

A Short History of Orthodox Christian Perfumery and Incense Making

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(Painting: Still Life With Symbols of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Dirck DeBray

1672: Oil on Panel. Amstelkring Museum, Amsterdam)

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Introduction

It is with great gratitude that I dedicate this short history of Christian incense and perfumery to Reader Seraphim, and to all those who have been encouraging me to "write a book someday". Although I cannot fulfill that particular mission at the present time I do want to give some attention to this very important subject. For too long, we have assigned this great and important work to monastics whose real mission is to pray for the world. It was not always this way.

Until 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Muslim Caliphates, Christian artisans, yes, laymen and laywomen did this work! It was only after that, that we we began to "slack off" and give these jobs to monastics. They have enough to do. Let us take the torch from them, fulfill this work and donate some of our profits to them so that they will be free to fulfill their real mission: prayer for the world!

Ancient Perfumes and Perfumers Before Christ

Our story begins long ago, in the Jewish temples of the Sinai and the Holy Land. Ancient Jewish temples were served by the Levite priests who became the guardians of the secrets of ancient perfumery in the middle east. Much of what we know and practice today, are due to their efforts and we must acknowledge them as the founding fathers of our art. In the ancient Jewish temples, one of the first "recipes" for liturgical incense was given in the book of Exodus and spread throughout the middle eastern world of that time. Even pagans attempted to recreate and duplicate the ancient recipe found in the book of Exodus. History does not tell us if the pagans were ever successful, but as a perfumer myself I must say that I find this doubtful. Firstly, Exodus does not give exact measurements for the ingredients, and secondly, measurements themselves were an inexact science in those days, leading to much confusion in terms of formula.



The Levite Priesthood

In short, the Jewish oral tradition was in itself, a secret method of teaching, and involved a great deal of knowledge of the scriptures, and the theology that was germane to the Jewish world at that time. Approximately 4000 years ago, the Israelites began to perfect their secrets of perfumery and incense, and this led to a very closed and rather secret society, even within the Levite priesthood. Perfumers of that tribe were highly educated men and were the guardians, not only of perfumery and its importance in the temples of Israel, but also of herbalism and healing.

Today, we have modern chemistry, anti-biotics, and modern medicine to guide us in our search for health, but back then people were very much dependent upon the priesthood, not only for their spiritual health, but their mental and physical health as well. (This holds true in many other cultures as well: Shamanism and Animism, as "religious movements" gained great footholds in various parts of the world at various times in history, not because of the efficacy or "truthfulness" of their theology, but because of the appeal of their practical knowledge of herbalism to heal people of very real ailments and infirmities.)

In other cultures, meanwhile, great strides were being made in the arts of perfumery, notably in China and also in India, even Africa. Throughout history every continent around the globe has produced great perfumes, and great perfumers. For our own study, we will be looking at Christian perfumers, perfumery and incense making, since the founding of the Christian Churches in 33 A.D. We will come forward to the present time, and hopefully, we will begin to understand some of the spiritual secrets of this ancient Christian art.

Let us look now, at the recipe in Exodus. It tells us great secrets, although we may have to dig much deeper to obtain them:

Exodus 30:34-38 34 And the LORD said unto Moses, Take unto thee sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense: of each shall there be a like weight: 35 And thou shalt make it a perfume, a confection after the art of the apothecary, tempered together, pure and holy: 36 And thou shalt beat some of it very small, and put of it before the testimony in the tabernacle of the congregation, where I will meet with thee: it shall be unto you most holy. 37 And as for the perfume which thou shalt make, ye shall not make to yourselves according to the composition thereof: it shall be unto thee holy for the LORD. 38 Whosoever shall make like unto that, to smell thereto, shall even be cut off from his people. (The King James Version)



Model of the Temple of Jerusalem as it would have been in the first century. Israel Museum, Jerusalem

In verse 34 we read that each shall of a "like weight". This means that the recipe calls for equal parts of all these, however it does not say how much a "part" is ! It is for the perfumer to figure out, by means of experimentation, what the "weight" should be. The reason this is supremely important is that : fragrance oils, especially "essential" oils interact differently at different weights! Although, theoretically, a pound of rose, in volume, is the same in chemical "strength" as an ounce of rose, the other ingredients will interact differently at different weights, thereby producing a different scent! Verse 36 tells us we have to grind these ingredients very small, very finely. This would have been next to impossible in those days! And even with a basic mortar and pestle, such as has been found in Native American archaeological digs, some over 7000 years old, it would have taken a greatly long time to do this.

