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Incense and Fragrances: from House to Church

A Study of the Introduction of Incense in the Early Byzantine Christian Churches

When the Russian ambassadors entered Hagia Sophia in 987, they were struck by the enchanting fragrance within the church. This wonderful perfume, which floated through the church came from the perfumed oils burning in the lamps and from the fragrant smoke of incense wafting from censers. In 987, if we are to trust the *Russian primary Chronicle*, the prince of Kiev, Vladimir, had sent ten wise men to investigate Christian churches abroad. They visited the Bulgarians, the Germans and the Byzantines. In Constantinople, they were received by the emperor himself, who took special care to impress his visitors: “the emperor sent a message to the patriarch to inform him that a Russian delegation had arrived to examine the Greek faith, and directed him to prepare the church and the clergy, and to array himself in sacerdotal robes, so that the Russians might behold the glory of the God of the Greeks. When the patriarch received these commands, he bade the clergy assemble, and they performed the customary rites. They burned incense, and the choirs sang hymns. The emperor accompanied the Russians to the church, and placed them in a wide space, calling their attention to the beauty of the building, the chanting, and the offices of the archpriest and the ministry of the deacons, while he explained to them the worship of his God.” The Russians were indeed impressed by such splendor and they eventually chose the Greek faith.

The perfume of the church was but one element in conveying the glory of God. Lights, colours and singing also played an important role in the aesthetic experience. Yet the odour of the church was a key factor in the choice of the Byzantine church over the Bulgarian and the German churches. Compared with the stench of Bulgarian churches, and the absence of beauty in the German churches, the sweet-smelling fragrance of Hagia Sophia was indeed, a pleasant surprise for the visitors. It was to become a trademark of the Byzantine churches. This is not to say that other churches did not burn incense in their religious buildings, but it seems clear that the Patriarchal church used more incense and insisted more on perfume than other medieval churches. Incense had become the perfume of Byzantine churches. The smell of incense lingered in the churches and, at any time of the day, its odour was expected, strong during the censuring, faint the rest of the time, and a discrete but stubborn reminder that a religious ceremony had taken place.

Yet, it may seem surprising to find incense in such a prominent place in Christian Byzantine churches when it was so despised for its use in pagan sacrifices by early Christian writers. The Apologists, following some Biblical texts against sacrifices, have no word strong enough to condemn incense sacrifice¹. Some authors, like Tertullian, even reprove incense selling since it can condone idolatry if it leads the buyers to sacrifice with it². In the first three centuries AD, incense sacrifice had become the most common, and, with libations, one of the cheapest of all sacrifices³. Christian soon considered incense offering as a symbol for idolatry⁴. They insisted that the true worship of God in Christianity has nothing to do with incense. For these early Christians, material sacrifices proved a misunderstanding on the part of Jews and pagans on the true nature of God who, as a spiritual being, did not need or relish material offerings⁵. More often than not, up to

¹ The Letter of Barnabas, ed. R. A. KRAFT, Paris ²1971, 82 (transl. F. X. GLIMM, *The Apostolic Fathers*. Washington, D.C. 1947, 192: Incense is an abomination to Me.).

² Tertullianus, *De idololatria* 2. Critical text, translation and commentary by J. H. WASZINK – J. C. .M. VAN WINDEN. Leiden 1987, 168.

³ Propertius, *Elegies*, II 10, v. 24: *pauperibus sacris vilia tura damus*, transl. G. P. GOOLD. Cambridge–London 1990, 150–1; Heliodorus, *Ethiopica*, ed. R. M. RATTENBURY – T. W. LUMB. Paris 1938, 26.

⁴ Jerome, *Ep.* 14, ed. J. Labourt. Paris 1982, I 38.

⁵ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 30, ed. J. H. WASZINK. Paris 1998, 152.

the fifth century, when Christian sermons and treatises mention incense, it is to reject it from Christian worship and condemn it for its sacrificial use⁶.

For a second reason references to incense were unpopular in early Christian writings. The sacrifice of incense was the easiest and most commonly required sacrifice during the persecutions against Christians. Incense was very much tainted with either the blood of the martyrs or, worse, with the fall of weaker Christians into apostasy. Even twelfth century Byzantine sources mention incense in connection with the martyrs. Theodore Balsamon (c.1140–after 1195) and John Zonaras (12th c.), both recall how persecutors used incense to force Christians towards making sacrifice, and apostasy⁷.

In the light of this well-publicised early Christian aversion towards incense, it should come as a surprise that incense eventually came to be widely used in late antique and mediaeval Byzantine churches. This change of attitude requires an explanation and a careful dating. Two questions remain unsolved: when was incense brought inside churches? The debate turns around Constantine, who, if we trust the *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Romanae*, is responsible for offering censers, incense and spices to the newly erected Roman basilicas that he subsidised. Was Constantine offering something totally unknown to Christian churches and to Christian households or was it acceptable, for Christians, to receive such gifts because incense, spices and censers were commonly used by these same Christians and formed an important part of their material culture?

Few scholars have devoted attention to the Late Antique Christians' attitude towards incense and those who have studied incense have mostly studied either its trade⁸ or its use in the Christian liturgy. From C. F. Atchley to M. Pfeifer, scholars of the liturgy have often traced the different steps of the introduction of incense in churches⁹. C. F. Atchley's study was a pioneer work and it stands out. Whenever he saw incense in a text, he made a note of it and that reference ended up in one of his neatly arranged chapters. His approach was functionalist and it represented the first attempt at explaining the diverse uses of incense in mediaeval churches. Although Atchley warned scholars not to trust the *Liber Pontificalis* for the fourth century, and he dated the general introduction of incense inside churches to the fifth century, many scholars have followed L. Duchesne in dating the introduction of incense to the time of Constantine, and in relying on the authenticity of the Constantinian donations recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis Romanae ecclesiae*¹⁰. G. Dix notes the rejection of incense in the pre-Nicene Church but he does not marvel that the survivors of the Great persecution could celebrate their cult with incense¹¹. R. Taft notes the absence of incense in the early Church, but he does not explain its subsequent presence in later centuries. He cites Atchley, Dix and Schneider on the subject¹². Most scholars of the liturgy consider that incense made its entry into the churches along with other major changes brought by Constantine, such as the freedom to worship and the building of lavishly decorated basilicas. Since it was taken for granted in later centuries, none wondered why Constantine would offer something apparently so offensive to Christians. They recorded the change, but did not try to explain why censers could be accepted as a gift by the Roman church, if incense was such a despised product, shunned by Christians as conducive to idolatry.

⁶ Augustine d'Hippone, *Vingt-six sermons au peuple d'Afrique*. Paris 1996. R. TAFT, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, II: The Great Entrance. A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Pre-anaphoral Rites (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 200)*. Roma 1978, 149.

⁷ Theodore Balsamon (c.1140–after 1195), *PG* 18, 505 C; John Zonaras (12th c.), *PG* 18, 508.

⁸ N. GROOM, *Frankincense and Myrrh. A Study of Arabian Incense Trade*. London 1981; F. DE ROMANIS, *Cassia, Cinnamomo, Ossidiana. Uomini e merci tra Oceano Indiano e Mediterraneo* Rome 1996; A. AVANZINI, *Profumi d'Arabia*, Roma 1997; D. P. M. WEERAKKODY, *Trapobanê. Ancient Sri Lanka as known to Greek and Romans (Indicopleustoi 1)*. Turnhout 1997; J. DESANGES, *Recherches sur l'activité des Méditerranéens aux confins de l'Afrique (VI^e siècle avant J.C.–IV^e siècle après J.C.)*. Rome 1978; M. G. RASCHKE, *New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East*, in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II, 9, 2. Berlin – New York 1978, 604–1378; for the early Middle Ages, M. McCORMICK, *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900*. Cambridge 2001, 620, 716–19.

⁹ E. g. C. F. ATCHLEY, *A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship (Alcuin Club Collections 13)*. London 1909; M. PFEIFER, *Der Weihrauch. Geschichte, Bedeutung, Verwendung*. Regensburg 1997.

¹⁰ L. DUCHESNE, *Origines du culte chrétien. Etude sur la liturgie latine avant Charlemagne*. Paris 1920. L. DUCHESNE (ed.), *Liber Pontificalis, Texte, introduction, commentaire*. Paris 1955–1957.

¹¹ G. DIX, *The Shape of the Liturgy*. Westminster 1945, 311, 427.

¹² TAFT, *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* 149–51; C. SCHNEIDER, *Studien zum Ursprung liturgischer Einzelheiten östlicher Liturgien. Kyrios* 3 (1938) 149–90.

If we are to agree that Constantine did offer censers and spices to the Roman churches, we have to explain why this was possible, and not offensive to Christians. It is important to understand what incense meant to Christians, leaving aside the pagan or Jewish religious use of incense. Sacrificial incense was not acceptable for Christians, but there were other, more mundane uses of incense and perfumes. This is where a study of material culture can help. Christians were not “foreign elements” within a society. Although most had completely abandoned the cults of the gods, they still shared traditions and a common understanding of what was good for their health and environment. In order to understand why incense, and more generally perfumes became part of the Christian religious culture, we have to turn to the role they played in ordinary life, in a domestic setting. To understand what value was granted to them, one should study not only their prices and availability but also the different occasions on which incense and perfumes were called for. This is the reason why this study will devote a section to the belief that incense and more generally good odours could drive away illnesses; then another section will study how this belief induced an altogether protective and pleasurable use of incense and perfumes into domestic or public settings. I will argue that it is this combination of beliefs and practices, which led Christians to maintain a purificatory use of incense in their houses and eventually in their churches. It is this type of use, which Constantine probably had in mind, if he really did offer censers the Roman Church, (as opposed to the sacrificial use of incense, which was only later, also introduced in the churches).

