

# MEMNONIA

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PARFUMS, ONGUENTS ET COSMÉTIQUES  
DANS L'ÉGYPTE ANCIENNE



## ANCIENT SCENT – AN EVALUATION OF THE SOURCES [Pl. I-II]

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According to the Roman writer Pliny of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, “perfumes serve the purpose of the most superfluous of all forms of luxury ; for pearls and jewels do nevertheless pass to the wearer's heir, and clothes last for some time, but unguents lose their scent quickly, and die in the very hour when they are used.” Furthermore (he adds) “all [the money] is paid for the pleasure of someone else, for a person carrying scent about him does not smell it himself” <sup>(1)</sup>.

It is through the classical writers that we obtain the most detailed descriptions of ancient scents, both their composition and their effect. Fortunately for us, they often quote Egyptian sources. However, the fact that these writers came from a different geographical and cultural background, that they did not speak the Egyptian language, and that they were also removed in time from the pharaonic Egyptians, allows for many misunderstandings and “re-interpretations”. In this brief presentation I would like to assess the source material at our disposal, including both primary and secondary sources, and to point out some specific problems encountered in the quest for “the most superfluous of all forms of luxury” <sup>(2)</sup>.

### LEXICOGRAPHY

A number of prescriptions for the manufacture of scented substances have survived. The most detailed are those written down on the walls of the so-called laboratories <sup>(3)</sup> in the temples of Philæ <sup>(4)</sup> and especially Edfu <sup>(5)</sup>, along with the references in the texts of the temple at Dendera <sup>(6)</sup>. Some parallels may be found in earlier sources, such as the medical texts, but the Ptolemaic material is by far the most explicit. In addition, we have Greek versions of some of the recipes <sup>(7)</sup>.

The main, and at times unsurmountable, problem here is of a lexicographical nature. How do we determine the ingredients and translate the words? Some are known from other contexts, or we know the general

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nature of them through the use of the hieroglyphic determinative, though as in the case of the various resins (frankincense, myrrh, etc.) there is an ongoing discussion as to the exact significance of the terms <sup>(8)</sup>. The ancient Egyptians themselves were sometimes in doubt and added glosses to clarify a specific term – for example when the expression “fresh Horus eye” in one of the Edfu texts is explained by “wine”.

In other instances an ingredient is so unusual that it is difficult to grasp – as when fruit paste is apparently used as a base for a scented substance. This is the case, for example, with the best documented scent of all, *kyphi*, known from Edfu, Philae, Plutarch (who copied from Manetho)<sup>(9)</sup>, Galen<sup>(10)</sup>, Dioscorides<sup>(11)</sup> and even sources going back to the beginning of the New Kingdom<sup>(12)</sup>. *Kyphi* was intended to be burnt (cf. Pl. I), or even taken as a remedy against snake bite, and its main ingredient appears to be - raisins. Further back in time, sycamore paste was used as a base for scent, mixed with other fragrant ingredients<sup>(13)</sup>. When comparing the different recipes for *kyphi*, one finds that there is considerable variation in the plant material added to the basic ingredients, and cardamom may be substituted for cinnamon and cassia for pine resin. Hence, for lexicographical studies they are not as useful as one would perhaps have expected when searching for Greek equivalents to Egyptian terms. For these reasons it is not possible to produce an exact copy of ancient *kyphi*. As in the case of another intangible aspect of Egyptian civilisation – their music – we can only gain a general idea, and even the Egyptian themselves would have recognised different kinds. Edfu provides two recipes, and classical authors mention a sun *kyphi* and a moon *kyphi*<sup>(14)</sup>.

