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PERFUME

العطور

*Lise Manniche*

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## PERFUME

## العطور

*Lise Manniche*

Parfüm  
Parfum

*Perfume in Egypt was fat-based, and the ingredients most often mentioned in texts are frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, and cardamom. Scent had an important role in temple and funerary ritual. Furthermore, perfume was a luxury item and a commodity traded in the Mediterranean.*

صنعت العطور المصرية من أساس دهني وقد ذكرت النصوص إضافة البخور الزكي الرائحة والقرفة والمر وحب الهال إلى هذا الأساس. كان للعطور دور هام في طقوس المعابد والطقوس الجنائزية، وكانت تعتبر مادة متلفة وغالية وكسلعة تجارية ببلاد البحر الأبيض المتوسط.

**I**n ancient Egypt, scent was released in the form of incense, or it was prepared on a base of oils or fat. Although distillation appears to have been known in parts of the ancient world c. 2000 BCE (Belgiorno 2007), there is as yet no proof of its having been applied in Pharaonic Egypt. The sources of our information are as follows: prescriptions included in medical papyri (e.g., Papyrus Ebers) or on temple walls (e.g., Edfu, Philae) or quoted by classical authors (e.g., Theophrastus, Pliny, Galen, Dioscorides); representations of activities related to scent manufacture on tomb walls; scent containers and representations of such containers on the walls of tombs and temples, indicating contexts in which scent was used; surviving raw materials; surviving prepared substances and analyses thereof; and survivals in Islamic and modern practices. Scent was a luxury item. Costly ingredients were imported, prepared, and exported, and there are many examples of this traffic both entering and leaving Egypt from as early as 2000 BCE. This trade was a major force in the Egyptian

economy (Serpico and White 2000a). Traditionally, frankincense and myrrh came from the land of Punt (in the area of Eritrea and Somalia [Kitchen 2001]), but Syria-Palestine is known to be a source of pistacia resin.

### *Ingredients*

When assessing the ingredients that went into scented preparations as quoted in texts, the main problem encountered is of a lexicographical nature. Although the general category of an ingredient is indicated by a determinative, many plant names remain unidentified, and some designations may have changed or developed over the centuries. Where translations into Greek are available, this is only helpful up to a point, as authors may suggest a substitute ingredient, rather than a translation, for a plant that was perhaps not available locally. Adulteration of expensive scents was common. Foreign ingredients of a durable nature were appreciated for their rarity, and preparations from more common and ephemeral

ingredients (e.g., lotus) do not appear to have been recorded as frequently. When quoting Egyptian recipes for scents, classical authors make frequent mention of a small number of popular ingredients: frankincense, myrrh, cinnamon, cassia, and cardamom. All of these would themselves have been imported by the Egyptians. Temple records of New-Kingdom date mention large shipments of frankincense and myrrh, which is known to have been acquired on the coast of modern Somalia and Eritrea (Fattovich and Bard 2006). The spices would have come by caravan from even further afield. Ptolemaic inscriptions specify numerous designations for gums and resins according to age, color, texture, etc. Other plant ingredients quoted include iris, henna, juniper, lily, marjoram, mint, myrtle, sweet flag, cyprus grass, mastic, and pistacia resin (fig. 1). Occasionally, mineral ingredients are included.

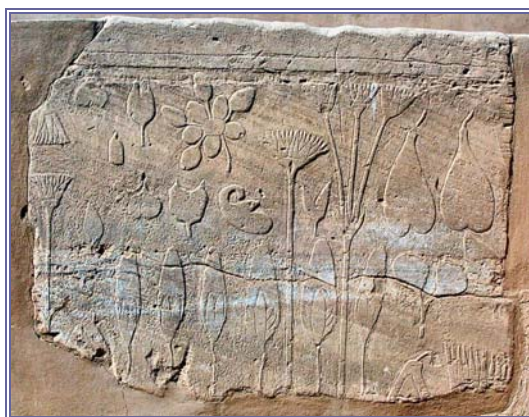


Figure 1. Samples of plants as depicted in the “botanical garden” of Thutmose III at Karnak (18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).