1) AIR PROPERTIES AND PERFUMED MEDICINES

Ancient people had a very strong sense of the influence of natural elements on their life. They paid attention to their environment because they strongly believed that it was the key to their well-being. This was particularly true of the air that surrounded them. The novelist Heliodoros explains that there is no way to protect ourselves from the influence of the air we breathe because it penetrates into us: “We are completely enveloped in air, which permeates our bodies by way of our eyes, nose, respiratory tract, and other channels, bringing with it, as it enters, various properties from outside, thus engendering in those who take it an effect corresponding to the properties it introduces. [...] Being composed of such fine particles, it penetrates to his bones, to his very marrow¹³.” The properties of the air and particularly its odours therefore were carefully watched. A common lore attributed malevolent powers to foul odours, as they were commonly believed to be the cause of diseases. They were not only disliked for their unpleasantness, but they were also held to be dangerous. Galen mentioned the danger involved in entering a house where the air was putrid¹⁴. The Hippocratic tradition taught that the corruption of the air was the only source of disease, and its followers refused to accept the idea of contamination by contact with a sick person¹⁵. The treaty *On Breaths* attributes the origin of all illnesses, including epilepsy, the sacred illness, to the air one breathed: “Epidemic fever has this characteristic because all men inhale the same wind; when a similar wind has mingled with all bodies in a similar way, the fevers too prove to be similar. [...] So whenever the air has been infected with such pollution as are hostile to the human race, the men fall sick.”¹⁶ Diseases made the air malevolent to people explains Lucretius, “*fit morbidus aer*”¹⁷. Christians of the fourth century shared this point of view with the non-Christian

¹³ Heliodorus, *Ethiopian Story*, transl. J. R. MORGAN, in: *Collected Ancient Greek Novels*, ed. B. P. REARDON. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London, 1989, 416 = Heliodorus, *Ethiopica* III 7, 3 ed. R. M. RATTENBURY – T. W. LUMB. Paris 1960, I 109: Ὁ περικεχυμένος ἡμῖν οὗτος ἀήρ δι’ ὀφθαλμῶν τε καὶ ῥινῶν καὶ ἄσθματος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων πόρων εἰς τὰ βᾶθη δικνούμενος καὶ τῶν ἐξωθεν ποιότητων συνεισφερόμενος [...] τὸ παρ’ ἑαυτοῦ πνεῦμα πικρίας ἀνάμεστον εἰς τὸν πλησίον διερρίπισε, τὸ δὲ ἄτε λεπτομερὲς ἄχρις ἐπ’ ὅστέα καὶ μυελοῦς αὐτοῦ εἰσδύεται ...; Lucretius, *De rer. nat.* VI 802–803, explains that odors, especially strong fumes creep into the brain: *odor insinuat quā facile in cerebrum*.

¹⁴ Galen, *De febrium differentiis*, ed. C. G. KÜHN. Leipzig 1833, VIII 279.

¹⁵ M. D. GRMEK, *Les vicissitudes des notions d’infection, de contagion et de germe dans la médecine antique*. In: *Mémoires V. Textes médicaux latins*, ed. G. SABBAN. Saint-Etienne 1984, 62: La notion classique d’infection était si étroitement liée à celle d’impureté au sens magico-religieux qu’on ne parvenait pas à intégrer les connaissances empiriques sur la transmissibilité des maladies dans le cadre doctrinal d’une médecine qui se voulait strictement rationnelle.

¹⁶ Hippocrates, *Breaths* 6, transl. W. H. S. JONES. London–New York 1923, 234–235: ὁ μὲν οὖν κοινὸς πυρετὸς διὰ τοῦτο τοιοῦτος ἐστίν, ὅτι τὸ πνεῦμα ταῦτ’ ὅπαντες ἔλκουσιν; ὁμοίου δὲ ὁμοίως τοῦ πνεύματος τῷ σώματι μιχθέντος, ὁμοιοὶ καὶ οἱ πυρετοὶ γίνονται; [...] ὅποταν μὲν οὖν ὁ ἀήρ τοιοῦτοῖσι χρωσθῆ μιάσμασιν, ἃ τῇ ἀνθρωπείῃ φύσει πολέμια ἐστίν, ἀνθρωποὶ τότε νοσέουσιν.

¹⁷ Lucretius, *De rer. nat.* VI 1097, transl. W. H. D. ROUSE. Cambridge – London 1966, 522.

members of society: “If they lived in a pestilential atmosphere, they were bound to fall ill for certain”, warned Eusebius¹⁸. For Christians, too, sickness rolled in with the winds. They too believed that foul air endangered their health.

Everything that smelt badly was deemed potentially dangerous as well as disagreeable. Lucretius even believed that there existed a tree whose stinking flowers could kill passers by¹⁹. Naturally, nothing frightened the people of the ancient world more than the terrible smell of rotten, corrupted matter. There was a real horror and fear of dead bodies, “for anything that is decomposing has an evil odour”, notes Theophrastos²⁰. Fumigation by strong and powerful substances could help conceal this stench. Incense was burnt and perfumes exposed to the air while lamps and candles were lighted around the dead body lying in state. Survivors of a deceased person would purify the house of the dead by burning incense, and hoped thus to create a wall of smoke between death and themselves. By surrounding themselves with perfumes, they hoped to overcome the power of foul air.

From the belief in the aerial theory of the spread of diseases, and from the sickness-bearing power accorded to foul smell, there followed the crucial need to drive dangerous odours away by replacing them with agreeable scents, which were equally aerially mobile. Spices and fragrant herbs were believed to have curative powers partly because they were able to push away the deadly stench. As the Babylonian Talmud puts it: “the spices are to remove the bad smell”²¹.

Therefore fragrances were granted powers in the same way as foul odours were: they could penetrate the body since they mingled with the air or with liquids. Their primary use was to counteract the malevolent effect of bad smell, first as a preventive measure, and then as a medicine. This is why they were used as an antidote to the odour of death and the corruption of the flesh, as an almost universal ingredient in the cure of illnesses, and finally as a protective substance in everyday life. These ideas were not new, as Athenaeos reports: “Don’t you know that the sensations of our brain are soothed by sweet odours and cured besides, just as Alexis says in *Love-lorn Lass*: “A highly important element of health is to send good odours to the brain.”²² From the Greek medical tradition and folklore they were also imported to Rome. At the time when a “plague” struck Rome in Commodus’ time, his doctors advised him to leave Rome and to go to a tiny place called Laurentium. “The doctors thought this place was safe, because it was reputed to be immune from infectious diseases in the atmosphere, by virtue of the redolent fragrances of the laurels and the pleasant shade of the trees there. The inhabitants of the city followed the doctors’ orders too, by filling their nostrils and ears with sweet scented perfume and by making constant use of incense and aromatic herbs. Some said that if sweet-smelling scent filled the sensory passages first, it stopped them (from later) inhaling the polluted air. If an infection were to get in, they said, the scent (then) drove it out by its greater potency.”²³

During the periods of both of the Early and of the Later Roman Empire, Christians shared this idea that good odours could counteract the spread of illnesses and even cure them²⁴. The third century writer, Clement of Alexandria, for example, admits that fragrances are healthy, particularly for the brain²⁵. He recommends placing perfumes on the nose to cure common colds, or rubbing one’s feet with perfumed cream, in order to

¹⁸ Eusebius of Cesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel* VIII 14, 23, ed. E. DES PLACES (SC 369). Paris 1991, 154–5: Καὶ γὰρ εἰ ἐν ἀέρι γεγένητο λοιμικῶ, πάντως ὄφειλον νοσῆσαι.

¹⁹ Seneca, *Natural Questions* II 53: *Praeterea quocumque dedit fulmen, ibi odorem esse sulphuris certum est, qui, quia natura gravis est, saepius haustus alienat*, transl. Th. H. CORCORAN. Cambridge – London 1971, 182–3: there is a sickness-bearing power in lightning. [...] Wherever lightning has struck there is sure to be an odour of sulphur in the area, which disturbs the reason if inhaled too much. Lucretius, VI, 786–787, ed. cit., 498–510: *Est etiam magnis Heliconis montibus arbor / floris odore hominem taetro consueta necare.* = There is in the great mountains of Helicon a tree which is accustomed to kill men by the vile stench of its flower. On lightnings and sulphur, S. LILJA, *The Treatment of Odours in the Poetry of Antiquity*. Helsinki 1972, 199–205.

²⁰ Theophrastus, *Concerning Odours* 1, 2: ἅπαν γὰρ τὸ σηπόμενον κακῶδες, transl. A. F. HORT 328–9.

²¹ Babyl. Berakhot, 53a; Homer, *Od.* IV 445, Idothea gives ambrosia to Ulysses and his companions to breathe in order to protect them from the stench of seals.

²² Athenaeus, *Deipn.* XV 687: οὐκ οἶδας ὅτι αἱ ἐν τῷ ἐγκεφάλῳ ἡμῶν αἰσθήσεις ὀδμαῖς ἡδεῖαις πατηγοροῦνται προσέτι τε θεραπεύονται, καθὰ καὶ Ἀλεξίς φησιν ἐν Πονήρᾳ οὕτως; ὑγείας μέρος μέγιστον ὀσμάς ἐγκεφάλῳ χρηστὰς ποιεῖν.

²³ Herodianus I, 12, 2, transl. C. R. WHITTAKER. Cambridge – London 1969, I, 74–5.

²⁴ B. CASEAU, *Les usages médicaux de l’encens et des parfums. Un aspect de la médecine populaire antique et de sa christianisation*, in: *Air, Miasmes et Contagion. Les épidémies dans l’Antiquité et au Moyen Age*. Langres 2001, 75–85.

²⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.*, II 68 (110 MARCOVICH). Greek text and French translation C. MONDÉSERT, *Clément d’Alexandrie. Le Pédagogue* (SC 108). Paris 1991, II 134–38.

warm them and to draw blood away from the head. He believes perfumes can cure headaches and improve moods. He eventually concludes that perfumed ointments are excellent for one's health, and that perfumes should be used as a medicine, ὡσπερ φαρμάκῳ (hōsper pharmakō). In his mind, this was their *raison d'être*. When used for seduction or display, they were being misused and these uses should be shunned by Christians.

Fragrant spices and gum-resins were clearly not neutral products, they were deemed powerful and they belonged to both the world of medicine and to the world of folk remedies. Apuleius describes frankincense, cassia and myrrh as medicines in his *Apologia*²⁶, and indeed, any book of medicine recommends those ingredients to cure a number of different ailments.

In the same way as modern medicines come in the form of syrups, pills or suppositories (with the same ingredients and power to cure) ancient perfumed medicines also took in different forms. They could be oil-based and liquid, they could be mixed to an emollient cream, also they could come in a solid form, or in a powdered form. Frankincense, for example, was used in fumigation, salve, potions and pills. It was also part of some oil-based perfumes and unguents. Medicines, efficient in liquid forms, also could be burnt as incense. One of the most famous perfumed medicines was called *Kyphi*²⁷. It was deemed to have all sorts of beneficial properties. Plutarch states that *Kyphi* was used “both as a potion and as a salve; for taken internally, it seems to cleanse properly the internal organs, since it is an emollient.”²⁸ The *Syriac Book of Medicines*, a compilation of Hippocratean medical knowledge, with four hundred prescriptions and a section on astrology, possibly written by a Nestorian physician, contained information about another fragrant panacea, bearing a slightly different name. It records a medicine called “*Kûpar*”, effacious in the cure of hardness of the liver, pleurisy and coughs. It was made of gum of terebinth, of myrrh, spikenard, crocus, cinnamon, cassia and of a few other plants: “Dissolve the medicine which can be dissolved and the dried grapes in strong-smelling wine, pound the dry medicines and clean them, and melt the gum of terebinth with the honey, and mix them all together, and work up well and pour them into a vessel, and administer in some drink that is suitable for the particular disease. It may also be burnt like incense before the table, and its smell is very pleasant.”²⁹ The idea that a medicine can be used both to cure and to create a pleasant atmosphere, reveals the profound polyvalence of ancient medicines. They could cure a specific ailment and at the same time bring about a general sense of well-being and of protection. The fact that they cured, protected and aroused a sense of pleasantness at the same time, was not perceived as being contradictory, but it was seen evidence of their effectiveness. Their fragrance alone was seen as a beneficial power. For example, besides the practical warming and sometimes soothing effects of spices used in salves to heal wounds, the aroma of the medicine was supposed to bring relief and to help to cure the wounded patient.

