Swinging Censers: the Late Antique Christian Transition to Incense Use in the Fourth to Sixth Centuries CE

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ABSTRACT

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A thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Ancient Greek and Roman Studies

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Christianity emerged into a world of rich religious traditions in the first century CE. As the fledgling religion developed, Christians continued using some Jewish practices, excluded others and integrated some Pagan customs as well. Although both Pagans and Jews burnt incense as a signifier of sacred space and sacrifice, Christians prior to Constantine fiercely resisted this practice. In their rare mentions of frankincense or other resins, Ante-Nicene father strongly polemicize against censing in the church. By the sixth century, however, incense burning became
universal liturgical practice in the church, as evidenced by liturgies instructing deacons to cense during mass, other literary evidence and censers in the archaeological record. This thesis seeks to offer an explanation and provide a date for the adoption of incense in the Late Antique Church. Using modern neurological research, literary and archaeological evidence I purpose that Christians were resistant to burning incense due to collective trauma of the proscriptions, in which Romans tested suspected atheists by ordering them to offer incense to Roman gods. Once Christians who experienced these horrific events had died out by sometime in the late fourth century, and members of the church no longer associated the scent of burning resin with the deaths of Christians, but rather with the scent of temples, and adopted the practice in the early fifth century.
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Introduction: The Problem of Censing God in the Late Antique Church

Christians struggled to define themselves as a distinct, legitimate religion in the Late Antique Mediterranean world. Church leaders engaged with preexisting sacred symbolism to communicate Christianity’s claim that adherents had an authentic relationship with the divine. Incense was a powerful symbol of divine presence and became a particular concern for Christians in the first three hundred years of their religion’s development. Roman officials rooted out Christians using the act of offering incense to pagan gods as a test of faith.¹ Despite the initial rejection of incense, Christians came to adopt burning frankincense and other resins as part of church sanctioned practice. Today, upon walking into an orthodox church, swinging censers can produce sweet smoke so thick that the altar is obscured by haze.

This thesis seeks to explore the changes in Late Antique Christian practice and thought that lead to the adoption of incense, and to approximate the date this transition occurred. I propose that incense was integrated into Christian ritual in the fifth century because after the youngest generation of the proscriptions had died, Christians only recognized the scent as the pan-Mediterranean accepted odor of the sacred. The first task of this thesis is to demonstrate the ancient heritage of incense in ritual use in the Mediterranean and to explore Christian attitudes towards incense. Next, I discuss the modern neurological research of olfaction to help understand sensory experience in the past. Although much of olfaction is only partially understood, both anecdotal

and laboratory evidence demonstrate that olfaction, emotion and memory are closely linked.\(^2\) The ability of incense to steer thought towards the sacred influenced Christian choice to adopt incense as part of ritual practice. I then move into an exploration of textual and archaeological evidence for Christian incense use from the fourth through the sixth centuries.

Long before Romans even began to dream of imperial conquest, the sweet smell of frankincense wafted gently up to the heavens from temples in Egypt, Israel, and Italy herself.\(^3\) Incense all along Mediterranean shores was typically composed of frankincense and other odorants which when burned release sweet smelling smoke. Frankincense trees, *Boswellia sacra*, which are primarily located in eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula are the source of resin for most incense.\(^4\) As recorded by Pliny the Elder, harvesters cut deep incisions into living bark of Frankincense trees, then allowed the sap to pool and dry into hard resin clumps they collected.\(^5\) Romans in the first century considered frankincense holy. Pliny reports that the harvesters were, “called sacred, and are not allowed to be polluted by ever meeting women or funeral processions when they are engaged in making incisions in the trees in order to obtain the frankincense.”\(^6\) Pliny’s informants considered frankincense to be a divine object from the moment the gum became visible. Everything surrounding the resin was religiously regulated.

By the fourth century CE, Romans had developed a rich symbolic language to signify sacred space, whether a large temple or humble house shrine. Archaeologists readily understand

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\(^6\) Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 39.
visual elements, such as cult statues, temple architecture and votive offerings as signifiers of sacred space. The visual, however, was but one element of a complete sensory language that signaled holy places in the Roman world; scent, particularly that of incense, was part of this language. Although many religious traditions of the Mediterranean embraced incense burning as part of their ritual practice, Christians did not. Christian scholars have tended to place the adoption of incense by Christians at the fourth century CE,\(^7\) considering censing to be a part of the sweeping theological changes that occurred after the Edict of Milan in 313CE.\(^8\) Archaeological evidence such as censers, incense boxes, and artistic depictions of incense date no earlier than the fifth century. Based on this data, I demonstrate that the date of Christian incense use should be pushed back at least until the fifth century. By the late sixth century incense use in Christian ritual practice was common enough that censers were mass produced for liturgical purposes.\(^9\)


\(^8\) Constantine and Licinius enacted the Edict of Milan which sanctioned Christianity as a state religion. With the most powerful man in the empire now a patron of the church this legal action led to major theological shifts in many communities. Johannes Roldanus, *The Church in the Age of Constantine: The Theological Challenge*, (New York: Routledge 2009) 1.