Known base ingredients for incense are raisins and sycamore figs, but raisins would burn easily on their own. Available base ingredients for scent to be applied to the body would include oil of local *Sesamum indicum* L., *Ricinus communis* L., *Balanos aegyptiaca* L., *Moringa oleifera*, and (in limited quantity and probably imported) olive and almond, with fat of ox, sheep, or fowl for a more solid unguent. Pulp or liquid (*reben*) of starchy seeds of an as-yet-unidentified Ethiopian tree (*nedjem*) was also used. Most available analyses

of the contents of perfume jars are antiquated and only specify “fatty matter” (e.g., analyses of the substances from the tomb of Tutankhamun [Chapman and Plenderleith 1926]) or are summary (Reutter 1913), but results of the application of modern technology are beginning to appear (Serpico and White 2000a, 2000b). Samples taken from the mummy of Ramesses II were subjected to pollen analysis with interesting results: his body had been anointed with chamomile oil, the flower having grown in a field with a host of other plants that left pollen traces (Leroi-Gourhan 1985). Ongoing research in French laboratories (and elsewhere) using chromatography and infrared spectroscopy should provide further details on ingredients and methods of preparation, such as wet chemistry, in the future (Leblanc 2003).

### *Manufacture*

Most textual references for the manufacture of Egyptian scents date to the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. In order to extract the properties of plants and flowers to be added to the base material, the Egyptians used maceration and boiling (Serpico and White 2000b). Apart from the choice of ingredients, sequence and timing were crucial, as the ingredient added last would be the most pungent. Some items (e.g., orris root) were added to bind the scents or to bring out the fragrance (e.g., sweet wine added to myrrh). Most perfumes were left in their natural color, although alkanet could be used for dyeing them red.

Details of perfume preparation are available primarily from the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu, where they are inscribed on the walls of the so-called laboratory, which, due to lack of light and ventilation, rather served as a storeroom (fig. 2). The instructions may have been copied from a “Book of Unguent” mentioned among the library books stored in the temple of Dendara (Chassinat 1966 -: 817). The entire operation might take up to a year, even two, if the preparation of the base ingredient was included. Before proceeding with the main ingredients, the oil or fat was



Figure 2. Recipes for scents as recorded in the “laboratory” of the temple of Edfu (Ptolemaic).



Figure 3. Glass perfume bottles in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (New Kingdom).

made astringent by adding herbs and spices. The recipes are meticulous in specifying quantities, especially of the reduction that would take place during cooking, which if done correctly, would have a pre-calculated end result (usually 1 *hin*, or 0.5 L).

Classical authors give many instructions about preparing scent with frequent references to Egyptian practices. These scents were aimed at Greek or Roman customers, and the perfume was a luxury item, not necessarily for sacred use. Perfume may have been imported from Egypt in bulk or in glass bottles (fig. 3), which have been found all over the Mediterranean. It may also have been prepared “on license” from ingredients shipped in - hence the need for having the recipes in print. Delicate floral scents had to be macerated several times. For making a batch of lily perfume, Dioscorides (1.62)

reports that he would take 1000 lilies and macerate them for 24 hours in spiced balanos oil. After straining and skimming, another 1000 lilies would be macerated in this oil. The more times this was repeated, the stronger the scent.

The manufacture of scent must have been a major industry in Egypt. However, no production centers seem to have been unearthed, and, unlike other crafts, it was hardly ever included in tomb decoration. One exception is a 26<sup>th</sup>-Dynasty representation of the squeezing of flowers now in the Louvre (Manniche 1999: 69); another is a unique sequence of figures painted on the wall of the anonymous (non-royal) Theban tomb number 175, which dates to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and shows grinding, sifting, cooking, and bottling along with some of the ingredients (fig. 4).