Incense represented a very popular preventive medicine, at time when the well recognized beneficial properties of perfume on the brain were added to the beneficial influence of the air one breathed upon one's health. Out of that combination of beliefs came the notion that diffusing perfume in the air not only refreshed a room, but also that it brought protection to those smelling it.

This idea was not new. It was long used in Egypt to refresh the air of temples. Plutarch describing the daily offering of incense in Isiac temples, helped to spread that knowledge. He explains how incense was used as an air-freshening tool “conducive to health.”³⁰ Different types of incense were burnt for their specific properties, at different times of the day. Early in the morning, the priests burnt resin on the altars to revivify and purify the air that had become heavy and oppressive during the night; “fanning into fresh life the languished spirit innate in the body, in as much as the odour of resin contains something forceful and

²⁶ Apuleius, *Apologia* 32, ed. V. BÉTOLAUD, *Oeuvres complètes d'Apulée*. Paris 1873, 425: *ut si tus, et cassia, et myrrham, ceterosque id genus odores funeri tantum emptos arbitraris; quum et medicamento parentur, et sacrificio.*

²⁷ L. MANNICHE, *Sacred Luxuries. Fragrance, Aromatherapy and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt*. Ithaca – New York 1999, 47–61.

²⁸ Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 383, *Moralia*, vol. V: Τῷ δὲ κῦφι χρώνται καὶ πώματι καὶ χρίματι; πινόμενον γὰρ δοκεῖ τὰ ἐντὸς καθαίρειν ὡς χρῆ μαλακτικὸν ὄν, transl. F. K. BABBITT. Cambridge – London 1936, 188–9.

²⁹ *The Book of Medicines, Ancient Syrian Anatomy, Pathology and Therapeutics*, ed. and transl. E. A. W. BUDGE. Oxford 1913 (repr. London 2002) II 407.

³⁰ Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 383, *Moralia* V: τὰ πρὸς ὑγίειαν ἐπιτηδεύματα.

stimulating.”³¹ Then, at midday, they burnt myrrh to counteract the copious exhalations coming from the earth and to protect the temple from pestilence. At nightfall, they burnt Kyphi, the famous compound incense, which was made of sixteen ingredients. Plutarch writes: “Most of the ingredients that are taken into this compound, in as much as they have aromatic properties, give forth a sweet emanation and a beneficent exhalation, by which the air is changed, and the body moved gently and softly by the current, acquires a temperament conducive to sleep; and the distress and strain of our daily cares, as if they were knots, these exhalations relax and loosen without the aid of wine.”³²

We could argue that Plutarch’s description fits a religious tradition whereby incense was considered a sacrifice to the gods. But he reveals that the Isiac temples’ use of incense was meant to benefit the priests and not solely to placate the gods: “In their sacred services and holy living and strict regimen, the element of health is no less important than that of piety.”³³

Although Isiac temples showed a sophistication in their use of incense, which may not have been matched elsewhere, the general knowledge of incense’s curative and protective powers was neither restricted to the world of learned priests, nor to the world of physicians. It was widespread. Incense was commonly used in houses where health matters were considered seriously and where means were not lacking. In pagan houses, incense could protect the living while pleasing the gods. It was used in a wealthy Egyptian house in the fifth century, the house of Gesios. Shenoute, *hegoumenos* of the White Monastery, and Gesios’ personal enemy, said that it was burning on the domestic altars devoted to his gods³⁴. In Christian houses, it came to protect the living both from danger, and from illnesses and demons. In 526, the first action of the monk Zosimus, when he foresaw the coming earthquake that was to destroy Antioch, was to shield from destruction the house where he was staying, by lighting a censer in order to carry efficient prayers to God³⁵.

2) DOMESTIC USES OF INCENSE AND PERFUMES

Greek literature, recorded for later generations, the beneficial power of perfumes and the difference means by which to purify a room³⁶. Burning fragrant resins, spreading spices or sweet-smelling herbs aimed at disinfecting buildings, and at the same time, maintained a pleasant atmosphere. From the residence of Circe, fragrant smokes of cedar wood and thuya embalmed the air of the island and turned her cave into a centre of attraction³⁷. We know from Euripides that burning incense was the daily task of servants, who cleaned the house and swept the floors in fifth century BC Athens³⁸. In Roman times, such habits of air freshening were frequent, not only in the main living area, but also in the different rooms of the house. Pliny mentions a number of ways to perfume the rooms of wealthy villas. In *triclinia*, for example, water mixed with lemon verbena was spread before a meal, to make the meat appear more attractive³⁹, and after the meal, to purify the air. “With this, writes Pliny, the table of Jupiter is swept, and homes are cleansed and purified.”⁴⁰ *Quin-*

³¹ Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 383, *Moralia V*: καὶ τὸ σύμφυτον τῷ σώματι πνεῦμα μεμαρασμένον ἀναριπίζοντες, ἐχούσης τι τῆ ὁσμῆς σφοδρὸν καὶ καταπληκτικόν.

³² Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 383, *Moralia*, vol. V, transl. *op. cit.* n. 25, 188–9.

³³ Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 383, *Moralia V*: ταῖς ἱερουργίαις καὶ ταῖς ἀγνεῖαις καὶ διαίταις οὐχ ἦττον ἔνεστι τοῦ ὀσίου τὸ ὑγιεινόν, transl. *op. cit.* n. 25, 184–5.

³⁴ S. EMMEL, *From the Other Side of the Nile: Shenute and Panopolis*, in: *Perspectives on Panopolis. An Egyptian Town from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest*, ed. A. EGBERTS – B. P. MUHS – J. VAN DER VLIET. Leiden 2002, 95–113.

³⁵ Euagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV, 7.

³⁶ Ch. SINGER, *The Herbal in Antiquity and its Transmission to later Ages*. *JHSt* 47 (1927) 1–52; S. AMIGUES, *Etudes de botanique antique*. (*Mémoires de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*). Paris 2002.

³⁷ Homer, *Od.* V 59–61.

³⁸ Euripides, *Phaeton*, fr. 773, 12–14, ed. R. KANNICHT, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, V/2. Göttingen 2004, 804–805: σαίρουσι δῶμα καὶ δόμων κειμήλια / καθ’ ἡμέραν φοιβῶσι κάπηχωρίοις / ὁσμαῖσι θυμιῶσιν εισόδους δόμων. S. LILJA, *The Treatment of Odours in the Poetry of Antiquity*. Helsinki 1972, 54.

³⁹ Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 25, 59, 107: *aiunt, si aqua spargatur triclinium qua maduerit, laetiores convictus fieri* = They say too that if a dining-couch is sprinkled with water in which this plant has been soaked the entertainment becomes merrier, transl. W. H. S. JONES. London – Cambridge 1956, 215–7. W. DEONNA – M. RENARD, *Croyances et superstitions de table dans la Rome antique* (*Collection. Latomus XLVI*). Bruxelles 1961, 41.

⁴⁰ Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 25, 59, 105: *hac Iovis mensa verritur, domus purgantur lustranturque*, *ibid.* 214–5.

*quefolium*⁴¹ and saffron⁴² were also used to clean domestic floors. Fresh flowers were strewn for their beauty as well as for their redolence; another case where purification and pleasure worked together. Luxury living included perfumes. In the third century, Elagabalus' imperial palace was a very fragrant place: he "would have perfumes from India burned without any coals, in order that the fumes might fill his apartments"⁴³. "He used to strew roses and all manner of flowers, such as lilies, and narcissi, over his banqueting-rooms, his couches and his porticoes, and then stroll about in them."⁴⁴ Elagabalus was famous for living luxuriously, yet, only the quantities consumed by him were extraordinary; it was not uncommon for rich people to adorn the atmosphere of their house with balmy scents and beautiful flowers. For parties and especially for weddings, all sorts of perfumes were called forth. To prepare the marriage of emperor Honorius with Stilicho's daughter Maria, the poet makes the Goddess Venus issue some orders: "Let these haste to entwine the gleaming door-posts with my sacred myrtle. Do sprinkle the palace with drops of nectar and kindle a whole grove of Sabaeen incense."⁴⁵ These preparations and ways of describing weddings reach a long way back in time: Sappho's description of Hector and Andromache's wedding also includes the burning of myrrh, cassia and frankincense⁴⁶. They were still common in sixth century A.D. Egypt: Dioskoros of Aphrodito, in an *Epithalamium* for Count Kallinikos, describes the rose-filled bedroom awaiting the new couple⁴⁷. In all these cases, it is difficult to distinguish what is propitiation, what are pleasure and festive celebrations and what is creation of an erotic atmosphere, in this abundance of fragrances.

With adherence to these practices, the senses of sight and smell were delighted, while the mind was reassured that the air was safe. W. Deonna argued that the use of flowers, particularly at roses, on numerous floor mosaics symbolically rendered permanent their power of purification⁴⁸. This argument should be remembered when interpreting flower ornamentation in churches.

One way to render the atmosphere of a house fragrant was to take care of the quality of the oil burning in the lamps. The oil used for the lamps was often of inferior quality⁴⁹, and it was notorious famous for producing an acrid odour when burned⁵⁰. Among the most common practices was to pour perfumed unguents into a variety of lamps. A few drops of unguents could transform this acidity into various sweet scents. Elagabalus had balsam-oil poured into the lamps⁵¹. Trimalchio uses the same perfume for his guests, and for the lamps⁵². The *Vita Silvestri* recommends that nard-oil be burnt in Roman basilicas⁵³.

⁴¹ Pliny, *Historia naturalis* 25, 62, 109: *adhibetur et purgandis domibus* = It is also used in purifying houses, *ibid.* 216–7.

⁴² Petronius, *Satiricon* 68: *scobemque et minio tinctam sparserunt et, quod nunquam ante videram ex lapide speculari pulverem tritum*. Saffron was used therefore both for its fragrance and for its color.

