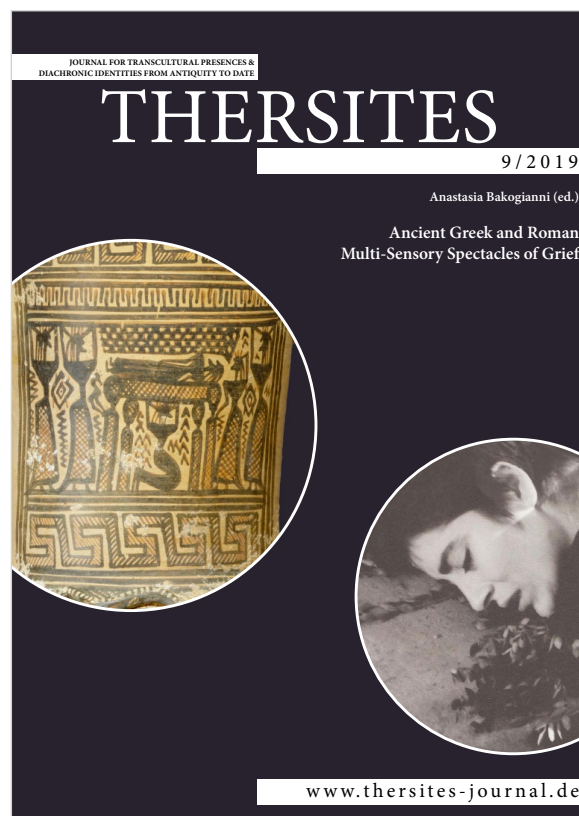


David Clancy
(INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

The Smell of Grief
Odour and Olfaction at the
Roman Funeral

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ABSTRACT

The Roman funeral has received regular scholarly attention as a ritualised expression of elite identity and performative grief, with emphasis on its visual and auditory elements. By contrast, analysis of the role of smell in funerary rites has typically been relegated to a passing mention, and all too often been dismissed as merely a means of offsetting the dismal odour of a decaying corpse. However, this prioritisation may better reflect contemporary western attitudes to the senses than those of the ancient Romans, who in their literature placed considerable emphasis on the presence of funerary odours, and spent considerable sums of money to treat their dead with the finest spices from across the empire. As Pliny, Plutarch, and others make clear, these materials and the fragrances they produced could provoke strong reactions and accusations of *mollitia* among the living. And yet, for those bearing witness to the deceased's departure from one world and their transition to another, the funeral's olfactory dimensions were central to its form and function. This paper examines the social, ontological and epistemological significance of odour to the Roman funeral – its importance in communicating critical information about the grief endured by the living, the status of the deceased and the success of the ritual itself.

DAVID CLANCY

(INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

The Smell of Grief: Odour and Olfaction at the Roman Funeral

1. Introduction¹

IN April of 1485, workmen searching for marble and other stones along the Via Appia made an altogether more remarkable discovery: the tomb of a young Roman girl, whom witnesses quickly (and erroneously) identified as Tullia, daughter of Cicero.² Accounts of the discovery emphasise the immaculate condition of the corpse, with her skin, hair, nails, eyes, and eyelashes all extremely well preserved. The whole of Rome flocked to gaze upon a face ‘so lovely, so pleasing, so attractive, that, although the girl had certainly been dead fifteen hundred years, she appeared to have been laid to rest that very day.’³ In addition to her physical appearance, various accounts describe in some detail the thick aromatic paste which covered her body, and which they believed responsible for its pristine condition. Upon lifting the lid of her sarcophagus, the workmen were said to have been greeted by ‘a strong odour of turpentine and myrrh,’ while other discerning noses detected frankincense, aloe, and oil of cedar. Indeed so potent was this aroma that it soon attracted a large swarm of bees. The rich fragrance contributed to one observer’s assertion that the grave’s occupant was an illustrious one: ‘none but a noble person could afford to be buried in such a costly sarcophagus thus filled with precious ointments.’⁴

A witness to the funeral of ‘Tullia’ some fifteen hundred years previous would doubtless have reached the same conclusion. While those too poor to afford proper burial rites might be left to rot in pits beyond the city’s gates,⁵ Rome’s well-to-do spent lavish sums importing foreign perfumes and spices,

¹ My sincere thanks to Anastasia Bakogianni, Valerie Hope, Nicholas Purcell, Neil McLynn and Mark Bradley for their insight and critique at various stages of this paper’s development.

² Lanciani (1892).

³ Lanciani (1892) 297.

⁴ Lanciani (1892) 296.

⁵ *Var. De Ling. Lat.* 5.25.

whose exotic aromas accompanied them in death, whether atop the pyre or in the tomb itself. However, as we shall, see the presence or absence of odour was a key consideration for all social classes.⁶ This paper sets out to examine the extent to which Roman funerary rituals were markedly olfactory experiences, and explores the significance of odorous materials, such as those that accompanied ‘Tullia,’ to these rituals’ function, both as rites of passage, facilitating the deceased’s transition to an afterlife, and as symbols of grief and social status.

Until very recently, any attempt to trace the historical significance of odour would likely have been met with confusion or outright scepticism from those unsure of its purpose, or even validity. Contemporary scholarship has long privileged vision above all other sensory modalities; in the field of Classical Studies this is perhaps most evident in work dedicated to ‘the gaze’ or ‘reading’ the body in antiquity. Despite the undoubted value of such work, this trend has at last begun to give way, with multiple edited volumes addressing the plurality of sensory experience in antiquity.⁷ As a result, scholars are beginning to consider with greater depth and clarity how the varieties of sensory experience shaped daily existence in the ancient world.⁸ Much of this work has concentrated on smell, breaking what was once termed the ‘rule of olfactive silence’.⁹ Both Glen Bowersock (1997) and David Potter (1999) have examined the contribution of odour to the creation and maintenance of social gradations. Béatrice Caseau (1994) and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (2006), whose primary concerns lie in the significance of smell in early Christian contexts, have similarly discussed its prominence in pre-Christian religious traditions. More recent still, an edited volume by Bradley (2015) traced the influence of ancient odours across a range of genres and contexts, while Derrick (2017) and Flohr (2017) have focused on the

⁶ Odour was frequently associated with social status, as shall be discussed below, and this is no less true in the case of the poor; Varro (*De Lingua Latina* 5.25) speculates that the mass graves outside Rome’s walls took their name (*puticuli*) from the rotten odour they produced.

