

Aromatherapy Quarterly

30 - Autumn 1991

The Aromatic Ball Rolls On

As you read this issue of Aromatherapy Quarterly, you will notice that a substantial number of the contributions come from abroad, and this is an accurate reflection of the growing interest in aromatherapy world-wide.

Evidence of this widening interest is seen in other ways, too. More overseas students are taking aromatherapy courses in England, and English teachers are in great demand in other countries, with the USA in particular being avid for teachers and speakers from France, Germany and the UK. Here, we have had exciting talks and seminars from Pierre Franchome and Dr. Penoel from France and Professor Wabner from Germany.

Book sales and translations are another indicator: aromatherapy books in English sell well in every country where English is understood (not only those where it is the first language) and are being translated into many more languages. On my desk I have a copy of Shirley Price's *Practical Aromatherapy* in Norwegian, and my own *Aromatherapy - an A-Z* is about to appear in Japanese - a mind-boggling enterprise, to my mind at least. How do you even begin translating the title into a language composed of pictograms - and far more than 26 of them? In the event, the honorable translator got stuck on only one word in the whole book (and that was a trade-name)! The traffic is by no means one-way. We have seen Marguerite Maury's pioneering book re-issued in English after many years out of print and before long, English readers will at last have access to the original Gattefosse book that started the aromatic ball rolling. Other exciting books are in the process of translation.

All these forms of exchange enrich our understanding of aromatherapy. May they expand ever wider.

Tricia Davis
Founding Editor



AQ Features this Season

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Aromatherapy in Ancient Egypt

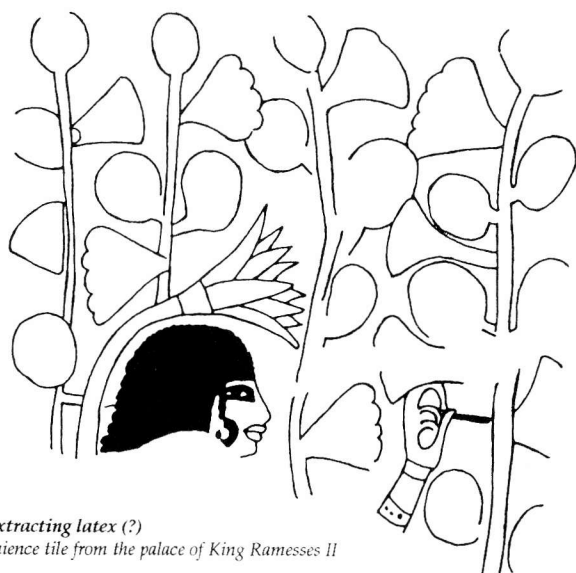
by Lise Manniche

Dr. Manniche, a leading Danish Egyptologist, is author of many books, including *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal*, British Museum Publications, 1989.

When an Ancient Egyptian, engaged in building a pyramid or a temple, returned from work with a splitting headache, his wife might reach for her chest of home remedies and massage his scalp with essential oil of juniper, cumin and frankincense mixed with goose fat. This gentle treatment would soon ease the pain. The Egyptians were at the forefront in so many areas, large and small, and aromatherapy was one of them.

The medicinal use of plants was developed in all primitive cultures, but it is to Egypt that we Westerners can trace our herbal tradition. Not only did the inhabitants of the Nile Valley develop their pharmacopoeia into a fine art, but by writing down the prescriptions they ensured that their knowledge was passed on to future generations. The Greek physicians learnt from their Egyptian colleagues, and the Arabs in turn copied Greek medical manuscripts, eventually, when settling in Spain, introducing the corpus of ancient knowledge into Europe.

We are to a considerable extent able to translate and interpret the Egyptian scrolls of medical papyri. The main obstacle lies in the identification of a number of plants and other items which occur in the prescriptions. This obviously prevents us from testing the efficacy of many of the suggested remedies, which must be based on centuries of trial and error. Nevertheless, we have a fair idea of both the methods and the ingredients used in Egypt several thousand years ago, with the bulk of the texts dating from c. 1700 - 1300 B.C.



*Extracting latex (?)
Faience tile from the palace of King Ramesses II*

Scented oils made in Egypt were famous throughout the ancient world. Perfumes in our sense of the word did not exist in Pharaonic times, for the distillation of alcohol only became

generally known in the 4th century B.C. Plant material was soaked in oil, then placed in a linen bag and squeezed and twisted to extract the last drops of essential oil. An alternative method was to boil the plant with oil and water and skim off the oil. It was the secret combination of herbs and the method and timing of the preparation which was crucial and contributed to the success of the Egyptian perfume industry.



