CHAPTER 6

Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606/1210) on the Prophet's Sense of Smell

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1 Introduction

The Prophet Muḥammad (d. 12/632) reportedly declared that "perfume and women are made dear to me, but my solace lies in prayer" (al-Nasāʾī, *Sunan, k. ʿishrat al-nisāʾ* 10; Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, 75b).[1] However, determining the Prophet's attitude toward perfume is not a straightforward task. On the one hand, he is attributed a love for aromata and an abhorrence of halitosis (Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, 155 n1, 213, 501, 620, 663). "The thing that most troubled the Messenger of God was that a bad smell should come from him" (Ibn Ḥajar, 9:379). On the other hand, early Muslim sources relate stories about his ascetic willingness to ignore or even celebrate holy stench. Thus, he is said to have stated that the breath of a fasting person smells better than musk (al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *k. al-īmān* 8; see Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, 117, 336), and a Companion recalled that the Prophet's entourage smelled of sheep, because his closest followers were dressed in simple garments of wool (Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan, k. al-libās* 5; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 4:407). One should also note that the Qurʾān is remarkably indifferent to olfaction: the most common Arabic root indicating "smell," *sh-m-m*, does not appear in it at all. Smells are mentioned in the Qurʾān in only two contexts.[2] There are brief allusions to fragrant substances in Paradise (Q 56:89, 76:5, 83:26), and in the Joseph story, Jacob miraculously catches a whiff of the scent of Joseph's shirt, even though Joseph is far away, in Egypt (Q 12:94). This "Qurʾānic anosmia" (Lange) contrasts sharply with the richly perfumed culture of the Prophet's hometown Mecca, where his clan, Quraysh, traded in aromata and where during his youth the holy precinct (*ḥaram*) was the site of many olfactory rituals, including fumigation and the application of fragrant unguents to the Kaʿba walls (Bursi, 206).

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2 See *ISH*, vol. 2, ch. 1 (§ 4).

In sum, the Prophet's attitude towards perfume (as well as bad odors) was complex. Possibly, it developed over time. Ignaz Goldziher once suggested that "we have to accept the steadily increasing sensualism of Muḥammad as a fact" (Goldziher, 146–7). Be that as it may, it is striking that the Muslim political and religious leaders of the generation after the Prophet colored their hair and beards (El-Shamsy; Juynboll, "Dying"), dressed themselves fashionably, and perfumed themselves lavishly. In Ibn Saʿd's (d. ca. 230/845) biographical dictionary of famous men and women of the early period, perfume is given "a salient role," even if "the prayer devotees (*Betbrüder*), as sworn enemies of the cosmetic arts, agitated against it" (Goldziher, 147–8).

As the urban, lavishly scented high culture of Islamic civilization gradually took shape, it was opportune to attribute a love of perfume to the Prophet, and to seek support for this in the stories told about him. The fame of the Prophet's saying that perfume was "made dear to me," as G. H. A. Juynboll has observed, is "inversely proportional to its meagre support in *isnād* strands [i.e., chains of transmission]," leading Juynboll to conclude that it is "a relatively late tradition" (Juynboll, *Encyclopedia*, 75b). If ever there was an ascetic reticence to indulge in too much perfume in early Islam, it soon evaporated. Building on Prophetic precedent and driven on by the rich olfactory traditions of the conquered territories, medieval Islamic perfumery became a prime site for the manifestation of Islamic sensory culture (see Bonnéric; Gyselen; King), a characteristic to which several later chapters in this volume likewise attest.[3]

Below, a selection of Prophetic *ḥadīth*s about perfume and other aromata is translated on the basis of a much-used standard reference work of *ḥadīth*, *The Collection of Basic Sayings of the Messenger* (*Jāmiʿ al-uṣūl fī aḥādīth al-rasūl*) of Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr (d. 606/1210), a versatile scholar and chief clerk working for the local court in Mosul. The *Collection of Basic Sayings* is a *ḥadīth* compendium that draws on the *Muwaṭṭaʾ* of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) and the canonical Sunni collections of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), and al-Nasāʾī (d. 303/915), with the notable exclusion of Ibn Māja (d. 273/887). The *Collection of Basic Sayings* does not quote all variants of a *ḥadīth* transmitted by these authorities, but instead only gives one common version, or a small number of different versions, in each case noting in which collections these versions occur (usually, by using the formula *akhrajahu*, "it was included by"). Further, it does not cite the complete chains of transmission of a tradition; it only provides the name of the person who transmitted the *ḥadīth* from the Prophet Muḥammad. Finally, it offers explanations of difficult terminology. All this made the *Collection of*

3 See *ISH*, vol. 2, chs. 8 (§ 2), 16, 17 (§ 3), 19, 20, 25.

Basic Sayings a popular text in madrasa education in the later centuries of Islam (see Aerts; Ahmad).

