

Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis* (ca. 77 AD)

eds. John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S., H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A. (1855)

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Liber XIII / Book XIII

i

Hactenus in odoribus habent pretia silvae, erantque per se mira singula, iuvitque luxuria omnia ea miscere et e cunctis unum odorem facere: ita reperta sunt unguenta.

Thus far we have been speaking of the trees which are valuable for the odours they produce, and each of which is a subject for our wonder in itself. Luxury, however, has thought fit to mingle all of these, and to make a single odour of the whole; hence it is that unguents have been invented.

quis primus invenerit non traditur. Iliacis temporibus non erant, nec ture supplicabatur: cedri tantum et citri, suorum fruticum, et in sacris fumo convolutum nidorem verius quam odorem noverant, iam rosae suco reperto; nominatur enim hic quoque in olei laude.

Who was the first to make unguents is a fact not recorded. In the times of the Trojan war they did not exist, nor did they use incense when sacrificing to the gods; indeed, people knew of no other smell, or rather stench, I may say, than that of the cedar and the citrus, shrubs of their own growth, as it arose in volumes of smoke from the sacrifices; still, however, even then, the extract of roses was known, for we find it mentioned as conferring additional value on olive-oil.

unguentum Persarum gentis esse debet. illi madent eo et accersita commendatione inlucie natum virus extinguunt. primum, quod equidem inveniam, castris Darii regis expugnatis in reliquo eius apparatu Alexander cepit scrinium unguentorum. postea voluptas eius a nostris quoque inter lautissima atque etiam honestissima vitae bona admissa est, honosque et ad defunctos pertinere coepit. quapropter plura de eo dicemus. quae ex his non erunt fruticum, ad praesens nominibus tantum indicabuntur, natura vero eorum suis redditur locis.

We ought, by good rights, to ascribe the first use of unguents to the Persians, for they quite soak themselves in it, and so, by an adventitious recommendation, counteract the bad odours which are produced by dirt. The first instance of the use of unguents that I have been able to meet with is that of the chest of perfumes which fell into the hands of Alexander, with the rest of the property of King Darius, at the taking of his camp. Since those times this luxury has been adopted by our own countrymen as well, among the most prized and, indeed, the most elegant of all the enjoyments of life, and has begun even to be admitted in the list of honours paid to the dead; for which reason we shall have to enlarge further on that subject. Those perfumes which are not the produce of shrubs will only be mentioned for the present by name: the nature of them will, however, be stated in their appropriate places.

ii

Unguentis cognomina dedere aliis patriae, aliis suci, aliis arbores, aliis causae, primumque id scire convenit, mutatam auctoritatem et saepius transisse gloriam. laudatissimum fuit antiquitus in Delo insula, postea Mendesium. nec mixtura et compositione tantum hoc accidit, sed iidem suci varie alibi atque alibi praevaluere aut degeneravere.

The names of unguents are due, some of them, to the original place of their composition, others, again, to the extracts which form their bases, others to the trees from which they are derived, and others to the peculiar circumstance under which they were first made: and it is as well, first of all, to know that in this respect the fashion has often changed, and that the high repute of peculiar kinds has been but transitory. In ancient times, the perfumes the most esteemed of all were those of the island of Delos, and at a later period those of Mendes. This degree of esteem is founded, not only on the mode of mixing them and the relative proportions, but according to the degree of favour or disfavour in

which the various places which produce the ingredients are held, and the comparative excellence or degeneracy of the ingredients themselves.

irinum Corinthi diu maxime placuit, postea Cyzici, simili modo rhodinum Phaseli, quam gloriam abstulere Neapolis, Capua, Praeneste. crocinum [in] Solis Ciliciae diu maxime laudatum est, mox Rhodi, oenanthium in Cypro, post Adramytteu, amaracinum in Coe, postea eodem loco praelatum est melinum, cyprinum in Cypro, deinde in Aegypto, ubi Mendesium et metopium subito gratius fatum est.

The perfume of iris, from Corinth, was long held in the highest esteem, till that of Cyzicus came into fashion. It was the same, too, with the perfume of roses, from Phaselis, the repute of which was afterwards eclipsed by those of Neapolis, Capua, and Praeneste. Oil of saffron, from Soli in Cilicia, was for a long time held in repute beyond any other, and then that from Rhodes; after which perfume of oenanthem, from Cyprus, came into fashion, and then that of Egypt was preferred. At a later period that of Adramytteum came into vogue, and then was supplanted by unguent of marjoram, from Cos, which in its turn was superseded by quince blossom unguent from the same place. As to perfume of cyprus, that from the island of Cyprus was at first preferred, and then that of Egypt; when all on a sudden the unguents of Mendes and metopium rose into esteem.

mox haec abstulit Phoenice et cyprini laudem Aegypto reliquit. Panathenaicum suum Athenae perseveranter optinere. fuerat et pardalium in Tarso, cuius etiam compositio et mixtura oblitterata est. narcissinum quoque eo flore narcissi desiit componi.