The worldwide media coverage, in the spring of 2002, of the recreated *kyphi* demonstrates the dilemma we face. Sixteen ingredients for *kyphi* are quoted by Plutarch, Edfu and Philae. As has previously been pointed out<sup>(15)</sup>, eight of these are fairly certain : raisins, wine and honey ; myrrh and frankincense; pine resin, juniper and a plant by the name of *chaerophyllum* (identified in a jar with the name on)<sup>(16)</sup>. Three plants are “probably correct” (sweet flag, camel grass/lemon grass and cyperus grass). But that leaves five problematic ingredients, which even vary among themselves. In the Greek text one has been rendered as cardamom. This could be a translation of the Egyptian word (which some scholars translate cinnamon<sup>(17)</sup>), or it may be a substitute for an ingredient which was either unknown, unavailable, or considered inferior. The newly recreated version of *kyphi* is based on raisins and honey, but for some reason wine was replaced by palm wine. The three resins are myrrh, frankincense and mastic, the herbs being juniper, lemon grass, cyperus grass, sweet flag and mint. Cassia (mentioned by Galen) was preferred to cinnamon or cardamom. The



problematic aspalathos was interpreted as bois de Rhodes, and sesili was omitted, as was perhaps also *chaerophyllum* <sup>(18)</sup>. Even if we identify the plants correctly, there remains the question of the exact species and which part of the plant was used : stem, leaves, flower, root, seeds, or fruits, juice or resin. In many instances this makes a difference.

Other scents used by the elite, rather than in the temple, were so famous in the Mediterranean that a Greek translation from the hieroglyphic original was required for it to be manufactured locally, but again there remains the possibility that an unfamiliar ingredient, which was available in Egypt, was replaced by another in Greece or at Rome.

#### **Attempts at recreating *kyphi* have been made before :**

- by a company in New Mexico c. 2000.
- for an exhibition in the National Museum in Copenhagen in 1998.
- for an exhibition in Munich in Germany in 1990.
- in 1887 by Victor Loret and a French pharmacist.
- in the 1850s by a chemist in Berlin (at which time it was marketed as an aphrodisiac).
- in the Middle Ages by an unguent-maker from Alexandria by the name of Nikolaos.

#### **ICONOGRAPHY**

Scent and perfume is not usually visible – if we disregard the luxurious wrapping in which these substances are presented and traded, nowadays as well as in antiquity. Nevertheless, the visual arts have some bearing on a discussion of the nature of pharaonic perfume, for the artists found a way of signalling to their contemporaries, and to us, that scent was of the utmost importance, not only during the lifetime of the Egyptians (as a matter of course), but also in their funerary beliefs.

This is most evident in the wall decoration of the tombs of private individuals beginning during the Old Kingdom and reaching its climax in the New Kingdom. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> dynasty, Hesire had his unguent cupboard depicted in his mastaba <sup>(19)</sup>. In the 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty there is a very large picture of Ptahshepses sniffing a pot of unguent at close hand, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty participants at banquets are anointed as we watch. This is also the case when an official is rewarded by the king, for example in several tombs at el-

Amarna. As in those days perfume was not based on alcohol, but on oils or fats, a heavily anointed person would also have been quite greasy, and this state of affairs would leave traces on his or her garments. The white linen would have dark stains where it was close to the body, as at the breasts, shoulders or knees. In order to show a true abundance of scent, the artist would place a whole lump of unguent on top of the heads or wigs of the guests (cf. Pl. II). This has in the past been interpreted as an actual cone of unguent, but there seems now to be some consensus <sup>(20)</sup> in regarding it as a visual aid, provided by the ancient artists to remind us of the odoriferous ambiance – the significance of which will be demonstrated below.

### ANALYSIS

Apart from studying the recipes and overcoming lexicographical problems, the most obvious approach towards an assessment of ancient scent would be to carry out analyses of residue in perfume containers. Recent results of such analyses of eye-paint in the Louvre gave surprising results, in that it proved that knowledge of chemistry was far more sophisticated than had previously been believed. Similar work on scent, using all available modern technology, is currently being continued in laboratories in France <sup>(21)</sup>.

