

Permeable Boundaries: Experiencing the Divine Beyond Sight.

INTRODUCTION

This discussion paper explores the role of smell in ancient Egyptian religion through the perspective of sensorial archaeology. It considers how religious knowledge may have been constructed not only through visual and textual means, but through embodied, multi-sensory experience. Focusing on the significance of fragrance in relation to sacred plants, and divine embodiment, the paper examines how scent functioned as a medium through which the presence of the gods was perceived and understood. Drawing on examples such as the association between deities and aromatic substances, as well as the sensory environments of temple spaces like Karnak and Athribis, it raises questions about the permeability of sacred spaces and the extent to which non-elite populations may have engaged with the divine through olfactory experience. It calls for 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. Only by moving past a predominantly visual framework can scholars fully apprehend how the Egyptians perceived, encountered, and interacted with their gods. By engaging with theoretical approaches in sensorial archaeology, this paper proposes that smell offers a productive lens for rethinking ancient Egyptian religious practice as embodied, affective, and spatially diffuse.

Ancient Egyptians were careful observers of their environment, and their religious ideas developed through close engagement with the natural and cosmic world. However, this perception was not limited to sight alone; rather, it involved the full range of the senses. From the perspective of sensorial archaeology, Egyptian religion can be understood as fundamentally multi-sensory and embodied, in which knowledge of the divine was acquired through bodily experience. Among these senses, smell played a particularly significant role.

Fragrant flowers and trees, such as the lotus associated with Nefertum and the sacred sycamore, would have stood out as extraordinary within the landscape, marking certain spaces as imbued with divine presence. Perfume itself was not merely symbolic but was understood as a material extension of the gods' bodies (Wise, 2009). Many deities were closely associated with fragrance. Osiris, for instance, had an ancient connection to sacred perfumes. Some scholars suggest that his name may once have meant "place of the eye," referring to the myth in which Horus offers his sweet-smelling Eye to his father after defeating Seth. The Egyptians frequently identified the Eye of Horus with incense, and in some traditions, it was specifically linked to labdanum resin, imagined as tears falling from the god's eye onto gum-cistus shrubs (Wise, 2009).



Fig 1 God Nefertum

Over time, Osiris became associated with these plants, understood as the physical “place” where the sacred substance of the Eye manifested. Even the goats that wandered among these shrubs were revered, believed to embody the ram-form of Osiris worshipped at Mendes (Wise, 2009). These associations suggest a sensory ecology in which landscape, vegetation, and scent were fully integrated into religious meaning.

Temple texts further emphasize the intimate connection between divine bodies and fragrance. In the Ritual of Amun, incense is described as emanating directly from the god’s flesh, his sweat falling to the earth and becoming a life-giving substance shared among the gods. Such descriptions point to an embodied theology in which divine presence is not abstract, but materially and sensorially experienced through scent (Wise, 2009).

Fragrance was also closely tied to solar symbolism. In the Pyramid Texts, the “scent of Horus’s eye” represents the sun, since Horus’s eyes were identified with the sun and the moon. The sun god Ra was believed to have first appeared in a lotus blossom, the symbol of Nefertum, whose fragrance rises each morning like incense offered to the rising sun. Through this association, scent functioned as a medium through which solar energy and divine vitality were transmitted. (Wise, 2009)

These solar connections endowed ritual practices such as censuring with transformative power. as describe in the article of Goebis (2011). In such rituals priests manipulated smell, heat, and atmosphere to animate divine statues. By burning incense, they symbolically transferred the warmth, moisture, and “odor of a living body” to otherwise inert materials such as wood or metal. Like the fragrant sweat of Amun that enlivens the cosmos, incense was believed to breathe vitality into the divine image, making the presence of the god perceptible through the senses. (Wise, 2009)



Myrrh and frankincense trees were likewise venerated, sometimes as mother goddesses, their resin described as a divine bodily fluid. Deities were believed to offer life-sustaining substances through trees. For example, goddesses such as Hathor are depicted emerging from trees, providing water to the dead and sustaining them in the afterlife. These examples highlight how plant life, resin, and scent formed part of a broader sensory network linking the human, natural, and divine worlds (Wise, 2009).

Fig 2 Khonsu-mes receives libation of food and drink from the tree goddess. Papyrus of Khonsu-mes 21st Dynasty, c. 1000 B.C.Thebes).

Incense may also have influenced the mental and emotional states of ritual participants. Its aroma could induce a calming or even trance-like condition, facilitating communication with the gods (Wise, 2009). From a sensorial perspective, this suggests that ritual practice did not merely represent the divine, but actively altered perception, shaping how the body experienced reality. In funerary contexts, particularly in the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony, scent played a crucial role in restoring life to the dead. For the Egyptians, smell was a defining characteristic of living beings, perfumed, sweating bodies in the heat of the Nile, while the absence of scent signified death. Rituals involving incense therefore reintroduced the sensory qualities of life (Tatomir, 2016)

More broadly, fragrance was understood as a direct marker of divine presence on earth. A persistent and distinctive scent, often associated with the sacred land of Punt, signalled that a god had manifested or was about to communicate. In the account of the divine birth of Hatshepsut, her mother first perceives the presence of Amun-Ra through fragrance before sight. Smell thus functioned as an immediate and authoritative sensory indicator of the divine (Incordino, 2016)

Egyptian thought therefore placed particular importance on smell as a mode of perception. Unlike other senses, which require conscious interpretation, scent was understood to act directly on memory and emotion, producing an immediate response (Tatomir, 2016). From the perspective of sensorial archaeology, this highlights the extent to which religious experience was grounded in the body.

