Foreign aromatic products in the cultural and religious identity of ancient Egypt

Abstract

Brief analysis of the different values of some aromatic products, which Egypt imported from African countries and became a fundamental part of the belief system of ancient Egyptian religion. Scented trees and plants were particularly important since they were used to evoke the Gods and recreate a sacred space for them on Earth. Beautiful gardens, sensual pleasures and the divine birth of pharaohs were all linked to the use of those foreign products, thereby justifying their provisioning through commercial expeditions planned by the crown over the centuries.

Keywords

African aromatic products, Punt, God’s Land, Egyptian mythology
Beside their principal economic and social value as status symbols, some African aromatic products coming mainly from Egypt’s southern neighbours (Nubia, Punt) acquired ideological and religious meaning in the ancient Egyptian culture. Over the centuries, in fact, some of those items have assumed an important role as essential part of the Egyptian mythology, despite (or maybe because of) their ‘foreign’ origin.

The connection between aromata and the mythic Land of Punt (or God’s Land), frequently stressed by the textual documentation, represents probably the primary reason why those products have raised to the level of ‘divine’. The postulation of a mythic origin of aromata is clearly illustrated, for example, in the Myth of Osiris, in which the god’s death is mourned by all the Gods with very interesting consequences:

Then Horus began to cry. His tears fell to the ground and grew: this is how myrrh (antiw) came into being. […] Then Shu and Tefnut began to cry exceedingly much. The water of their eyes fell to the ground and grew: this is how incense (snetjer) came into being. […] Then Isis and nephthys grew very very tired. Their sweat went out into the ground and it grew. This is how the ti-shepes plant came into being.

(Papyrus Salt 825)

The most important aspect of aromata is of course scent, which, according to the Egyptian mythology, represents the divine presence on Earth. A persistent fragrance, often of Puntite origin, is the unequivocal mark that some god has been evoked to speak a prophecy, or has come to Earth for some special purpose.

The text describing the divine birth of Queen Hatshepsut taking place in the Deir El-Bahari Temple is a good example (Fig.2): the Queen’s mother was awakened by the divine presence of Amun-Ra, (manifested through his perfume from Punt) who came to Earth to generate his daughter Hatshepsut, future king of Egypt:

The palace was filled with the perfume of the God [...], she awoke because of the fragrance of the God [...], all his fragrances were of Punt [...].

(Naville 1898)

The strong association between aromatic products and gods corporal humors in some religious texts (such as Papyrus Jumilhac, Papyrus of the Delta or Papyrus Salt) perfectly indicates the nature of their divine character, esta-

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1 This research is part of a wider project about the linguistic and cultural areas of transitions in Africa, funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research (FIRB 2012). See: www.africantransitions.it for more information. The products chosen as topic of this work are: ebony, ‘hesayt’, ‘ti-shapes’, ‘ihemet’ and ‘menenen’; see Incordino (2016b) for the lexicographic analysis on those words.

2 See Aufrere 2016 (in press) to get a clearer idea of the connection between divine humors and aromatic products.
lished in order to use their ideological value as strong motivation for the never-ending provisioning attempts throughout the centuries. Through this postulation, the quest for *aromata* becomes the search for divine elements to bring back to Egypt from their land of origin (Punt, God’s Land), in order to recreate a divine environment in which the Gods can be evoked.

This sacred space takes often the form of a garden, which is to be found into the architectural plans of many of the principal cult temples of the country. These gardens can be equipped with an open space containing all the animal and vegetal species of Egypt and other countries to be offered to the Gods. One of the best know examples is the so-called Botanic Garden of the Amon Temple in Karnak, Thebes (Fig.1), dated to the reign of Thutmosis III (1479-1425 BC ca.), in which the different species are represented as tributes from defeated countries.

![Figure 1 – Relief from the Botanic Garden of Karnak with a possible representation of the aromatic product ‘hesayt’ (*ḥs3yt*)](image)

Another example comes from the tomb of Sennefer (TT96, West Thebes), Overseer of the gardens of the Amon Temple in Karnak, in which the importance of the gardens is due to the endless offerings to the Gods, with a particular emphasis on perfume:
Presenting the perfume of the marshes and flowers, and offering all kinds of plants from among the finest of the orchard [...] Overseer of the gardens of Amun, Sennefer, justified, who presents all the choice plants of the garden to his Majesty in the course of every day, in order to offer them to the temple of Amun every day.

