Britta K. Ager: The Scent of Ancient Magic. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2022. XII, 225 p. $ 75.00. ISBN: 978-0-472-13302-4.

Britta K. Ager's "The Scent of Ancient Magic" argues that Greeks and Romans found in smell "a uniquely appropriate mental model" for understanding how magic works (p. 3).[1] She pursues that claim across a range of sources, from agronomic and medical writing to the Greek and Demotic magical papyri, from literary witches in Apollonius and Lucan to the scenting of sacred space. In doing so, she goes beyond many works in the sensory turn of ancient history by bringing together a large and useful body of material that is not often read together.[2] The book is learned, readable, and often persuasive, and it will be useful to scholars of magic, ritual, gender, and the history of the senses. My main reservation is methodological and simple. Throughout the book, "smell" is used to denote a scented substance, the odorous quality attributed to it, and the experience of smelling itself. When they blur, the claim that scent *explains* magical efficacy can slip into merely noting that scent is present. In those cases it becomes harder to say whether scent is really functioning as the model Ager proposes, or whether more familiar models (sympathy, contamination, divine communication) are doing the explanatory work and scent is supplying ornamentation.

Ager develops the book's central claim in a clear sequence. It begins with a problem: how do ancient writers picture the 'middle' of magical causation when the action and its result are visible but the process linking them is not? Ager's answer in part is that smell fills this explanatory gap: because odour travels invisibly between bodies, it offers a ready-made model for how one thing can act on another at a distance. Chapter 1 sets out that problem and the terms of the discussion by combining a broad, historically flexible understanding of 'magic' with a claim about what smell can do as a way of imagining hidden influence. Chapter 2 turns to practice, especially to strong-

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2 For the contested status of sensory 'experience' as a historiographic object, see R. Boddice/M. Smith: Emotion, Sense, Experience. Cambridge 2020 (Elements in Histories of Emotions and the Senses), pp. 23–25; M. M. Smith: A Sensory History Manifesto. University Park, PA 2021 (Perspectives on Sensory History); W. Tullett: State of the Field: Sensory History. In: History 106, 2021, pp. 804–820, at pp. 806, 808–809.

smelling plants, drugs, and fumigation, where a single procedure recurs across agronomy, medicine, purification, and curse even as the explanation for it changes. Chapter 3 moves to the Greek and Demotic magical papyri, where scent is not just described but prescribed, and where Ager distinguishes fragrance used to prepare ritual space from fragrance deployed offensively to harm a target. Chapters 4 and 5 form the book's literary core. They trace a shift from Apollonius' incense-scented Medea and the dangerous allure of perfume to Roman hag-witches such as Horace's Canidia, for whom stench and perfume are both moral markers and means of attack. Chapter 6 moves from bodies to places, asking how incense, smoke, and aromatics mark and extend sacred space, from Homeric sulfur fumigation to Pliny's scented temple plaster. The epilogue returns to the book's main idea through a modern example and ends by asking how smelling is learned and shaped by class, gender, and occupation.

Chapter 1 ("The Breath of the Leopard", pp.1–43) opens with Aelian's leopard whose fragrant breath draws animals "as if by a *iunx*" (NA 5.40) or magical charm. Ager turns that image into the book's guiding question: when an action and its outcome are visible, but the link between them is not, how did ancient writers conceive what happens in the middle? Most of the chapter is devoted to theoretical framing. Drawing on modern work on the senses and social meaning of odour, she argues that smell makes a good model for hidden influence because it spreads, lingers, gets inside bodies, and as she puts it plainly is "deniable" (p. 28): difficult to trace back to a source. The other structural move is Ager's decision to treat "magic" as a contested label rather than a fixed domain, "constantly renegotiated" and disputed like the meanings of smells themselves (pp. 25–26). That decision allows the later chapters to track the same substances and gestures as they move between healing, purification, and curse. It also has a cost. The opening chapter sometimes reads more as a defence of smell as a subject than as a clear statement of what will be shown from the ancient evidence, and it does not always mark when it shifts between the three levels of 'smell' set out at the start of this review.[3]

3 The distinction has a parallel in sensory history at large. Alain Corbin insists that historians separate self-reported sensory habits from stereotypes ascribed by outsiders [A. Corbin: Charting the Cultural History of the Senses. In: D. Howes (ed.): Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader. Oxford/New York 2005, pp. 128–139, at p. 133; cf. Tullett (note 2), pp. 812–813]. An analogous issue runs through

