

“Cleopatra herself reclined beneath a canopy of cloth of gold, dressed in the character of Venus. Boys costumed as Cupids accompanied her. Instead of a crew the barge was lined with the most beautiful of her waiting-women attired as Nereids and Graces, and all the while an indescribably rich perfume, exhaled from innumerable censers, was wafted from the vessel to the river-banks.”<sup>1</sup> Plutarch’s vivid description of Cleopatra’s lavish royal-display has incited a significant number of artists and poets throughout history to produce countless paintings and plays recalling the arrival of her floating palace to meet Mark Antony at Tarsus. Likewise, modern scholarship has enthusiastically pursued all of the conventional facets of her captivating history while failing to give the role of scent the necessary prominence for the insight it can provide not only on her reign but also on the ancient Mediterranean civilizations that provided the context for the function of fragrance as a dynamically powerful symbol.

As Cleopatra’s vessel approached Tarsus, the haze of incense and perfume emanating from her barge amplified her regal presence as it enveloped the people of Cilicia gathered alongside the riverbank. The vessel functioned as a floating shrine bearing the queen as Aphrodite incarnate for these residents of Asia Minor. Since earlier times, humanity instinctively interpreted the scented tendrils of incense and fragrance unfurling towards the heavens as a transcendent connection into the realm of the divine. The presence of fragrance functioned as a vital element in the correlation of perfumed air as the life-giving breath that defied the stench of death. Thus, Cleopatra cast her scented aura over the people of Cilicia to emphasize not only her royal status, but also more

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, “Mark Antony,” in *Makers of Rome*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 293.

importantly her role as benefactor and intermediary of the divine and “the word spread on every side that Venus had come to revel with Bacchus for the benefit of Asia.”<sup>2</sup>

Cleopatra has provided a unique situation for the understanding of the role of scent within ancient Mediterranean civilizations because her reign precipitated the interaction of these distinct cultures, coinciding and ultimately clashing around her to define the role of perfume vested in her image. The Ptolemaic queen of Macedonian descent brought to the residents of Tarsus a regal display of authority enshrined in Egyptian ritual to an appropriately eastern audience while Mark Antony’s presence with his Roman soldiers made the portrayal relevant for a distinct interpretation by a Roman audience. Thus, for the Egyptian, Hebrew, and Persian civilizations, perfume functioned as a veritable symbol of power and authority derived from the religious realm through the existence of structured priesthoods that oversaw the production of aromatic substances and actively supported the role of the ruler as an intermediary of the divine. Likewise, the early Greek civilizations of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans demonstrated a similar understanding of perfume as a symbol of power cultivated within the religious sphere and enforced through their palace-based economies.

As a great admirer of the Homeric epics that attested to the powerful role of scent, Alexander the Great adopted and evolved this early Greek model with his conquest of the East. Alexander adeptly assimilated the powerful construct of scent already present within Persian and Egyptian culture to strengthen his authority, and the Ptolemaic rulers, as his successors to the Egyptian throne, emulated the example. Thus, for Cleopatra, fragrance functioned as the ultimate symbol of authority within an Egyptian framework

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<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, “Mark Antony,” in *Makers of Rome*, 294.

until her interaction with the greater Mediterranean world rendered it damaging through the negative Greek and Roman connotations on perfume.

Although early Greek society had portrayed scent as a symbol of power with religious implications, the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC witnessed a perceptible change with the increased commercialization and development of perfume into an item of luxury crafted from fragrant plants and resins foreign to the Greek landscape. The 6<sup>th</sup> century BC confirmed the symbolic degradation of perfume as official government sanctions banned the item and turned it into an icon of foreign luxury and Eastern excess. Fragrance quickly came to be associated with the monarchical trappings of the Persians, established enemies of the Greeks. This construct of scent as a symbol of foreignness and excess filtered into Roman society through philosophical writings, plays, and the general admiration of Classical Greek thought by the Romans. The Romans further debased the role of scent as the principles epitomized by the Republic revealed fragrance to be incompatible with traditional Roman values. In this manner, Cleopatra's function of fragrance as true symbol of authority and religious approval within the original context became a representation of sensual excess and female wiles.

### **The Egyptian foundation: perfume as sign of the divine**

Ancient Egyptian civilization epitomized the function of perfume as a powerful symbol of authority and divine sanction with the role of fragrance weaving through Egyptian culture and its long continuous history. The functions of the pharaoh, enforced by the stabilizing force of the native priestly class responsible for the fragrant substances, were asserted through his exclusive access to the ingredients and formulations of these divine creations of scent. Therefore, scent represented one of the most venerable symbols

of authority and divine approval that the pharaoh could obtain through the vital endorsement and exclusive allocation of the aromatic substances by the priestly class.

The ancient Egyptian concept of the origin of fragrance revealed the foundation for the role of scent and its inextricable bond with the divine. Lise Manniche, a specialist in ancient Egyptian aromatics, wrote: “Scents were believed to originate from the gods in the first place, to have sprung from their eyes or their bones, in particular the eye of the sun-god Re.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the ancient Egyptians understood scent as the very essence of the divine to the extent of depicting the origin of perfumes from the very flesh of the gods. Functioning with this understanding, the priests would burn myrrh, frankincense, and kyphi throughout the day to imbue the wooden deities that resided in the temples with the life-breathing aroma.<sup>4</sup> Scent represented the exhalation of a life-giving force, the very breath of life. Thus, the priests would reinforce the life-endowing essence of their deities by dipping their little finger with a golden thimble into the perfumed unguent and gently applying it to the wooden statues of the gods.<sup>5</sup> In this manner, fragrance developed into a palpable representation of both the essence and the presence of the divine. The concept of divine scent became so embedded within ancient Egyptian culture that R.J. Forbes, a specialist in ancient cosmetics and perfumes, stated: “Though the Egyptians had a term for ‘smell’ they always referred to perfumes as the ‘fragrance of gods.’”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, ancient Egyptian culture developed the vital foundation for the development of scent into a symbol of power through its depiction as a direct derivative from the realm of the divine.

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<sup>3</sup> Lise Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> R.J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), 27.

Egyptian rulers extended this representation and authority of the deities into their own hands by assuming the role of divine intermediaries through the possession of the transcendent world of aromatics. Manniche wrote: “The temple affirmed beyond any doubt the resident god as the ruler of the created world and the king in his role of chief intermediary between the divine and the people on earth.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, the temple complex created the appropriate setting for the extension of the deities’ authority into the hands of the ruler especially since the pharaoh had the authority to procure the aromatic ingredients. Most fragrant substances required for temple rituals, such as resins, gums, and flowers, had to be acquired through arduous expeditions and trade agreements with Arabian and Ethiopian groups whose land produced these scented substances.

