

Response to S. Sensi, 'Permeable Boundaries: Experiencing the Divine Beyond Sight'

Jack W. Brooker

In her discussion paper, Sensi raises a very valid point about the reliance (or over-reliance) placed by scholars on the technical and theological reconstruction of Egyptian religion, rather advocating "a methodological shift within Egyptology toward approaches that integrate all the senses: olfactory, tactile, auditory, and beyond, in order to more accurately reconstruct ancient lived experience" (p. 1). The project has considerable promise, bringing the comparatively new approaches of sensory archaeology to bear on the question of Egyptian religious experience as an embodied phenomenon.

Sensi provides a useful indication of various contexts in which the associations of olfactory fragrances with divine presence and divine bodies can be seen in an Egyptian context, building primarily on the work of Wise.¹ Sensi's connection of literary presentations of fragrant smells in the *Ritual of Amun* and the Pyramid Texts with the ritual use of fragrances (e.g. in the animation of divine statues) demonstrates how a consideration of olfactory experience can refine our interpretation of the meaningfulness of religious rituals for participants and witnesses.

This aspect of Sensi's approach could be developed by engagement with the cognitive dimensions of sensory experience, perhaps by building upon the work done in this regard by Eidinow on the representation of divine smells in Greek literature, and the capacity of these representations to (re)activate situated conceptualisations of the divine.²

It would also be interesting to see Sensi supplement her exploration of the olfactory environment of temple spaces by moving beyond the deliberately introduced fragrant aromas of incense and temple gardens, and to consider also the place of unpleasant scents in temple environments. This idea is partly alluded to in the reference to bodies with the competing odours of sweat and perfume (p. 3), but it may be interesting to consider those unpleasant smells that arose from the urban and river environments outside the temple walls, such as those described in the *Dispute Between a Man and his Ba*:

“Lo, my name reeks
Lo, more than carrion smell
On summer days of burning sky.

Lo, my name reeks
Lo, more than a catch of fish
On fishing days of burning sky.

Lo, my name reeks
Lo, more than ducks smell,
More than reed-coverts full of waterfowl.”³

¹ Wise (2009).

² Eidinow (2022), esp. p. 79ff.

³ Lichtheim (2006, [1973]) pp. 210-211.

This animal stench could even be considered within the bounds of the temple environment, especially in such contexts as the enclosures of sacred animals like the Apis and Mnevis bulls; the aroma frankincense and myrrh is one olfactory experience, the scent of bovine defecation quite another. Does the presumed presence of these other olfactory inputs require us to question how far the fragrances introduced at temples are detectable by those outside the walls? Or could an argument be made that these odours serve as a contrast that reinforces the divine associations of pleasant olfactory experiences?

Regardless, Sensi's project is certain to highlight important aspects of the experience of sacred spaces in pharaonic Egypt, with the potential to contribute towards a deeper understanding of the cognitive and sensory structures underlying religious experiences more generally.

Bibliography

Eidinow, E. (2022) 'Ancient Greek smellscape and divine fragrances: anthropomorphising the gods in ancient Greek culture', in E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz and J. North (eds), *Cognitive approaches to ancient religious experience*. Ancient Religion and Cognition. Cambridge University Press, pp. 69-95.

Lichtheim, M. (2006, [1973]) *Ancient Egyptian Literature*. University of California Press.

Wise, E. (2009) 'An "Odor of Sanctity": The iconography, magic, and ritual of Egyptian incense', *Studia Antiqua*, 7(1), Article 8, pp. 67-80. Available at:

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1136&context=studiaantiqua>