Chapter 2 (“Fragrant Panacea”, pp. 46–75) is where the book’s argument gains substance because it moves from literary description to repeated actions that were supposed to do something. Ager’s starting point is Vergil’s Venus, whose wound-cure includes an *odoriferam panaceam* (Aen. 12.411–419): fragrance is not an ornament of the remedy but a sign of its power, even when the text does not spell out how that power travels. From there she follows a set of practices (above all fumigation) whose basic form stays stable while the explanation offered for it shifts. As she puts it, “the action remains the same while the intellectual overlay justifying the action changes” (p. 47). The same cloud of smoke can be pest control, therapy, purification, or something a critic will call “magic,” depending on context and on who is doing the naming. A brief moment in the *Geoponika* makes the point with a suggestive contrast: mice avoid protective substances “either because of antipathy, or because of an avoidance of the smell” (ἢ κατὰ ἀντιπάθειαν, ἢ κατὰ ἀποστροφὴν τῆς ὀσμῆς, 12.39; p. 50). The *Geoponika* itself wavers between a theory of hidden incompatibility and a theory of odour-driven effect. Ager builds out from there, looking at rootcutters and dangerous harvests, garlic that moves between kitchen, prophylaxis, and witchcraft, and Homer’s moly as a case where the same plant becomes drug or charm as its setting changes. However, the *Geoponika* passage already brings the methodological problem into focus. The chapter’s strength is that it keeps returning to a hard question: when a substance is both pungent and potent, is smell the vehicle of efficacy, or the mark by which potency is recognised? The material is rich enough to force that question. What the chapter does less consistently is give the reader a way to decide between these possibilities. The distinction between smell as cause and smell as sign is repeatedly raised, but not stabilised into a method that can be applied across cases.

Chapter 3 (“Scent in the Magical Papyri”, pp. 76–102) is the book’s most demanding test of its central thesis, because the texts it discusses do not just describe odour, but prescribe it as part of a procedure. Ager organises the material around a distinction relevant for such procedures: fragrance that sets the scene for divine presence and fragrance used as an instrument in coercive or aggressive work (p. 77; pp. 92–93). The chapter’s close attention

Ager’s material: the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM) practitioner who prescribes myrrh is working within his own framework; Horace’s Canidia is a construction of male literary anxiety. Both involve smell, but the relationship between odour and agency differs, and the triad helps keep that difference visible.

to the technical apparatus of the papyri, like incenses and oils, branches and garlands, lamp-oils, aromatics chewed to "incense" the mouth (p. 80), is particularly useful, as is its recognition that not every ingredient belongs in an olfactory explanation. A magnet included for its attractive powers (p. 81), for example, shows that "scent" is not always the relevant model even when an aromatic is present. Occasionally, Ager suggests that "overwhelming aromas of incenses and oils may have helped them to enter a frame of mind" receptive to divine encounter (p. 77). That is plausible, but it also marks a point where different levels of explanation begin to blur: what the papyri require as procedure, what they imply about how a rite works, and what we infer about the practitioner's experience are not the same. The chapter's climax is its discussion of the erotic spells that personify myrrh. One text calls on Myrrh "who serves at the side of the gods" and orders her not to enter by various bodily routes but "through her 'soul' (διὰ τῆς ψυχῆς)" (p. 98). Here the aromatic is, at once, burnt resin, a named power, and an imagined invader. That convergence is what makes Ager's "mental model" thesis persuasive. It is also where conceptual control is most needed. The same passage can be read as material penetration, as authority borrowed from divine association, or as an attempt to overwhelm a target's senses and will; each implies a different account of how the spell is supposed to work. Ager marks the limits in places. Some foul ingredients are "incidental" (p. 93), and in incense-ash inks "scent is perhaps more symbolic than actual" (p. 91). These are important admissions. What the chapter does not do is turn them into a rule for reading. The distinction between smell as cause, smell as sign, and smell as experienced effect is repeatedly encountered, but not stabilised into a method that can be applied across the material. One could imagine, for instance, a simple diagnostic: when a papyrus specifies that a substance must be smelled by the target, scent is plausibly causal; when it lists an aromatic alongside non-odorant ingredients such as magnets or inscribed lead, scent is more likely incidental or symbolic; when a text dwells on the practitioner's own sensory state, the explanatory register is experiential. Even if provisional, something like that grid would give the reader a way to sort passages rather than noting the ambiguity afresh each time.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn from procedures to literary witchcraft, where smell works at once as narrative device and moral signal.[4] Chapter 4 ("Perfumed Enchantments", pp. 103–131) traces a line from rootcutters and the dangers of strong-smelling plants to Apollonius' Medea, whose breast-band (μίτρη) is twice called θυώδης, "incense-scented" (pp. 113–114). Ager's claim is that Apollonius brings together two older anxieties, dangerous drugs and dangerous women, by making perfume look like a kind of φάρμακον: "Apollonius' innovation was to conflate the danger of witches and their odiferous herbs with the danger of women and their perfumes" (p. 125). The dragon-sedation scene gives a clear picture of how this is supposed to work. "The overpowering smell of the drugs enveloped it in sleep" (p. 117). Smell here is not background detail. It does something. Ager follows this with a useful account of what scent implies about bodies and boundaries. Perfume reaches the nose, is breathed in, and becomes part of the person who inhales it (p. 129). This way of thinking about scent carries a familiar anxiety. Influence crosses into the body without asking permission. It is absorbed. It lingers. The chapter also includes a warning that deserves to stay in view. Witches' bodily odours and the odours of their preparations "are linked but should not be conflated" (p. 103). That warning points toward the broader issue this review has been tracing: when the distinction is kept, perfume can be followed as material, as social marker, and as means of action. When it drops out, references to scent begin to flatten into a single sense and the explanatory work becomes harder to track.