Chapter I: Ritual Incense Use in the Mediterranean from Prehistory to 313 CE

Incense had enjoyed great popularity in the Mediterranean for hundreds of years prior to Christianity’s emergence. The fragrance sweetened air after household cleaning, and wealthy hosts even sprinkled some into wine for a layer of complexity. One of the primary uses of incense, however, was for religious purposes. After hundreds of years of burning incense in worship of their gods, Mediterranean peoples strongly associated incense with sacred space. Many religions of the ancient Mediterranean considered built sacred space to be the home of the god. Odor marks space. A phenomenologist, reflecting on what makes a home, remarks on the special scent of his childhood room, “I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray.” For him, the scent of raisins was the smell of home. Unlike the phenomenologist, ancient Mediterranean people shared the experience of smelling frankincense, myrrh, stryax, pine and other sweet smelling resins in their gods’ home.

The earliest possible attestation of incense in the Mediterranean lies within pre-dynastic elite tombs of Egypt, at the site of El Mahasna. Excavators recovered dried resin balls, although their function is unknown. Mourners may have used these crystalized resins in burial ritual,

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11 Classen, Aroma, 23.
14 Nielsen, Incense in Ancient Israel, 3.
intended the deceased to burn them in an afterlife or simply placed the fragrant material with the corpse to alleviate the stench of death. Egyptians used incense explicitly in religious ritual no later than the eleventh century BCE. The *Great Harris Papyrus*, which was a written eulogy of Rameses III,\textsuperscript{15} records pharaoh as having said to Ptah, “I lead to thee Punt, with its fragrance to go round thy abode in the morning, I planted incense trees in thy font court, never seen again since former times.”\textsuperscript{16} The incense trees literally defined the sacred dwelling of Ptah. As a priest approached the temple, his first experience of the holy place would have been through the scent of the trees.

In the later *Tale of Wenamun*\textsuperscript{17} the author utilized incense to mark divinity in a similar way. A shipwrecked merchant, upon finding land, encounters a large personage he thinks is a god. To this being he says, “I will cause to be brought thee all the sacred oil, and frankincense, and cassia, and incense, such as is set aside for the temple use and wherewith the gods are honored.”\textsuperscript{18} This story demonstrates that Egyptians of the third intermediate period not only used incense in worship of their gods, but specifically in places of worship. The phrase “set aside” implies that these valued scents were somewhat exclusive to sacred space.

Although Egyptians sought incense in the land of Punt, often identified as a country southeast of Egypt,\textsuperscript{19} Arabia emerged as the homeland of the finest incenses, particularly frankincense. Romans, many centuries later, would describe Arabia as “happy and blessed,” after the godly scents Arabs traded.\textsuperscript{20} Despite the comparative dearth of archaeological research (due to the often tumultuous political climate of the region), incense was very likely used there contemporaneously to use in Egypt. In any case, Arabians definitely utilized incense in worship as

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid 31.
\textsuperscript{17} A papyrus dating to ca. 1000 BCE. *The Tale of Wenamun* quoted in E.G. Cuthbert F. Atchley, *A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co: 1909) 8.\textsuperscript{18}
\textsuperscript{19} Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, 6.
\textsuperscript{20} Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 37.
attested to by engravings on the sides of altars that name of specific types of incense burnt, showing preference for certain scents in a religious context.

On the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, Greeks and Romans also utilized incense in worship. Greek, as well as Roman, tradition adopted incense at a much later date than those cultures to the south. Since most of the plants used for incense, the frankincense tree in particular, are only native to countries on the south eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, Greeks and Romans could not have utilized incense until cultural contact and trade relations had been formed between themselves and incense-producing areas. Little surprise, then, that the Iliad and Odyssey make no mention of incense use, religious or otherwise. By the time of Pythagoras in the sixth century BCE Greeks used incense in worship of their gods. In Iamblicus’ De Pythagorica Vita, he relates that Pythagoras instructed his followers to sacrifice the smoke of incense, rather than the blood of animals, to the gods. In a fragment, he instructs, “Frankincense ought to be given to gods, but praise to good men.” Around the fourth century BCE, incense was solidly situated as part of sacred space. Thucydides counted censers as part of the treasures of the temple of Aphrodite at Eryx and by the second century CE, when Christianity was developing, Pausanias in Graeciae Descriptio describes visiting an oracle at the Temple of Ceres at Patras where incense was offered as part of the diving ritual.

The earliest literary attestation of religious incense use in Rome comes from Platus ca. 184 BCE. In Aulularia, the household god, lar, describes the devotions he receives, “He has an only

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21 Nielsen, Incense in Ancient Isreal 18.
22 An avenue for further research would be to explore if these scents were designated for exclusively for religious purpose or not.
23 Λάρμπυν (frankincense) and ἐπιθυμίασι (offering of incense) do not appear in either epic. G. Cuthbert F. Atchley, A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship, 41-42.
26 Atchley A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship, 43.
daughter; she is always every day making offerings to me, either with incense, or wine, or something or other; she presents me, too, with chaplets.”

As previously observed in Pliny, Roman authors wrote mysteriously of frankincense, one of the most prestigious incenses. Ovid relates the story of frankincense’s creation in book four of *Metamorphoses*. Having learned that the sun god had deflowered his virgin daughter, Leucothoe, the Persian king buried her alive. The Sun, finding her dead transformed her body into a frankincense tree, “On the cold nymph he rain’d a nectar show’r./ Ah! undeserving thus (he said) to die./Yet still in odours thou shalt reach the sky./ The body soon dissolv’d, and all around/ Perfum’d with heav’nly fragrances the ground,/ A sacrifice for Gods up-rose from thence,/ A sweet, delightful tree of frankincense.”