⁷ E.g. Butler and Purves (2013); Toner (2014); Bradley (2015) and Betts (2017).

⁸ For a critique of the historically and culturally contingent nature of ‘the senses’ (that is, the five distinct senses with which Western society is most familiar), see Ingold (2011).

⁹ Howes (1991) 128.

olfactory atmosphere of the Roman fort and *vicus* near Vindolanda and Roman *fullonicae*, respectively. Nevertheless, such work remains in its infancy, and there is still much to consider. The Roman funeral has long received considerable scholarly attention as a highly public spectacle, with emphasis on its visual and auditory components: the procession of family members and those hired to imitate family members (the *pompa*), the funerary dirge (the *nenia*), and the public eulogy in the forum (the *laudatio*).¹⁰ By contrast, its olfactory dimensions have received little attention in contemporary scholarship, which tends to dismiss the use of perfumes and spices as no more than a means of offsetting the dismal odours produced by a decaying corpse.¹¹

While their ability to ameliorate the smell of putrefaction was undoubtedly important, I instead argue that for Romans themselves the olfactory dimension of funerals was as much a matter of eschatological significance as it was practical necessity. Not only did it aid in the demarcation of funerary space and serve as a ritual expression of grief and/or mourning, but it might also communicate social, ontological, and epistemological information about the funeral's participants, both living and dead. And, as the funeral and its participants moved through the city, that sense of funerary space was transported with them, advertising this information to a wide audience. A primary concern of this paper is therefore to reposition odour away from the margins of Roman funerary experience, and instead integrate it more fully into our appreciation and understanding of these rites. To do so, it employs an embodied approach in considering Roman attitudes to death, exploring the impact of bodily experience – in this case smell – on Romans' understanding of the world around them. It treats odour not merely as a passive or impotent by-product of funerary rites, but as an active and affective agent in their realisation, moving the act of smelling to the foreground of the sensorium. In the process, it aims to demonstrate the centrality of smell to the spectacle of funeral rites, and how this underpinned the success of the rites as a ritualised expression of grief, a performance of social class, and of course as a rite of passage.

¹⁰ To give just five examples: Toynbee (1996); Flower (1996); Dutsch (2008); Bodel (1999) and Hope (2019).

¹¹ See for example Potter (2014) 36-7: 'funerals tended to activate sight and sound to reify the concept of sadness, while using scent to eclipse the reek of a dead body.' Cf. Hope (2017).

The geographical focus of this paper is the city of Rome itself, and on material ranging from the first century BCE to the second century CE, a period in which cremation largely replaced inhumation as the Romans' preferred method of disposing of the corpse.¹² The period between the first centuries BCE and CE also witnessed the most rapid increase in the trade of south Arabian incenses across the ancient Mediterranean world.¹³ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this period should provide us with the majority of our evidence for their incorporation in Roman funerals.¹⁴ However, it is important to note that this paper's limited geographical focus does not reflect similar limitations in the spread of this phenomenon. Consider, for instance, the burial of an adult woman in Dorchester in the third century CE: chemical analyses have indicated that her body was treated with odiferous gum resins from the genus *Boswellia*, better known as frankincense or olibanum, which would have been sourced from destinations as distant and exotic as east Africa, southern Arabia or north-western India.¹⁵ Similar examples have been found across Roman Europe, but the Dorchester burial provides a particularly striking insight into just how integral this olfactory component was, such that even inhabitants on the very fringes of the empire were willing to spend considerable sums on the purchase and transportation of these materials.

The material discussed is treated in a broadly synchronic manner. Evidence is limited when it comes to the study of Roman funerals; that pertaining to the funerary use of odours even more so. A synchronic analysis of the limited evidence is therefore better suited to an exploration of the meanings and functions of incense and perfumes in elite funerals, despite the inevitable risk of anachronism. Finally, while much of this evidence – and, in turn, the focus of this paper – concerns itself with the funeral customs of Roman (male) aristocrats, the consequences of odour's incorporation in imperial funerals will also be briefly considered.¹⁶ Above all, this paper suggests that Romans' odiferous funeral practices were intimately connected to their conceptions of death and the afterlife, and that its olfactory dimension

¹² Hope (2009), 81-2.

¹³ De Romanis (1996) and McLaughlin (2010).

¹⁴ Of course, the majority of our textual evidence comes from the writings of elite males, and the inherent biases of this evidence must be borne in mind.

¹⁵ Brettell et al. (2015).

¹⁶ For a further discussion of imperial funerals see Hope's paper in this issue.

helped facilitate the funeral's purpose as a rite of passage, aiding the deceased's transition from this life to the next. But before considering in detail the reasons for odour's incorporation within funerary ritual, it is worth examining how this was done.

2. Preparation, Pollution and Procession

Following a Roman's death, custom dictated that the deceased lie in state for up to seven days, but this may have been rare, even for the wealthy; most corpses were probably disposed of quite hastily, particularly in summer when the heat would have exacerbated the smell of decomposition. During this period of lying in state, the corpse was treated with perfumes and ointments, as we have already seen.¹⁷ Pots of burning incense (*accerae*) might also be placed beside the bier,¹⁸ as illustrated on a famous relief from the tomb of the Haterii (Fig.1), where one attendant in the lower right-hand corner can be seen poised to add more incense to the flames. This would certainly have provided some relief from the less palatable odours of the corpse, but the fragrances produced also played an important role in combating the metaphysical pollution wrought by the corpse's interstitial nature.