Chapter 5 ("Rot and Roses", pp. 132–171) shifts to Rome and to the hag-witch, where fragrance and stench become tools for thinking about gender, class, and corruption. Horace's Canidia is the centre of the chapter, and Ager's reading stays close to the text. Canidia's smell marks her, but it also acts. "Canidia uses perfume [...] as a weapon in her magical arsenal" (p. 140). She anoints her victim rather than herself, in Ager's phrase, "attacking him with the scent" (p. 140). Odour here moves between bodies, it contaminates, it alters. Varus' hair goes white "from Canidia's odors" (pp. 141), and food is spoiled "as if Canidia had breathed on" it (pp. 142). Ager places these scenes within late-Republican anxieties about perfume, cosmetics, and sexually assertive women, and shows how *venena*, cosmetics, and spell-mixtures

4 These chapters build on B. K. Ager: Magic Perfumes and Deadly Herbs: The Scent of Witches' Magic in Classical Literature. In: Preternature. Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural 8, 2019, pp. 1–34.

share a language (pp. 134–135; 149–152). Ovid's Medea sharpens the point. In the *Metamorphoses* her dragons are transformed *nisi odore*, "by smell alone" (p. 169). Odour here is presented as doing the work. When these elements come together, scent as material, as marker, and as experience, the figure of the witch becomes especially clear. In other places the categories blur. Perfume, garlic, and menstrual blood appear as a single class of threat (pp. 144–146), though it is not always clear whether the danger lies in their scent, in the substance their scent signifies, or in how they are experienced. The distinction is important, however, since without it, the analysis risks treating very different mechanisms as if they were the same. A substance might smell but not act in virtue of its scent, while the effects of the experience of a scent might have nothing to do with the substance at all, but rather with whatever is internal to the person. The mechanisms are not reducible to one another.

Chapter 6 ("Scented Space, Scenting Space", pp. 172–197) broadens the focus from bodies to built environments and asks what smell does to a place. Ager opens with Pliny's temple at Elis, whose saffron-infused plaster still yields scent, even taste, when rubbed (nat. 36.177), and uses this as a way into scent as a kind of spatial practice. Incense and aromatics mark a space as sacred and help to maintain it. They also move it. In processions, a cloud of smoke carries the boundary with it and briefly enlarges it (pp. 184–186). In epiphanies, a sudden sweetness signals that a god is present without being seen (pp. 176–177). Smell does not stay where it starts. It spreads, settles, and lingers, a fluidity that makes it ritually useful. Ager's larger claim is that scent shifts from sign to medium, from indicating divine presence to making it available for use (p. 174). The example of Odysseus' sulfur fumigation after the slaughter shows how difficult it can be to keep these levels apart. The act sits somewhere between cleaning a space and guarding it against what remains after violence (p. 188). The smoke does something, but it is not always clear what work it is doing. At points like this the chapter raises a question it does not settle. When a space is described as scented, what carries the force? Is it the behaviour of smoke as a material that fills and clings? Is it the cultic or cultural status of particular aromatics, which mark a place as sacred? Or is it the experience of those present, who are made to feel that they stand within a different kind of space? These possibilities do not exclude one another, but they are not the same. When Ager writes that "to build a perfumed temple is an attempt to infuse the building itself with sa-

credness" (p. 187), the language points in several directions at once. The force of the claim depends on which one is meant.