⁴³ *Script. Historiae Aug., Ant. Elag.* 31, 4: *odores Indicos sine carbonibus ad vaporandas dietas iubebat incendi*, transl. D. MAGIE. London, 1953, II 166–7.

⁴⁴ *Script. Historiae Aug., Ant. Elag.* 19, 7: *stravit et triclinia de rosa et lectos et porticus ac sic deambulavit, idque omniflorum genere, liliis, violis, hyacinthis et narcissis*, transl. *ibid.* II 144–5.

⁴⁵ Claudian, *Epithalamium*, v. 208–210: *hi nostra nitidos postes obducere myrto contendant; pars nectareis adspersite tecta fontibus et flamma lucos adolete Sabaeos*.

⁴⁶ Sappho II, 56, ed. Th. REINACH – A. PUECH, Alcée, Sappho. Paris 1937, 234: *μύρρα καὶ κασία λιβανός τ' ὄνεδέχυντο* [Pap. Oxy. 1232, 3rd c.].

⁴⁷ L. B. B. MACCOULL, Dioscorus of Aphrodito, His Work and his World. Berkeley 1988, 88 = P. Cair. Masp. II 67179, 1.12: *σὸν θάλαμον ῥοδόεντα*.

⁴⁸ DEONNA, *Croyances* (n. 39), 43: La rose servant à conjurer les sortilèges, il n'est pas surprenant que nous la rencontrions utilisée là contre le mauvais oeil et contre les forces nocives. Ainsi à El Djem un abondant tapis de roses, auxquelles se mêlent des oiseaux oiseaux, des masques bachiques, des flûtes de Pan, sert de champ à un médaillon représentant Vénus et des Amours dionysiaques, symboles des forces de vie, de fécondité, d'abondance.

⁴⁹ J.P. BRUN, L'oléiculture antique en Provence. Les huileries du département du Var. *Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise, Supplément* 15 (1986) 56; LILJA, *Treatment of Odours* 95.

⁵⁰ Juvenalis, *Sat.* V 86–88, p. 76–7: *at hic qui pallidus adfertur misero tibi caulis olebit lanternam* = the sickly greens offered to you, poor devil, will smell of the lamp"; Horace, *Sat.* I, VI, 123–24: *ungor olivo, Non quo fraudatis immundus Natta lucernis* = I anoint myself with oil – not such as filthy Natta steals from the lamps; Lucretius, *De rer. nat.* VI 791–3 mentions the potential danger lying in the acrid odor of lamps when the flame has just been extinguished: *Nocturnumque recens extinctum lumen ubi acri nidore offendit nares, consopit ibidem concidere et spumas qui morbo mittere suavit.*

⁵¹ *Script. Historiae Aug., Ant. Elag.* 24, 1, transl. D. MAGIE. London 1953, II 153.

⁵² Petronius, *Sat.* 70, 9: *Hinc ex eodem unguento in vinarium atque lucernam aliquantum est infusum*.

⁵³ *Liber Pontificalis, Vita Silvestri*, ed. L. DUCHESNE. II 173, *Oleus nardinus pisticus*.

Christians maintained the habits and practices of their ancestors. They did not renounce the use of perfumes and incense to refresh the air they breathed. Even Tertullian, who is not known for indulging in practices tainted with paganism, invites Christians to put flowers on their bed, if they enjoy it⁵⁴, and he confesses about himself: “if the smell of any place offends me, I burn something from Arabia.”⁵⁵ In the late fourth century, when the poet Claudian describes ideal palaces, they are redolent with sweet smelling scents. The palace of Neptune is “all adorned with flowers”⁵⁶. “In the midst [of the residence of Venus] is a courtyard rich with fragrant turf that yields a harvest of perfume; there grows sweet spikenard and ripe cassia, Panchaeian cinnamon flowers and sprays of oozy balm, while balsam creeps forth slowly in an exudative stream.”⁵⁷ These divine gardens were not far from what could be seen in Rome, itself⁵⁸. It was not uncommon to see rich landowners embellish their urban gardens with exotic plants transplanted from other regions. “In many sections of the city, writes Columella, we see at one time cassia putting forth its leaves, again the frankincense plant, and gardens blooming with myrrh and saffron.”⁵⁹

This obsession with beneficial odours also led the Romans to add spices and perfumes to wine and food. The sense of smell seemed to be as important as the sense of taste where food was concerned. This is why, when the food, in itself, was not fragrant, spices were added to it. The preservative capacity of spices was used above all to maintain the quality of food and wine, which was naturally a constant problem. Spices also could be chosen for their medicinal capacities. Salts, for example, could be spiced for therapeutic purposes. Apicius gives us a recipe that is supposed to work for everything: “These spiced salts are used against indigestion, to move the bowels, against all illness, against pestilence as well as for the prevention of colds. They are very gentle indeed and more healthful than you would expect.”⁶⁰ Wine provided a frequent ground for experimentation. Spices were mixed with wine to help in bettering and preserving its taste but also to lessen drunkenness⁶¹. Rose wine and violet wine proposed in Apicius’ cookbook, were, it seems, used as laxatives.

Odours were used to stimulate taste, says Plutarch⁶². They were also used for their specific curative or beneficial properties. Beyond the issue of taste lay something more important: preserving the food and protecting health and well-being.

3) INCENSE, MAGIC AND THE OTHER-WORLD

Besides the medicinal reasons for use of perfumes, and besides the existence of deeply entrenched habits, there was yet another reason for Christians to keep on using perfumes in their houses. A perfect aroma was, for the Christians too, an attribute of the divine. Perfumes were believed to be powerful elements of spiritual and divine beings.

This association of divine beings with perfumes is very ancient. The belief that God, gods and goddesses were themselves fragrant beings was in some degree shared by Jews, pagans and Christians. A few Old Tes-

⁵⁴ Liber Pontificalis, Vita Silvestri, ed. L. DUCHESNE. II 173, *Oleus nardinus pisticus*; Tertullian, De Corona militis V 3 (KROY-MANN).

⁵⁵ Tertullian, De Corona militis X 5, transl. E. A. QUAIN, Tertullian. Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical works (*Fathers of the Church* 40). New York 1959, 253.

⁵⁶ Claudian, Epithalamium, v. 154–155, transl. M. PLATNAUER. London 1956, I 253.

⁵⁷ Claudian, Epithalamium, v. 92–96 (I 249): *In medio glaebis redolentibus area dives preebet odoratas messes; hic mitis amoni, hic cassiae matura seges, Panchaeaque turgent cinnama, nec sicco frondescunt vimina costo tardaue sudanti prorepunt balsama rivo.*

⁵⁸ Varro, Res Rusticae I 2, 10. P. GRIMAL, Les jardins romains à la fin de la république et aux deux premiers siècles de l’Empire. Paris 1943.

⁵⁹ Columella, On Agriculture III 8, 4: *compluribus locis urbis iam cassiam frondentem conspicimus, iam tuream plantam, florentisque hortos myrrha et croco*, transl. H. BOYD ASH. Cambridge – London 1941, I 275.

⁶⁰ Apicius, Cookery and Dining in Imperial Rome, ed. and transl. by J. DOMMERS VEHLING. New York 1977, 54. The ingredients are: common salt ground, ammoniac salt, pepper, ginger, aminean bryony, thyme seed, celery seed, origany, saffron, rocket seed, marjoram, nard leaves, parsley and anise seed.

⁶¹ Athenaeus, Deipn. XI 464, transl. Ch. BURTON GULICK. London 1927, 24–5, Book 2, 66. – Pliny mentions a mixture of myrrh and ashes of swallow’s beak in the wine: *Historia naturalis* 30, 51: *hirundis rostri cinis cum murra tritus et vino quod bibetur inspersus securos praestabit a temulentia*. = A swallow’s beak reduced to ash, beaten up with myrrh, and sprinkled on the wine that will be drunk, will free drinkers from fear of becoming tipsy.

⁶² Plutarch, Advice About Keeping Well 126, in *Moralia*, vol. II, *ibid.*, 236–37.

tament texts give a basis to this idea, particularly one which describes the Wisdom of God, soon to be interpreted as the Holy Ghost: *Sicut cinnamomum et balsamum aromatizans odorem dedi, / quasi myrrha electa dedi suavitatem odoris; et quasi storax, et galbanus, et unguia, et gutta, / et quasi Libanus non incisus vaporavi habitationem meam, / et quasi balsamum non mistum odor meus*⁶³. In early Christian writers, God himself is described as the perfect fragrance. Athenagoras calls God ἡ τελεία εὐωδία⁶⁴, the ultimate fragrance. The same image appears in Irenaeus of Lyon: God does not need sacrifices, since “He is forever full of all goods, of all sweet smell and He has in himself all the vapors of fragrances.”⁶⁵ He is even the prototype of fragrance. In the Christian thought-world, wonderful fragrances stand for virtues, holiness and the divine. God’s dwelling and the saints’ residence in heaven is described as a fragrant place. When Symeon Stylites the Younger had a vision of the other-world, he saw “the garden of Paradise and the trees, and a palace of light, and a spring of perfume gushing on top of an arch built by God.”⁶⁶ As a result, whenever Christ or his messengers appear to those who will die shortly after, perfume is very often mentioned as a sure sign that the door of Paradise has been opened. When Symeon the elder was sick and close to his death, God looked after him so that, “the wind blew softly, and it was cool and balmy as though heavenly dew were dropping upon the saint. Pleasant fragrances exhaled and emerged from it, the like of which has not been told in the world. There was not one single odour, but wave upon wave came, whose several odours were different from one another, so that neither spices nor sweet herbs and pleasant smell which are in this world, can be compared to the fragrance of those waves; the result of the care and providence of God.” Perfume obviously played an important role in describing the Divine in Christian literature. This was not, however, specifically Christian.

In Graeco-Roman mythologies, wonderful life giving odour was also the attribute of some of the gods and a sign of their divinity⁶⁷. For Homer, “the outstanding characteristic of Zeus, when he sits on Mount Ida, is fragrance.”⁶⁸ The late antique poet Claudian mentions Venus’ fragrant bosom⁶⁹. Naturally, the fragrance of the gods was so powerful that it was spread upon whatever they touched wherever they went. A large area like Cyprus was scented, because of Venus’ supposed dwelling there. For Catullus, gods and goddesses smelt of an inimitable perfume, whose fragrance was such a marvel that anyone having smelt it would wish to be only a nose⁷⁰. This divine perfume is sometimes referred to as “ambrosia”. It was for the gods, both their perfume and their food, since these divine beings fed up fragrances.