In later times Phoenicia eclipsed Egypt in the manufacture of these last two, but left to that country the repute of producing the best unguent of cyprus. Athens has perseveringly maintained the repute of her panathenaicon. There was formerly a famous unguent, known as "pardalium," and made at Tarsus; at the present day its very composition and the mode of mixing it are quite unknown there: they have left off, too, making unguent of narcissus from the flowers of that plant.

ratio faciendi duplex, succus et corpus: ille olei generibus fere constat, hoc odorum, haec stymmata vocant, illa hedysmata. tertius inter haec est colos multis neglectus; huius causa adduntur cinnabaris et anchusa. sal adpersus olei naturam coercet. quibus anchusa adiecta est, sal non additur. resina aut cummis adiciuntur ad continendum odorem in corpore; celerrime is evanescit atque defluit, si non sunt haec addita.

There are two elements which enter into the composition of unguents, the juices and the solid parts. The former generally consist of various kinds of oils, the latter of odoriferous substances. These last are known as hedysmata, while the oils are called stymmata. There is a third element, which occupies a place between the two, but has been much neglected, the colouring matter, namely. To produce a colour, however, cinnabar and alkanet are often employed. If salt is sprinkled in the oil, it will aid it in retaining its properties; but if alkanet has been employed, salt is never used. Resin and gum are added to fix the odour in the solid perfumes; indeed it is apt to die away and disappear with the greatest rapidity if these substances are not employed.

unguentorum expeditissimum fuit primumque, ut verisimile est, e bryon et balanino oleo, de quibus supra diximus et increvit deinde Mendesium balanino, resina, murra, magisque etiamnum metopium. oleum est amygdalis amarissimum expressum in Aegypto, cui addidere omphacium, cardamomum, iuncum, calamum, mel, vinum, murrum, semen balsami, galbanum, resinam terbinthinam.

The unguent which is the most readily prepared of all, and indeed, in all probability, the very first that was ever made, is that composed of bryon and oil of balanus, substances of which we have made mention already. In later times the Mendesian unguent was invented, a more complicated mixture, as resin and myrrh were added to oil of balanus, and at the present day they even add metopion as well, an Egyptian oil extracted from bitter almonds; to which have been added omphacium, cardamum, sweet rush, honey, wine, myrrh, seed of balsamum, galbanum, and resin of terebinth, as so many ingredients.

e vilissimis quidem hodieque est — ob id creditum et id e vetustissimis esse — quod constat oleo myrteo, calamo, cupresso, cypro, lentisco, mali granati cortice. sed divulgata maxime unguenta crediderim rosa, quae plurima ubique gignitur. itaque simplicissima rhodini mixtura diu fuit additis omphacio, flore rosae, crocino, cinnabari, calamo, melle, iunco, salis flore aut anchusa, vino.

similis ratio et in crocino additis cinnabari, anchusa, vino. similis et in sampsuchino admixtis omphacio, calamo. optimum hoc in Cypro, Mytilenis, ubi plurima sampsuchus. miscentur et vilora genera olei e myrto, lauru, quibus additur sampsuchum, liliu, faenum Graecum, murra, casia, nardum, iuncus, cinnamomum.

e malis quoque cotoneis et strutheis fit oleum, ut dicemus, melinum, quod in unguenta transit admixtis omphacio, cyprino, sesamino, balsamo, iunco, casia, habrotono. susinum tenuissimum omnium est; constat ex liliis, balanino, calamo, melle, cinnamo, croco, murra;

Among the most common unguents at the present day, and for that reason supposed to be the most ancient, is that composed of oil of myrtle, calamus, cypress, cyprus, mastich, and pomegranate-rind. I am of opinion, however, that the unguents which have been the most universally adopted, are those which are compounded of the rose, a flower that grows everywhere; and hence for a long time the composition of oil of roses was of the most simple nature, though more recently there have been added omphacium, rose blossoms, cinnabar, calamus, honey, sweet-rush, flour of salt or else alkanet, and wine.