The most important find of all, the perfume from the tomb of Tutankhamun, was analysed at the time of its discovery – but science has advanced somewhat since the 1920s! It has been estimated that about 350 litres of scented oil and fat were buried with him. When the second wave of robbers entered his tomb shortly after his burial, they brought leather sacks to carry it all away. Apparently they were interrupted, leaving the alabaster jars with their necks broken and their interiors showing fingerprints, where they had scooped out the contents. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of scent was left. Even today residue is clearly visible inside the jars as they are exhibited in the museum. The analysis of one jar with 450 g scent in it was not surprising: 87.7% fatty matter, probably animal fat, the rest being “some balm or resin” <sup>(22)</sup>. The scented substance from the tomb of Tutankhamun still gave a faint odour, which has been variously described as coconut or flowers of broom or valerian.

One may compare this ancient analysis with another from the 1980s of a tiny sample of the tissue of the mummy of Ramesses II, which through pollen analysis alone yielded a truly amazing glimpse of ancient vegetation: the royal mummy had apparently been anointed with camomile oil, and this camomile had grown in a field full of weeds, all of which were identified <sup>(23)</sup>. I am convinced that the next major step forward in research on ancient



perfume lies in the analysis of such physical remains inside vessels that belonged to the elite – if not to royalty.

### CULTURAL CONTEXT

The significance of perfume in its cultural context in Egypt is becoming more clearly defined. From the beginning of Egyptian history there is evidence of the importance of scent and cosmetics in funerary beliefs and temple ritual. The most famous palette of all, the Narmer palette, was possibly used during a ritual, but we do not know what, nor do we know whether it involved eye-paint or scent. What we do know is that it was found in a “mixed layer” in the temple at Hierakonpolis, and that its decoration suggests a context which is either bellicose or is in some other way political. Private individuals were given sachets of eye-paint as tomb equipment, and the “seven sacred oils”, each distinguished no doubt by their scent, their consistency and their mythological context, became a required element in funerary equipment of the historical period.

The significance of scent in funerary beliefs is truly understood only when seen in the context of the symbolism of tomb equipment and tomb decoration, and the metaphors used in text and pictures to create an ambiance that would further the idea of rebirth in the hereafter. The Egyptians wanted eternal life. New life, rebirth, required the same elements as the original birth, that is to say some sort of sexual activity, or at least the presence of sexual powers. These, as we all know, are enhanced by scent and cosmetics, and by an abundance of hair, in Egypt emphasised by the use of wigs. When studying the tomb paintings of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms and the very sophisticated ideas expressed by means of plays on words which are so beautifully and so clearly presented to us, there can be no doubt that funerary beliefs were very closely related to sexual concepts of daily life. This is why we can legitimately say that funerary beliefs and practices enlighten us on aspects of daily life, for it works both ways. This has been clearly demonstrated in the plays of words relating the concept of procreation to a visual pun of pouring out a drink. One may recall the word-plays used to explain the creation of the world, and the visual puns so abundantly presented by the artists become clear in so-called scenes of daily life : banquet scenes, fishing and fowling, hunting and so on <sup>(24)</sup>.

These very Egyptian concepts and their emphasis on sexuality must be borne in mind in any discussion of the significance of scent and cosmetics. This is something that painstaking work by a number of scholars has revealed. The classical authors, some two thousand years closer to the



action than we are, were unaware of this. In the works of Theophrastus, Pliny, Galen, and Dioscorides, we have isolated recipes, very valuable in their own right, but they do not enlighten us as to the cultural context in which the preparations were used. "The Egyptian", "The Mendesian", Susinum, Sampsuchum, Amarakinon – very evocative names, and so they would have been among the upper classes of Athens and Rome, imported or manufactured according to foreign recipes to delight, but only that – like any souvenir torn from its proper context, as were the foreign scents imported into Egypt : *Djefti* and *Inbu* from Alasia, best quality *Kadjawar* from Khatti, sweet flag oil from Amor, *Gati* from Takhsi and ben (moringa) oil from Naharin – as mentioned in one of the students' letters from the late New Kingdom. We may quote Pliny once more on the demand for foreign scents in Arabia, imported from abroad : "so tired do mortals get of things that are their own, and so covetous are they of what belongs to other people" <sup>(25)</sup>. In Athens of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC "The Egyptian" was one of the most popular perfumes, consisting of a colourless base oil with the addition of cinnamon and myrrh steeped in wine, ideally matured for eight years. In Egypt itself, it would seem that nothing surpassed the delicate fragrance of the lotus flower, but its popularity would have had as much to do with its mythological background as womb of the sun god at the moment of its creation and, in addition possibly, an awareness of the interesting medicinal (sexually stimulating) properties of the lotus <sup>(26)</sup>.