In other instances, those ‘gardens’ were part of the actual re-enactment of God’s Land in Egypt, like for example the so-called ‘Punt chamber’ in the Ptolemaic Temple of Athribis (Fig. 2). In that site there is what seems an open chamber where myrrh trees (or other aromatic plants) were planted as offerings to the gods. The same meaning can be ascribed to the reliefs which decorate the walls: a very detailed description of all the aromatic plants from Punt and God’s Land, with an accurate indication of their color, aspect, resin, scent and also their medical/cosmetic use.

**Figure 2** – The garden of the Amon-Ra temple in Karnak from a scene in Sennefer’s Theban tomb (TT96)
Ancient Egyptians believed this ‘garden of Eden’ was not made for men, but for the Gods and their pleasures (even the most sensual one ³) on Earth. The aromatic products represented the only link between the human and the divine world. The erotic aspect of aromata can be found, for example, in a passage of the Deir el Bahari text, which refers to the satisfying union between Hatshepsut’s mother and Amun with a very clear metaphor:

... the whole palace was flooded by the perfume of the God and all balms of Punt

In this respect, Punt and God’s Land represented an ideal of beauty and happiness, which was of course desired by human beings too. In some poetic texts, in fact, men in the arms of their lovers are usually referred to as: “feeling in the land of Punt”, comparing in this way the sensual pleasure to the hap-

³ See Betrò (1997).
piness of God’s Land. In other instances (Fig. 4), the beauty and sex appeal of women are conveyed by the sweet fragrance of ‘ti-shepes oil’, one of the luxury products coming from Punt⁴.

![Figure 4 – Ostrakon (P.71380) from Deir el Medina with reference to ti-shepes oil](image)

Another interesting link between foreign _aromata_ and the religious world has been recently suggested by Aufrere (2016), who proposes a connection between myrrh resin and female falcons, supposedly able to produce the resin. Different goddesses were referred to as falcons, but typically Hathor, the ‘Lady of Punt’.

Falcons in general are vehicles of the divine, according to ancient Egyptian mythology, and can foresee the Gods’ presence. This element can be moreover elaborated together with the myth of the Phoenix bird, considered a myrrh carrier by Herodotus and it can be related to the solar religious cult of Heliopolis, since the soul (namely ‘ba’) of the falcon-headed god Ra, the Behedite, Lord of Punt and of God’s Land, is worshipped at Edfu temple.

The relation between _aromata_ and the gods/masters of foreign countries is well documented in many documents: ebony sticks are the tool magicians mostly use to set a connection with Thot/Hermes in the form of an Ethiopian baboon with a dog’s head, or with the lioness goddess Sekhmet, the ‘Great of Magic, the Ethiopian Cat’⁵.

⁴ See Incordino (2016) for different interpretation hypothesis of this foreign plant.
⁵ See Aufrere (2001)
One more connection with southern countries (Nubia in particular) can be found in the text of the famous stela of Sesostris III from Wadi Halfa\(^6\) (today kept at the Archaeological Museum in Florence, 2540), in which several Nubian toponyms are listed and represented as Egyptian conquests. Among them there is the toponym ‘Hesa/Hesai (\(H:\!s\!i\)-\(H\!s\!i\!i\))’\(^7\), from which the name of the *aromata* ‘hesayt’ could possibly derive\(^8\).

Moreover, the name the ancient goddess Khensut (\(Hnsw\!t\)) mentioned also in the Pyramid Texts (S456c) and in the inscriptions of the Hibis Temple at Kharga Oasis, could be related to the ‘hesayt’ aromatic product and its supposed Nubian origin. This goddess, probably representing one of the aspects of the goddess Hathor (according to an Edfu inscription, Hathor is the ‘Lady of hesyt (Khensut)’), could have been of Nubian origin (from the toponym Hesa/Hesai?). For this reason, she is represented above the head of the god Soped in the Hibis Temple, as a sign of conquest (Soped’s epithet is ‘Lord of the foreign countries’) (Barguet 1950).

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\(^7\) See Zibelius (1972) pp.149, Gauthier (1975) pp. 205 for the toponym.

\(^8\) See Barguet (1950) p.6, note 3.


Derchain P., (1965) Le Papyrus Salt 825 (BM 10051), rituel pour la conservation de la vie en Égypte, Brussels.