Ovid explicitly conveys that Romans in the first century CE considered incense, and frankincense in particular, to be part of worship. This worship was sacrifice, which Ovid makes reference to as well. In the myth the blood of Leucothoe is ameliorated by the “heavenly fragrances.”

Within academia, scholars acknowledge that Christianity grew out of Judaism, thus incense use in Jewish tradition, particularly in Syria-Palestine, likely influenced Christian thought and practice. The Hebrew Bible frequently mentions incense. In Exodus, after Moses had led the Hebrews out of Egypt he climbed Mount Saini and received instructions from God regarding proper worship. Among other precious materials, the Lord commanded that he receive incense, specifically frankincense. God also gave careful instructions about the construction of His holy temple, including an altar of incense:

You shall make an altar on which to offer incense … You shall place it in front of the curtain that is above the Ark of the Covenant, in front of the mercy seat that is over the

covenant, where I will meet with you. Aaron shall offer fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall offer it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall offer it, a regular incense offering before the Lord throughout your generations. You shall not offer unholy incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering on it. Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on its horns. Throughout your generations he shall perform the rite of atonement for it once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering. It is most holy to the Lord.31

This passage demonstrates the centrality of incense in Jewish practice when the Temple stood, as well as the association between incense and sacrifice. The Day of Atonement is the holiest day in the Jewish year. The text demands sacrifice of both incense and blood on this most holy day. Locating the altar so near to the Holy of Holies, the Ark of the Covenant, establishes that incense served as a reminder of God’s presence in the Temple. Priests burned incense at the opening and closing of every day; the smell must have constantly permeated the room.

Other references to incense in the Hebrew Bible include Leviticus, in which the Israelites are time and again commanded to offer incense;32 Kings Solomon himself burns incense in Kings;33 and in Jeremiah burning incense to other gods is a most grave sin.34 In Jewish tradition, incense functioned to call upon God’s presence to enter a space. In the time of Jesus, when the Temple still stood in Jerusalem, burning incense as commanded in Exodus was still part of Jewish practice, as attested to in the Gospel of Luke. The author opens with an account of the revelation to Zachariah that his son, John the Baptist, had been conceived, “Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot according to the custom of the priesthood to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense… Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.”35 This opening illustrates the

31 Exodus 30: 1–10 (NSRV).
32 Leviticus 4:7; 10:1; 16:12,13; 26:30.
33 1 King 9:25.
34 Jeremiah 44:3.
35 Luke 1:8–11

The Bible provides ample evidence that incense evoked God’s presence in Judaism, at least through the Second Temple period. The Roman army’s destruction of the Temple in 70 CE following the Jewish Rebellion marked a watershed moment in Jewish history and thought. While the Temple was standing, Judaism largely focused worship upon this sacred space; after the destruction Jews had to work out how to worship God outside of His temple. This period is significant in Christian history as well because this is the time followers of Jesus began to develop a distinct religion. In the decades following the destruction of the Temple, space for Jewish congregation transitioned to the synagogue, a place that functioned as a space for the study of Torah. Without the Temple, sacrifice ceased as God’s location on Earth no longer existed. Ritual incense burning, considered a part of sacrifice, ended as well.

In all of the places Christianity spread in the course of the first three centuries CE incense indicated divine presence during sacrificial rites. Early Christians considered the Eucharist as a sacrifice. Paul described the Eucharist as sacrifice in 1 Corinthians 10:23-26, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ… Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?” Outside the biblical text, Justin Martyr in Dialog with Trypho explicitly states that the Eucharist is a sacrifice, “He then speaks of those Gentiles, namely us, who in every

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37 It is important to note that synagogues pre-date the destruction of the Second Temple.
38 Although excavators have found incense utensils in some synagogues, this is likely evidence for incense used in cleaning, rather than worship. Harvery, Scenting Salvation, 16.
place offer sacrifices to Him, i.e., the bread of the Eucharist, and also the cup of the Eucharist, affirming both that we glorify His name, and that you profane [it].”\(^{40}\) Censing the space of the liturgy would have sensually situated the rite in sacrificial language.

Despite the ubiquity of frankincense and other resins as part of sacred space, no evidence, literary or archaeological, exists that Christians burned incense as part of religious ritual before Constantine. On the contrary, direct evidence that church leaders passionately forbade burning incense during this time is abundant. Clement of Alexandria witnesses that the church forbade incense in the liturgy. In reference to Ephesians 5:2,\(^{41}\) in which Paul, or Deutero-Paul, likens Christ’s sacrifice to incense, Clement assures his congregation that Christ would never have burned the fragrant resin: “let this not be understood as the sacrifice and good odor of incense, but as the acceptable gift of love, a spiritual fragrance on the altar, that the Lord offers up.”\(^{42}\) Origen, writing in the third century, amounts burning incense to idolatry, writing that, “they who sustain them by sacrificing [incense] to them will be held no less responsible than the demons themselves that do the crimes. For the demons and they that have kept them on earth, where they could not exist without the exhalations and nourishment considered vital to their bodies, work as one in doing evil to mankind.”\(^{43}\) Before the fifth century, when church leaders make rare mention of incense,

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\(^{41}\) “…and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” NSRV.


they always do so to draw a distinction between what was acceptable practice for Christians and the idolatry of pagans.