As early as the year 2002 BC the ruler Henu sent an expedition to Punt, probably in the northern area of modern Ethiopia, to procure myrrh for the temple complexes. The inscription at the Wadi Hammamat stated that they required armed forces to bring “all the gifts from the gods’-Land.”<sup>8</sup> The inscription displayed the difficulty in securing the valuable resin and the continued connection of scent to the gods. The Egyptian rulers continued with the struggle to secure a steady source of the aromatic substances in order to strengthen their authority and prestige through the extension of the role of scent. “In the Eighteenth Dynasty Queen Hatshepsut achieved fame not only by bringing incense from Punt, for others had done so before, but by attempting to transport the very incense trees to the gardens of Amun-Re at Deir el-Bahari.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a recovered jamb bears an inscription with additional information on Hatshepsut stating, “Her Majesty built

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<sup>7</sup> Lise Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness-Ancient Egypt* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2004), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Lise Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries*, 36.

a store room for her antiu resin to produce pellets of incense every day so that the temple could always be enveloped in the scent of the gods'-land."<sup>10</sup> This inscription depicted the importance and esteem of the ruler in procuring the fragrant ingredients that functioned as the foundation of religious authority. More importantly, it demonstrated the evocative nature of perfume to conjure the essence of the gods and their dwelling. Thus, Egyptian rulers adeptly utilized the correlation of scent with the divine to establish their religious authority as facilitators and intermediaries of the sacred realm.

The native priesthood functioned as the essential structure and counterpart to the pharaoh for the development of scent as an exclusively sacred symbol of prestige and power. Manniche wrote: "In the Old Kingdom priests were in charge of the king's oils which were kept in an 'unguent chamber' with a selection of scented substances."<sup>11</sup> Thus, from the earliest period, the king and the priests worked symbiotically to establish fragrance as an item of prestige and authority, especially through its exclusivity. Guiseppe Donato, a specialist in the perfume industry of antiquity, stated: "The priests were the topmost perfumers. Only they knew the secret of aromas, and had the privilege of preparing the odorous substances; perfume was as valuable as gold and as worthy of the gods."<sup>12</sup> In addition, the sacred nature of scent was further emphasized through the priesthood's conscientious effort to keep the ritual of the creation of unguents within the temple walls. Donato wrote: "In Egypt the perfume industry was completely in the hands of the priests, whose workshops were generally located in the rear of the temples and only they could have access." The priests kept the recipes for the perfumes, some of

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<sup>10</sup> Lise Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries*, 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Guiseppe Donato, *The Fragrant Past: Perfumes of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar* (Rome: Emory University of Art and Archaeology, 1989), 9.

which took over a year to concoct, on the walls of their laboratories. The native Egyptian priests kept the entire process, from the storage of the ingredients to the final product, within the confines of the temple, giving it its exclusive nature within the Egyptian religious construct. In order to further emphasize the divine nature of perfume the priests observed strict guidelines to lend their creations greater purity and sanctity. Manniche wrote: “For the priests in the service of the gods cleanliness was strictly prescribed. Not only did they have to wash several times a day, but they also had to be clean shaven all over.”<sup>13</sup> This would have kept the priests free of any impure parasites or lice that could have compromised the sacred unguents. The priests’ authority also appropriately extended into the realm of the dead. C.J.S. Thompson, author of *Mystery and Lure of Perfume*, stated: “The embalming of the dead was carried out by professional embalmers who were attached to the temples, and all the various objects employed in furnishing the tombs were provided by those directly under the control of the priests.”<sup>14</sup> In this fashion, the priests maintained control over the production of scent to enhance its sacred symbolism and its transcendent ability to defy the stench of death. Thus, the native Egyptian priesthood actively cooperated with the pharaoh to establish fragrance as a powerful symbol of religious sanction and authority while strengthening the role of the ruler as divine intermediary. This ultimately functioned as the foundation for the concept of scent as a symbol of the divine within other ancient Mediterranean cultures, such as the Hebrew and the Persian civilizations.

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<sup>13</sup> Lise Manniche, *The Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 44.

<sup>14</sup> C.J.S. Thompson, *Mystery and Lure of Perfume* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1927), 21.

## **The Hebrew derivation: God's scent and the power to anoint**

The ancient Hebrew culture has revealed an extension of the Egyptian understanding of scent with the use of a structured priesthood to organize and control the production of perfume to further enhance the religious authority of their king through anointing rituals that stress the role of divine intermediary. Evidence demonstrated that the ancient Hebrews of the Mediterranean derived their concept of fragrance as a sacred symbol of the divine through their contact with the Egyptian civilization. Donato wrote: “Released from captivity in Egypt, the Hebrews brought back a reverence for the art of perfumery.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the fragrance wafting from the temples and the perfume emanating from the wooden deities traveling in processions must have had an indelible impact on the Hebrew understanding of the role of scent as sacred material. Mandy Aftel, a specialist in natural perfumery, stated: “When Moses returned from exile in Egypt, the Lord commanded him to compound a holy oil from olive oil and fragrant spices.”<sup>16</sup> This demonstrated not only their interaction with the Egyptian understanding of scent, but more importantly, their acquisition of the role of fragrance as a direct derivation from the realm of the divine through a direct command from God. In this manner, the perfume oil gained an aura of divine sanction especially upheld by the structured priestly class that oversaw the production.

Just like in Egyptian culture, the priests played a vital role in maintaining perfume as a symbol of authority by strictly limiting it to the realm of the sacred. Jean-Pierre Brun, an ancient historian, stated: “The offering of perfume and incense was thus an essential ritual in the worship of Yahweh, and some priests solely specialized in the

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<sup>15</sup> Guiseppe Donato, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Mandy Aftel, *Essence and Alchemy* (New York: North Point Press, 2001), 20.

making of these perfumes.”<sup>17</sup> This exemplified the Hebrew priests’ high esteem of fragrance to warrant specialization and allow scent to function as the necessary medium to commune with God. The priesthood made a concerted effort to emphasize perfume as a sacred item safely guarded within their control in the religious sphere. Dayagi-Menndels wrote: “The Talmud mentions the priests of the Abtinas family, who had the monopoly on preparing incense for the Temple. They refused to let others share in the knowledge of their craft, fearing it might be used for profane purposes.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Martin Watt, author of *Frankincense and Myrrh*, stated: “The sacred nature of the incense and oil precluded their use by ordinary mortals. Nor were they allowed to emulate the formula. The penalty for doing so was banishment.”<sup>19</sup> The harshness of the penalty emphasized the crucial need to maintain scent within a religious framework.

Scent fulfilled its role as a symbol of power by extending the authority of God to a divinely sanctioned ruler through the anointing rituals performed by the priests. Holy anointing oils served a vital role in their religious practices. Dayagi-Menndels wrote: “The Jewish kings were anointed with it, although it is stated that the kings of the family of David alone had the privilege of being anointed with the Holy Oil.”<sup>20</sup> The undeniable sacred aura of the Holy Oil demonstrated its ability to confer divine sanction to those anointed with it. Even the ingredients macerated in the oil contributed to its significance such as the “Balm of Judea” from the shrub allegedly brought to Israel by the Queen of Sheba who bestowed it upon King Solomon as a present. The small shrub was able to be

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-Pierre Brun, “Perfume Production: Cases of Delos and Paestum,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 104 (2000): 277.