The Roman concept of death pollution exemplifies an understanding of death as a 'protracted social process',¹⁹ rather than an instantaneous event. As such, one of the primary functions of funerary rites was to ensure the deceased's safe transition to the afterlife, thereby allowing him to take up the position of ancestor. Whilst awaiting these rites' completion, the corpse occupied an indeterminate and uncomfortable grey zone; belonging properly neither to the world of the living nor that of the dead, its liminality brought with it an unwanted and keenly felt contagion.²⁰ The application of fragrant odours to the corpse also closely parallels their role in ancient medicine, where they were employed to combat the malevolent odours thought

¹⁷ For an overview of Roman funerary practices, see Toynbee (1996) 43-61 and Hope (2009) 65-96.

¹⁸ Bodel (1999) 267.

¹⁹ Hopkins (1983) 217.

²⁰ Lindsay (2000); Bradley (2012) and Lennon (2012). These accounts of Roman metaphysical pollution draw heavily on Douglas (2002). On its effects see Hope (2009) 71-2.

to be symptomatic of sickness and disease.²¹ On occasion, such malodours might even be thought to prove fatal; Lucretius, for instance, memorably describes a tree whose nasty odour could kill a man.²² As a result, medicinal treatments were frequently chosen for their fragrant properties, an attempt to treat both the symptom and the source of illness or disease. Similarly, with regard to a funerary context, despite the individual in question having died (and ostensibly being in no need of further medical care), the stench of the degenerating corpse as it lay in the *domus* was emblematic of its polluted state, warranting its continued treatment with fragrant aromas in order to combat the odour of pollution.

Death pollution was contagious, indeed unavoidable for those closest to the deceased, and family members publicly indicated their polluted status by adopting black mourning garments. Some even refrained from washing, in a physical expression of their metaphysical impurity.²³ Branches of the pungent cypress plant, placed outside the *domus*, alerted passers-by to the polluted nature of its inhabitants, both living and dead. All this served to differentiate and distinguish those in mourning from everyday society, as the household was instead transformed into a *familia funesta* or even ‘en quelque sorte des morts vivants’.²⁴

On the day of the funerary procession, both corpse and family members departed the house and made their way along the processional route, where they were joined by musicians and professional mourners (*praeficae*) singing funeral dirges. Incense bearers might also accompany the bier as it bore the corpse through the city, as illustrated on a limestone relief from Amiternum (Fig.2), where the figure is shown immediately behind those carrying the bier. The procession’s initial destination was the forum, where a member of the deceased noble’s family would deliver the *laudatio funebris* from the Rostra, before then moving beyond the city walls to dispose of the corpse. Unfortunately, we possess few details about the specific route that would have been taken. Given that the nobility generally lived close to the forum (along the Via Sacra or on the nearby Palatine hill, for instance), it is

²¹ Potter (1999), Caseau (1994) and (2001).

²² *De Rerum Natura* 6.1124.

²³ Lennon (2012) and Scheid (1984). In doing so, the mourners’ behaviour and appearance reversed expected norms, placing them in opposition to both those not in mourning and the corpse. See Hope (2017).

²⁴ Scheid (1984) 119.

possible that in many cases the procession would not have had far to travel to complete the initial leg of its journey. While this may appear convenient, a short journey would have afforded little opportunity to attract a suitably large audience, the size of which was, after all, a reflection of the esteem in which the family was held. It is therefore likely that a more circuitous route, taking in some of Rome's sidestreets, would have been deliberately adopted.²⁵ In turn, the choice of route would have impacted upon the speed and ease with which the procession moved. The growth of the city of Rome led to the development of new concepts of space, new systems of traffic flow, and new technologies of mobility.²⁶ These factors, not to mention its sheer scale and hilly terrain, meant that traversing this space was an altogether different experience than would have been encountered in any other Roman town or city. For members of the funeral procession, and particularly for those bearing the weight of the bier, their speed of movement would have been hindered by narrow streets, thronging crowds, and all the accompanying and competing sights, sounds, and smells. As a result, the cortege's rate of progress across the city is likely to have been fitful and uneven.²⁷

Once again, however, and for the purposes of attracting attention, this may not have been completely undesirable. Indeed, from the moment it set out, we can safely assume that the funeral cortege would have adopted the measured, deliberate pace associated with the upper classes. As was so often the case when it came to Roman social mores, the ideal gait was one of moderation; an unhurried and considered speed that distinguished itself from the haste of slaves, but was not so slow as to suggest a similarly sluggish and laboured mind.²⁸ The moderate pace of the funeral procession was therefore both a socially conscious affectation and a consequence of the physical constraints placed upon it by Rome's urban environment. And, just as the wails of lamentation and the sounds of horns and trumpets contributed to the creation of a particular and distinct auditory environment, so too did its rich aromas provide an olfactory advertisement of the procession's movement through the city – setting it apart from the tumult of daily life through which it passed. As the procession wound its way further along

²⁵ Favro and Johanson (2010).

²⁶ Laurence (2016).

²⁷ Cf. Johanson (2011).

²⁸ O'Sullivan (2011).

the route, the lingering aromas which trailed behind represented a temporary trace of the funeral's passing (as well as that of the individual in question) to those left in its wake. In this respect, the funerary *pompa* was no different from religious processions in employing odour to demarcate ritual activity (see below); where it differed, however, was in simultaneously communicating the polluted nature of its participants. Given odour's capacity to evoke memories with an immediacy and impact unmatched by the other senses, the rich scents emanating from the procession would also doubtless have reminded participants and onlookers of previous funerals attended. In doing so, odour helped emphasise the ritual's role in the creation and consolidation of social and familial identity.²⁹