*Pellets of incense
Relief from Memphis, now in Hildesheim. (ca. 1200 BC)*

In medicinal treatment, both singles and composites were in use. It is interesting that many of the properties attributed to the plants in the ancient texts are recognized in modern herbal medicine. Apart from using the remedies in internal treatment, the Egyptians would prescribe massage, fumigation, inhalation or a poultice of herbs. An alternative ointment to the juniper oil mentioned above to treat headache consisted of a mixture of dill seeds, bryony, coriander and two unidentified plants in donkey's fat. Swollen limbs were anointed with celery ground in oil, and a soothing ointment with cinnamon and frankincense was applied as a bandage to aching limbs. If a bone was broken, the poultice would include coriander, honey and fermented plant juice ground to a paste. Along with honey and myrrh, coriander appears in an ointment for treating herpes. A plant which is believed to be myrtle was used to fumigate a patient with a nervous affliction in his face. When he began to perspire, the session would conclude with a facial massage. Inhalation was prescribed for a cough; a hot stone was placed in a pot, and a mixture containing, for example, alum and wormwood poured over it. A second pot was placed above as a lid, with a hole pierced in the bottom to enable the patient to inhale the health-giving steam through a straw.

The robbers wrenched off the lids of the jars, or broke the necks of the vases and scooped out the contents, leaving clear fingerprints on the inside of the vessels.

It is generally believed that Egyptian mummies were treated with a wealth of herbs and spices to preserve them, and the mysterious process of mummification has captured the imagination for centuries. The main clue to a successful result

Aromatherapy in Ancient Egypt

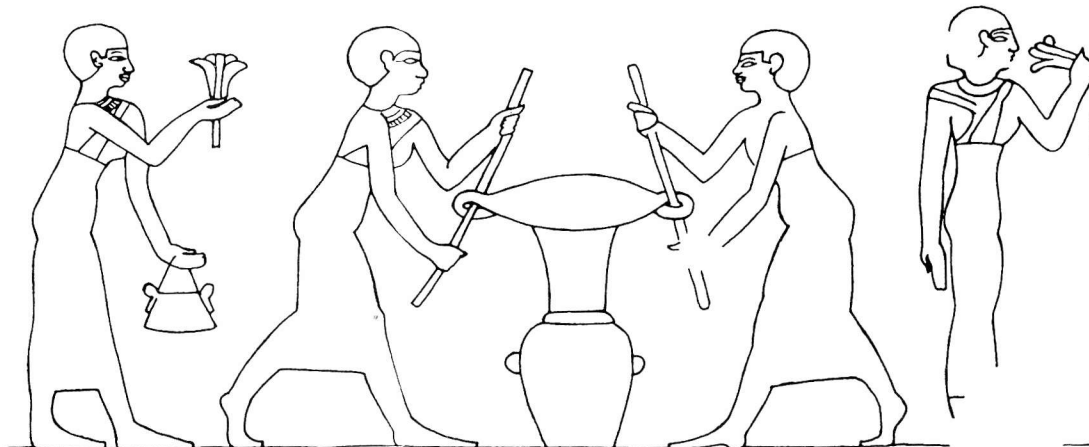
is to remove the soft organs and dry out the remainder of the body in order to avoid putrefaction. This was achieved either by placing the body in the dry sand of the desert - and this was the kind of burial that the majority of the population would have had - or by subjecting it to a process of desiccation by covering it in dry natron. It was only after this vital step that the body was anointed with precious oils, a method which no doubt reflects the practises of aromatherapists treating their clients in this life! Classical sources mention oil of juniper (which has a well-known stimulating and refreshing effect) mixed with myrrh and cinnamon, and archaeological evidence seems to support this.