This sensory dimension is also reflected in temple landscapes. Trees were planted in temple gardens, such as those at the temple of Amun-Ra in Karnak and the Ptolemaic temple of Atrihbis, where myrrh trees and other aromatic species from different regions, are depicted alongside descriptions of their colour, texture, and scent, each element linked to the bodies of specific deities. Such representations demonstrate that the Egyptians conceived of the divine world not only in visual or symbolic terms, but as a fully sensory and embodied reality (Incordino, 2016).

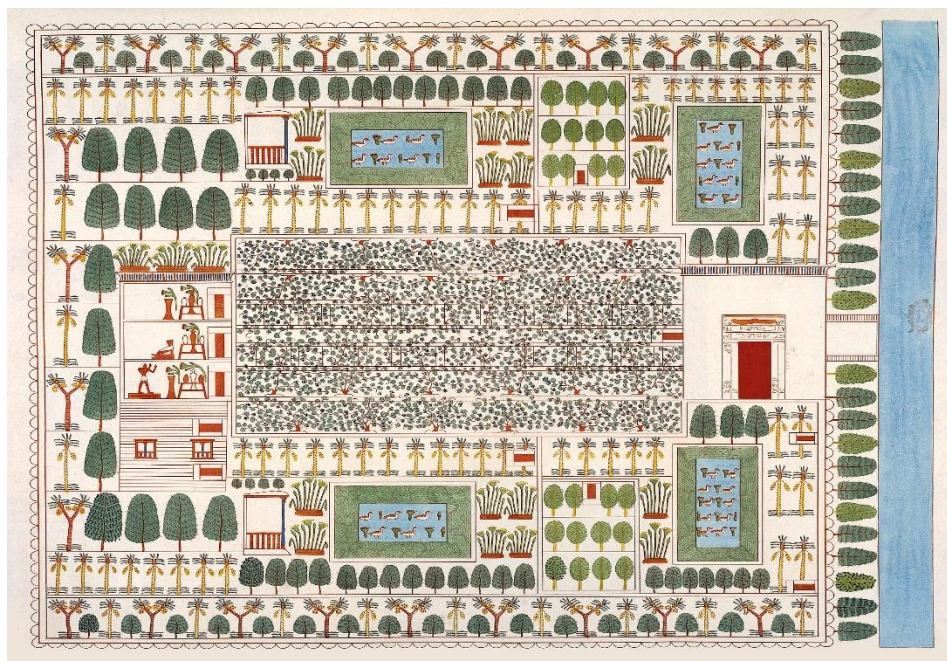


Fig. 3: The garden of the Amon-Ra temple in Karnak from a scene in Sennefer's Theban tomb

Drawing on the work of Hamilakis (2013) and Day (2019) in sensorial archaeology, this study will examine how smell shaped ancient Egyptian perceptions of the world, particularly in religious contexts. Focusing on two archaeological sites, the temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak as depicted from a scene in Sennefer's Theban tomb and the temple of Athribis, it seeks to explore the sensory dimensions of sacred space, building on the approaches of Price (2018) and Parkinson (2019). In particular, it asks whether temples were truly closed spaces for the general population, or whether they were more permeable than traditionally assumed. While non-initiates may not have witnessed the rituals performed within, they may still have experienced the presence of the gods through scent. Unlike sight, smell cannot be fully contained by walls; on certain days, the fragrances of flowers, resins, and incense from temple gardens may have extended beyond the sacred enclosure. In this way, even those excluded from the inner sanctuaries could have participated, however indirectly, in the sensory experience of the divine.

CONCLUSION

This discussion highlights the importance of reconsidering ancient Egyptian religion as a deeply sensory and embodied experience, in which smell played a central role. Rather than functioning solely as a symbolic or decorative element, fragrance appears to have operated as a material and perceptual bridge between humans and the divine, shaping how presence, memory, and meaning were experienced.

By examining the relationships between deities, perfumes, plants, and temple environments, this paper suggests that scent formed part of a broader sensory ecology that integrated landscape, ritual, and theology. In doing so, it opens up new ways of thinking about how sacred spaces functioned, not simply as visually restricted environments, but as dynamic sensory fields that may have extended beyond their architectural boundaries.

The possibility that temple fragrances could travel beyond enclosed spaces raises important questions about access and participation. Even if many individuals were excluded from direct ritual practice, they may nonetheless have encountered the divine through smell, challenging traditional assumptions about the separation between sacred and profane space.

Ultimately, this paper does not seek to provide definitive answers, but rather to foreground smell as a significant yet often overlooked dimension of ancient Egyptian religious life. It invites further exploration into how sensory experience can reshape our understanding of the past, and how approaches from sensorial archaeology can help reconstruct forms of knowledge that were lived through the body as much as they were thought or seen.

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FIGURES

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