The exploration of the world of ancient scents is just beginning. It requires several sciences to come together: lexicography, iconography, pollen analysis, chromatography and chemistry, and a thorough understanding of Egyptian culture and its ways of communicating. By employing all of these, we shall begin to understand "the most superfluous of all forms of luxury".

### Résumé

Research into what was by the Roman writer Pliny called "the most superfluous of all forms of luxury" should focus on four main areas : 1) lexicographical studies to define more closely the ingredients used in preparations mentioned in prescriptions on the walls of Graeco-Roman temples ; 2) iconographical studies of scenes where perfumed unguent is applied or otherwise represented by the artists ; 3) analyses of samples from scent containers in museums, using the most recent scientific equipment and methods ; and 4) a study of cultural context in which perfume and unguents appear in representations (during temple ritual, as a royal reward to officials, as a commodity used in daily life and, above all, as a significant part of funerary equipment and beliefs).

## ملخص

كان يجب أن يتركز البحث فيما سماه الكاتب الرومانى بليينوس بـ الشكل الأكثر سطحية من كل أشكال البذخ على أربعة محاور رئيسية.

١ - دراسة معجمية تهدف إلى تعريف أدق لمكونات المستحضرات المشار إليها فى الكتابات الموجودة على جدران المعابد الإغريقية - الرومانية.

٢ - دراسة ايقونية للمشاهد التى استعملت فيها الدهانات المعطرة أو مثل فنانون استعمالها.

٣ - تحليل العينات المأخوذة من أوانى العطور الموجودة فى المتاحف باستعمال أحدث التقنيات وأدقها.

٤ - دراسة السياق الثقافى التى ظهرت فيه الدهانات المعطرة فى الرسومات (خلال الطقوس الدينية، كمكافأة ملكية أو كمادة للاستعمال اليومى وخاصة كعنصر من عناصر التجهيز الجنائزى).

## NOTES

- (1) *Natural History* XIII.20, translated by H. Rackham, Loeb edition, 1936.
- (2) Substantial works on ancient Egyptian perfume include *Parfums & Cosmétiques dans l'Égypte ancienne*, Cairo, Paris, Marseille 2002 ; L. Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries. Perfume, Aromatherapy and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt*, Opus Publishing Limited, London and Cornell University Press 1999 (= *Egyptian Luxuries. Fragrance, Aromatherapy and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt*, American University Press, Cairo 1999) ; J. Winand et al., *L'art du parfum*, Paris, 1993 ; E. Paszthory, *Salben, Schminken und Parfüme im Altertum*, Mainz am Rhein, 1992 ; M. Dayagi-Mendels, *Perfumes and Cosmetics in the Ancient World*, Israel Museum, 1992.
- (3) See E. Paszthory, "Laboratorien in ptolemäischen Tempelanlagen" in *Antike Welt* 19, 1989, pp. 2-20.
- (4) Hieroglyphic text by J. Dümichen in H. Brugsch, *Recueil de monuments égyptiens* IV, 1885 pl. 84 (the columns of text do not correspond to the original).
- (5) Hieroglyphic texts in E. Chassinat (2nd rev. ed. by S. Cauville and D. Devauchelle), *Le temple d'Edfou*, II, 1987, pp. 189-230.
- (6) E. Chassinat, *Le mystère d'Osiris au mois de Khoiak*, Cairo, 1968, pp. 380-435 and pp. 809-23.