Where references do appear of Christians censing, Roman authorities force Christians to burn incense as a test of atheism. Pliny the Younger witnesses to this practice in his 212 CE letter to Emperor Trajan, “They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine; they also cursed Christ; none of which things, it is said, can any of those that are ready Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go.” Tertullian provides the only instance in which incense burning is condoned, “if the smell of some place or other offends me, I burn the Arabian product myself, but not with the same ceremony, nor in the same dress, nor with the same pomp, with which it is done to idols.”

Apparently Christians used incense as a house-hold fumigator, but his theological argumentation suggests that some of his fellow theologians did not condone censing under any circumstances. Thus, there is no direct evidence that church leaders allowed incense to burn during the liturgy at least before the Edict of Milan.

Church Father mentions of ritually burned incense are overwhelmingly negative until the fifth century. By the sixth century, incense became an accepted, even expected, element of Christian practice. How could a people who were avidly outspoken against incense transition to embracing the practice? In the chapters that follow, I offer an explanation for the change in Christian attitude towards incense in ritual practice.


46 At this time censers were mass produced for liturgical use. See Kurt Weitzman, “An East Christian Censer,” 2-4.
Chapter II: The Christian Cultural Response to Incense from the 1st to 4th Centuries

Given Church Fathers’ fiery polemic against incense burning, the later acceptance of the practice is rather unexpected. Christian scholars have suggested that the prohibition was a mechanism of identity construction. Tertullian wrote with great confidence, “We [Christians] certainly buy no frankincense.” This explanation does not account for the fact that the church later embraced censing. In this chapter I argue that a major contributing factor was the deep impression of collective pain and suffering the scent of incense conjured for Late Antique Christians.

Aroma therapy experts and other olfaction scientists assert that odor elicits an emotional response. Although neurologists debate whether scent elicits emotion or mood, research affirms that odors alter the way people feel. Recent University of Jerusalem experiments with frankincense have demonstrated the compound’s ability to influence mood. Incensole acetate, a substance found in frankincense, produces a warming sensation in the skin and has anti-depressive effects. In laboratory experiments, mice exposed to incensole acetate were calmer in stressful situations than control mice. The effects of this compound are only felt after intense prolonged

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47 Harvey, Scenting Salvation, 38 and Toner, Smell and Christianity, 164.
49 Most people have had an emotional memory triggered by smell. My mother finds the scent of mulberry potpourri not only repulsive, but becomes angry as she remembers when my three-year-old brother dumped the entire contents of the refrigerator into a Dutch oven with mulberry potpourri.
50 Erhlichman and Badstone, “Olfaction and Emotion” 410.
51 Arieh Moussaieff, “Incensole acetate, an incense component, elicits psychoactivity by activating TRPV3 channels in the brain,” 3024.
52 Ibid., 3027.
exposure, therefore only those closest to incense feel an altered state of consciousness.\(^{53}\) The psychotropic effects of frankincense likely motivated censing in religious settings initially, but the smell, whether or not everyone participating in worship felt their mood altered, became a part of sacred space in the Mediterranean.

People interpret odors using personal and cultural experiences. Fragrances are molecules which bind to nasal scent receptors.\(^{54}\) The olfactory bulb receives messages that particular molecules are present and interprets the scent. The olfactory bulb is located near the hypothalamus which regulates emotion and memory; neurologists theorize this proximity might explain why scent often triggers highly emotional memories.\(^{55}\) Ancient Mediterranean people had a deep cultural memory of incense as the scent of sacred space and sacrifice, as described in the previous chapter. In Against Celsus Origen demonstrated that Christians not only understood the connection between sacrifice and incense, but exploited the association in their argumentation, “He [Celsus] does not understand that we regard the spirit of every good man as an altar from which arises an incense which is truly and spiritually sweet-smelling, namely, the prayers ascending from a pure conscious.”\(^{56}\) The early church’s negative experience of being forced to burn incense as a test of faith prevented them from embracing the practice until after the cessation of the proscriptions.

A significant historical moment can impact odor perception. Survivors and rescue workers of the 9/11 terror attack on the World Trade Center experienced varying degrees of tension, anxiety and fear when within several blocks of Ground Zero. Not only did community members feel this way in sight of the debris, but also in the subway or in other places with an obstructed view of the

\(^{53}\) Arieh Moussaieff, “Incensole acetate, an incense component, elicits psychoactivity by activating TRPV3 channels in the brain,” 3025.


Investigators soon found that people were not reacting to distressing sights of the attack site, but to a peculiar odor that was first released when the planes hit the towers. The scent is described as “a complex and unique mixture of chemicals that smelled rubbery, bitter and sweet at the same time.” As the scent dissipated in the following months, people who experienced the attacks first-hand found they had an easier time passing through affected areas.

Christians smelling incense from the first to fourth centuries would think of the persecutions and the associated emotions of fear. In the narrative of Polycarp’s death, when Romans officials tried to burn him, he was unharmed, and witnesses “perceived such a sweet odor, as if frankincense or some such precious spice had been smoking there.” This detail from the martyrdom account of Polycarp reveals that Christians understood the cultural significance of incense in the larger Mediterranean culture of which they were a part. The passage also demonstrates that within their subculture they reinterpreted the symbolism of the fragrance. Rather than the smell of frankincense symbolizing a sacrifice to God in a safe environment, frankincense signified another kind of sacrifice - the painful loss of a beloved community member.