Because divine beings were rendered well-disposed when offered perfumes, it was a natural consequence that fragrances were used to manipulate them, both in temple rituals and in magical rituals. Temple pagan rituals included the offering of incense to gods and goddesses, who were supposed to relish feeding on perfumes. Magical papyri refer to incense as one of the fundamental ingredients used to make spells work. Different kinds of incense were prepared to suit each god’s taste: “The proper incense of Kronos is styrax, for it is heavy and fragrant; of Zeus, malabathron; of Ares, kostos; of Helios, frankincense; of Aphrodite, Indian nard; of Hermes, cassia; of Selene, myrrh. These are the secret incenses.”⁷¹ Incense and spicy unguents were

⁶³ Ecclesiasticus 24, 20 in the Vulgate.

⁶⁴ Athenagoras, Embassy for the Christians XIII 2, ed. B. POUDERON, Athénagore, Supplique au sujet des Chrétiens et Sur la résurrection des morts (SC 379). Paris 1992, 110.

⁶⁵ Irenaeus of Lyon, Haer. IV 14, 3, ed. A. ROUSSEAU (SC 100). Paris 1965, 546: *est enim semper plenus omnibus bonis omnemque odorem suavitatis et omnes suaevolentium vaporationes habens in se*; in Greek: ἔστι γὰρ αἰεὶ πλήρης πάντων τῶν ἀγαθῶν πᾶσαν τε ὁσμὴν εὐωδίας καὶ παντοδαπὰς ἡδυόσμων ἀναθυμιάσεις ἔχων ἐν ἑαυτῷ.

⁶⁶ La Vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592), I–II, ed. et transl. P. VAN DEN VEN (*Subsidia Hagiographica* 32). Bruxelles 1962–70, I 29: εἶδε τὸν παράδεισον καὶ τὰ φυτὰ καὶ παλάτιον φωτὸς καὶ πηγὴν τοῦ μύρου ἐπὶ καμάραν θεοέργαστον ἀναβλύζουσαν.

⁶⁷ E. LOHMEYER, Vom Göttlichen Wohlgeruch. *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaft, Phil.-Hist. Klasse* 10 (1919) 1–32; W. DEONNA, Croyances antiques et modernes: l’odeur suave des dieux et des élus. *Genava, Bulletin du Musée d’Art et d’Histoire de Genève du Musée Ariana* 17 (1939) 168–262.

⁶⁸ Homer, Iliad 15, 153.

⁶⁹ Claudian, Epithalamium, v. 109–110 (I 251): *nati venientis conspicit umbram / ambrosioque sinu puerum complexa ferocem*.

⁷⁰ Gaius Valerius Catullus, ed. W. KROLL, Stuttgart 1968, Carmen 13, 11–14 (Ad Fabulum): *Nam unguentum dabo, quod meae puellae / Donarunt Veneres Cupidinesque; / Quod tu quom olfacies, Deos, rogabis, / Totum ut te faciant, Fabulle, nasum*.

⁷¹ Papyri Graecae Magicae (PMG) XIII, 351–357, ed. K. PREISENDANZ – E. HEITSCH, Die griechischen Zauberpapyri, second ed. A. HENRICHS. Stuttgart 1974, 105, transl. in H. D. BETZ (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic Spells*. Chicago – London 1986, 172.

as clearly a part of a sorcerer's equipment as they were basic medicines⁷². They were used for their mediatory powers, for they carried the words of the spell to the gods and spirits. Incense, that is, usually either gum-resins or fragrant woods, was burnt while some magic words were pronounced. They were also used for their propitiatory powers since there was hope that the gods and spirits, being pleased by the sacrifice, would be willing to fulfil the spell. Incense could be used in a sacrifice, as a sacrifice, or as a tool to please the gods and to carry the spell. In a spell to meet a god, we can see this separation between sacrifice and incense offering: when you have sacrificed burn also the seven approved kinds of incense in which the gods delight, for the seven censings of the seven stars. The incenses are these: malabathron, styrax, nard, kostos, cassia, frankincense and myrrh. Take these and the seven flowers of the seven stars, which are rose, lotus, narcissus, white lily, erephyllinon, gillyflower, marjoram. Having ground them all to a powder, with wine not mixed with seawater, burn all as incense⁷³.

The number of amulets and magical papyri of Christian origin indicate the heavy infusion of magic in Christian homes⁷⁴. Aromatics were still called upon to work the magic, in a society where they were readily available⁷⁵. While some Christians continued to practise magic in the traditional manner, trusting incense to carry to the spirits their binding message, others refused any practice involving the manipulation of demons they feared⁷⁶. However, they kept on attributing to incense its beneficial properties. Their thought-world admitted an opposition between the divine, the good, the fragrant, and the demonic; between the evil and the fetid. They retained the ancient association between perfume and the divine world, an association, which is clear in the New Testament. Early Christian imagery is rich in references to fragrances and uses perfumes as a symbol: "we are the aroma of Christ to God" (2 Co. 2, 15) said Paul, talking about the Christians. From Origen to Gregory of Nyssa, the numerous spices and fragrances surrounding the beloved in the *Song of Songs*, stood for Christ's virtues⁷⁷.

In that thought-world, if God and Paradise were the spring of all perfumes, evil and demons stood for stench. Christians eventually believed that demons could not tolerate perfumes, a reminder of Paradise and a token of God's sanctity. Incense and more generally perfumes became demonifuge. Demons and heresies, the work of their influence, "stank". Through the elaboration of a rhetoric of stench and fragrance applied to order the world into antinomies such as Hell and Paradise, sin and sanctity, evil and good, heresy and orthodoxy, the appreciation of fragrant substances, perfumes and incense, was transformed into a specifically Christian one. Where pagans considered that divine beings and spirits, gods and demons alike were pleased by incense⁷⁸, Christians now made an insuperable distinction between godly fragrances, and demonic stench. Demons – including former gods – were no longer pleased by the smoke of incense, but they were driven away by the odour of Paradise which holy Christians used against them. The evolution of Christian writers' perception of fragrances is clear if we compare Origen who, in the third century thought that the simple fact of burning incense could please and retain demons on earth⁷⁹, and Symeon Stylites the Younger, who in the

⁷² J. SCARBOROUGH, The Pharmacology of Sacred Plants, Herbs, and Roots, in: *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Ch. A. FARAONE – D. OBBINK. New York – Oxford 1991, 138–74.

⁷³ PMG XIII, 351-357, ed. K. PREISENDANZ – E. HEITSCH, *Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, second ed. A. HENRICHs. Stuttgart 1974, 105

⁷⁴ H. MAGUIRE (ed.), *Byzantine Magic*. Washington, D.C. 1995; E. DAUTERMAN MAGUIRE – H. P. MAGUIRE – M. J. DUNCAN-FLOWERS, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House (Illinois Byzantine Studies II)*. Urbana – Chicago 1989, 32.

⁷⁵ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 30: *grana thuris unius assis*. J. DESANGES, *L'Antiquité*, in: M. MOLLAT DU JOURDAIN – J. DESANGES, *Les routes millénaires*. Paris 1988, 110; L. R. LiDONNICI, Single-Stemmed Wormwood, Pinecones and Myrrh: Expense and Availability of Recipe Ingredients in the Greek Magical Papyri. *Kernos* 14 (2001) 61–91; V. NUTTON, The Drug Trade in Antiquity. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 78 (1985) 138–45; J. INNES MILLER, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 BC to AD 641*. Oxford 1969.

⁷⁶ B. CASEAU, *Myrrh Ink and Incense in the Magical Papyri*, ed. E. IVison – S. TAKACS (to be published).

⁷⁷ P. MELONI, *Il profumo dell'immortalità. L'interpretazione patristica di Cantico 1, 3*. Roma 1975.

⁷⁸ Porphyre, *De abstinentia* II.

⁷⁹ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 45, transl. J. J. O'MEARA (*Ancient Christian Writers*, 19), 188: Some people give no thought to the question of demons: that it to say, to the fact that these demons in order to be able to exist in the heavy atmosphere that encircles the earth, must have the nourishment of exhalations and, consequently, are always on the lookout for the savour of burnt sacrifices, blood and incense. [...] In my opinion, when there is question of crimes committed by these demons operating against men, they who sustain them by sacrificing to them will be held no less responsible than the demons themselves that do the crimes.

sixth century, used incense precisely to drive away those same demons⁸⁰. Incense as fragrance had been Christianized in the period between their two lifetimes. The common sets of ideas concerning incense was adopted and adapted by Christians.

So far, we have explained why incense and perfumes could be used in Christian houses in the same way they had been used for health reasons in pagan houses. Whenever available, perfumes were poured into the oils of the lamps and when a crowd was gathered in one room, censers were very probably lit to dispel bad odours. It seems reasonable to assume that Christians maintained such a tradition even when they were gathering for cult reasons. However, this has been debated: because Christian writers only mention incense in a metaphorical way before the fourth century. The first sure attestation of incense inside a church dates back to the end of the fourth century in the Anastasis in Jerusalem. It is not possible to assert that incense was always present in churches before that date. It is even highly possible that in some churches, the odour of incense was considered offensive. In North African churches, Donatists had already accused Catholics of crypto-paganism and of leniency towards *turificati*, Christians who had offered a sacrifice of incense to pagan gods during the persecution. The last thing they needed in their churches was the odour of incense floating around to confirm the Donatists worst suspicions⁸¹. However, in other churches in Italy, Syria or Palestine, where such accusations were uncommon, incense may have been used in the usual prophylactic manner.

4) INCENSE AND THE DEAD

There is yet another reason for the introduction of incense inside churches and it is linked to its use around the dead. Fumigation by incense was used at different stages of the funerals for its purificatory and prophylactic powers: it was used at home during the lying in state, then during the funerary processions, and finally inside the tomb. Incense was present wherever a location had been contaminated by death. The survivors of a deceased person would purify the house of the dead by burning incense, and they hoped to create, at the same time, “a wall of smoke between death and themselves”.

Incense was burnt and perfumes were exposed to the air while lamps and candles were lit around the body. Depending on the social status of the dead person, the body was exposed to visitors, sometimes at the entrance of the house, or, in the case of emperors, in a room of the palace. This exposure lasted from one day, for an ordinary poor citizen, to a week, for an emperor.

