

Burning for You: A Reconsideration of Incense in Ovid

Ovid uses *tus* for incense seventy-nine times in his entire corpus. He employs the word in offerings to unnamed gods (e.g. *Ars Amatoria* 1.638; *Amores* 3.3.33; *Metamorphoses* 9.159), to members of the pantheon (*Amores* 3.13.9 (Juno); *Met.* 3.733 (Bacchus); *Fasti* 4.411 (Ceres)), and as offerings to the emperor and his family (e.g. *Fasti* 1.719; *Fasti* 2.631; *Tristia* 1.2.104). Looking at Ovid's application of *tus* in his corpus, his offerings to the emperor from exile embody more than singular acts of flattery. This paper argues that Ovid's offerings of incense to Augustus should be understood in the context of his other presentations of *tus*. Through an examination of *tus*, the emperor's divinity in Ovid gains further dimension.

Ovid utilizes incense as a marker of proper obeisance to the gods throughout his corpus. Mortals who demand incense burned in their honor secure the repercussions of their hubris. For example, Niobe in *Metamorphoses* 6.170-183 demands, in part, an offering of incense to her as a goddess on earth rather than to Latona. Niobe's hubris, her unjust demand for divine honors, results in the death of her children. When Latona calls upon Apollo and Diana to punish Niobe (6.204-217), the goddess does not specifically mention incense as part of Niobe's crimes. Later in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid clarifies this omission. In book fourteen, Aeneas wishes to honor the Sybil in two ways: *templa tibi statuam, tribuam tibi turis honores* (14.128). The Sybil thwarts his bestowal of divine honors with the reply: *'nec dea sum' dixit 'nec sacri turis honore humanum dignare caput'* (14.130-131). Ovid's Sybil explains for the mortal reader what Latona and the gods already knew; she distinctly categorizes the proposed offering of *tus* as something belonging only to the gods. The Sybil, if she had not refused Aeneas' offerings, would then have committed a crime comparable to Niobe's. Ovid then understands incense as an offering fit only for the gods, and a crime for mortals to demand.

In keeping with Ovid's treatment of incense in the *Metamorphoses*, this paper places *tus* offered to Augustus in the context of divine honors (either as an act of hubris or justly deserved). In *Ex Ponto* 2.8 and 4.9.105-112, Ovid offers incense and prayers to statuettes of the imperial family. McGowan (2009) does not believe Ovid actually possessed a shrine to the imperial family, Gradel (2002) calls Ovid's actions pathetic, and Fishwick (1991) attributes the scene to poetic license. Given the other uses and misuses of incense in his corpus, a straightforward disregard of the poet's actions overlooks his meaning. The reality of Ovid's shrine notwithstanding, his application of *tus* places the emperor's worship in the context of other offerings of incense within his corpus (following Feeney 1998).

Furthermore, incense as an offering to Augustus appears elsewhere in Ovid's exile poetry (e.g. *Tristia* 1.2.103-4, 2.1.57-60, and *Ex Ponto* 1.4.55-6). These offerings are not connected to a festival, the *Lares*, or a specific god that would explain or allow the offering of incense for the living emperor (c.f. Robinson's (2011) note on *Fasti* 2.631 *date tura* as a regular offering for the *Lares*). The offerings in the *Tristia* are qualified by Ovid's use of *pro* (*pro te*; *pro Caesare*); offerings on behalf of a person do not indicate worship (Habicht 2017; McGowan 2009). The incense offered at *Ex Ponto* 1.4.55-6 is not limited by *pro*, but given to Augustus and his family in the dative (*Caesaribus*). Therefore incense offered to Augustus and members of his family should be read in the context of other Ovidian uses of *tus* in order to clarify the focus of the poet's worship.

The implications of the emperor's divinity are not lost on the poet, who uses his offerings of incense to complicate our reading of Augustus as both man and god. It is not for this paper to say whether or not Ovid viewed Augustus as a Niobe-figure or a god, but an analysis of his application of the word enables a reading of his exile-offerings as more than flattery.

Bibliography

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