With the evidence that odor often conjures memory and emotion, Christians in the Late Antique Church must have had powerful reactions when incense wafted towards their noses. Christians who failed to testify to their faith in the face of severe punishment were considered “lapsed.” The church had to decide if lapsed Christians, both lay and clergy, had a place in the community. Writings of church fathers attest to the crisis of faith these incense tests elicited.

58 Ibid 78.
60 This is part of the larger schismatic “Donatist Controversy.” A North African priest started baptized lapsed clergy, which gave rise to the issue of whether or not sacraments performed by lapsed clergy were valid. For more see W.H.C. Frend, “The Donatists: Pandora’s Box” in *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 488-492.
Cyprian had little pity for *traditores*:\textsuperscript{61} “Why bring with you, O wretched man, a sacrifice? Why immolate a victim? You yourself have come to the altar an offering; you yourself have come a victim: there you have immolated your salvation, your hope; there you have burnt up your faith in those deadly fires.”\textsuperscript{62} Cyprian’s word choice indicates anger, disgust and a sense of loss. For him the scent of incense must have been nauseating. Aversion to incense was not restricted to the educated priestly class of Christian communities. The proscriptions affected all Christians, from slaves to patrons. If an individual was not singled out, he or she knew someone who had been. The fragrance became synonymous with the proscriptions. The smell of incense recalled the suffering, both personal and communal, that Roman officials wrought.

Patristic sources invite the reader to imagine what the persecutions were like. A young man forced to burn incense before the genius of the emperor. His heart pounds in his chest as a big man in imposing Roman military garb presents him with a tripod of incense. He is told that he can prove his innocence against the charge of atheism by throwing a few grains of incense into the fire. His stomach is in knots and his chest feels constricted as he struggles with the gravest decision he has yet faced: does he take up the sweet smelling resin, sending up blasphemous smoke to Roman gods and become a ridiculed outcast of his small but tightly knit community of fellow Jesus believers? Or does he refuse, trust in his God, become a hero of his brothers and sisters in Christ, but almost certainly die? Unwilling to allow his young life to depart from him, he pinches some frankincense, hardly enough to be seen, between his thumb and forefinger. Surely such a small offence will be forgiven? Soon the fragrance of incense fills his nose as relief, shame and fear fill his body. For a while he is shunned from the community, mockingly called *turificatus*, “incense-burner.”\textsuperscript{63} Every

\textsuperscript{61} Another slur used against the lapsed meaning “betrayer” from Ibid., 489.
time he walks past a temple the smoky scent of incense enters his sinuses, pulling from his mind that memory laden with fear.

Context, however, is a significant part of olfaction. The scent of burning resins alone might not have raised such repulsive memories. Incense was also used in antiquity as part of common housekeeping as a fumigator. Given the same smell under different conditions, a person might have different reactions. When encountering incense billowing from temples accompanied by priests, censers of precious metal and other trappings of ritual, a Christian might have been reminded of the hardships of the proscriptions and find the scent unpleasant. The same scent, wafting through a kitchen after gutting fish and lacking temple ceremony, might not elicit the same response. Tertullian certainly thought these two uses were completely different, as observed in his aside that incense used as a profane household fumigator was not sinful in The Chaplet. This complacency, from the same man who so quickly dismissed that Christians burnt incense, is telling of the centrality of context in odor reaction.

For some generations after Constantine associating the fragrance of incense and Christian deaths would have been alive in the church’s consciousness. With the passing of those who had experienced proscriptions, aversion to incense would have faded away too. The new generations of Christian who knew the stories, but not the sensations, of persecutions lacked the cultural context that led to distaste of incense. To them, incense was not a noxious smell, but a pleasant fragrance that wafted forth from temples. Converts would only have associated incense burning with sanctity. Thus, by the end of the fourth century, beginning of the fifth, the collective consciousness of the church was free to exploit incense as a marker of sacred space.

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64 Constance Classen, Aroma, 19.
Chapter III: Evidence of Christian Censing

In the last chapter I posited that Christian use of ritual incense could have been introduced no earlier than the deaths of Christians who experienced persecution. In the fourth century, living to sixty years of age was possible, so most Christians who had lived through the persecutions died in the following sixty years.66 The Edict of Milan was passed in 313 CE. Therefore by 373 CE no one in the Church had direct experience of burning incense as a test of faith. By the end of the fourth century, perhaps the beginning of the fifth, Christians might have begun to use incense in worship. Indeed, both archaeological and textual evidence date no earlier than the fifth century. This chapter reviews the evidence, both literary and archaeological, of incense burning in Christian ritual practice.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Mediterranean people associated incense burning with sacrifice and Christians interpreted the Eucharistic celebration as a sacrifice. Thus, rather unsurprisingly, the first reference to incense burning in the church, made by Theodoret of Cyrus in 453 CE, explicitly refers to the sacrifice of the Eucharist, “We, on the other hand, celebrate a liturgy corresponding to what is within, when we offer God incense, the light of the lamps, and the Eucharistic liturgy of the holy table.”67 Theodoret’s witness demonstrates that Christians in the mid fifth century used incense both as part of sacrifice and as sacrificial object, exactly as their pagan and Jewish forebears did. The casual manner with which Theodoret mentions incense

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67 This passage is taken from his exegesis on Exodus 25, the Lord’s instructions to the Moses about how to build His temple. Theodoret of Cyrus, Questions of the Octateuch, 40.3, vol 1 trans Robert C. Hill, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 242.
suggests that burning fragrant resin was not new or uncommon in the Antiochene community. This corresponds with the thesis that incense burning in the liturgy emerged between the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century.