<sup>18</sup> Michal Dayagi-Menndels, *Perfume and Cosmetics in the Ancient World* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1989), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Watt, *Frankincense and Myrrh* (Essex: Saffron Walden, 1996), 79.

<sup>20</sup> Michal Dayagi-Menndels, 43.

cultivated into an extremely valuable sacred grove that afforded great prestige to those who controlled it. Thus, the Hebrews reemphasized the Egyptian notion of scent as a symbol of divine authority that could be bestowed upon those anointed. This notion played a vital role in the later development of Christianity and the choice to refer to Jesus as Christ, meaning the anointed one. In this fashion, the ancient Hebrews expanded the Egyptian notion of sacred scent into their homeland with the aid of an organized priesthood that prescribed the ritual of anointing with perfumed oil to confer divine authority and approval to their kings.

### **The Persians: aesthetic perfume**

The Persians also cultivated the Egyptian concept of scent as a sign of power through a structured priesthood that organized the production of the precious substances. Donato wrote: “Their religious beliefs called for the burning of incense on the altar five times a day.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the priests aptly displayed their constant commune with the realm of the divine through the continuous stream of smoke billowing into the heavens. Furthermore, the priests controlled the production of fragrance to enhance its exclusivity. Sally Pointer, a specialist in ancient perfume, stated: “The production of perfume seems to have been carefully controlled and monitored, reflecting the importance of this commodity and the value of the ingredients used in its manufacture.”<sup>22</sup> Persian priests also concocted medicines out of the fragrant plants and resins, presenting perfume as a direct remedy from the divine. Pat Willard, a specialist in exotic spices, added: “For this reason, when the Persians became ill they turned to the priests who knew how to mix potions and rubs-thick perfumes and bracing tonics-that would give praise to the gods

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<sup>21</sup> Guiseppe Donato, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Sally Pointer, *The Artifice of Beauty* (London: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 13.

who ruled their lives.”<sup>23</sup> This emphasized not only the authority of the priest, but more importantly, it demonstrated the intervention of the divine in bringing a cure to the people, subtly blurring the line between perfume and sacred panacea. In this fashion, the ancient Persians cultivated the role of fragrance as a symbol of power bound within the religious realm in the successful manner of the Egyptians and the Hebrews. These ancient civilizations developed a concept of perfume as an ethereal presence so palpable and transcendent that it made it possible for the kings and priests to appropriate the authority of the religious realm and exercise it on earth.

The ancient Persian portrayal of scent played a critical role in the degradation of the position of perfume within a wider Mediterranean framework because the Greco-Roman perspective conveniently removed it from the intended religious context in order to characterize and symbolically subvert the Persian threat on the Greeks. In this manner, for the first time, the Persians are portrayed as crafting perfume for the sole purpose of providing pleasure. Pliny recorded in his *Natural History*: “Perfume in its own sense ought by right to be accredited to the Persian race: they soak themselves in it.”<sup>24</sup> Even though perfume had been used more than a millennium earlier in several ancient Mediterranean civilizations, the emphasis was placed on the act of overindulgence in order to recast perfume. Athenaeus also mentioned in the second century AD that Darius III as king of Persia had in his retinue 14 perfumers and 46 garland makers as an emphasis on excessive luxury, while within the appropriate Persian context this would have been seen as the proper and pious compliance to the ritualistic communion of the

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<sup>23</sup> Pat Willard, *Secrets of Saffron: The Vagabond Life of the World's Most Seductive Scent* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), 99.

king with the realm of the divine.<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly, the early Greek civilizations of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans also had espoused a similar understanding of perfume as a symbol of power cultivated within the religious sphere, but the later Greeks refused to assume this concept due to the economic shifts of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and the presence of the Persian threat.

### **The Minoans and the Mycenaeans: scents of a distant past**

The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the Aegean actually embodied the concept of scent as a sacred symbol of authority and prestige guarded within the religious realm and enforced through their palace-based economies. Maintaining perfume within the religious realm proved essential in upholding its powerful role as a link to the divine. Cynthia Shelmerdine, a specialist in the perfume industry of the Mycenaean, stated: “Some of the best known Mycenaean deities are among the recipients of the perfumes, including Potnia and Poseidon.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the palace-based economies controlled the creation and distribution of fragrance in order to maintain its divine role. Shelmerdine stated: “For the tablets do reveal extensive palace control at Pylos, Knossos, and Mycenae; they record the collection of raw materials, their allocation to perfumers, stock-taking, and distribution of the final product. This scribal attention shows that perfumery was an officially controlled activity.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, perfume and its aromatic components represented items of esteem that were handled in a manner comparable to that of the ancient Egyptian temple complexes. Priests, likewise, played a vital role in the portrayal

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<sup>25</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, trans. Charles Burton Gulick (London: William Heinemann, 1929), Vol. 3, bk 13 or 177.

<sup>26</sup> Cynthia Shelmerdine, *The Perfume Industry of Mycenaean Pylos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 124.

<sup>27</sup> Cynthia Shelmerdine, 7.

of scent as a symbol of authority. The “Priest-king fresco” from the palace at Knossos prominently displayed a priest wearing a crown of lilies with a peacock feather as a sign of status and authority. Roses and irises also figure prominently on other frescoes dating to 1700 BC in the palace at Knossos. Thus, the earlier civilizations of the Aegean cultivated a notion of perfume as a sign of authority and prestige afforded by the structure of the palace-economies.

The Homeric works recalled this earlier period of Greek history as the subject matter for the epics and hymns. Thus, these works served to reinforce the power of scent embedded in the realm of the divine. For example, the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* recounted the fragrance emanating from the dwellings of the gods on Mount Olympus, much like the scent that must have billowed from the hearth in the megaron at the Palace of Nestor in Pylos.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Homeric works depicted a period in the Greek’s perceived distant past where perfume enveloped the gods in divine exclusivity.