The same is the case, too, with oil of saffron, to which have been lately added cinnabar, alkanet, and wine; and with oil of sampsuchum, with which omphacium and calamus have been compounded. The best comes from Cyprus and Mytilene, where sampsuchum abounds in large quantities. The commoner kinds of oil, too, are mixed with those of myrrh and laurel, to which are added sampsuchum, lilies, fenugreek, myrrh, cassia, nard, sweet-rush, and cinnamon.

There is an oil, too, made of the common quince and the sparrow quince, called melinum, as we shall have occasion to mention hereafter; it is used as an ingredient in unguents, mixed with omphacium, oil of cyprus, oil of sesamum, balsamum, sweet-rush, cassia, and abrotonum. Susinum is the most fluid of them all: it is made of lilies, oil of balanus, calamus, honey, cinnamon, saffron, and myrrh;

et dein cyprinum ex cypro et omphacio et cardamomo, calamo, aspalatho, habrotono; aliqui et cyperum addunt et murrā et panacem. hoc optimum Sidone, mox Aegypto. si non addatur sesminum oleum, durat et quadriennio; excitatur cinnamomo.

telinum fit ex oleo recenti, cypiro, calamo, meliloto, faeno Graeco, melle, maro, amaraco. hoc multo erat celeberrimum Menandri poetae comici aetate; postea successit propter gloriam appellatum megalium, ex oleo balanino, calamo, iunco, xylobalsamo, casia, resina. huius proprietas ut ventiletur in coquendo, donec desinat olere; rursus refrigeratum odorem suum capit.

singuli quoque suci nobilia unguenta faciunt: in primis malobathrum, postea iris Illyrica et Cyzicena amaracus, herbarum utraque. vel pauca his et alia alii miscent; qui plurima, alterutri mel, salis florem, omphacium, agni folia, panacem.

while the unguent of cyprus is compounded of cyprus, omphacium and cardamum, calamus, aspalathus, and abrotonum. There are some persons who, when making unguent of cyprus, employ myrrh also, and panax: the best is that made at Sidon, and the next best that of Egypt: care must be taken not to add oil of sesamum: it will keep as long as four years, and its odour is strengthened by the addition of cinnamon.

Telinum is made of fresh olive-oil, cypirus, calamus, melilote, fenugreek, honey, marum, and sweet marjoram. This last was the perfume most in vogue in the time of the Comic poet Menander: a considerable time after that known as "megalium" took its place, being so called as holding the very highest rank; it was composed of oil of balanus, balsamum, calamus, sweet-rush, xylobalsamum, cassia, and resin. One peculiar property of this unguent is, that it requires to be constantly stirred while boiling, until it has lost all smell: when it becomes cold, it recovers its odour.

There are some single essences also which, individually, afford unguents of very high character: the first rank is due to malobathrum, and the next to the iris of Illyricum and the sweet marjoram of Cyzicus, both of them herbs. There are perfumers who sometimes add some few other ingredients to these: those who use the most, employ for the purpose honey, flour of salt, omphacium, leaves of agnus, and panax, all of them foreign ingredients.

externa omnia et prodigiosa cinnamomino pretia: adicitur cinnamo balaninum oleum, xylobalsamum, calamus, iunci, balsami semina, murra, mel odoratum. unguentorum hoc crassissimum. pretia ei a XXXV ad CCC. nardinum sive foliatum constat omphacio aut balanino, iunco, costo, nardo, amomo, murra, balsamo.

in hoc genere conveniet meminisse herbarum, quae nardum Indicum imitentur, species VIII a nobis esse dictas: tanta materia adulternadi est. omnia autem acutiora fiunt costo, amomo, quae maxime utiliora croco, acerrima per se amomo; hoc et capitis dolores facit. quidam satis habent adspargere quae sunt pretiosissima ceteris decoctis, inpendio parcentes, sed non est eadem vis nisi una decoctis.

The price of unguent of cinnamon is quite enormous; to cinnamon there is added oil of balanus, xylobalsamum, calamus, sweet-rush, seeds of balsamum, myrrh, and perfumed honey: it is the thickest in consistency of all the unguents; the price at which it sells ranges from thirty-five to three hundred denarii per pound. Unguent of nard, or foliatum, is composed of omphacium or else oil of balanus, sweet-rush, costus, nard, amomum, myrrh, and balsamum.

