

BRITTA K. AGER, *THE SCENT OF ANCIENT MAGIC*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 225. ISBN 9780472133024. US\$75.00.

Magic — Ager suggests — is like a scent or perfume: elusive, potentially powerful, but ambiguous in its meaning and perception. Her introduction positions her study within the movement to refocus attention to the sensory aspects of the ancient past, marked by such early works as Lilja's *Treatment of Odours in the Poetry of Antiquity* and Detienne's *Gardens of Adonis* (both 1972). Not coincidentally, perhaps, this early period of anthropological reception in the classics also saw the rise of interest in the study of ancient magic, signalled by the republication of the *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM; 1973–1974). Drawing on anthropological and sociological literature, Ager highlights both the interest of scent as an object of study and its denigration in the cultures of the sight-focused modern West, which tends to associate the other senses with the primitive.

The remainder of the volume is structured around five chapters, the first centred on Greek and Roman herbal and zoological lore, reflected in sources such as Theophrastus, Pliny the Elder and the *Geoponica*; the second turning its attention to the Greek and Demotic magical papyri from the Roman Egypt of the early centuries C.E.; the third and fourth looking in turn at Greek and Latin literature describing 'witches': the deadly young Medea, scented like incense (Θυώδης), the aged and grotesque Canidia, both wielding scents as weapons. The last, and richest, chapter leaves behind magic proper to think about the ways in which scent's intangible yet powerful qualities could serve as indexes for the sacred, and in which the scented boundaries of temples could be transferred to temporary ritual spaces through 'portable olfactory scentscapes' (186).

As Ager discusses in this last chapter (183–4), the sense of smell is culturally contingent; individuals in a society learn what to pay attention to, and how. Modern researchers might imagine the smells of Greek temples as those of animal sacrifice — roasting meat, blood, excrement and offal made pungent by the summer heat. Yet ancient observers were apparently as habituated to these scents as today's city-dwellers are to the sound of cars; for ancient worshippers, temples, like Medea, smelled of incense. This creates problems for Ager, since it often seems that that ancient Greek and Latin authors were little more attentive to scents than modern readers — she notes, for example, that Apollonius neglects to mention the stench of the corpses hanging from trees in Colchis (114), and in discussions of garlic, often identified with the Homeric *moly*, there is scarce mention of its distinctive smell (65–75). As a result, Ager must often draw extensively upon anthropological comparanda to tease out how scent might have worked.

An interesting example of this conflict arises in Ager's discussions of texts from the Greek magical papyri, in which practitioners invoke myrrh to inflame their victims with love, an example of what Ager calls the use of 'scent as an aggressive weapon' (129). Yet it is again striking that the papyri seem largely uninterested in the myrrh's smell — what for us is its most characteristic feature; it is rather described as a kind of daimonic agent, entering the woman's body not through her nose but through her side or her ψυχή. As Ager discusses, myrrh was also ingested, and used in ink, and so had other — visual, gustatory and curative — properties which were of interest to practitioners. But this problem is also one of the book's greatest strengths; it forces our attention to a quality which both we, and the ancient writers, largely ignore. Myrrh may not have been *only* a scent, but it must have combined with other materials to create ritual scentscapes with powerful effects and associations, and this awareness offers new perspectives even on familiar texts. Looking again at one of the invocations, we see that the adjective πικρά (PGM IV.1496) might be a reference to a 'sharp' or 'pungent' smell, camouflaged in the standard English translation 'bitter'.

Beyond this work of perspective broadening, Ager's work is valuable for bringing together scattered but fascinating mentions of scents in ancient texts — the perfuming and fumigation of women's spaces, bedchambers and storerooms (115–16), and the claims by the *Geoponica* that bees sting people who smell like wine, sex or perfume (145), or that pigeons can be perfumed to attract their wild compatriots to their dove-cotes (122). Ager's study serves as an elegant and inspiring basis upon which future work might be built, work hinted at by her anthropological digressions, which might complement her own literary approach with techniques such as experimental archaeology or the study of material remains.

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