### **Alexander: opening Pandora’s perfume box**

Alexander, as a Macedonian king, sought to strengthen his authority over Greece by appealing to the Greek collective conscience of the Homeric works as unifying force. As a great admirer of the Homeric epics that attested to the powerful role of scent evident in the Minoan and Mycenaean culture, Alexander adopted the early Greek model and espoused it with the “Eastern” representations of power, including their notion of scent. Unfortunately, Alexander never managed to return to solidify his authority over mainland Greece for the response would have been unenthusiastic since the Greco-Roman world resignedly retorted the acculturation of these degenerative customs. Plutarch stated: “It

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<sup>28</sup> Homer, “Hymn to Hermes,” 4.

was in Persia that the Macedonians received their first taste of gold and silver and women and of luxury of the barbarian way of life, and henceforth, like hounds which have picked up a scent, they pressed on the track down the wealth of the Persians.”<sup>29</sup> This revealed the introduction of luxury as a foreign matter embroiled with the role of scent. Pliny also attributed the introduction of perfume to Alexander’s interaction with Persia. He wrote: “The first case that I am able to discover was when a chest of perfumes was captured by Alexander among the rest of the property of King Darius when his property was taken. Afterwards the pleasure of perfume was also admitted by our fellow countrymen.”<sup>30</sup> This characterization implied that although Alexander had conquered the Persians, their luxuries, such as perfume, had enslaved them to their very own desires. Pliny also characterized the Greco-Roman world’s concept of the origins of perfume as an eastern luxury conducive to a barbarian lifestyle. Fortunately, for Alexander, his short-lived empire encompassed the civilizations that interpreted scent as a symbol of sacred reverence and had the existing priesthoods to support this function

Alexander, as the conqueror of Persia and the East, cleverly utilized cultural assimilation as an essential role in the legitimization of his authority over his new empire, embodying the powerful role of scent within the appropriate Persian context. Plutarch wrote, “He had himself purified by the Babylonian priests, who he had become accustomed to bring on his campaigns for such purposes.”<sup>31</sup> In this manner, he espoused the divine authority of the Persian priesthood that continued to uphold the social integrity of the faithful culture. Alexander further enhanced his connection to the divine as

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<sup>29</sup> Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 279.

<sup>30</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 13.1.

<sup>31</sup> Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, 314.

Plutarch wrote, “Alexander’s skin was fresh and sweet-smelling, and the whole of his body gave off a special fragrance which permeated the clothes he wore.”<sup>32</sup> This demonstrated his desire to portray himself as divine through the use of scent. Plutarch also stated that Alexander sent one of his tutors 500 talents’ weight of Frankincense and 100 of Myrrh and said “I have sent you plenty of myrrh and Frankincense so that you need not be stingy towards the gods any longer.”<sup>33</sup> This revealed Alexander’s connection of scent with the divine and his display of authority in that now that he had conquered Persia he had an abundant source of fragrance, which inevitably demonstrated his power. Thus, Alexander ably adopted and continued the notion of power invested in scent like the Persian kings had done. The Ptolemaic rulers, as his successors to the Egyptian throne, emulated his example of cultural syncretization to consolidate and strengthen their authority over the land of the pharaohs.

### **The Ptolemaic rulers: establishing power with scents of purpose**

Fragrance played an essential role in the successful transference of power into the hands of the Ptolemaic rulers. The sacred aromatics and the priesthoods in creating them functioned as the essential foundation and medium for the consolidation of their authority as rightful and divinely sanctioned rulers of Egypt.

Ptolemy I, as the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty, set the precedent of cultural assimilation as Alexander had done before him. This functioned to integrate their background as Macedonian rulers into the framework of the Egyptian pantheon. Stanley Burstein, a Ptolemaic specialist, stated: “The most striking product of this Hellenized Egyptian religion was when Ptolemy I called on an Egyptian priest and historian

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<sup>32</sup> Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, 255.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

Manetho and the Athenian ritual expert Timotheos to create a new god to serve as Alexandria's new patron deity." Thus, "The new god, Sarapis, was a synthesis of Egyptian and Greek elements, combining aspects of Hades, Osiris, Asklepios, and Zeus."<sup>34</sup> In this manner, Ptolemy I integrated his own visual imagery within the standard Egyptian framework in order to legitimize his provenance and secure his authority.

The native priesthood functioned as the essential stabilizing structure of Egyptian culture, which made its support of the Ptolemaic rulers fundamental to the establishment of their authority. Burstein wrote: "For millennia, the security of Egypt and its kings depended on the support of the gods and their priesthoods, and that remained true of Ptolemaic Egypt."<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the new Macedonian dynasty found it essential to curry the favor of the priesthood. Burstein stated, "Like innumerable pharaohs before them, the Ptolemaic rulers had sought support in the region by sponsoring extensive temple-building activity in the great sanctuaries and cultivating the priestly and noble families."<sup>36</sup> Thus, in response to the invested attention and financial support of the priesthoods, the native priest became some of the dynasty's chief supporters. Their loyalty to the kings proved invaluable in accessing the powerful pharaonic trappings, which invariably included scent.

Strictly maintaining fragrance within the religious realm proved essential in the continuance of scent as a symbol of power. Michael Grant, a historical biographer, wrote: "The whole perfumery business was one of the state monopolies of the Ptolemies."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Stanley Burstein, *The Reign of Cleopatra* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Grant, *Cleopatra* (London: Phoenix Press, 2003), 176.

Thus, the new rulers ably consolidated their authority like past pharaohs by controlling the entire production process of perfume creation. A fragment of papyrus from Ptolemaic Egypt stated a request for permission to recreate a certain perfume recipe.<sup>38</sup> This not only demonstrated the control over the manufacture of aromatic substances, but more importantly, it afforded the production of perfume a great amount of prestige. Thus, the Ptolemaic rulers understood that the more exclusive and restrictive the production of scent became, the more authority and significance the symbol of perfume gained.

Manniche stated: “By the time we reach the Ptolemaic period, the recipes for unguents and other sacred preparations were deemed important to be inscribed in stone in the walls of the temples in a tiny chamber inside, where only the priests and other staff had access.”<sup>39</sup> In this manner, the Ptolemaic rulers demonstrated the significance of the fragrances and the official recipes as they deemed them important enough to be preserved in stone and strictly within the hands of the native priests. Thus, the invested effort of the Ptolemaic rulers to control the manufacture of fragrance and maintain it within the traditional religious realm provided them with a veritable medium for the consolidation of their authority vested in the symbolism of scent.

The symbol of scent within the Ptolemaic dynasty served its purpose during the staged appearances of the rulers as a means of reaffirming their divine status and authority. Michael Chauveau, a historian specializing on Cleopatra VII, stated: “The masses, whether native Egyptian or Greeks living in the provinces, had no occasions to gaze on their pharaoh-kings, veritable living deities whose appearance would arouse the

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<sup>38</sup> T.C. Skeat, “A Fragment on the Ptolemaic Perfume Monopoly,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archeology* 52 (1966): 179.

<sup>39</sup> Lise Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries*, 37.

hopes of many.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, the throngs of spectators would have recognized and correlated the scent emanating from the ruler’s display with that of the wooden deities when they were led in procession on their litter to other temples to visit the other gods. The scent would have been invariably associated with the temple complexes, and thus the connection to the support of the native priesthood would have been inevitable and welcomed by the rulers.