While speaking on this subject, it will be as well to bear in mind that there are nine different kinds of plants of a similar kind, of which we have already made mention as being employed for the purpose of imitating Indian nard; so abundant are the materials that are afforded for adulteration. All these perfumes are rendered still more pungent by the addition of costus and amomum, which have a particularly powerful effect on the olfactory organs; while myrrh gives them greater consistency and additional sweetness, and saffron makes them better adapted for medicinal purposes. They are most pungent, however, when mixed with amomum alone, which will often produce head-ache even. There are some persons who content themselves with sprinkling the more precious ingredients upon the others after boiling them down, for the purpose of economy; but the strength of the unguent is not so great as when the ingredients have been boiled together.

murra et per se unguentum facit sine oleo, stacte dumtaxat, alioqui nimiam amaritudinem adfert. cyprino viride fit, susino unguinosum, Mendesio nigrum, rhodino candidum, murra pallidum.

haec sunt antiquae inventionis genera et postea officinarum furta. Nunc dicetur cumulus ipse deliciarum et summa auctoritas rei.

ergo regale unguentum, appellatum quoniam Parthorum regibus ita temperatur, constat myrobalano, costo, amomo, cinnamo comaco, cardamomo, nardi spica, maro, murra, casia, styrace, ladano, opobalsamo, calamo iuncoque Syriis, oenanthe, malobathro, serichato, cypro, aspalatho, panace, croco, cypiro, amaraco, loto, melle, vino. nihilque eius rei causa in Italia victrix omnium, in Europa vero tota praeter irim Illyricam et nardum Gallicum gignitur. nam vinum et rosa et myrti folia oleumque communia fere omnium terrarum intellegantur.

Myrrh used by itself, and without the mixture of oil, forms an unguent, but it is stacte only that must be used, for otherwise it will be productive of too great bitterness. Unguent of cyprus turns other unguents green, while lily unguent makes them more unctuous: the unguent of Mendes turns them black, rose unguent makes them white, and that of myrrh of a pallid hue.

Such are the particulars of the ancient inventions, and the various falsifications of the shops in later times; we will now pass on to make mention of what is the very height of refinement in these articles of luxury, indeed, I may say, the beau ideal of them all.

This is what is called the "regal" unguent, from the fact that it is composed in these proportions for the kings of the Parthians. It consists of myrobalanus, costus, amomum, cinnamon, comacum, cardamum, spikenard, marum, myrrh, cassia, storax, ladanum, opobalsamum, Syrian calamus and Syrian sweet-rush, oenanthe, malobathrum, serichatum, cyprus, aspalathus, panax, saffron, cypirus, sweet marjoram, lotus, honey, and wine. Not one of the ingredients in this compound is produced either in Italy, that conqueror of the world, or, indeed, in all Europe, with the exception of the iris, which grows in Illyricum, and the nard, which is to be found in Gaul: as to the wine, the rose, the leaves of myrtle, and the olive-oil, they are possessed by pretty nearly all countries in common.

iii

Siccis odoribus constant quae diapasmata vocantur. nam faecem unguenti magma appellant. inter omnes potentissimus odor quisque novissime additur. unguenta optime servantur in alabastris, odores in oleo, quod diuturnitati eorum tanto utilius quanto pinguius, ut ex amygdalis. et ipsa unguenta vetustate meliora. sol inimicus iis, quam ob rem in umbra conduntur plumbeis vasis. experimentum eorum inversa manu capitur, ne carnosae partis calor vitiet.

Those unguents which are known by the name of "diapasma," are composed of dried perfumes. The lees of unguents are known by the name of "magma". In all these preparations the most powerful perfume is the one that is added the last of all. Unguents keep best in boxes of alabaster, and perfumes when mixed with oil, which conduces all the more to their durability the thicker it is, such as the oil of almonds, for instance. Unguents, too, improve with age; but the sun is apt to spoil them, for which reason they are usually stowed away in a shady place in vessels of lead. When their goodness is being tested, they are placed on the back of the hand, lest the heat of the palm, which is more fleshy, should have a bad effect upon them.

iv

Haec est materia luxus e cunctis maxime supervacui. margaritae enim gemmaeque ad heredem tamen transeunt, vestes prorogant tempus: unguenta ilico expirant ac suis moriuntur horis. summa commendatio eorum ut transeuntem feminam odor invitet etiam aliud agentis. exceduntque quadringenos denarios librae: tanti emitur voluptas aliena; etenim odorem qui gerit, ipse non sentit.