3. Scent and Sensibility

If the deceased was to be cremated, then the funeral reached its olfactory climax at the site of the pyre. Here a variety of fragrant substances (such as cinnamon, saffron, and myrrh) might be set alongside the corpse, and the pyre itself constructed from sweet-smelling woods.³⁰ These materials joined the corpse in being reduced to ashes, their rich aromas mingling in the air. After the pyre had burnt itself out, the bones and ashes would be collected, again liberally doused with perfumes, and placed in some form of urn or receptacle.³¹ The enthusiasm with which olfactory elements were incorporated within funerary ritual, as well as the novel nature of this behaviour, was recorded and summarily condemned by Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century CE. He complains that his contemporaries 'burn over the departed the products which they had originally understood to have been created for the gods.'³² Here Pliny alludes to the common Roman practice, adopted from the Greeks, of offering an olfactory sacrifice to the gods, in place of one of wine or meat, for example. The significance of this alleged misappropriation will be returned to, but it is clear that, as substances that were intimately associated with the divine, Pliny deems their use in mortuary ritual inappropriate, indeed near-blasphemous. His objection is exacerbated by the scale on which this was done: 'perfumes such as are given to

²⁹ See further below, and cf. Baroin (2010).

³⁰ Lilja (1967), 55; Noy (2000).

³¹ Toynbee (1996) 50 and Hope (2009) 84. Cf. Herodian, 3.15.7-8.

³² *Plin. Nat.* 12.83-4.

the gods a grain at a time... are piled up in heaps to the honour of dead bodies.³³ Nero, to take an extreme example, is said to have burned more incense than Arabia could produce in an entire year upon the death of his wife Poppaea: a demonstration of the emperor's extravagance,³⁴ but also, for Pliny, an action that bordered on religious sacrilege. However, Pliny would appear to be in the minority in opposing the use of perfumes to honour the dead. Indeed, his comments only highlight the phenomenon's ubiquity, as the Roman elite eagerly adopted and incorporated odour in their funerals. Upon the death of Sulla in 78 BCE, for instance, the women of Rome were said to have provided such vast quantities of spices that two hundred and ten litters were required to carry it all in the funeral procession.³⁵ Despite having been a divisive figure whilst alive, the high regard in which Sulla is held by those who mourn him is mirrored in the sheer scale of olfactory offerings: no expense was spared in acquiring high-quality materials to burn alongside the body.

In life, a fondness for scenting oneself with oils or perfume might leave a Roman male open to accusations of *mollitia* – softness or effeminacy. Yet even those who, like Pliny, scorned the wearing of perfume by the living, might see its use in funerary ritual as appropriate, even necessary.³⁶ Cato the Younger, for instance, was one such man, widely famed as an arch-traditionalist and a paragon of moral virtue. Unlike his beloved brother Caepio, Cato shunned the wearing of perfume, and this was taken by Plutarch to be an exemplary demonstration of his strict and severe character, as well as his tendency toward moderation in eschewing luxury and the effete.³⁷ Following Caepio's death in 67 BC, however, Plutarch records how Cato went to

³³ *Plin. Nat.* 12.83-4.

³⁴ See also Hope in this issue (132).

³⁵ *Plut. Sull.* 38.

³⁶ The vehemence which Pliny reserved for the wearing of perfume is perhaps best illustrated by his account of one Lucius Plotius. Having been condemned to death, Plotius attempted to hide but was betrayed by the smell of his perfume. He receives little sympathy from Pliny, however, who remarks: 'who would not consider that people of that sort deserved to die?' (*Plin. Nat.* 13.24). On the association between the use of perfume and accusations of effeminacy and immorality, see Edwards (1993) 68-9 and 186-8.

³⁷ *Plut. Cat. Mi.* 3.

great trouble to have incense and costly raiment burned with the body,³⁸ suggesting that, for Cato at least, the provision of such materials, and the odours they generated, were a crucial component in giving Caepio the burial he deserved. It is clear from Plutarch's account that Cato's actions were not universally condoned by his contemporaries, some of whom saw his willingness to publicly express his grief in this manner as a lapse into ostentation.

The importance of fragrance in bestowing honour on the dead, and the willingness of the wealthy to spend lavishly in order to do so, are themes that occur frequently in Statius' *Silvae*, which provide some of the most vivid and evocative accounts of funerary odours. Statius, writing in the first century CE, was a direct contemporary of Pliny, and makes frequent reference to the use of odiferous materials in a work largely concerned with evoking the sense of loss following bereavement, testifying to its magnitude and helping those left behind to deal with their grief. In a poem consoling Flavius Ursus on the death of his favourite slave, for instance, Statius describes how the slave is joined on the pyre by some of the most expensive of spices:

*sed nix servilis adempto
ignis. odoriferos exhausit flamma Sabaeos
et Cilicum messes Phariaque exempta volucris
cinnama et Assyrio manantes gramine sucos,
et domini fletus.*

But no servile flames for the deceased.
The fire consumed the fragrant harvests of myrrh and
Cilician saffron, and cinnamon stolen from the Phoenix,
and the juices flowing from Assyrian herbs,
as well as your master's tears.³⁹

The poem thus records in rich and loving detail the range of aromatics burnt alongside the body, including *odoriferos Sabaeos* (most likely myrrh), Cilician saffron, which Strabo and Pliny,⁴⁰ report as being the highest quality variety, and cinnamon stolen from the nest of a phoenix (or *Pharia volucris*).

³⁸ *Plut. Cat. Mi.* 11.

³⁹ *Stat. Silv.* 2.6.85-89.

⁴⁰ *Strab.* 14.5.5 and *Plin. Nat.* 13.2.

The great value of these odiferous materials is therefore made clear, with the heady aromas they produced reminding those present of Ursus' great wealth, and the extravagant act of conspicuous consumption communicating the depth of his grief.