In addition, the Ptolemaic rulers also utilized scent to emphasize their political and military prowess, further enhancing the role of scent within the Egyptian framework. Athenaeus, describing the triumphal procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in 285 BC, wrote: “As for the whole floor, it was strewed with every kind of flower. Then there were images of victory, having golden wings, and they bore in their hands incense burners. Next came boys in purple tunics, bearing frankincense and myrrh, and saffron on golden dishes.”<sup>41</sup> This victorious display, redolent with the aromas of a vast and mighty empire at its height, certainly would have made an indelible impression on the viewers’ conception of scent as a symbol of power. Likewise, for Berenice II of Cyrene who married Ptolemy III Euergetes and added her homeland to the Ptolemaic territory, the rose perfume representative of Cyrene became a symbol of her contribution to the empire. Berenice II oversaw the production of the scent so that it retained its status as the finest rose extract in the world.<sup>42</sup> In this manner, fragrance proved invaluable for the Ptolemaic rulers and the establishment of their authority through the continued cultivation of the traditional Egyptian role of scent as a symbol of divine sanction and

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<sup>40</sup> Michel Chauveau, *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>41</sup> Athenaeus, *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitnesses-Ancient Egypt*, 338.

<sup>42</sup> Michal Dayagi-Menndels, 66.

priesthood solidarity. The Ptolemies cleverly espoused the existing framework of the religious sphere to adopt the powerful implications of perfume and further strengthen it through the fastidious control of its manufacture in order to render it more powerful and prestigious. In this manner, Cleopatra inherited the valuable Egyptian tradition of scent as a symbol of power enshrined in the Ptolemaic practice of lavish displays of divine authority.

### **Cleopatra's Divine Essence: the sweet smell of success in Egypt**

Cleopatra inherited the Ptolemaic construct of scent as an invaluable asset in the control and management of Egyptian affairs. She also espoused the staged Ptolemaic displays of divine royalty, which advantageously incorporated the sacred presence of fragrance. In addition, she wisely cultivated support for the native Egyptian customs in an effort to secure her authority after a period of civil turmoil. In this manner, scent served an invaluable role in the solidification of her authority within an Egyptian framework until her interaction within the greater Mediterranean sphere rendered it damaging to her international image due to the distinct construct of perfume of the influential Greco-Roman world.

The accession of her role as monarch of the Ptolemaic empire handed Cleopatra a nation marred by a recent period of civil unrest. This prompted Cleopatra to solidify her authority within Egypt by appealing to the most entrenched and fundamental facet of their civilization, the religious traditions of the Egyptian populace. Frank Goddio, prominent archaeologist in Alexandria, wrote: "The most famous deity in Upper Egypt at the time was the sacred bull Buchis, worshipped as the soul of Amon-Re. Every time the holy bull died, it was replaced with a new one amid much solemn ceremony. Although

the Ptolemies had traditionally sent emissaries to these rites, Cleopatra was the first ruler to go in person.”<sup>43</sup> Cleopatra’s display of religious adherence and unprecedented appearance greatly moved the spectators of the procession. Goddio stated: “She was hailed by the locals not merely as Cleopatra VII Philopator, but as the Lady of Two Lands and Isis incarnate.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, by displaying herself as divine ruler and financing temples in both Upper and Lower Egypt, Cleopatra managed to utilize the religious framework to solidify her authority over Egypt. The actual display of her presence invariably accompanied by scent served to establish Egyptian solidarity while reinforcing her authority. Ernle Bradford, a specialist on Cleopatra, wrote: “The Egyptian people would continue to toil and work the delta, and adore their ancient gods, so long as the new rulers also appeared to be god-descended.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, the key to accessing the approval of the populace rested in the connections made from the display of the ruler and the trappings of the deities and the pharaohs, which consistently included fragrance and lavishly staged appearances.

The river barges of the Ptolemaic rulers served as the principal means for the regal displays and the dissemination of scent that played such a crucial role in reinforcing their authority. The life-giving Nile basically pulsed through the entire length of Egypt reassuring the inhabitants along its banks with the bountiful crops born out of its fertile silt. Thus, the Nile functioned as the perfect setting not only for its thorough access to the Egyptian populace, but more importantly, for its sacred symbolism. Diana Kleiner, a Cleopatra scholar, wrote: “Boats had long been sacred in Egypt. Ritual ships stored in

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<sup>43</sup> Frank Goddio, *Cleopatra’s Palace: In Search of a Legend* (New York: Random House, 1999), 73.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Ernle Bradford, *Cleopatra* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 21.

temples, were used to transport the gods from one religious site to another.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, the Ptolemaic rulers utilized the barges to establish their authority through a direct association with the divine. Furthermore, Grant stated: “Magnificent Nile boats were a Ptolemaic specialty. Constructed of fragrant cedar and cypress, the vessel contained shrines of Aphrodite and Dionysus, the deities who were most closely associated with ruler-worship. There was also a grotto or winter-garden with censers, and the decks were designed as arcaded courts.”<sup>47</sup> The very presence of the fragrant timber with its unique scent brought from Cyprus and Syria to build the barges reinforced their ability and power to procure such rare materials. Thus, the visual imagery accompanied by the sillage of scent from the censers created a powerful platform for the establishment and the dissemination of their authority and divine sanction. Cleopatra utilized this approach several times throughout her reign as was attested to by Plutarch and her regal display at Tarsus. She also traveled the Nile on a barge with Caesar. The power of the setting with its religious overtones and symbolism of divine sanction proved invaluable in legitimizing the pro-Roman stance. Grant stated: “Such a parade played an essential part in the pacification of Egypt, and provided the means of strengthening Cleopatra’s pro-Roman regime.”<sup>48</sup> This demonstrated how the religious realm within Egyptian civilization allowed for its symbolism and property of scent to propagate the power of the ruler.

Cleopatra further cultivated the role of scent during her reign through the use of the essence extracted from the small white flowers of the henna tree as a symbol of her

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<sup>46</sup> Diana E. Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 104.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Grant, 83.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

empire at its greatest extent. Her alliance with Marc Antony proved valuable and by 37BC her territory had regained the span of the empire at its greatest extent unseen in over a century. Burstein stated: “As ruler of the most important client kingdom, Cleopatra emerged as the big winner in the process. In addition to confirming her authority over Cyprus, Antony put under Egyptian rule an enormous swath of territory, including the island of Crete, Kyrene in modern Libya, numerous cities in Phoenicia, Syria and Cilicia in southern Turkey and the Arab kingdom of Iturea in northern Palestine.”<sup>49</sup> The vastness of the territory allowed Cleopatra to cultivate the necessary areas for the aromatic plants needed for her cyprinum perfume and its main ingredient of camphire or henna flower extract.<sup>50</sup> Pliny later confirmed that the best henna flowers were exclusively grown in Cyprus, Ashkelon, and Canopus.<sup>51</sup> Cleopatra managed to have all of these three areas under her sway during her reign and thus they represented the extent of the accomplishments of her rule.

The addition of Cyprus to the royal holdings of Cleopatra functioned as an extremely valuable economic and religious symbol that represented the birthplace of Aphrodite, a valuable source of timber, and fertile fields conducive to the cultivation of many fragrant plants. Burstein wrote: “Cleopatra had coins struck on Cyprus depicting her with the attributes of Isis and Aphrodite.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the control of Cyprus allowed her the authority to build fragrant barges and display a link with Aphrodite and the divine realm. Ashkelon, a city north of Gaza, demonstrated the extent of her prestige and influence by issuing coins with her image. Erich Gruen, a specialist on Cleopatra, stated:

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<sup>49</sup> Stanley Burstein, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Sally Pointer, 13.