These perfumes form the objects of a luxury which may be looked upon as being the most superfluous of any, for pearls and jewels, after all, do pass to a man's representative, and garments have some durability; but unguents lose their odour in an instant, and die away the very hour they are used. The very highest recommendation of them is, that when a female passes by, the odour which proceeds from her may possibly attract the attention of those even who till then are intent upon something else. In price they exceed so large a sum even as four hundred denarii per pound: so vast is the amount that is paid for a luxury made not for our own enjoyment, but for that of others; for the person who carries the perfume about him is not the one, after all, that smells it.

si tamen et haec aliqua differentia signanda sunt, in M. Ciceronis monumentis invenitur unguenta gratiora quae terram quam quae crocum sapiant, quando etiam corruptissimo in genere magis tamen iuvat quaedam ipsius vitii severitas. sed quosdam crassitudo maxime delectat, spissum appellantes, linque iam, non solum perfundi, gaudent.

vidimus etiam vestigia pedum tingui, quod monstrasse M. Othonem Neroni principi ferebant, quaeso ut qualiter sentiretur iuaretque ab ea parte corporis? nec non aliquem e privatis audivimus iussisse spargi parietes balnearum unguento atque Gaium principem solia temperari ac, ne principale videatur hoc bonum, et postea quendam e servis Neronis.

maxime tamen mirum est hanc gratiam penetrasse et in castra; aquilae certe ac signa, pulverulenta illa et cuspidibus horrida, unguuntur festis diebus, utinamque dicere possemus quis primus instituisset! ita est nimirum: hac mercede corruptae orbem terrarum devicere aquilae. ista patrocina quaerimus vitiis, ut per hoc ius sub casside unguenta sumantur.

And yet, even here, there are some points of difference that deserve to be remarked. We read in the works of Cicero, that those unguents which smell of the earth are preferable to those which smell of saffron; being a proof, that even in a matter which most strikingly bespeaks our state of extreme corruptness, it is thought as well to temper the vice by a little show of austerity. There are some persons too who look more particularly for consistency in their unguents, to which they accordingly give the name of "spissum"; thus showing that they love not only to be sprinkled, but even to be plastered over, with unguents.

We have known the very soles even of the feet to be sprinkled with perfumes; a refinement which was taught, it is said, by M. Otho to the Emperor Nero. How, I should like to know, could a perfume be at all perceptible, or, indeed, productive of any kind of pleasure, when placed on that part of the body? We have heard also of a private person giving orders for the walls of the bath-room to be sprinkled with unguents, while the Emperor Caius had the same thing done to his sitting-bath: that this, too, might not be looked upon as the peculiar privilege of a prince, it was afterwards done by one of the slaves that belonged to Nero.

But the most wonderful thing of all is, that this kind of luxurious gratification should have made its way into the camp even: at all events, the eagles and the standards, dusty as they are, and bristling with their sharpened points, are anointed on festive days. I only wish it could, by any possibility, be stated who it was that first taught us this practice. It was, no doubt, under the corrupting influence of such

temptations as these, that our eagles achieved the conquest of the world: thus do we seek to obtain their patronage and sanction for our vices, and make them our precedent for using unguents even beneath the casque.

v

Quando id primum ad Romanos penetravit, non facile dixerim. certum est Antiocho rege Asiaque devictis, urbis anno DLXV, P. Licinium Crassum L. Iulium Caesarem censores edixisse ne quis venderet unguenta exotica; sic enim appellavere.

I cannot exactly say at what period the use of unguents first found its way to Rome. It is a well-known fact, that when King Antiochus and Asia were subdued, an edict was published in the year of the City 565, in the censorship of P. Licinius Crassus and L. Julius Cæsar, forbidding any one to sell exotics; for by that name unguents were then called.

at Hercules iam quidam etiam in potus addunt, tantique est amaritudo ut odore prodigo fruantur ex utraque parte corporis. L. Plotium, L. Planci bis consulis censorisque fratrem, proscriptum a triumviris in Salurnitana latebra unguenta odore proditum constat, quo dedecore tota absoluta proscriptio est; quis enim non merito iudicet perisse tales?

But, in the name of Hercules! at the present day, there are some persons who even go so far as to put them in their drink, and the bitterness produced thereby is prized to a high degree, in order that by their lavishness on these odours they may thus gratify the senses of two parts of the body at the same moment. It is a well-known historical fact, that L. Plotius, the brother of L. Plancus, who was twice consul and censor, after being proscribed by the Triumvirs, was betrayed in his place of concealment at Salerno by the smell of his unguents, a disgrace which more than outweighed all the guilt attending his proscription. For who is there that can be of opinion that such men as this do not richly deserve to come to a violent end?