Predating Theodoret’s mention of censing, the earliest evidence of incense in Christian art is iconographic representations of the magi in funerary settings. The story of the wise men comes from chapter two of the Gospel of Matthew, the only gospel that relates the story. According to Matthew, wise men from the East traveled to Jerusalem to pay homage to the infant Jesus as “the king of the Jews.” They presented Christ with, “treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” The three foreigners who recognized Jesus’ lordship before the Jews represented the opening of God’s covenant beyond Jews to all people. The first representations of incense are not of ritual use, but rather as components of a popular narrative of Jesus’ life.

At the cemetery of Priscilla in Rome a depiction of the magi presenting the infant Christ with their gifts accompanies an epitaph which dates between the second half of the third to the early fourth century. The gold, frankincense and myrrh are highly stylized, given only enough form to identify one from another. Late Antique artists typically represented the gifts schematically; if any differentiation is made between gifts, artisans rendered gold as a crown, while the frankincense and myrrh remain undefined. Irenaeus, a second century CE writer, provides an interpretation of the gifts, “they showed, by these gifts which they offered, who it was that was worshiped; myrrh, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; gold because He was a King, ‘of whose kingdom is no end;’ and frankincense, because He was

68 NSRV Matthew 2:3
69 NSRV Matthew 2:12
71 Fig 1. “Epitaph of Severa, with Epiphany Scene,” Ibid., 26.
72 Fig 2. “Front Panel of a Sarcophagus Lid,” Ibid., 31.
God, who also ‘was made known in Judea,’ and ‘was declared by those who sought Him not.’”

Irenaeus demonstrates that Christians were keenly aware that incense indicated divine presence. This statement is not evidence that Christians burned incense in the second century, however. Irenaeus suggests that pagans seeking to worship Christ would have done so with in the manner they were familiar, with frankincense, not that any Christian would have.

Representations of unburning or covered frankincense in the earliest renderings of the Magi also suggest that Christians did not engage in censing. Perhaps the artists didn’t think that burning incense would have been an appropriate gift for an infant. On a later eighth or ninth century ornamental plaque, however, the first two magi are shown carrying censers. For this artist, the magi came with smoking incense. He was able to imagine such a scenario because by his time incense was an institutional part of Christian worship.

The fifth century seems to continue the innocuous representation of frankincense and myrrh in magi iconography, however the context of these illustrations changed. Portrayals of the magi remained popular in burials, but extended into liturgical settings. Pyxides were vessels constructed from precious material which carried the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist to members of the community unable to attend mass. On a pyxis from late in the fifth century, the gifts are depicted as being offered in baskets, the tops of the gifts just visible over the rims. Another ivory pyxis from the sixth century does not differentiate between the gifts at all, rather all three look more like loaves of bread than precious goods fit for a king. Although the images of incense lack detailed rendering, they appear on vessels which contained the physical body of

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74 Figure 3. “Ornamental Plaque,” Beer, The Magi, 45.
75 Fig 4. “Pyxis with the Adoration of the Magi and the Annunciation to the Shepherds,” Ibid 37.
76 Figure 5. “Pyxis with Shepherds and Angels, and the Adoration of the Magi.” Beer, The Magi, 39.
Christ. The association between the center piece of the liturgy and incense implies that priests who used these containers were comfortable with worshiping Christ by censing. A fifth century commentary of Matthew interprets the gift of frankincense as a symbol of Jesus’ divinity, just as Irenaeus had. The author describes frankincense as, “… a beautiful gift like the soothing speech of the Holy Spirit.”77 No pre-Constantine Christian author describes the Arabian spice so favorably. The anonymous author of this incomplete commentary was comfortable with incense and used remarkably positive language, in contrast to Irenaeus’ indifference. Apart from incense being an appropriate image for carrying the holy flesh, Pyxides also functioned as vessels for fragrant resins.78 Although the external images do not necessarily express function, these pyxides may well have served as containers for incense.

Also dated to the fifth century, two ivory pyxides depict the visitation of the two Marys to the empty tomb of Christ, and in both the women carry censers.79 On the Sitten Pyxis the two censing women approach an angel who sits inside a domed structure. Likewise, in the Met’s pxyxis, the two women approach a domed structure, but instead of an angel, they walk towards an altar. All four Gospels witness to the women entering the Tomb of Christ to find Him absent. The angel in the Sitten Pyxis tells the women that Christ is not there and in the Met Pyxis the altar stands in for this scene. Given Tertullian’s witness80 that Christians used incense as a fumigant, the imagining of women censing in a tomb is not extraordinary. The Met pyxis, however, has clear

79 Figure 6 the Sitten Pyxis from Archer St. Clair “The Visit to the Tomb: Narrative and Liturgy on Three Early Christian Pyxides,” in Gesta vol 18 no 1 (1978) 127. Figure 7 “Pyx with the Women at Christ’s Tomb.” The Collection Online. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/464499.
liturgical overtones. The Marys are walking towards an apse that contains a codex upon an altar. Although the two Marys bring a funerary context to the pyxides, the domed structures and altar lift the narrative out of the gospels and into liturgical practice. This scene also reflects the idea that the mass was a reenactment of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection.