<sup>51</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 12.109 or page 79.

<sup>52</sup> Stanley Burstein, 20.

“The coinage of Ashkelon, an important coastal city of Palestine, includes the issue of a tetradrachm in the year 49BC that displays a portrait of Cleopatra. It has been suggested that Ashkelon formed part of the support of Cleopatra’s operations.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, Ashkelon revealed the extent of her influence. Canopus, in Egypt, represented her authority over the Egyptian homeland. Therefore, the henna flowers that were only cultivated in these three regions yielded a scent for Cleopatra that represented the extent of her power.

Wafted around the palace, the perfume would have been a veritable reminder to officials and those around her of the scope of her authority, her resources, and her political support system. In this manner, fragrance served an invaluable role in the solidification of her authority within an Egyptian construct until it was rendered damaging to her international image due to the distinct construct of perfume of the influential Greco-Roman world.

### **The Greeks: the deconstruction of fragrance**

Scent reemerged in 7<sup>th</sup> century Greek society without any discernible links to the earlier aromatic traditions of Minoan and Mycenaean culture. Instead, perfume emerged in the Greek world as an article of luxury linked to commercialization through the trade network of the Mediterranean and perceptibly devoid of any religious implications or sacerdotal management. Perfume quickly proliferated Greek society, causing concern to the political figures of the time who interpreted it as a morally threatening symbol of Eastern origin. Thus, the notion of fragrance evolved in Greek culture to eventually embody the Persian threat and its characteristic Eastern excess and foreignness. Lacking assertive control by the religious realm and embroiled in its representation of Persia and

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<sup>53</sup> Erich Gruen, “Cleopatra in Rome: Facts and Fantasies,” in *Myth, History and Culture in Republican Rome* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), 263.

the East, perfume became debased to a mere superfluous substance that catered to the senses.

The 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. witnessed the resurgence of fragrance in the Greek world as an imported commodity commercialized by Mediterranean trade. Brun stated: “During the Geometric and Orientalizing periods, perfumes were produced chiefly in the Orient, in Egypt, and in Cyprus. It was not until the seventh century B.C. that more widespread trade began with Greece.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the Greeks witnessed the arrival of perfume as a commodity imported from the Eastern world. Furthermore, this established the notion that traditionally fragrant ingredients were only produced in those countries, forever embedding perfumery in the realm of the East. Perfume production in Greece always had to rely on the importation of ingredients. The areas of Corinth and Delos that developed extensive trade networks, participated in the perfume industry only through the importation of aromatic substances. Corinth played an important role as redistributive center through the production of aryballoi. Edwin Morris, author of *Scents of Time*, wrote: “By the seventh century B.C., terra-cotta perfume containers were produced as an industry in Corinth.”<sup>55</sup> This industry was intrinsically bound with the extensive colonization of the period and the foreign interaction with other cultures such as their Egyptian interface. The Corinthian’s role in sponsoring part of the colony of Naukratis in Egypt probably helped filter fragrance into the Greek community, but the religious context failed to transfer. Instead, fragrance developed into a lucrative industry that relied on the foreign ingredients for its production.

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<sup>54</sup> Jean-Pierre Brun, 277.

<sup>55</sup> Edwin Morris, *Scents of Time: Perfume from Ancient Egypt to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1999), 27.

The Greek perception of scent was irrevocably debased after both Spartan and Athenian leaders deemed it incompatible with a virtuous lifestyle. Plutarch wrote of Lycurgus, the seventh century B.C. leader of Sparta: “He outlawed the use of make-up in the city. Perfume he banned too because it wasted and spoilt olive oil and because it pandered to the senses.”<sup>56</sup> Not only was perfume relegated to the feminine realm of makeup and artifice, it was banned because it tainted the already established Greek tradition of using pure olive oil on the skin. Furthermore, fragrance solely represented the seduction of the senses and nothing else, for religious connotations were not actively emphasized. Olive oil was the only carrier available to the Greeks for the creation of perfume, and since it served such a vital role in their diet and lifestyle, tainting it with foreign aromatics seemed incompatible and inappropriate. Socrates, in the *Deipnosophists*, stated that the sweetest smell was that of olive oil in the gymnasium for it emphasized the body’s accomplishment of hard work.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, he later stated that Sophocles’ play called *The Judgment* depicted Athena, goddess of wisdom and virtue, appropriately anointing herself with pure olive oil, while Aphrodite, the Cypriot goddess of love, scented herself with perfume and toyed with her mirror.<sup>58</sup> This indicated how they perceived the purity of the Greek olive oil as the embodiment of virtue and scent as a mere sensual accessory. Thus, Lycurgus’ negative assessment of perfume firmly debased the Greek perception of scent and rendered it incompatible with the symbolism of Greek virtue inherent in pure olive oil.

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<sup>56</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch on Sparta*, trans. Richard J.A. Talbert (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 148.

<sup>57</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, Book 15, 177.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

The concept of perfume was further debased by the Greek effort to cast the Persian threat with the corresponding monarchical trappings that invariably included the lavish use of perfume. Greek perception firmly placed the origin of perfume in the hands of the Persians.<sup>59</sup> Perfumery was strictly viewed as a morally weakening profession. Furthermore, the Athenian understanding of perfume had already been influenced by the standard set by Solon who banned all “unguent cookers” or perfumers from the Athenian city-state in 594B.C. through his capacity as archon.<sup>60</sup> Thus, perfume readily embodied the potential Persian threat with its Eastern excesses and monarchical subjugation. The concept of perfume as an article of luxury with an Eastern origin created a symbol of the monarchical trappings that the oligarchies and democracies of the Greek city-states worked to defy. Plutarch displayed this connection between a perfume and a monarchical setting in the description of Darius’ bath. He stated: “When Alexander entered Darius’ bath he saw that the basins, the pitchers, and the caskets containing unguents. He also noticed that the whole room was marvelously fragrant with spices and perfumes and he exclaimed, ‘So this it seems, is what it is to be king.’”<sup>61</sup> Thus, it was very revealing that Alexander found the representation of a powerful king in the scented accoutrements of the bath. Therefore, Greeks clearly associated monarchic rule and the Persia threat within the article of luxury that was perfume.

The festival of Adonis also exemplified the degradation of fragrance in the framework provided by the ancient Greeks. Perfume embodied a cultural threat in the context of the Adonia as a symbol of Eastern origin embroiled in effeminacy,

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<sup>59</sup> Sally Pointer, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, Book 15, 178.

