavenly and divine was truly accessible. In both the material and imaginary environments, Paulinus played the role of spiritual guide as the leader of the liturgical community. Through his various initiatives – which, in addition to those already mentioned, include his efforts to express the abstract and unattainable, such as eschatological concepts, in the language of the senses – he aimed to establish his liturgical community on a broader level.

By creating his own language and semantic framework for understanding transcendent Christian reality, Paulinus employed the familiar concept of the spiritual sensorium to gather his flock into a unified sensory community that followed him in his interpretations. They gathered not only physically around the relics of the saint, but also spiritually – perceiving through their inner senses a reality that otherwise seemed inaccessible to them – and were not meant to see only a symbol in the light that radiated from the tomb of St. Felix. On the contrary, Paulinus taught them to recognize in the stimuli accessible to the spiritual senses the traces of eternal Christian truth, which testified not only to ethical standards and moral conduct, but also to the truthfulness of the soteriological promises. With Paulinus at the helm and under his influence, this sensory community was able to personally confirm the reality and truth of the Christian message in the presence of the tomb of the Nolan saint – first through their physical senses and then through their awakened spiritual senses.

[50] This refers to a way of describing holy men used by P. Brown (Brown 1981, 69).

It is appropriate to conclude this study by returning to one of the premises mentioned in the introduction. Having summarized the specific findings about Paulinus' sensory community and his efforts to awaken the spiritual sensorium of its members, we can argue that the concept of sensory community has a real analytical value. As a suitable analytical framework that helps to avoid overly general or reductive conclusions about the perceptions and values associated with the senses, it provides a degree of assurance that sensory experience is not reduced exclusively to its physical or metaphorical component. Instead, it allows this experience to be considered in the complexity of its social context. Furthermore, examining early Christian devotional practice through the lens of the sensory community allows for a more sophisticated understanding of liturgical life by looking at rituals and customs from the perspective of the community itself. The complexity of religious experience in a particular liturgical setting thus becomes more comprehensible when one approaches the sensory responses of the faithful and also the ways in which these responses were shaped. In this regard, several examples discussed in this study – particularly Paulinus' nuanced use of the senses across different modalities – clearly justify this approach. Further research is certainly warranted to assess the broader applicability of the concept of sensory community. This study aims to contribute to ongoing discussions in the field of sensory history and point to possible directions for the study of sensory experience in late antiquity.

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Sensus corporei, sensus spirituales: Чулна заједница Павлина из Ноле

Апстракт: У раду настојимо да истражимо однос Павлина из Ноле према чулима у домену хришћанске побожне праксе. Оквир истраживања одређен је претпоставком да је група људи којој се Павлин обраћао у својим делима, превасходно у *Наталицијима*, представљала једну чулну заједницу, односно скупину људи која је делила основни скуп схватања и вредности везан за чулно опажање. На уобичајени начин за оновремене хришћанске писце, Павлин је сматрао да човек може да се ослања на два комплементарна, али суштински различита чулна апарата, која се начелно могу окарактерисати као телесни и духовни сензоријум. Духовни сензоријум, према његовом мишљењу, требало је користити ради опажања натчулне духовне стварности, недоступне обичним, физичким чулима. С тим у вези, анализираћемо начине и средства на које се Павлин из Ноле ослањао како би своју чулну заједницу подучио да помоћу духовног чулног апарата, посредством светаца – у првом реду св. Феликса – приступи самом Богу.

Кључне речи: Павлин из Ноле, чула, чулна историја, чулна заједница, духовни сензоријум, Св. Феликс.

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