Before the appearance of censers on liturgical utensils, early liturgies dating to the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth century contain incense blessings. In the “Divine Liturgy of James Holy Apostle and Brother of Our Lord” a prayer is said over incense at the beginning followed by a second prayer over incense at the presentation of the bread and wine. During the second prayer the priest says, “cleanse our minds and our thoughts from impure desires, from worldly deceit, from all influence of the devil; and accept from the hands of us sinners this incense, as thou didst accept the offering of Abel, and Noah, and Aaron, and Samuel, and all of Thy saints.” This passage eludes to several functions of incense. In this prayer the incense cleanses the mind against sin, a reference to the common practice of censing homes as part of cleaning. The blessing also clearly considers incense as a sacrifice by likening burning resins to the animal sacrifices of Jewish patriarchs.

The earliest direct evidence of censers swinging in church services comes from Ravenna in a mosaic securely dated between 547 and 548 CE in the Church of San Vitale. The mosaic portrays Emperor Justinian presenting his gifts to the newly built church. Standing on the far right, a deacon holds a censer in his left hand. The practice of emperors presenting imperial gifts to newly consecrated churches is also preserved in the Liber Pontificalis. This text, also dating to the sixth

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83 Figure 8. Mosaic of Justinian Presenting Imperial Gifts to the Church of San Vital. Giuseppe Bovini, Ravenna Mosaics, (Greenwhich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1956) plate 28.
century, claims that Constantine supposedly donated censers to the Basilica of St. Peter. This mention of incense burning at such an early date demonstrates that the practice was ubiquitous in the sixth century when the text was written, rather than a reality of the time of Constantine.

Later historians often credited emperors with burning incense as a sign of humility. Evagrius Scholasticus recorded that Maurice, who ruled from 583-602 CE, before he was emperor, “was offering incense, at the dead of night, within the sanctuary of Mary… the veil which surrounds the holy table became wrapt in flames; so that Maurice was seized with amazement and awe, and was terrified at the sight. Gregory, the archbishop of the city, who was standing by, said that it was a divine manifestation, betokening to him the highest fortune.”

Burning incense in churches was so common in the sixth century that author of Liber Pontificalis thought nothing of attributing Constantine, the greatest benefactor of the church, with the donation of censers which seemed to have been in use since time-forgotten.

The earliest surviving censers date to the late sixth, early seventh century. Often made of metal, the lack of earlier censers in the archaeological record is likely the result of melting down objects to be recast. Also, censers may not have been decorated with overt Christian symbols, so archaeologist may not have identified them as belonging to a church. The censer in the mosaic of the Church of San Vital is very plain. If the censer given by the Emperor was not ornate, perhaps ordinary day-to-day censers were not either. The oldest identified Christian censer, known as the Censer with Six Holy Figures, dates between 583 and 602 CE. The form is very similar to that depicted in Justinian’s mosaic, with a long chain ending in ring for holding and a box-like container

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86 Atchley, A History of the Use of Incense in Divine Worship, 143.
for incense. This later censer does not have feet like the one pictured at the Church of San Vital. The decorations are silver with gilding and has overt Christian themes, Christ himself being depicted. Another Metropolitan Museum of Art censer more closely resembles the San Vital mosaic and also dates to the sixth century.\(^8\) The decoration is plain compared to the Censer with Six Holy Figures, and identifying element of piece as Christian is a vague Christogram worked into the holding ring. The general form of the body is exactly like that of the mosaic, square with feet.

Certainly Christians began burning incense at the latest by the mid-fifth century. Theodoret of Cyprus apparently wrote his exegesis to a Christian audience familiar with incense burning. The fifth century also saw the arrival of material expressions of incense offerings. The practice was so common that censing figures appear on one of the most holy of vessels- the pyxides used to transport the Eucharist. In rare cases, the censers themselves even survive from this time. Sixth-century Christians were well accustomed to incense burning during mass. Censers and discussions of incense in ritual use became frequent in the literary and archaeological record of this time.\(^9\)

The transition in Christian incense burning practice began with Constantine and the theological changes brought with state-sanctioned status, which allowed for the eventual fifth century adoption of censing.


Conclusion: Censing Change

This thesis has been concerned with two questions. First, why did Christians adopt incense, and second, when did this occur? I suggest that the fragrance of incense was a potent signifier of sacred space and sacrifice in antiquity, and that this feature contributed both to the initial rejection and eventual adoption of incense by the church. Early Christians could not utilize incense until the aching memories of proscriptions were healed. The appearance of material evidence for the church’s incense use in the mid-fifth century corresponds to the time in which the scent of frankincense conjured images of prayer in sacred space, rather than the immolated bodies of cherished martyrs. By no means am I arguing that this was the only factor that led to the change in practice, or even one which Late Antique Christians would have been consciously aware. Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Origen mindfully constructed differentiations between Christians and pagans or Jews through incense use.90 Had identity construction been the concern for banning incense, church leaders wouldn’t have adopted censing until well after paganism had died out. Although many pagan practices were outlawed by the fifth century, pagans continued to worship and even burn incense.91 The deep cultural association between sacred space, sacrifice and incense, however, motivated the eventual Christian adoption of the practice and overcame concerns of identity.

Christians were faced with a difficult task in Late Antiquity to defend their bloodless sacrifice as acceptable to a god who they believed previously desired animal slaughter. The rhetoric of Church Fathers shows that they respected the antiquity of incense use in sacrifice and used the symbolism to explain how bread and wine were legitimate sacrifice. Clement of Alexandria defends the victimless sacrifice of the Eucharist in *Stromata,*

Now breathing together is properly said of the church. For the sacrifice of the church is the same time unveiled to God. Now the very ancient altar in Delos they celebrated as holy; which alone being undefiled by slaughter and death they say Pythagoras approached. And will they not believe us when we say that the righteous soul is the truly sacred altar, and that incense arising from it is holy prayer?  