- (7) See references in *Sacred Luxuries*, passim.
- (8) E. g. M. Chermette and J.-C. Goyon, "Le catalogue raisonné des producteurs de styrax et d'oliban d'Edfou et d'Athribis de Haute Egypte" in *SAK* 23, 1996, pp. 47-82 ; N. Baum "L'organisation du règne végétal dans l'Egypte ancienne", in S. Aufrère (éd.), *Encyclopédie religieuse de l'univers végétal*, Montpellier, 1999, pp. 421-43.
- (9) *De Iside et Osiride*, 81.
- (10) *De antidotis*, II,2.
- (11) *De materia medica* I,25.
- (12) See *Sacred Luxuries*, chapter 3.
- (13) J. D. S. Pendlebury and *al.*, *City of Akhenaten*, III, London 1951, p. 175 (no. 306).
- (14) Paulus Aegineta, *Epitomae medicae libri septem*, VII.22.
- (15) M. Betrò, "Il kuphi e i suoi ingredienti (I)", *EVO* 14/15 (1991-92), pp. 43-53. Previous literature on kyphi includes the study by V. Loret in *Journal asiatique* 10, July-August 1887, pp. 76-132 ; P. Derchain, "La recette du kyphi", in *RdE* 28, 1976, pp. 61-65.
- (16) The pot with its contents was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. The identification is cited by R. Germer, *Flora des pharaonischen Ägypten*, Mainz am Rhein, 1985, p. 143, cf. R. Germer, *Die Pflanzenmaterialien aus dem Grab des Tutanchamun*, Hildesheim, 1989 (= HÄB 28), pp. 63-64.
- (17) See, however, Germer, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- (18) Information kindly supplied by Isabelle Walter of l'Oréal.
- (19) See H. Altenmüller, "Das Ölmagazin im Grab des Hesire in Saqqara (QS 2405)", in *SAK* 4, 1976, pp. 1-29.
- (20) First hinted briefly by S. Schott, *Das schöne Fest vom Wüstentale*, Wiesbaden 1952, p. 75 ("aufgelegte – in Wirklichkeit verriebene – Pomade"). This was taken up by the present writer at a colloquium in Brussels in 1994 (see R. Tefnin ed., *La peinture égyptienne ancienne. Un monde de signes à préserver*, Brussels 1997, pp. 33-34). The suggestion was further commented on by N. Cherpion, "Le "cône d'onguent", gage de survie", in *BIFAO* 94, 1998, pp. 79-106, especially pp. 86-87.
- (21) See, for the time being, S. Aufrère, "A propos des résultats obtenus sur les échantillons conservés au Museum d'histoire naturelle de Lyon", in S. Aufrère (éd.), *Encyclopédie religieuse de l'univers végétal*, Montpellier, 1999, pp. 533-547.
- (22) *Journal of the Chemical Society* 129, 1926, pp. 2614- 2619.
- (23) L. Balout and C. Roubet (eds.), *La momie de Ramsès II*, Paris, 1985, pp. 162-165.



(24) See Manniche, "Reflections on the banquet scene" in Tefnin *op. cit.*, pp.29-35 ; P. Derchain, "Symbols and metaphors in literature and representations of private life" in *Royal Anthropological Institute News* 15, August 1976, pp. 7-10 ; W. Westendorff, "Bemerkungen zur "Kammer der Wiedergeburt" im Tutankhamungrab", in *ZAS* 94, 1967, pp. 139-50. Cf. also Manniche, *Sacred Luxuries*, chapter 5 "Scent for love and rebirth".

(25) *Natural History* XXII, 78.

(26) In one of the offering texts in the Edfu temple the eyes of the deity marvel and his nostrils dilate when sniffing a lotus flower (M.L. Ryhiner, *L'offrande du lotus dans les temples égyptiens de l'époque tardive*, Brussels 1986, pp. 31, 43 and 53). A TV6/Channel 4 television programme, broadcast in November 2000, quoted a laboratory in Manchester as proving that the blue lotus had properties akin to viagra. The narcotic properties of the flower had previously been suggested by W. A. Emboden, "Transcultural use of narcotic water lilies in ancient Egyptian and Maya drug ritual", in *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 3, 1981, p. 58.