Let's go back to the ingredients themselves: Verse 34 calls for : "sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum; these sweet spices with pure frankincense..." Firstly, there's no telling if what is meant by "sweet spices" is something extraneous to the other ingredients already named, or if that's what is solely referred to. These could have and would have, been anything under the sun that the Levite priests chose to use. We just do not know what they were, and the Levite priests aren't talking. Their lips are sealed. Moving on, stacte is probably "styrax" a resin found in native trees, and "onycha" is a type of mollusk shell. Galbanum is a resin from native trees in the region, hardened and dried to be burned. Oh goodness - we have to grind THESE up? With frankincense??? It's too much work. This is why most pagans of that time, would have given up at the first sentence of the recipe.

And now for the real mystery: Verse 35 says specifically: 35 And thou shalt make it a perfume, **a confection after the art of the apothecary**, tempered together, pure and holy...

A confection after the art of the apothecary, hm? Well, history does not tell us what such a confection is, how it was made or even anything about the aforementioned 'apothecaries'. We can probably surmise, that it was probably a type of paste, but made

of what? Bound together with what? Oil? Animal fats? What? We do not know and it is a mystery that will never be solved. This is why, in today's world, when some Christians write to me and ask me about this recipe, I tell them: it is impossible to re-create accurately, therefore, 'Don't worry - be happy!'

Christians are not meant to chase after philosophical mysteries. They are meant to follow our Lord, not be slaves to "the Law".

Lastly, these fragrances were not meant for every day of perfume by women or men, but were to be reserved solely for use in the temple as it says in the latter part of the passage. Therefore, even the ancient Jews recognized a distinction between "perfumery" and "holy incense". Likewise, when the first Christians, who were originally Jewish, began to form the first Christian Churches, they too, made such a distinction.

The Heavenly Perfume of the New Testament – Our Lord Jesus Christ



When people discuss Christian art, they are primarily concerned with the "visual" arts. They forget that true art, in any form, engages all five senses. Thus, the Christian Liturgy, as practiced in the Sacramental and historical Christian traditions, are works of art themselves. I am constantly amazed at people's ability to overlook this fact, and their inability to grasp that the Liturgy itself, is an expression of Supreme Art, and the Great Artist, Himself, who created the Universe ex nihilo. Our Lord is the Supreme Artist, having fashioned the earth, and all that dwells in it, and all the hills, mountains, valleys, seas, and sub-terrestrial, and sub-oceanic crevices, lifeforms, and all things that in Genesis are described as "that creepeth upon the Earth, and dwells within the sea."

Whether He did it in 6000 years ago or millions of years ago, makes no difference. Quit worrying about that. He did it, ex nihilo. From nothing. This is all that is required of us as Christians, to believe and it makes life a lot simpler. While it is true that the Liturgy is an earthly expression of our Lord's love for us, and the story of His sacrifice, death and resurrection, it is also true that this is expressed, plainly as "art". The priest intones the prayers, we answer with songs of praise allowing our ears to be filled with the Lord's Glory and his message to us; the incense is brought before us and our noses are engaged

in the act of interpreting the Gospel, then the icons are revered which engage our sight and touch, and at the culmination of the Liturgy, when the Eucharist is finally brought to a starving and thirsty people, our bodies are fulfilled with the Light of the Gospel through our sense of taste.

Finally, we are brought to the place where the soul yearns to be : in full communion with our Lord Jesus Christ, and all His Creation, and all the cloud of witnesses, and all the angelic host. In this way, God's people fully participate in the "hum" of the Universe, that which created all and sustains all. Christian incense and perfumery then, is a vital part of our Lord's greatest work of Art, the Divine Liturgy and through his people and the works of their hands, He is glorified and people are healed of inattention, indifference, insolence, and immovable hatred.

