

In the last issue of Labyrinth we looked at the use of cosmetic pigments. Many of these cosmetics had strong scents, but some were prepared for their perfume alone, rather than for their colour. R.J. Forbes (Studies in Ancient Technology, Vol. III) says that "ointments and aromatic oils were a necessity of life for all classes of society...they formed such an important item in the pattern of life, that the ancient Egyptians even went on strike to get them."! Not only in Egypt, but in Sumeria, Assyria, Mesopotamia, perfumed oils and unguents or creams were in constant demand for medical and religious use as well as for personal allure. Many of these substances were prepared with elaborate care, accompanied by rituals known only to the perfumers, particularly if they were intended for sacred offerings or ceremonial anointings. Containers were frequently beautiful little objets d'art made of alabaster or other precious materials.

Most perfumes were fat or oil based (alcohol as a perfume base is a development which had to await techniques of distillation, of course). Fats were almost exclusively derived from animal fat, oils from those plants which naturally contain them, such as castorbean, olive, sesame, almond, or the balanos, an Egyptian plant whose seeds were much valued as producing a thin high-quality oil which preserved scent well. Typical unguent bases were beef, sheep or goose fat; by the Roman Empire lanolin (the natural grease found in sheep's wool) was used in a mixture with honey as a complexion aid, if not directly as a perfume base. While a number of the vegetable oils used contained a natural perfume, other scents were commonly added, using one of several techniques for extracting essences from the plants. One very ancient method, according to Forbes, may be that still in use by "primitive peoples near the source of the Nile [who] macerate herbs in water, cover the vessel with strips of cloth steeped in grease or fat and boil the contents of the vessel until all the perfumes have evaporated fixing them in the fat or grease, which can then be scraped off the cloth." Another technique layered flowers in fat, which would then absorb their perfume. The scented fat produced in this way was worked into balls or cones of pomade, which were placed on top of guests' heads at parties. As the pomades melted, the partygoers could enjoy their scent. A third method involved heating flowers in oil, while yet another technique involved crushing or pressing flowers, seeds or leaves to squeeze out the oil or juice. For this purpose, the bag-press was used. All these perfume-makers' (or "unguent-cookers", as they were usually called) techniques, along with those of cooks, metalworkers and herbalists, laid the groundwork for the much later development of alchemy and later still, chemistry. Flowers which were used as scent-producers include irises, roses, violets, narcissus, lavender as well as the less common (to us at least) balsam, cassia, lupine, rushes, peppermint, heliotrope or rosemary. But as well as flowers, seeds, fruits, roots, leaves, bark and even wood might be used as a source of fragrant material: cardamom or almond seeds, ginger roots, citron or pomegranate fruit, cinnamon or cassia bark, peppermint, basil or bay leaves, cedar or sandal-wood might all be powdered up or otherwise reduced to an additive for a grease, an unguent, or a scented paste. Gums and resins might also be dried and powdered, or added to scented oils as thickeners and 'fixatives' to make the scents last longer in use.

If you want to find out some details about Greek or Roman perfumes, look at Theophrastus On Odours and Elder Pliny Natural History, Book XIII, chapters 1 - 5. Pliny clearly has reservations about the use of perfumes, at least by manly Romans, for he tells how one Lucius Plotius, who was proscribed by the Triumvirs after Caesar's murder and was in hiding in Salerno, had his hiding-place revealed by the scent of the unguent he was in the habit of using --"because of which disgraceful behavior", says Pliny "the proscription can be entirely freed from blame--for who wouldn't consider that men like that deserve to die?"