The epilogue (pp. 198–200) returns to the book's central idea through a modern example, Clive S. Lewis's Green Lady in "The Silver Chair", whose sweet-smelling fire clouds thought until an opposing stench breaks the spell. From there Ager turns to the question of how smelling is learned, and how it is shaped by class, gender, occupation, and habit. This is a good place to end, because it points toward a history of people learning to smell rather than a simple catalogue of pleasant and foul smells. The epilogue also condenses the book into a formula: "scent equals power, and power has a scent" (p. 199). The phrase catches something real in the material Ager has assembled. It also shows the limit of the book's language. At that level of generality, smell starts to become a mood or a label. The more persuasive chapters do something narrower and more useful. They show that particular substances, settings, and acts of smelling carry different kinds of force. The task, then, is not to abandon the formula, but to keep asking what sort of force is being claimed in each case.

What the book achieves is worth stating plainly. It brings into one conversation bodies of evidence that are usually kept apart: the magical papyri, agronomy, medical writing, literary witches, and the scenting of sacred space. Readers may disagree with particular readings, but they will still come away with a broader and more connected set of resources. The book also shows that smell is rarely just ornament. The move from Apollonius' incense-scented Medea to Horace's Canidia, who reeks and also uses perfume as a weapon, marks a change in how feminine danger is imagined and judged, especially in Roman writing of the late Republic and early empire.[5] More broadly, the book makes smell a plausible way into ancient thinking about unseen power. The method is not equally firm in every case, but the central

5 The shift can be read through Corbin's concept of changing "thresholds of tolerance," the idea that a society's boundaries between acceptable and offensive sensation move over time (A. Corbin: The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination. Cambridge, MA 1986). What Ager traces between Apollonius and Horace is in effect a lowering of olfactory tolerance for feminine magical agency: fragrance becomes stench as the threat is revalued. Whether the shift tracks actual changes in perception or literary convention is a question James G. Mansell has pressed for later periods [J. G. Mansell: Ways of Hearing: Sound, Culture and History. In: M. Bull (ed.): The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies. London/New York 2019, pp. 343–352, at p. 350; cf. Tullett (note 2), p. 812].

insight holds. Once scent is taken as one way of imagining hidden action, the historical task is to ask how that way of thinking shifts across genres and periods, and what fears and desires those shifts bring with them.

Three points in the argument would be helped by a little more precision. The first goes back to the three-way distinction set out at the start of this review. Some of Ager's best readings work because substance, odorous quality, and sensory experience come together in a single scene. Canidia's perfumed attack is one example. The scent enters the body, carries a moral charge, and is felt as compulsion. That is exactly why it is memorable. The difficulty begins when those levels come apart. At those moments the book can move from one to another without marking the shift, and the reader is left asking what kind of claim is being made. Is smell being treated as a material cause, as a sign of something else, or as an experience that acts on the mind and body?

A compact example appears in the discussion of incense-ash inks in the papyri. Ager notes that "scent is perhaps more symbolic than actual" (p. 91). That seems right. The ink is made from burnt aromatics, though by the time it is used for writing any perceptible smell is likely to be faint or gone. What matters is not an act of smelling. It is the history of the substance, the fact that it once gave off fragrance, that it was burned in a charged setting and that its ash still carries that association. This is useful evidence, and Ager is right to include it. It shows how far the idea of scent could travel in ritual thought. It also shows why the distinction is important to attend to. If we do not separate cases in which odour is actually being perceived from cases in which it survives only as an attributed quality or remembered association, then the claim that smell provides a "uniquely appropriate mental model" (p. 3) grows too loose to test. "Smell" then covers both sensory event and symbolic remainder, and those are not the same thing.