Christians had always used the symbolic language of incense to communicate that their practice was congruent with Mediterranean cultural norms. Once the negative association of incense with suffering evaporated, Christians could adopt incense and all that the scent signified completely. Indeed, the earliest extant evidence of church censing is in the mid-fifth century when those with memories of the proscriptions had died.  

The fifth century was also the period which saw a shift in the position of the Church from one of persecution to power. The Roman state headed by a Christian emperor seemed divinely sanctioned. The Church, no longer persecuted and in fact patronized by the state, seemed to have achieved a shadow of Christ’s kingdom on Earth. Believers no longer expected to see the end

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92 Christians saw themselves as inheritors of the Jewish god. See Justin Martyr, “Dialog with Trypho,” “Nor do we think that there is one God for us, and another for you, but that He alone is God who lead your fathers out of Egypt with a strong hand and a high arm.” In *The Complete Anti-Nicene Church Fathers Collection,* vol 1, Philip Schaff ed, 421.
96 Eusebius, writing around 324 CE, expounds upon the victory of the Church in *The History of the Church.* After citing Bible passages describing God conquering the enemies of His faithful, Eusebius interprets that these are prophesies fulfilled, “Happy that all this has been clearly fulfilled in my own time let me proceed with the next part of my story.” Andrew Louth ed, trans G. A. Williamson, (Penguin: New York, 1965), 304.
times themselves, but rather felt that God’s final judgment would come in a later era.\textsuperscript{97} Under these circumstances, Late Antique Christians came to understand the material world as a gift from God to be enjoyed. Church building projects and the theological shift to materiality were manifestations of these developments.\textsuperscript{98} The thick streams of frankincense lazily curling towards the heavens gave a sensuous voice to the worldly concerns of the Church.

The fifth century was the time at which incense was fully integrated into Christian liturgical worship.\textsuperscript{99} I do not deny that some communities likely utilized frankincense and other resins prior to this since proscriptions did not affect all areas equally, and certainly incense burning was not adopted spontaneously and completely in the fifth century. Rather I have argued that incense was not a universal, Church sanctioned practice until the fifth century. Although absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, the lack of liturgical incense use in ancient literature and in the archaeological record strongly supports that at the very least censing was not a common church sanctioned practice until well into the fifth century. The neurological and historical data also support a fifth century date for Christian incense adoption.

Many avenues of research remain unexplored. Certainly not all parishes introduced incense into services simultaneously. Thus a study which investigates where and when individual communities introduced censing would further deepen scholarly understanding not just of a historical process, but how parishes communicated amongst each other, spheres of influence and routes of information dispersal. Which resins were burned is another fruitful field of inquiry. Frankincense, although considered the most holy and mystical incense, was not the only one.

\textsuperscript{97} Toner, \textit{Smell and Christianity}, 166.
\textsuperscript{98} Roldanus, \textit{The Church in the Age of Constantine}, 41.
available. Knowing if there were differences in the type of incense burned from parish to parish or holiday to holiday, would further nuance historical understanding of Christian incense use.

Attending mass in the fifth century was a complete sensory experience. Visually, when going to celebrate mass, Late Antique Christians encountered spaces built for the sole purpose of the liturgy.¹⁰⁰ The focal point of the space would have been an apse that contained an altar upon which the sacrificial rite of the Eucharist would be performed, much like that depicted on the Metropolitan museum of art’s pxyis.¹⁰¹ They would have heard readings from the Bible, which by the sixth century was similar to the form read in services today.¹⁰² As a deacon swung a silver censer, thick smoke issued from the open top as the faces of holy men looked out from the sides.¹⁰³ The celebrant said, “Oh Lord our God, who lackest nothing, accept this incense offered by an unworthy hand, and deem us all worthy of Thy blessing, for Thou art our sanctification, and we ascribe glory to Thee.”¹⁰⁴ The faithful breathed in the fragrance as they heard these words. At the end of this blessing they found themselves situated in a sacred space, prepared to participate in a sacrifice.

¹⁰⁰ Constantine prided himself with many church building projects, perhaps the most famous is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Roldanus, The Church in the Age of Constantine, 166.
¹⁰¹ “Pyxis with Women at Christ’s Tomb.” Figure 7.
¹⁰² The Muratorian Canon gave the order and selection of canon texts very similar to that used today. W.H.C. Frend, The Rise of Christianity, 251.
¹⁰³ “Censer with Six Holy Figures.” Figure 9.
Figures


Figure 4: “Pyxis with the Adoration of the Magi and the Annunciation to the Shepherds.” Late 5th-early 6th century. From Manuela Beer et al., eds, *The Magi: Legend, Art and Cult* (Cologne: Hirmer, 2014.) 37.
Figure 6: “Sitten Pyxis.” 6th cent. From Archer St. Clair “The Visit to the Tomb: Narrative and Liturgy on Three Early Christian Pyxides,” in *Gesta* vol 18 no 1 (1978) 127.

Figure 8: Mosaic of Justinian Presenting Imperial Gifts to the Church of San Vital. Giuseppe Bovini, *Ravenna Mosaics*, (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1956) plate 28.

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Artifacts


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