In funeral processions, the purification of the air was intended as a protection for the living, while inside the burial cave, it offered its apotropaic powers not only to the living, (visiting during the occasional festive gatherings), but also to the dead. Incense was supposed to keep demons at a distance. This practice is well attested by the numerous incense burners discovered in tombs. At different times during the year, family, or those persons in charge of the tomb, would gather for a meal and a commemoration of the dead. The success of these *refrigeria* is indicated by the graffiti and paintings present in Roman catacombs⁸². This was a time at which incense was probably welcome to refresh the confined air and to ward off demonic ghosts. It is possible that some of the censers found in the tombs were used during such gatherings and were left behind, in the same way that one deposits behind pots of flowers on contemporary tombs. These gatherings were an occasion upon which to make the required offerings to the deceased. Inscriptions sometimes explained how the deceased wished his tomb to be cared for: that is with flowers, incense, or with fragrant lights and so forth.

For the demons and they that have kept them on earth, where they could not exist without the exhalations and nourishment considered vital to their bodies, work as one in doing evil to mankind.

⁸⁰ La vie ancienne de S. Syméon le Jeune (s. n. 66) II 6–7 (ch. 2).

⁸¹ At the council of Carthage in 311–312, a bishop of Numidia had asked for the removal from the Church of those who had sacrificed, including *turificatores*, unless they had been reconciled after their penance: Ps-Augustinus, *Adversus Fulgentium Donatistam* 24, in: C. LAMBOT, L'écrit attribué à Saint Augustin *Adversus Fulgentium Donatistam*. *Revue Bénédictine* 58 (1948) 221: *Sicut ergo palmites infructuosi amputati proiciuntur, ita turificati, traditores, abhorrentes deo manere in ecclesia dei non possunt, nisi cognito ululatu suo per paenitentiam reconcilientur.*

⁸² C. VOGEL, Le poisson, aliment du repas funéraire chrétien, in: *Mélanges offerts à Marcel Simon*. Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme. Influences et affrontements dans le monde antique. Paris 1978, 234–5. Paulinus of Nola, Ep. 12; Augustine, Ep. 29, 10.

The deceased believed that they still needed protection, and some inscriptions insist on having constant demonifuge, as provided by the combination of light and fragrances. Demons and hostile forces were supposed to hate perfumes and light. Demons were always associated with bad odour. Therefore perfumes were very useful around tombs. They would protect both the dead and the living. This belief is ancient. A funerary inscription of the end of the first century, in Rome, asks for garlands and for a lamp constantly to be burning with nard⁸³. Another inscription asks, that the freedmen of the deceased put violets and rose petals over the tomb, at the Parentalia and during two other festivals, and that they place a lighted lamp filled with incense on the tomb three times a month⁸⁴.

Perfumes acted as well-wishing token for the dead. An inscription found in Rome expresses the hope of seeing the loved one reach a fragrant place: ἐν μύροις σοῦ, τέκνον, ἡ ψυχὴ⁸⁵. Christians created their own Paradise as a fragrant garden, and they certainly felt at ease with perfumes around the dead. The *Passio Perpetuae* hints at the delicious scent of perfumes of Paradise⁸⁶. Prudentius mingles Virgilian elements and Christian theology in his poetic description of Paradise⁸⁷. In order to convince monks that they do not toil in vain, the *Regula Magistri* cites a vision recorded in the *Passio Sebastiani*, that describes Paradise as a splendid fragrant garden: “Herbs with saffron flowers spread a balmy air, from the fields waft the exquisite fragrances filling them. [...] Here winds carrying eternal life invade the nostrils. [...] Bushes produce cinnamon, and from the shrubs, balm springs up. The fragrance of the air diffuses pleasure to all of the body.”⁸⁸ Christian writers picked demonic stench and paradisiac perfumes in order to create a coherent world of opposites. Actual perfumes and smoking censers were brought to the tombs with this symbolism borne in mind. The Faithful brought lights and perfumes to the tombs of their loved ones. Light could replace darkness and evil, perfumes could push away both stench and demons. They also brought wine and food to share with the dead⁸⁹. In some cemeteries, the Faithful could also honour the saints, by offering them perfumes; this was a way to express faith in their immortal life in the garden of Paradise.

Prudentius watched the Faithful come to the catacombs and pour down balsams on Saint Hippolytus’ tomb⁹⁰. On saint Felix’s tomb in Nola, Paulinus of Nola reports similar offerings, unguents of nard-oil were mixed with the dust⁹¹, and perfumes also directly were poured inside the tomb⁹². Eventually, later saints’ lives mention incense as a common and welcome offering at the saints’ tombs. Before their martyrdom, saint Apater and his sister saint Iraï witness a vision of Christ accompanied by this promise: “even in the case of serious sinners, if they care to offer to your holy place, the day of your festival on earth, either bread, or wine, or incense, or sacred vessels, or oil, I shall wash away their sins, and I shall give their persons to you.”⁹³

⁸³ F. CUMONT, Cierges et Lampes sur les tombeaux, in: *Miscellanea Giovanni Mercati*, vol. V (*StT* 125). Città del Vaticano 1946, 41–47, 42.

⁸⁴ *CIL* 6.10248, cited in K. HOPKINS, *Death and Renewal*. Cambridge 1983, 233.

⁸⁵ *CIG* 6619.

⁸⁶ *Passio Perpetuae* 11, transl. H. MUSURILLO, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford 1972, 111.

⁸⁷ J. FONTAINE, Trois variations de Prudence sur le thème du Paradis, in: *Forschungen zur Römischen Literatur. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Karl Büchner*, ed. by W. WIMMEL. Wiesbaden, 1970, 96–115 (repr. in J. FONTAINE, *Etudes sur la poésie latine tardive d’Ausone à Prudence*. Paris 1980).

⁸⁸ *Regula Magistri* 10, 13 (*SC* 105) 440–42: *ubi croceis gramina floribus redolent et alantes campi iucundis admodum odoribus pollent. Aerae ibi vitam aeternam habentes nares aspirant. [...]Cinnamomum illic uirgutta gignunt et balsamum arbusta prorumpunt. Odor aeris delectationes per omnia membra diffundet.*

⁸⁹ Augustine’s mother used to drink in honour of the dead and was surprised to be rebuked for doing so in Milan: Augustine, *Confessions* VII 2; B. CASEAU, *L’encens, la nourriture et les morts*, in: S. COLLIN-BOUFFIER – M. H. SAUNER, *L’alimentation méditerranéenne*. Aix-en-Provence (to be published).

⁹⁰ Prudentius, *The Crowns of Martyrdom* XI 194, ed. H. J. THOMPSON. Cambridge – London, 1953, II 318: *balsama defundunt.*

⁹¹ Paulinus of Nola, Poem 18, transl. P. G. WALSH. New York 1975, 115: Others still can eagerly pour spikenard on the martyr’s burial place, and then withdraw the healing unguents from the hallowed tomb.

⁹² Paulinus of Nola, Poem 21, 586–595, ed. G. de HARTEL – M. KAMPTNER (*CSEL* 30). Vienna 1999, 177. – Archaeology confirms these practices. The Roman cemetery “*inter duas lauras*” has revealed a circular hole made in one of the pavement closing a tomb. This is probably a conduct used to pour perfumes or wine inside the tomb. Similar examples have also been found in some bricks closing the loculi inside the catacomb, J. GUYON, *Le cimetière aux deux lauriers. Recherches sur les catacombes romaines*. Rome 1987, 336–7.

⁹³ *Actes des Martyrs de l’Egypte*, ed. and transl. H. HYVERNAT. Hildesheim – New York 1977, 92–9.

Censers and perfumes had always been present around the dead, whether they were pagan, Jewish or Christian. The Christian offering of perfume and burning of incense certainly accompanied the entry of the saints' relics into churches. Sixth century sources, both in the West and in the East, reveal that censers were often kept at the disposal of the Faithful around saints' tombs. Before Symeon Stylites the Younger was born, his mother asked saint John the Baptist to grant her a child: and she came to his church in Antioch, took a censer, and glaced into it enough incense to fill the church with fragrant smoke⁹⁴. Pilgrims intended incense to convey their prayers to the saint. It was the right tool to reach beyond the well-guarded doors of Paradise.

The reasons why incense was found inside late Antique churches are indeed numerous. Incense purified the air, and it had a positive impact on health. Incense was also charged with symbolic powers, bringing closer earth and heaven, either as a reminder of Paradise awaiting the Faithful or as a means of communication with the other world. All these good reasons account for its presence in fifth and sixth century churches situated around the Mediterranean sea. Yet, up to the sixth century, incense was still sometimes perceived as potentially pagan. The previous connection it had with pagan cults and with magical practices remained alive in peoples' memories. It is a strong possibility that in the early fourth century, such a pagan connection must have been made. The memory of the martyrs, who had died for refusing to offer incense to the pagan gods was also on Christian minds. How likely is it that, in order just to please a Christian bishop, Constantine had offered ostentatious censers?

5) THE USE OF INCENSE IN THE ROMAN BASILICAS

In the *Vita Silvestri* of the *Liber Pontificalis*, compiled in the sixth century, the emperor Constantine is the donor, who lavishes precious vessels and objects of art on the newly erected Christian basilicas of Rome, as well as donating properties to provide future revenues. These were shining new basilicas. Imperial generosity ensured that they glittered with gold and silver. Fragrances added their own touch of splendour to the beautiful decoration. Not only were censers offered, but also spices to burn, and incomes to provide for them. Great care was taken to make fragrant the space of these Christian buildings, as a detailed study of what was offered can show.

Under the title of "adornment of the basilica"⁹⁵, it is specified that the oil burning in the chandeliers offered to the Constantinian basilica should be pure nard-oil: *oleus nardinus pisticus*⁹⁶. Nard was chosen for the exquisite fragrance that came out of it. Pliny explains that nard holds a foremost place among perfumes⁹⁷. Many plants, resembling Indian nard, were used for purposes of adulteration⁹⁸; this is why the *Liber Pontificalis* defines the quality of perfume required for the basilicas: pure, unadulterated nard oil. In Pliny's time, unadulterated nard cost 100 denarii per pound. However, nard oil could be cheap to buy when it was made from Gallic Nard⁹⁹. There is no way to tell what kind of nard oil was burning in the Roman basilicas. Nard could be imported from Syria, Gaul, Crete or India, and its price and odour differed with its origin. Indian nard was the most expensive, it was subject to the 25% import duty, according to the Red Sea or Alexandrian customs tariff, which was incorporated in the Digest¹⁰⁰. Although pure nard from India could reach 100 denarii per pound, Gallic nard was only three denarii per pound in Pliny's time¹⁰¹. Nard oil was produced from the stem or the leaf of the plant, (it was also called *foliatum*, leaf unguent)¹⁰², and from other ingredients such as amomum, behen oil, iuncus, perhaps lemon grass, costus, amomum, myrrh and balsam¹⁰³. Dioscorides provides

⁹⁴ La vie ancienne de S. Syméon le Jeune (s. n. 66) II 46, n. 10.

