

Smells at the Sanctuary: Scents as Offerings to the Gods

Dedicating an offering at a sanctuary was one of the most common ways to establish a reciprocal relationship with the divine in ancient Greece. The types of offerings varied significantly and could include statues, figurines, ceramic vessels, food, fabric, garlands and the like. Even the structures, the shrine's placement, and the environment might be seen as gifts to the gods in the way that they provided an appealing location for immortal and mortal. However, there is one important but often overlooked component of a dedication which also could have functioned as an offering: scent.

While the dedicated object was the physical manifestation of the gift, the scent may have served as an ephemeral offering which diffused through air, hopefully to delight the divine as well as the human dedicator. In the odoriferous world in which the ancient Greeks lived, pungent smells were all around. A whiff of a pleasant aroma may truly have been a gift. It has long been known that scent is a powerful way to prompt memories and emotion in humans. Certain odors or combinations thereof could have signaled the presence of a sanctuary or an occasion of a particular rite to an ancient Greek in the area. Clearly, many of the dedications offered to the gods would have emitted a sweet smell. Garlands, vegetation, foodstuffs, perfume, incense, and of course, sacrifices all would have added distinct odors to the sanctuary.

In order to track the elusive quality of smell within a ritual context, I have adopted an interdisciplinary approach. First, I considered the ancient perception and experience of the senses. Building upon recent scholarship concerning the ancient senses, I delved into the human cognitive response and perception to smells (Butler and Purves 2013; Houston and Taube 2001; Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994). Secondly, I turned to the textual evidence where ancient authors describe and express their perception of different types of scents. In particular,

Aristophanes' plays are rife with olfactory references as shown by M. Telò's recent article (2013). Then, I studied the iconographic evidence where objects known to emit scent such as flowers and perfumes are depicted at shrines. Finally, I addressed the material remains of odors within sanctuaries. Although many of these items do not survive in the archaeological record, some of the containers which held scented material are preserved. For example, aryballoi, alabastra, and exaleiptra, dedicated in high numbers at sanctuaries in the Archaic period, indicate the presence of perfumes. Analysis of their contents can offer clues as to their smell (Biers, Gerhardt, and Braniff 1994). In addition, other objects such as small altars with traces of burning suggest the presence of incense. Replicas and representations of scent-giving items also attest to the real presence of objects as well as the aromas themselves. Once these sources were collected, the ancient religious olfactory experience can begin to be recreated.

To illustrate how the offering of scent might be seen archaeologically, I employ one small stele shrine of the nymphs at Corinth (Kokkinovrysi) as a case study. Here, I can use the full assemblage, landscape, and Corinthian iconography along with the collective Greek corpora to understand a specific site. By refilling the vessels, replacing the vegetation, and reinstating the dedications, we can begin to restore the odors at shrines and ultimately, rethink the experience at the sanctuary.

Bibliography

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