The myrrh spells raise the same problem in a sharper form. In the text that addresses Myrrh as "who serves at the side of the gods" and instructs her to enter the target "through her 'soul' (διὰ τῆς ψυχῆς)" (p. 98, cited above p. 334), "myrrh" is at once burnt resin, divine name, and imagined force moving into the victim's interior. Ager's reading is powerful because it keeps all of this in view. It shows how a single aromatic can gather several kinds of force at once. Still, the chapter sometimes lets those forces stand in for one another too easily. One can read the passage as smoke entering the body, as efficacy borrowed from divine association, or as a sensory assault that overwhelms

the target. More than one of these may be present. That is no objection. The point is that they are different causal stories, and the difference matters if we want to know in what sense smell 'models' the working of magic. More broadly, when an aromatic produces both a smell and a magical effect, it is not always clear that the smell causes the effect. In many cases the smell may simply mark a substance already thought to possess power, as a sign of the plant's δύναμις rather than the δύναμις itself. That does not undo Ager's thesis. It tells us where the real pressure lies. The ambiguity is part of the evidence. The sources themselves do not always decide whether odour is mechanism, sign, or accompaniment, and a method that keeps those possibilities apart would make the argument more exact.

The second point is about the book's use of the word 'magic.' Ager treats 'magic' as a disputed label rather than a fixed domain, and so she includes material that stands close to what later writers would call 'magic' even when it is not named that way (pp. 26, 41). This breadth is one of the book's virtues. It avoids the old mistake of treating magic as a stable thing, set apart from medicine, religion, or ordinary practice, and it lets Ager follow the same substances and gestures as they move between healing, purification, and curse. That is useful, and often illuminating. The difficulty comes from the larger claim the book wants to make. Ager is not only saying that smell appears in material we might call magical. She is saying that smell helps explain how magic was imagined to work. Once the category is this broad, the question becomes harder and more interesting. Whose model of magic is being described here? The practitioner's, the poet's, the satirist's, the philosopher's, the audience's? Those are not the same, and the answer is likely to shift from one body of evidence to another. The book has more than enough material to say this more plainly than it does.

The fumigation material shows what is at stake. Chapter 2 rightly stresses that the same action recurs across pest control, religious purification, and healing, "while the intellectual overlay justifying the action changes" (p. 47). That observation is one of the best things in the book. It slows the reader down. It makes one notice how often the same smoke, the same plants, or the same gestures appear in settings that later scholarship likes to sort into separate boxes. Still, not every recurrence points toward 'magic.' Sometimes a source is doing agronomy or medicine in a language of sympathies and antipathies (hidden affinities and repulsions between substances), and that is already interesting enough. Ager is most persuasive when she lets this insta-

bility remain part of the evidence and asks how smell helps make a practice look safe, dangerous, legitimate, or suspect. The argument becomes less secure when the instability itself starts to serve as proof that smell and magic belong together. That step depends on a prior decision about what counts as 'magic,' and the book does not always pause over that decision long enough.

The third point is a smaller issue. It appears early in the book, in the brief appeal to Aristotle as a major source of the Western "sensory hierarchy" that placed smell down low in the ranking (pp. 5–6). One can see why Ager uses the shorthand. It helps explain why historians have so often neglected olfaction. Still, the point comes from an older story that now needs more care.[6] The book does not stand or fall with it. Even so, something is lost here. A fuller engagement with ancient theories of olfactory transmission and sensation, above all Aristotle's *De sensu* and related Peripatetic discussions of odour, would have given Ager exactly the sort of ancient causal language her argument needs. If ancient writers already had accounts of how odours travel, enter bodies, and alter states, those accounts belong near the centre of any claim that smell helped people imagine the hidden middle of magical action.

The book also points toward a next step that is hard to avoid once one has read it. Ager's evidence is mostly textual, and she knows that. Still, the questions she raises about fumigation, aromatics, and scented space become