⁹⁵ Liber Pontificalis, Vita Silvestri, ed. L. DUCHESNE I 173.

⁹⁶ Liber Pontificalis, Vita Silvestri, ed. L. DUCHESNE I 173.

⁹⁷ Pliny, Historia naturalis 12, 26, 42: *De folio nardi plura dici par est ut principali in unguentis*.

⁹⁸ Pliny, Historia naturalis 13, 2, 16.

⁹⁹ Pliny, Historia naturalis 15, 7, 30.

¹⁰⁰ INNES MILLER, The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire 88–92.

¹⁰¹ Pliny, Historia naturalis 12, 26, 43 and 46.

¹⁰² Pliny, Historia naturalis 13, 2, 15.

¹⁰³ Pliny, Historia naturalis 13, 2, 15.

the list of ingredients: to nard, add costum, amomum, myrrh and balsam. Gregory of Nyssa was aware that “one fragrant herb called nard gives its name to the whole mixture”¹⁰⁴.

Nard oil was a well-known perfume, commonly burnt in lamps of secular buildings. However, the choice of nard to fill Christian churches with its scent may have carried a religious meaning. In the *Song of Songs*, nard is the perfume that the bride effuses when the King is present¹⁰⁵. Nardinus, unguent made with nard, is also the very same perfume which, when it was spread on Christ at Bethany, filled the house with its sweet odour¹⁰⁶. Gregory of Nyssa in his Third Homily on the *Song of Songs* connects the two references: “If the nard of the Gospel has any relationship to the bride’s perfume, we may consider that precious, ‘genuine nard’ poured on the Lord’s head which filled the entire house with its sweet odour. In all likelihood this perfume did not differ from the perfume that gave the bride the scent of her spouse. [...] In the context of the Song of Songs, nard brings the scent of the bridegroom to his bride, and, in the Gospel, the sweet odour of Christ which fills the house becomes the anointing of the whole body of the Church in all the universe and in the whole world. Perhaps one may find a connection between these two passages.”¹⁰⁷ Nard could be interpreted as the perfume offered to the Lord as well as a symbol of the perfume of the Church, his bride. The fact that it was strong enough to fill the house, where the Lord was anointed, with love and humility was one more reason to choose nard. It was also among the ingredients of the sacred incense offered in the Jerusalem Temple, which is known from the Rabbinical tradition. The list in the *Liber Pontificalis* does not provide any reason for the choice of these objects and spices. However, it is plausible, without “over theologizing”, that the choice of nard was based on Biblical references. We cannot recapture the odour that came out of the lamps, but we know it was a sweet and powerful scent meant to fill the space. Nard oil was the combustible of at least 47 chandeliers in the Constantinian basilica that is the present San Giovanni in Laterano.

Nard oil was not the only fragrant unguent burning in the basilicas. Constantine promised an annual gift of 150 lb. of spices, to be burnt in front of the altar: *donum aromaticum ante altaria, annis singulis lib. CL*. This gift is mentioned just after the present of two gold censers, *thymiateria*, weighing 30 lb. The censers were clearly meant to burn these spices in front of the altar and Constantine’s donations took care to include the necessary ingredients. We know from the plurality of the spices offered, that this incense was a compound product. Unfortunately, we do not have details about the spices. Incense was not relegated to the corners of the church, but the two censers were placed in the most sacred part of the building, that is next to the altar.

Another set of fragrance bearing gifts was meant to ornament the baptistery. A “censer of finest gold with 49 prize jewels, weighing 15 lb.” was offered¹⁰⁸. Not only did incense waft in the baptistery, but Constantine offered “in the middle of the Font, a porphyry column that supports a golden basin in which there is a candle, of finest gold, weighing 52 lb., where at Eastertide 200 lb. of balsam is burnt, while the wick made of coarse earth flax.”¹⁰⁹

For the basilica dedicated to St Peter, the donation includes a censer of finest gold, decorated with 60 jewels and the following items of property to provide the church with spices: “in the suburbs of Antioch: the property Sybilles, presented to the emperor, revenue 322 *solidi*, 150 decads of paper (*charta*), 200 lb. spices, 200 lb. nard-oil, 35 lb. balsam; in the suburbs of Alexandria: the property Trimalca, given to the emperor Constantine by Ambrionius, revenue 620 *solidi*, 300 decads of paper, 300 lb. nard-oil, 60 lb. balsam, 150 lb. spices, 50 lb. Isaurian storax; [...] In Egypt, in the territory of the city of Armenia: [...] the property Passinopolimse, revenue 800 *solidi*, 400 decads of paper, 50 *medimni* of pepper, 100 lb. saffron, 150 lb. storax, 200

¹⁰⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, Commentary on the Song of Songs, transl. with an Introduction C. McCAMBLEY. Brookline 1987, 83.

¹⁰⁵ Song of Solomon 1, 12: my nard gave forth its scent; A. ROBERT – R. TOURNAY – A. FEUILLET, *Le Cantique des Cantiques*. Traduction et commentaire. Paris 1963, 86–7.

¹⁰⁶ Jn., 12: 3 and Mc., 14: 3.

¹⁰⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, Commentary on the Song of Songs, transl. *op. cit.* 87.

¹⁰⁸ The Book of Pontiffs (Liber Pontificalis), The Ancient Biographies of the first ninety Roman Bishops to AD 715, transl. R. DAVIS. Liverpool 2000, 17.

¹⁰⁹ Liber Pontificalis, ed. L. DUCHESNE I 174: *In medio fontis columna porfyreetica qui portat fiala aurea ubi candela est, pens. auro purissimo lib. LII, ubi ardet in diebus Paschae balsamum lib. CC, nixum vero ex stippa amianti.*

lb. cassia spices, 300 lb. nard-oil, 100 lb. balsam, 100 sacks of linen, 150 lb. cloves, 100 lb. cyprus-oil, 1000 clean papyrus stalks.”¹¹⁰

The first question to ask concerns the reliability of the *Liber Pontificalis* about these donations. Are we dealing with true if clumsy copies of texts kept in the archives at the time of the redaction of the *Vita Silvestri* in the early sixth century?¹¹¹ Or do we have an imaginary reconstruction of the donations made to Pope Silvester by the Emperor Constantine, after Rome had been ransacked and the precious vessels of the basilicas had been stolen?¹¹² Or again is the list based on what could be seen in late fifth century basilicas? The problem does not concern the erection of the basilicas, usually admitted, nor the *massae*, the domains given to provide the different churches with revenues, (although one of the arguments for the genuineness of the donations lies precisely on these domains); but it concerns the type and the shape of the objects offered to the basilicas. Let us state the problem. Christian writers of the second and third centuries, present an image of Christian communities devoid of specific buildings and sacred vessels. They also insist on the fact that God neither needs incense nor any material offering. Then, suddenly, with the “Peace of the Church”, buildings appear, along with richly decorated vessels, including censers to burn incense. All this is in stark contrast to the simplicity of the existence of Christian communities, as depicted by the Apologists. How can we explain such a change? Some authors believe in the genuineness of these donations, others doubt it and they would prefer to see there an image of Theodosian basilicas. Their arguments are as follows.

Those against a Constantinian date for the donations depicted in the *Vita Silvestri*, insist first on the fact that the Eusebian *Vita Constantini* does not mention statues or objects given to the Roman basilicas¹¹³. Another argument lies in the style of the objects depicted. It is believed that ornamentation should have excluded sculpture at this time, while, in the donations, we hear of statues of Christ surrounded by the angels and the Apostles¹¹⁴. Even R. Krautheimer, who considers the donations genuine, finds the *fastigium* with its figural decoration, out of place in a fourth century basilica: “The only item of dubious date listed in the *Liber Pontificalis* among Constantine’s donations to the Lateran basilica is, in my opinion, the *fastigium*. Its figural decoration, statues of Christ doctor mundi and the twelve Apostles facing the congregation, and Christ in majesty flanked by angels carrying spears, suggest at the present state of our knowledge, a date after the middle of the century. Or could the beginnings of three-dimensional figural groups antedate their appearance in mosaic and painting?”¹¹⁵ Statues had been closely related to idolatry based upon knowledge of their role in pagan worship. Therefore it would be a major change to introduce statues in a Christian basilica, at a time when such ambiguous objects might have been regarded as dangerously closely related to pagan practices¹¹⁶. Even if we were to accept images of Christ and the Apostles, angels with spears also are mentioned among the statues. The representation of angels known from paintings and sarcophagi do not include spears, nor indeed wings, at this time¹¹⁷. Their mere mention points to a later date very probably. Having incense burning so close to statues would indeed have been an imitation of pagan

¹¹⁰ The Book of Pontiffs 19–20 (translation slightly modified).

¹¹¹ *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. DUCHESNE CXLVIII: Ce sont donc bien des documents d’archives et même des documents relatifs à la fondation des églises et à leur première dotation que nous avons sous les yeux quand nous lisons ces énumérations du *Liber pontificalis*.

¹¹² Most of the objects donated by Constantine had disappeared in the hands of Alaric and Genseric in 410 and 455. Some of them were not replaced, especially the statues of *fastigium*: S. de BLAAUW, Imperial Connotations in Roman Church Interiors: the Significance and Effect of the Lateran Fastigium. *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* XV (2001) 137–46.

¹¹³ R. GRIGG, Constantine the Great and the Cult without Images. *Viator* 8 (1977) 3–4.

¹¹⁴ J. ENGEMANN, Der Skulpturenschmuck des ‘Fastigiums’ Konstantins I. nach dem Liber Pontificalis und der ‘Zufall der Überlieferung’. *Rivista di archeologia cristiana* 69 (1993) 179–203.

¹¹⁵ R. KRAUTHEIMER, The Constantinian Basilica. *DOP* 21 (1967) 11–140, 130, n. 47.

¹¹⁶ B. CASEAU, ΠΟΛΕΜΕΙΝ ΛΙΘΟΙΣ (Polemein Lithois). La désacralisation des espaces et des objets religieux païens durant l’Antiquité tardive, in: *Le sacré et son inscription dans l’espace à Byzance et en Occident. Etudes comparées*, sous la direction de M. KAPLAN (*Byzantina Sorbonensia* 18). Paris 2001, 61–123.

¹¹⁷ D. E. ESTIVILL, La imagen del angel en la Roma del siglo IV: estudio de iconología. Rome 1994; G. PEERS, Subtile bodies. Representing Angels in Byzantium. Berkeley 2001; G. STUHLFAUTH, Die Engel in der altchristlichen Kunst. Freiburg–Leipzig 1897.

cultic practices, when all the Christian authors of this period vehemently reject the worship of inanimate objects.