Once again, the ability of odour to communicate important information regarding social status is apparent. As Statius makes clear, the 'fragrant harvests' are bound to ideas of wealth and the marvellous that elevate the deceased slave above the status he endured in life. The threat of 'servile flames' is banished and he can now look forward to enjoying a more redolent afterlife. Statius' allusion to the phoenix is particularly apt given the funerary context: a bird said to subsist on incense and cardamom, which, when it is about to die, builds a nest of cassia and incense, before 'end[ing] its life among the perfumes.'⁴¹ In death it gives birth to a young phoenix, likewise destined to live for five hundred years or more.⁴² The fragrant phoenix thus embodies the connection between death, odiferous substances, and the hope of an afterlife. So keen is Statius on the phoenix as a literary device that he again makes use of it in a second poem. This time, however, the deceased is not human, as Statius' verse laments the death of the parrot of Atedius Melior:

*at non inglorius umbris
mittitur: Assyrio cineres adolentur amomo
et tenuous Arabum respirant gramine plumae
Sicaniisque crocis; senio nec fessus inert
scandet odoratos Phoenix felicior ignes.*

But he is not sent to the shades ingloriously:
his ashes steam with Assyrian cardamom,
and his delicate feathers are fragrant with Arabian myrrh
and Sicilian saffron. Unwearied by old age,
he will mount the perfumed pyre, a blessed Phoenix.⁴³

The poem is notable for two reasons. First, because it is well worth imagining what would no doubt have been Pliny's apoplectic reaction to the use of

⁴¹ *Ov. Met.* 15.391-417.

⁴² *Hdt.* 2.73; *Plin. Nat.* 10.2; *Ov. Met.* 15.391-417.

⁴³ *Stat. Silv.* 2.4.33-37.

perfumes in mourning a parrot. And second, because however tongue-in-cheek the poem may be,⁴⁴ by playing on established tropes it again underlines the connection between the need to honour the dead and the provision of a fragrant funeral, one that ensures Melior's parrot 'is not sent to the shades ingloriously.' In addition to advertising and honouring the social standing of the deceased, of course, the quantity of olfactory dedications likewise demonstrated the status of those paying for the funeral, who could afford to spend vast sums of money in grandiose acts of conspicuous consumption, only to see their investment literally go up in smoke.⁴⁵ In this, as in many other ways, funerary ritual expressed the wealth and power of the surviving family members as much as that of the deceased, and in doing so sought to emphasise familial continuity and unending prestige.⁴⁶

4. Smell and Social Transition

As we have seen in discussing its resultant pollution, death necessitated a careful re-negotiation of social structures and relations, and this focus on social continuity is but one illustration of the extent to which the Roman funeral was a multi-faceted and multi-functional ritual.⁴⁷ From the perspective of the deceased (and the deceased's family), however, its primary function was that of a rite of passage, removing the deceased from this world and integrating him into the next.⁴⁸ As highly public rituals, Roman funerals aimed to enable and demonstrate both this successful transition and, contingent upon its success, the re-integration of death's 'survivors' into the world of the living. In turn, any failure on the part of the living to provide the dead with adequate post-mortem treatment could potentially jeopardise this transition, with considerable consequences. Should funerary rites go unperformed or be performed incorrectly, the deceased was at risk of being

⁴⁴ Hardie (2006) 207, describes it as 'an unashamed parroting of Ovid's dead parrot poem, *Amores* 2.6.'

⁴⁵ Cf. *Stat. Silv.* 2.1.157-65, where this custom is taken to such extremes that it ultimately proves counterproductive: Melior adds so many odiferous tributes to the pyre of his son that 'the jealous fire will not take hold, and the weak flames are unable to burn so great a pile of offerings.'

⁴⁶ Baroin (2010) 19-48.

⁴⁷ Bodet (1999) and Kyle (1999).

⁴⁸ Metcalf and Huntington (1991) 79-130.

condemned to a shadowy or ghost-like existence; neither wholly living nor yet fully at rest, he occupied an indeterminate and interstitial space.⁴⁹

Odour provided sensory confirmation of a successful funeral, one that would lay the deceased's spirit to rest. By contrast, the absence of odour could be taken to indicate that the individual in question had failed to successfully transition to the afterlife. Tibullus, lying ill in a land far from home, worries about the consequences should he die without receiving all aspects of a proper burial, including the pouring of 'Assyrian perfumes' on his remains.⁵⁰ Propertius similarly has Cynthia rebuke him from beyond the grave, as her restless spirit laments the lack of aroma which contributed to her current, undesirable, manifestation:

*cur nardo flammae non oluere meae?
hoc etiam grave erat, nulla mercede hyacinthos
inicere et fracto busta piare cado.*

Why were my flames not perfumed with nard?
Was it too much effort, to scatter cheap hyacinths,
to honour my tomb with a shattered jar?⁵¹

Writing a century later, Persius satirised this requirement that the dead be treated with perfumes, describing how a jealous heir might seek post-mortem revenge by refraining from having the deceased's remains treated with good quality cinnamon or cassia:

*sed cenam funeris heres
negleget iratus, quod rem curtaveris; urnae
ossa inodora dabit, seu spirent cinnama surdum
seu ceraso peccent casiae, nescire paratus:
"tunc bona incolumis minuas?"*

But your heir, angry you've diminished your wealth, will skimp on
The funeral banquet, commit your ashes unperfumed to the urn,

⁴⁹ Johnson (1999) 127-8; Kyle (1998) 128-31.

⁵⁰ *Tib.* 1.3.5-8.

⁵¹ *Prop.* 4.7.32.

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Indifferent to whether the cinnamon smells stale, or the cassia's
Tainted with cherry. How can you lessen your fortune unscathed?⁵²

The passage expressly (albeit mockingly) highlights the importance of the odours themselves; it was not just the expense of the raw materials that was crucial, but the quality and potency of fragrance they emitted. But Persius' mockery, and the genuine importance attributed to its presence by others, raises the question of why odour, in particular, should be so integral to an understanding of the success of the rite. The answer may lie in the qualities of smell itself, qualities which were employed by the Romans to evoke and transcend certain conceptual dilemmas, and which have been explored by modern cultural theorists.