<sup>61</sup> Plutarch, *The Age of Alexander*, 274.

inappropriate lust, and the sensual artifice of the female realm. In ancient Greek culture, especially in fifth and fourth century B.C. Athens, perfume became deeply associated with Adonis and the eponymous festival. Marcel Detienne, author of *The Gardens of Adonis*, wrote: “In Greek love terminology, Adonis is synonymous both with perfume and with lover. ‘My perfume, my tender Adonis’: these are the names by which a courtesan addresses her loves in an epigram.”<sup>62</sup> Adonis personified an intrinsic link with the realm of perfume as the son of Myrrha, the inconsolable figure that bore her father’s child and became the fragrant myrrh shrub. Her mythological Eastern origin demonstrated the Greek perception of the lavish excesses and moral ambiguities of those foreign lands responsible for fragrance. Detienne stated: “For although the foreign origins of Adonis are indisputable-his very name is evidence of his Semitic connections-his Oriental qualities appear to be affected by the way in which the Greeks represented the East.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, the Greeks defined the debased construct of fragrance in their perception of the East and their characterization of Adonis. Detienne remarked: “Adonis the seducer, who is attracted to the world of women and pleasure, is excluded from the world of war and hunting. To the Greeks he is the perfect antithesis of a warrior hero.”<sup>64</sup> In this manner, Adonis embodied the perception of perfume as a degenerative force imbued with Eastern laxity and redolent of feminine indulgence.

The Greek construct of perfume facilitated the inevitable link of the feminine rituals of beauty to the corruptive Eastern indulgences that effectively debased the role of fragrance. In this manner, the festival of Adonis provided the appropriate circumstance

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<sup>62</sup> Marcel Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis: Spices in Greek Mythology*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 63.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

for the deterioration of the role of scent. Detienne recounted: “The contemporaries of Aristophanes were not mistaken: license and shamelessness lie at the heart of the Adonia. It is the moment when lovers triumph and women behave as demanding mistresses.”<sup>65</sup> In a similar manner, Aristophanes demonstrated in his *Lysistrata* how the ingenious women used their “saffron dresses, paints and perfumes and robes of gauze,” to force the men to end the war through clever manipulation.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the women extended their authority outside of their sphere of influence through the use of the powerfully sensual and corruptive realm of female artifice. For this reason, the Athenian city merely tolerated the Adonia as an exotic festival on the periphery of the official cults and ceremonies.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the construct of perfume and female beauty became debased through the inextricable link with the Greek perception and fear of the Orient’s beguiling pleasures.

The ancient Greeks thus deconstructed the powerful role of perfume by effectively removing it from the protective religious sphere used in other civilizations and subverting it as a symbol in the assertion of the unifying Persian threat. Thus, where the festival of Adonis was relegated to the fringes of Athenian society, the Ptolemaic rulers provided an official celebration. Detienne recounted: “According to the narrative of Theocritus in the third century B.C.E., the festival-spectacle held in the palace of the queen Arsinoe, wife of Ptolemy Philadelphus, included delicate gardens in silver baskets and golden alabasters with Syrian perfume to be deposited in honor of Adonis.”<sup>68</sup> Therefore, the appropriate context allowed them to assert their authority and demonstrate the extent of their empire with perfume of Syrian origin. Thus, perfume acted as a

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<sup>65</sup> Marcel Detienne, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 138.

dynamic symbol and a valuable cultural assessor that reflected the social investment made by the corresponding civilization.

### **The Etruscans: life and death bound and defied by scent**

Etruscan culture greatly appreciated the ephemeral presence and pleasure of scent. This concept of fragrance contributed to their heightened awareness of the transitional nature of life and its culmination in an ever-present afterlife. Their appreciation of luxury items cultivated through their extensive trade networks led to a concept of perfume as an item that celebrated life and preserved it in the transcendent aura of the religious realm.

This dynamic notion of scent simultaneously embodied in their luxuriance of life and in their religious piety allowed perfume imagery to effectively transition from bronze mirror engravings to sacred tomb paintings. Thus, perfume exemplified a conspicuous presence in Etruscan culture from the accepted quotidian displays to the imagery vested in the profound hope of an afterlife. Rachel Herz, a specialist on perfume history, remarked: “The Etruscans revered perfume to the point that Etruscan women were never without it. The Etruscan spirit of adornment, called Lassa, is a naked winged female carrying a perfume bottle.”<sup>69</sup> The depictions of this female attendant with her alabastron in hand on numerous bronze mirror engravings was inextricably linked with the presence of the two esteemed couples of Venus and Adonis as the Etruscan Turan and Atunis or Zeus and Hera as the Etruscan Tinia and Uni. Thus, the role of perfume prominently displayed within the context of the couple as an acceptable social unit extended the authority of the couple to the realm of the female. Furthermore, the dynamic concept of perfume as a celebratory gesture of life easily transferred into the hopeful transcendence

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<sup>69</sup> Rachel Herz, *Scent of Desire: Discovering Our Enigmatic Sense of Smell* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 173.

of the religious realm. Several bronze mirrors also depicted subject matter of religious importance vested in perfume imagery. Nancy de Grummond, a prominent Etruscologist, described one of the engravings: “Behind Tinia is the winged female Mean, who elsewhere appears as a goddess of victory; here her celebration involves applying fragrant oils with a dipper, a ritual quite literally resembling christening and imparting immortality.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, the depiction revealed the powerful connotations of perfume within the religious realm and the probable existence of a religious authority to strengthen this role. Robert Leighton, author of *Tarquinius: An Etruscan City*, stated: “Roman writers refer to the priestly duties and powers of Etruscan leaders or *lucumones* and the literary sources hint at their control of religious authority.”<sup>71</sup> In this manner, the Etruscans developed a more powerful role of scent vested in the authority of the religious figures. Their concept of perfume proved dynamic enough to function within such distinct settings as the celebration of a couple’s love and a religious ritual while acceptably displayed on a daily article of luxury because it embodied the transition of the celebration of life transcended into the afterlife.

Etruscan tomb paintings displayed the notion of fragrance as a symbol of the transcendental nature of death into the afterlife. Scent, either represented in alabaster or in garlands, embodied the ultimate metamorphosis of a substance exuding its perceptible yet invisible essence through the air, reminiscent of the body’s life-giving breath and soul. The tomb of Hunting and Fishing in Tarquinia prominently displayed in the tympanum a couple reclining wreathed in aromatic garlands. The painting also displayed

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<sup>70</sup> Nancy de Grummond, *Etruscan Myth, Sacred History and Legend* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006), 61.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Leighton, *Tarquinius: An Etruscan City* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 66.

an attendant with an alabastra and two girls assembling additional garlands.<sup>72</sup> Botanical remains from the period have demonstrated the presence of rosemary, parsley, and gold of pleasure, all aromatic and suitable for garlands.<sup>73</sup> Funerary goods such as Rhodian perfume and Corinthian aryballoi demonstrated the extent of their trade networks in procuring fragrances and the esteem of these items as articles of luxury present in the tombs.<sup>74</sup> Thus, fragrance afforded the Etruscans not only a pleasurable experience, but more importantly, it prompted their conceptualization of the transitory nature of life into the realm of the dead defied by the hope of an afterlife. Perfume celebrated life and preserved it in the transcendent aura of the religious realm.