The Egyptians had a highly-developed sense of smell, and the role of plants played a crucial part in life, in death and in resurrection. . . The amounts of incense consumed in the cult of the gods in temples throughout the country were staggering.

as at feasts and special events, where the recipients were not just the deceased, but the living as well. The Egyptians had a highly-developed sense of smell, and the role of plants played a crucial part in life, in death and in resurrection. Incense was imported from a land called Punt, probably to be identified with present-day Somalia. A love poem makes reference to this:

*When I embrace her
and her arms are open,
I feel like a man in Punt
who is immersed in scent...*

Numerous plays on words, both in literature and in art, suggest that scent contributed to an erotic ambience, which would in due course lead to conception and birth - and in another sphere, re-birth. This idea would also explain why precious oils form part of offerings to the dead and were included among gifts deposited in the tomb. Few burials have survived intact, having been disturbed by robbers soon after the burial. But the tomb of the boy king Tutankhamun (1347-1339 B.C.) provides a spectacular exception. The tomb was entered twice in antiquity. On one occasion the robbers went for gold; on the second they brought leather skins to fill up with unguents. These were stored in elaborate calcite



*Preparing essential oil of lilies.
Relief in the Egyptian Museum, Turin (ca. 200 BC)*

A most fascinating piece of information comes from three minute samples of tissue of the mummy of King Ramesses II (1290-1224 B.C). It would seem that at some stage the royal mummy was anointed with the oil of a plant of the genus *Compositae*, probably chamomile. Thanks to modern science and its application in pollen analysis, details became available of the habitat of this chamomile(?) plant. It grew at some distance from water, for no pollen of riverine plants was found in the oil residue. But there were no date palms in the area either.

The plants which grew with the chamomile(?) included wheat, lime, plane, Christ-thorn, hemp, cornflower, wormwood, chicory, convolvulus, nettles, plantain, sage and - unusual for this early date - cotton. Chamomile oil was a commodity used at a later date by the Copts - the Christian Egyptians - and it remains one of the classic sedatives in aromatherapy. Incidentally, it is also reported that twigs of rosemary have been found in mummy wrappings. Among other things, rosemary oil is nowadays appreciated for its tonic and invigorating properties.

In addition to anointing and massage, the Egyptians enjoyed the aromatic qualities of plants through fumigation. The amounts of incense consumed in the cult of the gods in temples throughout the country were staggering. Add to this the incense burnt at the funerals of private individuals as well

(‘alabaster’) jars (which according to Classical sources were ideally suited to the purpose). The robbers wrenched off the lids of the jars, or broke the necks of the vases and scooped out the contents, leaving clear finger-prints on the inside of the vessels. When discovered in the 1920’s, the residue was still soft to the touch. It was analyzed and was proved to consist largely of 90% animal fat and 10% resin.

By depositing scented oils near their deceased relatives, the Egyptians sought to ensure that essential needs were fulfilled. With other offerings they helped restore balance in the individual and in the universe. Scents helped maintain harmony between body and spirit, and it played a vital part in resurrection.

A bowl of unguent, discovered in the tomb of a private individual from around the same time, was found to contain vegetable oils with added iron and - morphine. When injected into a frog and a mouse, the drug was still active, a remarkable fact after more than 3000 years!

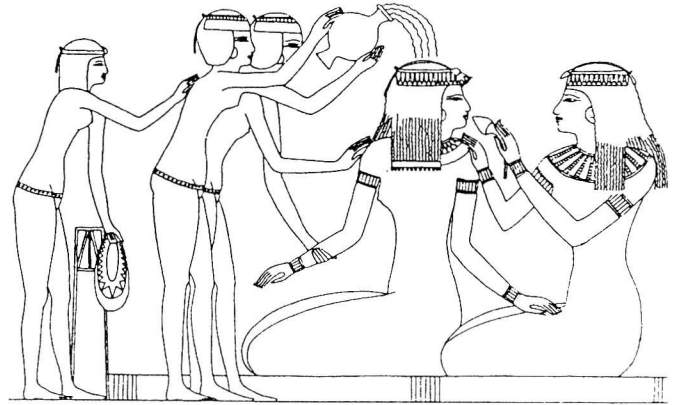


*Carrying unguent jars in the funeral procession.
Wall-painting in Theban Tomb no.55; 18th Dynasty.*

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resurrection. Anyone with a receptive mind is able to experience the benefits of such treatment. Tracing the tradition back in history makes us aware of our roots, and it also brings alive an ancient civilization and the human beings behind its impressive monuments.



*Red ointment being poured over a lady at a banquet.
Wall-painting in Theban Tomb no.77, after a drawing by Prisse d'Avennes;
18th Dynasty*

Dr. Manniche is lecturing on the 'Egypt Study Tour' taking place November 27 - December 11, 1991 organised by the Natural Oils Research Association. For more information, contact Butterbur & Sage, 101 Highgrove Street, Reading, RG1 5EJ, Tel. 0734-314484.

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