Of all the senses, smell is perhaps the most confounding. Having recognised a smell, we find ourselves unable to articulate what exactly it is we are experiencing without recourse either to the source of the smell, the evaluative categories of good or bad, or the use of a simile. Unlike other sensory modalities, we lack the vocabulary with which to discuss smells on their own terms, and may instead be forced to borrow language from the domains of taste or touch, for example, in describing something as having a bitter or sharp smell.⁵³ Resistant to language, smells are distinguished by their 'formlessness, indefinability and lack of clear articulation. [They are] characteristically incomplete'.⁵⁴ Yet it is precisely this ability to evade conceptualisation that makes the sense of smell so potently evocative. It is these very characteristics that led Dan Sperber to describe them as 'symbols par excellence',⁵⁵ and it is their very incompleteness that positions smells on the fringes of human experience, straddling the boundary between the tangible and the conceptual. An appreciation of these qualities has the potential to provide significant insight into the Romans' use of odour in a number of

⁵² *Pers.* 6.33-37.

⁵³ For the fascinating suggestion that this deficiency may be a cultural and linguistic one, see Majid et al. (2018), and the succinctly titled article by Majid and Burenhult (2014) 266-70, which describes how Jahai speakers share an olfactory vocabulary in which terms are not restricted to a narrow class of object, but instead refer to different odour qualities. *Cyes*, for example, is used for the smell of petrol, smoke, bat droppings, and some species of millipede.

⁵⁴ Gell (1997) 27; cf. Sperber (1975) 115-7 and Rindisbacher (1992) 330-1.

⁵⁵ Sperber (1975) 117-8.

contexts, including but not limited to our current concern with funerary ritual.

Roman religion, for instance, is another such context, within which odour helped to communicate and resolve the riddle of divinity: that of supernatural beings, the nature of whose existence was altogether separate and distinct from that of mortals, but who were nevertheless capable of exerting great influence in the natural world. We have already seen how Pliny alluded to the close connection between certain odiferous materials, the odours they produced, and the gods, such that their dedication to mortals was at best misplaced, and at worst a gross impiety. This association is echoed (however crudely) by Artemidorus' analysis of a dream in which a man wipes his anus with frankincense. His fate was to be convicted of sacrilege, 'since he treated with insolence that with which we honour the gods.'⁵⁶ In contrast to Artemidorus' villain, pious religious actors made use of incense and other odours in a range of contexts to honour and evoke the divine. Whether in physical temples or literary descriptions, divine odour was often indicative of divine presence, and the gods were thought to take great pleasure, even nourishment, from these odours.⁵⁷ Sacrificial victims, therefore, might be loaded with a range of aromatics before being burnt in offering to deities who feasted on the resulting odours. The burning of the fragrant carcasses, their subsequent transformation from solid to vapour, and the fragrant smoke rising heavenwards established a connection between the physical world of mortals and the metaphysical world of the divine. This connection was made possible by smell's ability to exist partly, simultaneously, but never wholly satisfactorily, in both. The prevalence of this form of worship and the conceptual framework underpinning it was ridiculed by Lucian, who describes how the gods eagerly await the 'steam of burnt offerings,' and are supplicated by 'a godly steam, and fit for godly nostrils, [which] rises heavenwards, and drifts to each quarter of the sky.' The grateful deities are pictured thronging about the altar, their mouths 'open to feast upon the smoke.'⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Artem. Oneir.* 5.4.

⁵⁷ Cf. Clements (2014) 46-59.

⁵⁸ *Luc. Sacr.* 9-13.

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Sweet smells were intimately connected with how the gods were perceived, a 'sign of their supernatural condition.'⁵⁹ Divine presence and divine smells were thus indelibly linked, a connection seen not only in religious ritual, but also in literary descriptions of the gods, with Roman authors following a Greek tradition in which the gods are recognizable as sweet-smelling.⁶⁰ In Vergil's *Aeneid*, for instance, Aeneas comes to recognise the departing Venus, in part, by the 'divine fragrance'⁶¹ that wafts from her hair. Returning to her home in Paphos, the goddess is said to reside in a temple steaming with Sabaeian incense and fresh garlands.⁶² Likewise, Plutarch highlights Isis' supernatural condition through reference to the 'wondrous fragrance from her own body' that she shares with others,⁶³ while the island on which Cronus is thought to sleep is 'suffused with fragrances scattered from the rock as from a fountain'.⁶⁴ As they themselves were fragrant, it was fitting that the gods should receive fragrant offerings as nourishment. This need for olfactory offerings was met not only by the community at large, but also by individual Romans, who might place gifts of flowers, perfumes or incense at the foot of statues of the gods. Odours emanating from temples or sanctuaries likewise provided instantaneous understanding of divine presence.⁶⁵ Ovid, for instance, vividly relates the heady aromas radiating from the temples on the Kalends of January:

*cernis odoratis ut lucat ignibus aether,
et sonet accensis spica Cilissa focus?
Flamma nitore suo templorum verberat aurum
et tremulum summa spargit in aede iubar.*

Dost mark how the sky sparkles with fragrant fires,
and how Cilician saffron crackles on the kindled hearths?

⁵⁹ Detienne (1994) 48.

⁶⁰ Clements (2014) 46-59.

⁶¹ *Verg. A.* 1.402-5.

⁶² On the Sabaei, traders from south-west Arabia (roughly modern Yemen) who were said to travel as far as Troglodytica (modern Somalia) to procure high quality frankincense and myrrh, see *Plin. Nat.* 12.51-3, 12.66.

⁶³ *Plut. De Iside.* 15.

⁶⁴ *Plut. De Facie.* 26.

⁶⁵ Caseau (1994) 54-65.