I have yet to meet a single atheist or modern "pagan" who grew up in an Orthodox, Catholic or Anglican church who says, "The incense doesn't matter". I have met many thousands of such people while traveling with my goods to faires around the west coast, and without exception, all of them get a little teary eyed, a little nostalgic, a little homesick for Mother Church in spite of their current views, through her 2000 year old history and practice of incense making. (None of these have ever walked away from my booth, without at least 1 ounce of "church incense" in their pocket, often as gift, but ever more often as a purchase.) People just cannot fail to be touched by the God-given sense of smell, and when they are allowed to fully experience the Church in a way that engages them fully, they are somehow changed, even if only in a small way.

The Journey of the Magi and Their Kingly Gifts



Our Lord's very birth was marked by a gift of "gold, frankincense and myrrh". In the days of 0 BC, people believed that incense would "purify" an area and prevent illness. It is not surprising to me at all that the Magi brought these particular gifts. They knew that a Great King was about to be born, and they planned for it, bringing sweet resins to purify the area for Mother and Child. No one wants a Great King or His Mother to die in child-bed. It's a sensible gift, given the beliefs and common ideas of the time. (And we can only imagine the stench and the millions of microbes and germs in that humble stable, because there was "no room for them at the inn". Of course, I think that the presence of our Lord, even as He was infant, would have sanctified the stable and made it "clean" for both

Mother and Child.)

There is a great deal of evidence that at least one of the Magi originated from Ethiopia, and as such, that they brought with them, the resin incense native to their land, which at that time would have been black Ethiopian frankincense and a red myrrh. As an aside, this is why I use these same resins so often in my blends: I believe that they were in fact, the original gifts to Christ and I want all my products to follow that tradition: a gift to the Christ Child.

Now, we move forward, through Christ's ministry: the Gospels tell us that a woman poured spikenard upon His head and that He blessed her saying:

"And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when his disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor." But when Jesus was aware of it, he said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for me. For you have the poor with you always, but me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on my body, she did it for my burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her." (Matt. 26)

It is my belief, that this woman was the first Christian perfumer, and as such we owe her a great debt, for her simple, and loving act. By doing this to Jesus, she had solidified and legitimized the use of perfume in the Christian world. Throughout the ages, she has indeed been memorialized and the many thousands/millions of Christian perfumers throughout history, including myself, praise her for her bravery and pureness of heart and intention. Every Sunday, when our priests celebrate the Liturgy and bring out the incense, truly this is a memorial to this kind and simple woman who loved Jesus, more than her own life or reputation.

For the apostles, a rough bunch to say the least, did not value her or her action. They valued money above her love for our Saviour. She loved Jesus more than His own disciples at that time. Glory to God for her, and for her life, and bravery and sacrifice.

For these are the mark of a true perfumer: Bravery in the face of impending martyrdom (of all kinds) and purity of heart and intention. It is our hope and intention to leave the world a better place, and to leave it a little better than we found it. Through our art, we hope to touch peoples senses and thereby awaken them to a higher law, a higher ideal, a higher aspiration than is found on earth. The perfumers aim, is to raise up the spirit of other people, to raise them up to God, to offer their prayers as a loving sacrifice, and to reach heaven with our art, raising us all above the temporal and earthly chains of this world. This is all that any perfumer, Christian or otherwise, wants to do.

It is very important to note that not long after Jesus said this, Judas Iscariot began looking into how and for how much, he could betray our Lord: "Then one of the twelve, called

Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver him to you?" And they counted out to him thirty pieces of silver. So from that time he sought opportunity to betray him."

It was, according to the Gospel, at least partly the act of a perfumer that led Judas Iscariot into jealousy, coveting, whatever it was that was in his heart, when he betrayed Christ. The perfumer goes before the betrayer, because the perfumer lifts people's spirits and hearts to God and this the betrayer cannot abide.

Likewise, when Jesus was crucified the women brought perfumes and prepared his body for the tomb. These women, known as the Myrrh Bearers, were the first Christian undertakers and they did what no one else in that time or place would have wanted to do: touch a "dead" body and lovingly prepare it for burial. Here too, we see the acts of perfumers in the story of the Gospels and we have to wonder: If the apostles did not think it was important, why include it in all the accounts???

Therefore, the incense and perfume of Christian artisans is important and I hope this website, my work, will inspire others to engage the art, and to do it prayerfully and reverently. "No one, comes to the Father but by Me," says Jesus. By serving him, perfumers and their customers, can "Taste and see, that the Lord is good!".