6 The narrative of a Western sensory hierarchy descending from Aristotle has been questioned by sensory historians who argue that perception was never a zero-sum ranking in which smell simply lost out to sight [M. Jenner: Follow Your Nose: Smell, Smelling and Their Histories. In: AHR 116, 2011, pp. 335–351, at p. 345; Tullett (note 2), pp. 809–811]. More to the point, Aristotle's actual treatment of smell is richer than the shorthand allows. His *De sensu* offers a detailed account of how odours are transmitted through a medium, received by the organ, and differentiated by analogy with taste, which is exactly the kind of causal language Ager's thesis needs. On Aristotle's theory of olfactory transmission, see M. A. Johnstone: Aristotle on Odour and Smell. In: OSAPh 43, 2012, pp. 143–183; T. K. Johansen: Aristotle on the Sense of Smell. In: Phronesis 41, 1996, pp. 1–19; H. Baltussen: Ancient Philosophers on the Sense of Smell. In: M. Bradley (ed.): Smell and the Ancient Senses. London/New York 2015 (The Senses in Antiquity), pp. 30–45. For the Peripatetic development, especially Theophrastus on odorous exhalation, see R. Roreitner: Theophrastus on Odorous Exhalations and the Nature of Perception. In: G. Guyomarc'h/A. Santoro (eds.): Perspectives on Peripatetic Physics. From Theophrastus to Alexander. Leiden/Boston 2025 (Philosophia Antiqua 176), pp. 71–106.

sharper when they are set beside material evidence. Residue analysis from incense-burners and lamps, archaeobotanical work on burned plant remains, and spatial study of burning and deposition in ritual settings could all press the argument further. If smell is more than motif, if it is part of how efficacy was imagined and staged, then it matters what was actually burned, where it was burned, and in what quantity. It also matters whether the heavy textual emphasis on frankincense, myrrh, and sulfur reflects ordinary practice, elite taste, or literary convention.[7]

Comparison offers another path forward. Ager notes that the link between scent and the supernatural appears in many cultures (pp. 19–22), though the material in Chapter 1 mostly serves to open the subject rather than test it. That is fair enough in a first book of this kind. Still, one comes away wanting more. A sustained comparison with other Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions could help sort out what is distinctive in the Greco-Roman evidence and what belongs to a wider habit of thinking with odour, smoke, and perfume. The point would not be to flatten these traditions into one pattern. It would be to ask, in a more exact way, how different cultures used scent to imagine agency that could not be seen and still felt real.[8]

A few minor errors should be noted. On p. 49, ἕλεται should read ἕλκεται, correctly printed on p. 1. On p. 60, "Theophastus" should read 'Theophrastus,' which is correct elsewhere. On p. 79 n. 8, "PGM 1" should read

7 On the methodological gap between textual representations of sensation and past sensory environments, see M. M. Smith: Echo. In: D. Novak/M. Sakakeeny (eds.): Keywords in Sound. Durham/London 2015, pp. 55–64; Mansell (note 5), p. 350; Tullett (note 2), pp. 808–809, 812. For the overlap between medical and magical recipe traditions and the difficulty of separating literary convention from practice, including experimental reconstruction of ancient scented materials, see S. Coughlin: Recipes for Horror in Graeco-Roman Magic and Medicine. In: G. Kazantzidis/ C. Thumiger (eds.): Horror in Classical Antiquity and Beyond: Body, Affect, Concepts. London 2025, pp. 215–245.

8 Sensory historians have argued that the discipline's methods should themselves be sensory, not only textual [Tullett (note 2), pp. 807, 819; Boddice/Smith (note 2), pp. 23–25]. For ancient material, experimental reconstruction of scented environments offers one way forward: see Y. Hamilakis: Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect. Cambridge/New York 2013, especially chapter 3; B. Huber/T. Larsen/R. N. Spengler/N. Boivin: How to Use Modern Science to Reconstruct Ancient Scents. In: Nature Human Behaviour 6, 2022, pp. 611–614; and the work of the Odeuropa project on historical smell heritage.

'PGM I.' On p. 147, *libinins* should read *libidinis*. The book is otherwise carefully produced and clean.

"The Scent of Ancient Magic" will be welcomed by scholars of ancient magic and religion, historians of the body and gender, readers of the magical papyri and Latin witch literature, and graduate students looking for a map of a field that has rarely been drawn in quite this way. Its real achievement is to make smell impossible to ignore in any future account of how Greeks and Romans imagined hidden power at work. Its limit is harder to state briefly, though it runs through much of the book. 'Smell' sometimes joins together very different things without saying clearly what sort of force is being invoked. At those moments the book does not always distinguish between smell as cause, smell as sign, and smell as experience. That difficulty is unlikely to undermine the argument, but it does invite further work. Ager has assembled the material that makes the problem visible and worth pursuing. Readers should take the individual readings, especially those on Medea, the myrrh spells, Canidia, and sacred-space fumigation, as models of what a sensory history of magic can do. They should take the larger claim as an invitation to ask when smell explains magic, when it marks it, and when it simply gives it a form that can be imagined.

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