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The flame with its own splendour beats upon the temples'
gold and spreads a flickering radiance on the hallowed roof.⁶⁶

While temples could afford to spend considerable sums on the most expensive fragrances, there was a wide price range for incense, making it easily accessible as a means of worshipping the gods.⁶⁷ Cheap incense allowed those of humbler means to venerate the gods in their own home, by throwing a few grains on the brazier of the Lararium, and Ovid eloquently expresses the inherent egalitarianism of olfactory sacrifice:

*nec quae de parva pauper dis libat acerra tura,
minus grandi quam data lance valent.*

The incense offered by the poor man from his humble censer
has not less effect than that given from a huge platter.⁶⁸

The use of perfumes and incense thus provided an olfactory indication of religious action. As Harvey puts it, these aromas 'attuned the mind to devotion and adoration both before and long after the act... had taken place.'⁶⁹ Religious processions, to take another example, often had censers placed along their route, wafting incense over the participants.⁷⁰ Describing the reception of the goddess Cybele in Rome, Livy records how:

*turibulis ante ianuas positis quae praeferebatur atque
accenso ture, precantibus ut volens propitiaque urbem
Romanam iniret.*

Censers had been placed before the doors along the route of the bearers, and kindling their incense, people prayed that gracious and benignant she might enter the city of Rome.⁷¹

⁶⁶ *Ov. Fast.* 1.75-8, trans. Frazer.

⁶⁷ Caseau (1994) 40-2.

⁶⁸ *Ov. Pont.* 4.8.39-40, trans. Wheeler.

⁶⁹ Harvey (2006) 14.

⁷⁰ Caseau (1994) 54-7.

⁷¹ *Liv.* 29.14, trans. Moore.

The need for this ceremony indicates that there was an element of doubt as to whether the goddess would choose to enter the city. However the combination of prayer and incense – both ephemeral, intangible manifestations of the citizens' communal piety – aims to secure and facilitate the deity's arrival. The incense is of particular importance in establishing a suitable olfactory environment for Cybele's entry, instigating an olfactory aura of religious sanctification which sought to supplant any and all secular or more mundane aromas. The fragrant smells thus served as a materialisation (however fleeting) both of the citizens' religiosity and of the goddess's presence in the streets of Rome.⁷²

This association between smells and the gods helps us to understand the presence of pleasing aromas at Roman funerals. By adorning and burning their bodies with perfumes and incense, the Romans recreated the wonderful aromas which were said to await those who had led honourable lives, received proper burial, and now dwelt in blessed conceptions of the afterlife. In Vergil's Elysium, for instance, the dead are said to reside among 'fragrant groves of laurel,'⁷³ while that of Tibullus is characterised by the sweet scent of roses and cassia.⁷⁴ Plutarch's account of Lethe is that of an idyllic grotto, filled with flowers and accompanied by 'a soft and gentle breeze that carried up fragrant scents, arousing wondrous pleasures.'⁷⁵ By incorporating a range of olfactory treatments in their burial practices, Romans aimed to ensure that their dead would smell just as good as the new worlds they would hopefully occupy.⁷⁶ Indeed this olfactory connection may also have been intended to ensure the dead's favourable reception among the gods of the underworld.⁷⁷

5. Conclusion

In 1991, sensory anthropologist David Howes proposed a universal association between olfaction and transition. Howes drew on a diverse series of examples, including the Jewish rite of Havdalah, the moment of transub-

⁷² Cf. Cicero's account (*Cic. Ver.* 2.4.77) of Diana's exit from Segesta.

⁷³ *Verg. A.* 6.658.

⁷⁴ *Tib.* 1.3.61-2.

⁷⁵ *Plut. De Sera.* 27.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Stat. Silv.* 2.6.85-9, as discussed above (98).

⁷⁷ Lilja (1967) 54.

stantiation in Roman Catholic mass, and the circumcision and marriage rituals of the Malagasy speakers of Madagascar. Assessing the use of odour, he concluded that in each case 'the primal/sensory emotive experience of smell is used to fill in the gaps of logical/semantic structures, and thus instigate transition between social categories'.⁷⁸ In order to understand why smell is so ubiquitous in these contexts, he points to its intrinsic qualities, as outlined earlier in this paper and underlined by Alfred Gell: 'the incompleteness, the disembodiedness of smells... makes them the model for the ideal which hovers on the edge of actualization'.⁷⁹ This indeterminacy and intangibility allows smell to confound the usual distinction between concept and object, making it ideally suited to matters of liminality and category change.

This paper has demonstrated how these qualities were incorporated and played an active role in Roman funerary ritual, working alongside other elements such as music, the performance of lamentation and the length of the procession itself. It has also attempted to establish how an understanding of smell as a sensory phenomenon may contribute to a more holistic appreciation of these rituals' efficacy as rites of passage and displays of elite identity. In doing so, it has examined the extent to which stimulating and potent aromas pervaded all aspects of elite Roman funerals, from the pungent cypress branch to heady blends of Arabian spices. The ubiquity of these materials within Roman funerary contexts is suggestive of the model proposed by Howes, with odour and its intrinsic properties serving as a symbolic mechanism through which Romans might approach the incomprehensible nature of death itself. The use of odour in Roman funerals was therefore multi-functional, but went well beyond the obvious necessity of masking the stench of rotting and decaying flesh. As the writings of Statius, Plutarch, and others reveal, the quality and quantity of olfactory offerings secured by wealthy Romans served as a ritual expression of grief and mourning, and a way of bestowing honour and prestige upon the recipient. Simultaneously, however, their incorporation within the funeral spectacle itself helped communicate the social rank and status of the participants. As the procession moved with measured step across the city, the odours emanating

⁷⁸ Howes (1991) 133.

⁷⁹ Gell (1997) 29.

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from it extended the geographical area in which its presence was felt, contributing to a multisensory display of elite identity.