### **The Romans: a city free of the nauseating stench of monarchical trappings**

Even though the Etruscans left an indelible mark on Roman civilization, the Romans refused to inherit their esteemed notion of scent. Instead, they cultivated a construct similar to that of the Greeks where political forces could utilize it to subvert an enemy's embodiment of foreignness and a barbarian lifestyle. The Etruscan kings represented the monarchical rule vested in an individual that the Roman Republic lived to defy. Thus, Ovid's *Fasti* depicted Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the last king of Rome, among the white lilies in an aromatic garden as he professes to have his enemies killed by poignantly removing the blooms.<sup>75</sup> In this fashion, the Romans formed an initial association of fragrance with the Orientalizing tendencies of the Etruscans and their monarchical rule personified here by the despotic authority of Sextus Tarquinius with his hands drenched in the unctuous smell of the waxen lilies. Confronted with this

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Leighton, 105.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>75</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. A.J. Boyle and R.D. Woodard (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 705.

monarchical government, the Romans further adhered to the Classical Greek construct of scent as a symbol of foreignness and excess through historical writings on Solon and Lycurgus and plays such as those of Aristophanes that subverted the embodied threat of perfume in comedic relief.

The Romans cultivated a concept of scent as a morally weakening luxury embroiled in foreignness that proved seemingly incompatible with the traditional Roman values of the Republic of self-reliance, efficiency, and military fortitude. Thus, by the early second century BC, in the Greek tradition of prohibition, the Romans censors banned the sale of perfume for its associations with moral laxity. Pliny recounted: “It is certain that in 189 B.C. the censors Publius Licinius Crassus and Lucius Julius Caesar issued a proclamation forbidding any sale of ‘unguenta exotica’ - that being the regular name for them.”<sup>76</sup> In this manner, Roman leaders purposefully degraded the portrayal of scent by prohibiting its sale and further demonstrated the negative connotations implied through the reference of fragrance as ‘foreign essences.’ This proclamation was directly aimed at Capua as a reprimand for their support of Hannibal and their moral decadence. Maria Rosaria Belgiorno, author of *Aromata Cipria*, remarked: “The ban was a step taken against the city of Capua; it hosted the most important perfumeries but its inhabitants did not have the status of Roman citizens.”<sup>77</sup> Thus, the perfumers of Capua represented the negative connotation of perfume embodied in foreignness by their status outside of the realm of the Roman citizen. Livy further emphasized this notion through his description of the war with Hannibal in which he recounts the foreign army’s winter stay in Capua. He described how the winter in the ‘city of pleasures’ weakened and ruined Hannibal’s

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<sup>76</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 12.24 or page 113.

<sup>77</sup> Maria Rosaria Belgiorno, *Aromata Cipria* (Perugia: Edizioni Era Nuova, 2006), 188.

army through the corruptive influence of sensual excess.<sup>78</sup> These connotations of scent formed the pervasive Roman understanding of fragrance as corruptive force.

The Romans further debased the concept of scent by relegating its production to the lowest members of society. Jean-Pierre Brun stated: “Perfume making was considered a *sordida ars*, and perfume makers were held in low public esteem.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, the Romans degraded the role of fragrance by negatively casting the art of the perfumer. In addition, Susan Stewart, author of *Cosmetics and Perfumes in the Roman World*, stated: “It seems likely from evidence at Pompeii and Herculaneum, as well as documentary mentions elsewhere, that many perfume businesses were financed initially by wealthy citizens but were run by slaves or freedmen.”<sup>80</sup> In this manner, the Romans cast perfume as a mere item of luxury commercialized for financial profit and capable of an existence devoid of any religious connotations.

The Romans continued the Greek tradition exemplified in the plays of Aristophanes that subverted the embodied threat of fragrance in comedic relief. R. J. Forbes explained: “The earliest Roman mention of perfumes and slave-specialists in the art of perfumery and adorning the human body is found in the works of Plautus and his generation.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, the Romans audience readily associated perfume with the characters of low status depicted in the plays. Jean-Pierre Brun wrote: “For the plebeians there were cheap perfumes, such as the sweet flag oils used by the prostitutes in Plautus’ *Poenulus*.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Livy, *The War with Hannibal*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London: Penguin Books, 1972), Book 23.18 or page 190.

<sup>79</sup> Jean-Pierre Brun, 277.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Stewart, *Cosmetics and Perfumes in the Roman World* (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Limited, 2007), 47.

<sup>81</sup> R.J. Forbes, 28.

<sup>82</sup> Jean-Pierre Brun, 278.

Furthermore, in Plautus' *Casina*, all of the female characters bore names with a conspicuous relation to a fragrance or scent. *Casina*, referring to cinnamon, the fragrant and foreign ingredient of eastern origin, represented the character with the lowest status of a slave girl within the Roman social stratum.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the Romans crafted a negative image of scent embroiled with connotations of foreignness and sensual excess reminiscent of the Greek construct.

The Romans additionally debased the concept of scent by further defining it within the realm of female artifice. In this manner, Cleopatra's function of fragrance as a veritable symbol of authority and religious approval within the original Egyptian context became a representation of sensual excess and female wiles. Perfumes and cosmetics exemplified a potential threat vested in a female's authority and expression of her own body. Susan Stewart wrote: "It is important to note that the word *pyxis* was also used to describe a container for strong medicines or even poisons. Beauty products and medicinal ointments were often interchangeable and certainly not mutually exclusive."<sup>84</sup> Thus, a woman's control over the storage of perfumes and unguents extended her authority into the medicinal realm and often precipitated distrust. Bradford stated: "There were many poisons in ancient Egypt, drugs that could be easily concealed in such things as combs and jewelry."<sup>85</sup> In this manner, perfume proved threatening in that it was visually interchangeable with poisonous materials and in female hands. Perhaps this was how Cleopatra retained control over her life and abstained from marching in Augustus' triumph.

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<sup>83</sup> Catherine Connors, "Scents and Sensibility in Plautus' *Casina*," *The Classical Quarterly* 47 (1997): 307.

<sup>84</sup> Susan Stewart, 74.

<sup>85</sup> Ernle Bradford, 270.

Overall, Cleopatra's divine construct of scent crumbled within the context provided by the Greco-Roman world. Pliny deemed it "...the most superfluous of all forms of luxury."<sup>86</sup> Thus, Pliny interpreted her action of anointing her hands with 400 denarii worth of perfumed unguent as a female excess of a sensual nature, while her Egyptian audience would have recognized this as the appropriate ritual of the goddess incarnate.<sup>87</sup> In this manner, perfume acted as a dynamic symbol and a valuable cultural assessor that reflected the social values invested by the corresponding Mediterranean civilizations.

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<sup>86</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, Book 13.20 or page 111.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

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