Many scholars, however, have followed L. Duchesne in accepting the genuineness of the donations reported in the *Vita Silvestri*. We have in Eusebios' *Vita Constantini* the plan of the emperor for the church to be built on Golgotha. It was "to outshine the finest buildings in any city"¹¹⁸. Indeed, when Egeria saw it some fifty years later, it was richly decorated¹¹⁹ and it had vessels of gold and silver¹²⁰. Incense burning in portable censers filled the basilica with fragrance on Sundays¹²¹. We lack a precise description for the Lateran basilica, but we can plausibly assume that the emperor had the same type of arrangements for his Roman foundation as for that in Jerusalem¹²². We have the testimony of Jerome on the ornamentation of Roman basilicas in the second half of the fourth century. He cites marbles, gilded ceilings and precious stones glittering on Church vessels¹²³. Jerome reproves such display of wealth, but apparently the common opinion against which he raises his voice is that rich vessels followed Biblical usage: these Churches were the heirs of the Temple of Jerusalem. Jerome cites the rich liturgical vessels of the Temple, the altar, the lamps, the censers, and the other precious utensils used for the ritual ceremonies¹²⁴. Although he himself considers such display of wealth to belong to the pre-Christian past, a time when God approved of blood sacrifices, his testimony reveals that everyone was far from happy to share his ideas. There was a strong wish to set up a formal and splendid liturgy in Roman basilicas and incense would perfectly fit in such a picture. The model that came to their mind was that of the first Temple of Jerusalem¹²⁵. It is particularly revealing that the word used in the *Liber Pontificalis* to designate the donated censers, "*thymiamaterium*", is a rare word that would be used in the Vulgate to refer precisely to the censers of the Jerusalem Temple¹²⁶. This however could also point to a late date for the redaction of the donations.

Other arguments in favor of the donations can be drawn from the text itself of the *Vita Silvestri*¹²⁷. Ch. Pietri, following, L. Duchesne, the editor¹²⁸, A. Piganiol¹²⁹ and A. Alföldi¹³⁰, all make the point that inventing such precise donations would have required a very talented and knowledgeable person since the geography revealed is very exact. The locations of the domains given to the different churches match the political geography of the beginning of the fourth century. To the Lateran basilica, he gave domains only in the Western parts of the Empire that he ruled at the time of the foundation in 313. To Saint Peter's basilica, he granted domains in the East that he had ruled since 324.

Other details may reveal that the compiler had an early fourth century document to work with¹³¹. The redactor of the *Liber Pontificalis* knew that Egypt still belonged to the Diocese of the Orient, which was true

¹¹⁸ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, III 30.

¹¹⁹ *Itinerarium Egeriae*, ed. P. MARAVAL (*SC* 296). Paris 1982, 25,9 (252): *Nam quid dicam de ornatu fabricae ipsius, quam Constantinus sub praesentia matris suae, in quantum vires regni sui habuit, honoravit auro, musivo et marmore prezioso.*

¹²⁰ *Itinerarium Egeriae* 25, 8 (252).

¹²¹ *Itinerarium Egeriae* 24, 10 (242): *ecce etiam thymiateria inferuntur intro spelunca Anastasis repleatur odoribus.*

¹²² KRAUTHEIMER, *Constantinian Basilica* 11–140, 135–6.

¹²³ Hieronymus ep. LII, *Ad Nepotianum presbyterum*, ed. J. LABOURT. Paris, 1951, II 185: *marmora nitent, auro splendent lacunaria, gemmis altare distinguitur.*

¹²⁴ Hieronymus, *op. cit.*: *Neque vero mihi aliquis opponat dives in Iudaea templum, mensam, lucernas, turibula, patellas, scyphos, mortariola et cetera ex auro fabre facta.*

¹²⁵ The theme of the Temple of Jerusalem opposed to the true temples inhabited by God, as found in the New Testament is reused by Caesarius of Arles to justify selling the liturgical vessels and ornaments of the church equated to the Temple in favor of Christian prisoners of war: *Life of Caesarius of Arles*, 32, transl. J. N. HILLGARTH. Prentice Hall 1969, 38: he even had the ornaments of the temple sold for the redemption of the true temple of God.

¹²⁶ It is used in the Vulgate (Jer., 52, 19) along with *thymiamaterium*, and in Ambrose, Ep. 4, 3; *De Sacramentis* IV 1.

¹²⁷ Ch. PIETRI, *Evergétisme et richesses ecclésiastiques dans l'Italie du IV^e à la fin du V^e s.: l'exemple romain. Ktema* III (1978) 318–21.

¹²⁸ *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. DUCHESNE CXLVII–CLIV.

¹²⁹ A. PIGANIOL, *L'empereur Constantin*. Paris 1932, 112.

¹³⁰ A. ALFÖLDI, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*. Oxford 1969, 130, n. 17.

¹³¹ The expression *nomen christianorum* to mean the Christian community; the mention of a military camp abandoned by the *Legio Parthica* II, an insignificant event unlikely to remain in the memory unless written in a document; names of the *massae* and *fundi* ...

up to 386 at the latest¹³². Finally, the fact that the rather clumsy copyist added to the imperial donations others made in the time of Constantine to the churches of Ostia, Albano, Capua and Naples, suggests that he was copying from archives rather than that he was creating an inventive reconstitution of treasures. When copying from his manuscripts, he was not consistent: sometimes we hear of the domains given to provide revenues to a church, and sometimes not. He listed Church vessel in some cases and not in other cases. It has been argued that a forger had no reason not to be systematic in his forgery. The other hypothesis is that our redactor was noting what he could see in early sixth century basilicas, but in this case such omissions, particularly concerning Church plate, would not make sense either.

Cl. Brenot is in favor of the genuineness of the donations, and she brings out the point of view of the numismatist. She notes that the revenues are given in solidi, which is a practice that started around 309/310. However, the text also mentions tremisses, which appear to be used from around 380 and are only common around the reign of Theodosius II and Valentinian III¹³³.

If these donations are genuinely Constantinian, then the interior furnishing of these newly erected Roman churches departed from tradition and bore the mark of an imperial style. S. de Blaauw suggests (s. n. 112) that the statues of the Lateran *fastigium* may have been accepted as a gesture of imperial benevolence in the fourth century, but were not replaced after their destruction at the hands of invading Barbarians, because statues were not easily accepted inside churches in Late Antiquity. If censers were indeed lit around the altar, the smoke rising towards statues, what would Christians have thought? Could they accept this setting as part of the imperial gift, without frowning at its pagan connotation? J. Elsner thinks that it is indeed possible that different Christian styles were present around the Constantinian era, clearly showing emulation of decorative schemes of other religions¹³⁴. Statues would fit in this diversity. If the whole donation is genuine, then we have to agree that Constantine imparted a very original and personal style to these churches, even to the point of risking bruising Christian sensibilities with armed angels looking like victories and standing censers, when Christians had recently died for refusing to offer an incense sacrifice.

It is very unlikely that Constantine would have offered a type of object deliberately offensive to the Christians. Even if he was a recent convert, he was not unaware of what constituted acceptable church plates. He had advisors on that issue, possibly Silvester himself¹³⁵. When he decided to provide funds and materials for the building of a church in Jerusalem, he ordered the local officials to grant to the bishop whatever he needed. The bishop was clearly in charge¹³⁶.

After two centuries of opposing imperial orders to offer a sacrifice of incense in front of imperial images, a sudden obedience to the introduction of incense as Imperial insignia, seems difficult to imagine of the same Christians. Incense, more than any other product, was tainted with the blood of martyrs. We therefore can exclude the idea that Constantine pushed censers inside churches to mark them as imperial territory. This would have been offensive and clumsy. The only acceptable use for incense inside such buildings would have been the purificatory one.

Mostly what Christians refused, was the sacrificial use of incense. God did not need sacrifices such as those offered by pagans and Jews. There is no trace of formal opposition to the purificatory use of incense. Since incense was known for its good medicinal properties and was widely used in domestic settings, it is very possible that it was used, also inside the vast Roman basilicas. It seems, however, more likely that the introduction of incense took place later in the fourth or even in the fifth century, when pagan altars had “stopped smoking” with their own sacrificial incense, and by which date a Christian understanding of incense

¹³² In 386 Polemius Silvius wrote a catalogue of provinces in which Egypt belongs to a diocese distinct from that of the Orient, cf. *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. DUCHESNE CL.

¹³³ Cl. BRENOT, De l'or et des épices pour l'Eglise: à propos des fondations romaines de Constantin. *Bulletin de la société nationale des Antiquaires de France* 1999, 91–5; Ph. GRIERSON – M. MAYS, Catalogue of Late Roman Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks and in the Whittemore Collection. Washington, D.C. 1992, 33.

¹³⁴ J. ELSNER, Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art. *Journal of Roman Studies* 93 (2003) 114–28 at 127

¹³⁵ *Liber Pontificalis*, Vita Silvestri, ed. L. DUCHESNE, 176 (var. from Ms E): *Item huius temporibus fecit aug. Constantinus ex rogatu Silvestri episcopi basilicam beato Petro.*

¹³⁶ KRAUTHEIMER, Constantinian Basilica 139: The bishop was responsible for the evaluation of the needs in material and workers, the imperial chancellery providing with materials not available locally and skilled labor. The bishop was to lay all requirements to be met by the building and its furnishing. This certainly included the type of Church vessels wished for by the bishop.

and of spices had had time to develop. By that time, the holy remains of the saints had started to make their entrance inside churches. The burning of incense during funeral banquets was perceived as natural¹³⁷. The complex symbolism of incense as a reminder of Paradise, had been expressed in the poetic voices of Ephrem and Prudentius. Hagiography was soon to develop the notion of the apotropaic powers of incense. The time was ripe to introduce censers into Christian basilicas. The idea of propitiatory incense re-emerged. Incense began to be offered to God or to a saint in order to grant health and the remission of sins. The gradual acceptance of this practice coincides with the collapse of paganism, as seen, for example, in the destruction of temples: since pagan sacrifices had ceased to be offered, propitiatory offerings of incense in a Christian context could no longer be ambiguously interpreted as an idolatrous act¹³⁸.

¹³⁷ Paulinus of Nola, Ep. 12; Augustine, Ep. 29, 10.

¹³⁸ Since this article was written, new books have appeared: S. ASHBROOK HARVEY, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*. Berkeley 2006; H. BRANDENBURG, *Ancient Churches of Rome from the fourth to the seventh century. The Dawn of Christian Architecture in the West*. Turnhout 2005. The author does not question the presence of incense inside Constantinian churches. On the text of *Liber Pontificalis*, see H. GEERTMAN (ed.), *Il Liber Pontificalis e la storia materiale*. Rome 2003.