In doing so, olfactory offerings came to provide an outlet for elite competition, one that was to be eventually usurped by the pre-eminence of the emperors. Imperial obsequies drew on many elements of traditional aristocratic funerals, and in this the use of odour was no different. While living emperors might adopt the wearing of perfume as an expression of their imperial power over mortals,⁸⁰ the use of odour at imperial funerals expressed a different, divine power, promoting an appreciation of their impending deification. Consider the funeral of Septimius Severus, as recounted by Herodian, which is worth quoting at length:

The bier is taken up and placed on the second storey. Every perfume and incense on earth and all the fruits and herbs and juices that are collected for their aroma are brought up and poured out in great heaps. Every people and city and prominent person of distinction vies with each other to send these last gifts in honour of the emperor. When an enormous pile of these aromatic spices has been accumulated and the entire place has been filled, there is a cavalry procession around the pyre in which the whole equestrian order rides in a circle round and round in a fixed formation, following the movement and rhythm of the Pyrrhic dance... After this part of the ceremony the heir to the principate takes a torch and puts it to the built-up pyre, while everyone else lights the fire all round. The whole structure easily catches fire and burns without difficulty because of the large amount of dry wood and aromatic spices which are piled high inside.⁸¹

The emphasis on the role of smell is considerable; the culmination of the funeral is expressed not only through visual displays (a cavalry exhibition, the flaming pyre), but also by sustained reference to the presence of odour throughout the rite. The emperor's worldwide dominion is reflected in the scale and diversity of olfactory offerings, while Herodian also underlines how the provinces from which these substances were sourced were only too happy to offer them as a means of honouring the emperor. Their subsequent cremation is of central importance to consolidating the intended result of

⁸⁰ Potter (1999) 169-89 and Bowersock (1997) 544-56.

⁸¹ *Herodian Hist.* 4.2.8-11, trans. Whittaker.

the ritual and the emperor's new status: 'after that he is worshipped with the rest of the gods'.⁸² The connection between odour and the gods, and odour's subsequent incorporation within funerary ritual, so bemoaned by Pliny, reached its logical conclusion under the principate, as the extravagant use of incense and perfumes impressed upon observers the imminent apotheosis of the emperor: he was made to smell like a god in the expectation that this was what he would become.

Returning to funerary odours more generally, however, we have also seen how their use on the corpse and along the processional route differentiated and demarcated funerary space from that of everyday existence. The heady aromas not only advertised the presence of funerary ritual, but also contributed strongly to the creation of what Scheid has called an 'espace funéraire',⁸³ within which the status of the deceased could be broken down and re-established as that of an ancestor. This facet was of obvious importance in a society where remembering one's ancestors and following in their footsteps was a significant aspect of elite identity. Within this space, smell served to advertise, and simultaneously combat, the pollution afflicting both the corpse and those closest to it.

What emerges from this discussion is the close association between death and odour which persisted in both theory and practice. Funereal smells inspired an understanding of the deceased's metaphysical destination as much as their final earthly journey. Our sources indicate that the connection between the Roman dead and odour did not end with the conclusion of the liminal period, but that the dead might be imagined as residing in a fragrant paradise. It is therefore no surprise to find that this association continued to be actively maintained long after the completion of the funeral itself. Nine days later, the family returned to the tomb for the *cena novendialis*. Now dressed in white and having undergone the ritual of *suffitio*, they no longer suffered the stigma of death pollution and could thus engage in feasting and revelry.⁸⁴ Festivals such as the Lemuria and Parentalia, held annually, attempted to ensure that interaction between the living and the dead remained benevolent. In each case, gifts of incense and perfume might be set before the tomb, with one inscription recording an explicit request

⁸² *Herodian Hist.* 4.2.11.

⁸³ Scheid (1984) 119.

⁸⁴ Toynbee (1996) 51; Bodel (2000) 141-2.

that former slaves of the deceased continue to burn incense at his tomb three times a month.⁸⁵

The preservation and active re-enactment of this association allowed the Romans to employ a similar conceptual framework in imagining their dead as that used to denote deities. Just as it pointed to the otherworldly nature of the gods, so too did the use of odour evoke the conceptual gap that lay between the worlds of the living and the dead, while also acting as a bridge between them. Ashley Clements' observation on the connection between the nature of odour and the nature of divinity, namely that 'odour emerges as an experience of divinity, and divinity, in turn, as an experience of odour'⁸⁶ can therefore be seen to apply just as readily to the connection between odour and death. Considered in olfactory terms, then, death itself was simultaneously othered yet familiar, and the scents that pervaded the Roman funeral intimately bound up with the expression and negotiation of grief.

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⁸⁵ *CIL* 6.10248.

⁸⁶ Clements (2014) 59.

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Illustrations

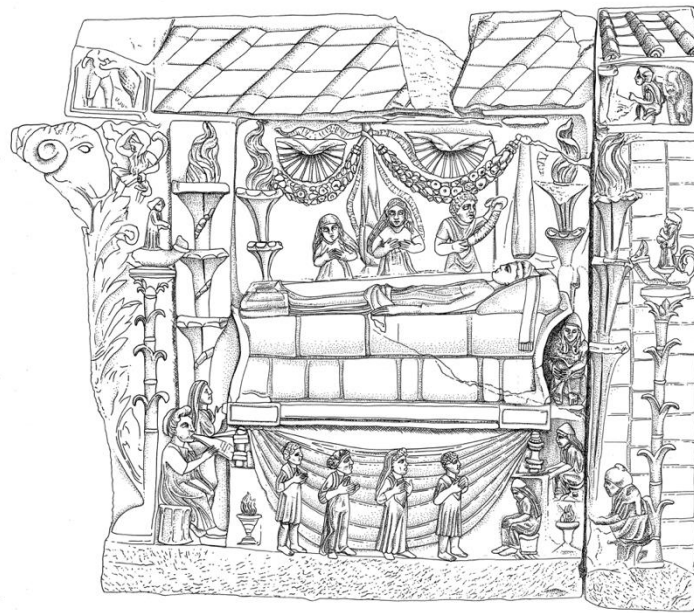


Figure 1. Lying-in-state relief from the tomb of the Haterii, Rome, c.100-110 CE. Illustration by Jerneja Willmott; copyright Maureen Carroll.



Figure 2. Funerary relief from Amiternum, c.50 BCE. Photograph: copyright Christopher Johanson.