#### Uses

Incense was burnt in quantity during the daily temple ritual (fig. 5), as well as in connection with embalming (Buckley and Evershed 2001; Buckley et al. 1999), at funerary ceremonies (fig. 6), and at home, the purpose being to purify the air. The overall caption for this act is *jrt sntr*, *sntr* having recently been demonstrated to be a specific designation for pistacia resin (Serpico and White 2000b: 884-886), although it probably carries an extended meaning. The most famous of all scents was kyphi, known from three versions on temple walls (two at Edfu, one at Philae), from papyri (P. Ebers), and from mentions as early as the Pyramid Texts. Kyphi is the Greek rendering of Egyptian *kapet*, which means a substance to be smoked (= *pro fumo*). Kyphi was also quoted extensively by classical writers (Galen, quoting Damocrates quoting Rufus from Ephesos; Dioscorides; Plutarch, quoting Manetho) and in the Middle Ages (Nicolaos from Alexandria, c. CE 1300). The number of ingredients in kyphi is in the region of 16, including resins, herbs and spices on a base of raisins. Already in the New Kingdom, P. Ebers included a recipe for kyphi, but with fewer ingredients. Galen prescribed it for snakebites, but Plutarch described the spiritual





Figure 4. Preparation of scent in TT 175 at Thebes (18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).



Figure 5. Tutankhamun burning incense in Luxor temple (18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).

and therapeutic effects of inhaling kyphi or even taking it in wine. He specifies a sun kyphi and a moon kyphi. Attempts have been made at recreating and marketing kyphi in modern times, but any claim to authenticity would stumble over lexicographical hurdles.

Perfumed oils or fats were used for anointing the image of the deity during the daily temple ritual (fig. 7), and liquid resin was poured over offering tables (fig. 8). Perfume was also part of the “package” given by the king to worthy officials during reward ceremonies, along with golden necklaces and sometimes gloves (fig. 9). It played a major part in funerary beliefs for ordinary mortals as well as for royalty. Tutankhamun’s tomb contained some 350 liters of oils and fats, some in fanciful containers carved of calcite (alabaster). The value of this commodity can be appreciated by the fact that the second lot of robbers who entered the tomb brought



Figure 6. A priest burning incense in front of a deceased couple in TT 255 (19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).



Figure 7. Ramesses II preparing to anoint the deity in Luxor Temple (19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).



Figure 8. Pouring liquid scent over offerings in Luxor temple (18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).



Figure 10. Couple with “unguent cones” and lotus flowers in TT 255 (19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty).



Figure 9. Rewarding of the high priest, Amenhotep, by Ramesses IX at Karnak.

with them leather skins specifically for removing the oils. Residue remains in the jars to this day, some with the fingerprints of the robbers who scooped out the contents. The elite in Egypt would include in their burials samples of the traditional seven sacred oils, and no doubt also larger containers, such as

those shown on the walls of their tomb chapels from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Dynasty. Smaller containers, often called cosmetic spoons, were carved out of wood or alabaster in the shape of swimming girls with ducks, lotus flowers, pomegranates, gazelles, or similar. By having an erotic significance, these spoons would assist the deceased in the quest for rebirth and eternal life. In tomb scenes depicting banquets on the occasion of annual funerary festivals, guests appear (Cherpion 1994) to be balancing cones of unguent (fig. 10) on top of their heads, though this is probably an indication from the artist that the guests were heavily perfumed with otherwise invisible scent. Scent played a major part in the erotic imagination of the Egyptians at many levels, from love poems to theogamy tales where the identity of a god is revealed through the perfume he exudes at the crucial moment (Sethe 1933: *Urk. IV*: 219, 13).

## *Bibliographic Notes*

The most comprehensive treatment of this subject is Manniche (1999). Other works with substantial chapters or entries on ancient Egyptian perfume include Paszthory (1992), Winand and Malaise (1993), and Charron et al. (2002).

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