From about 33 AD to 450 AD, Christian incense was primarily the raw resin of frankincense and myrrh, from the fields of Ethiopia, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Somalia, Yemen, Oman, what is now called Turkey (formerly Asia Minor), Iraq and Iran. These were the regions where these resins are historically found in abundance and even today, Hojari frankincense from Ethiopia and Oman, are among the most highly prized for their purity of scent and ability to blend with other resins, and perfume oils.

The Masters: The Christian Perfumers of the Byzantine Empire



Perfume vessels from the early Roman Period

After about 450 AD, these resins became more widely traded among the Arabs, and Coptic Christians, who then took it far into the northern reaches of what is now called the British Isles. Early Christians in these regions were now able to enjoy the same incense in their church services as those in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East. "Church incense" then, was a pure blend of frankincense and myrrh raw resin, untreated and unprocessed. But Christian perfumers saw ways to blend these resins to create specific perfumes for specific reasons: To honor Mary, the Mother of God, the Theotokos, pure rose was added.

In those days, "pure rose" wasn't very pure, nor was it especially pleasing. It was only after distillation was invented by the Islamic world, that true rose began to be extracted and added to these raw resins in order to produce some of the finest fragrances in the world, sometime around the 9th century. Until then, Christian incense makers and perfumers made do with pastes made from ground spikenard, cinnamon, cloves, and other fragrant spices. As the trade routes of the Silk Road and Incense Road, began to open up between east and west, and the waterways between the middle East and Europe began to flourish, even reaching into the British Isles, these recipes began to change, and were regularly traded between Christians, Jews, Hindus and later the Muslims.

By the time Constantinople became the center of the Christian world and the Byzantine Empire, all these groups were mingling together, trading secrets and formulas. Christian perfumers in Byzantium were even granted a place of honor in the Byzantine bazaar. They were assigned a spot directly below the enormous icon of Christ, in front of the

gates to the Emperor's palace, so that the scents they created would waft upward to Christ Himself as a daily Christian offering.



The Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, greatest of all the Christian Cathedrals

St. Abo the Perfumer of Bagdad, was originally a Muslim from Iraq, who converted to Christ. As a perfumer before his conversion, he would have been well trained in the art of Arab and Islamic perfumery, the rudiments of what we now call "chemistry", which was later codified by a Muslim man named Al Kindi in the 9th century.



(Al Kindi - died 873)

Al Kindi, also known as Alkindus, would have received the same training and would have had just as much contact with the Christian Byzantine perfumers as his predecessor, St. Abo. Al Kindi's recipes are found in his book, *Book of the Chemistry of Perfume*. In this work, Al Kindi included many of the Byzantine Christian recipes which he found

especially pleasing. He was also one of the first to refute the claims of the alchemists and denounced them as charlatans and blasphemers. (And he was right.)

Nonetheless, Al Kindi was heavily influenced by the Christian perfumers of Constantinople, the Byzantine Christian artisans of that time. He had great trade with them and learned much from them. Byzantine perfumers were considered the finest in the world at that time, and they held that distinction until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 AD. When the city fell to the Muslim caliphates, Christian perfumers were killed off and those few that survived, fled to all points of the globe. From that time on, monastics were charged with the task of creating scents for the Church as they were no longer so widely available and they were needed for the daily Liturgy and services of the Churches.



Modern Orthodox Christian Perfume and Incense

Many of these perfumers went to Greece and sought refuge in Mt. Athos, teaching their secrets to the monastics there, and this is why today, people tend to think of Orthodox incense as coming exclusively from there. While it is true that Athonite monastics have perfected that particular art, Christian perfumery and incense making is by no means limited to them.

Russian, Serbian, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, all sorts of ethnic Christians of the Orthodox world have kept and carefully guarded the secrets of the ancient Byzantine perfumers. Today, the Orthodox Christian world is graced with the scent of heaven, because of the dedication of its laity and its monastics to the preservation of this very ancient and very important spiritual work and art.

May St. Abo, the Perfumer of Bagdad, and all the perfumed saints of ancient Byzantium and Christendom, pray to God for us, as we continue their work and their legacy.