The *Collection of Basic Sayings* is ordered alphabetically and thematically. Aromata figure prominently in two places: under the letter *ḥā'*, in the chapter on the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), in a section dealing with the pilgrims' state of consecration (*iḥrām*); and under the letter *zāy*, in the chapter on toilette and adornments (*zīna*), in a section dedicated to perfume and unguents (*al-ṭīb wa-l-duhn*). The first section (§§ 1.1–10) centers on the use of perfume during *iḥrām*, the state of ritual consecration into which pilgrims enter before undertaking the major pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) or the minor pilgrimage (*ʿumra*), after making a statement of intention, performing certain rites, and donning the ritual garment. Traditionally, this happens at one of the pilgrimage boundary posts (*mawāqīt*, sing. *mīqāt*) on the approach to Mecca, such as al-Juḥfa or Dhū l-Ḥulayfa, both mentioned in the traditions quoted by Ibn al-Athīr. The second circumambulation during the pilgrimage, after performing the rites at ʿArafa and Minā (where the Feast of Sacrifice is celebrated), marks the termination of *iḥrām*.[4]

While some of the *ḥadīth*s compiled by Ibn al-Athīr leave room for the notion that the Prophet put on perfume not only before but even during *iḥrām*, most jurists of Islam came to settle on the view that the latter was forbidden. The discussion turned on another question: whether the scent of perfume, if it persisted beyond the moment of entering *iḥrām*, invalidated it (see Ibn Ḥajar, 3:399, 585). A more permissive position regarding the wearing of perfume during the pilgrimage is attributed, in the *ḥadīth*s presented by Ibn al-Athīr, to the Prophet's wife ʿĀ'isha (d. 58/678 or 59/679) (§§ 1.1, 1.4), while a more prohibitive view is attached to the name of ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar (d. 74/693) (§§ 1.2, 1.3, 1.7–9), the son of the second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13–23/634–44). The case of Ibn ʿUmar is noteworthy. On the one hand, Ibn Saʿd's biography of him provides many details about his concern with matters of fashion, including how he oiled and perfumed himself to attend Friday prayer and religious festivities (Ibn Saʿd, 111, ult.–112.3). On the other hand, he seems to have taken, like his father (see §§ 1.5, 1.6), a rather puritanical, anti-sensual stance when it came to the question of perfume during the pilgrimage. Ibn ʿUmar is also attributed a deep dislike of music, especially flute music, and of eating from silverware (Ibn Saʿd, 120.11–15, 126.9–10).

The second section (§§ 2.1–18) provides a range of essentially positive views of perfumes, as well as of fumigation (*istijmār*, *tabakhkhur*). Thus, the Prophet's love for perfume, especially musk and ambergris, finds mention (§§ 2.1, 2.3–5,

4 On legal rules concerning the senses during the pilgrimage, see further *ISH*, vol. 2, ch. 40.

2.9, 2.11). Perfume is described as originating in Paradise (§ 2.6), a motif further developed in medieval Islamic exegesis (see, e.g., al-Ṭabarī, 296–7). God, in a pun on the Arabic root *ṭ-y-b*, is said to be "good (*ṭayyib*), and He loves perfume (*ṭīb*)" (§ 2.2). The *ḥadīth*s in this section also discuss the notion that there are certain "male" aromata and certain "female" aromata (§§ 2.7, 2.8, 2.12, 2.13): musk and ambergris for men, saffron and the unguent known as *khalūq* for women. Women are to abstain from strongly scented perfumes, especially when going to the mosque for prayer (§§ 2.14–18). Scent, as the traditions in Ibn al-Athīr reveal, was an important marker of difference in the formative period of Islam, instrumental in disambiguating non-Muslim pilgrimage practices from Muslim ones and entrenching social hierarchies between the sexes.

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2 Translation

Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *Jāmiʿ al-uṣūl fī aḥādīth al-rasūl*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Arnaʾūṭ, 11 vols., Damascus: Maktabat al-Ḥilwānī et al., 1389–92/1969–72, vol. 3, pp. 31–40, vol. 4, pp. 766–73.

[*§ 1. On the Use of Perfume during* iḥrām = *Vol. 3, pp. 31–40*]

[§ 1.1]

[p. 31] ʿĀʾisha said, "I perfumed [p. 32] the Messenger of God with these two hands of mine when he entered *iḥrām* (*ḥīna aḥrama*) and [also] when he quit *iḥrām* (*ḥīna aḥalla*) before circumambulation [of the Kaʿba]." And she [ʿĀʾisha] held out her two flat hands.

There is another, similar report, in which [it is stated]: "[I perfumed him] before he quit Minā."

According to another report [she said], "I used to perfume the Prophet [eulogy] before he entered *iḥrām* and [also] on the Day of the Sacrifice before circumambulating the House [of God], with a perfume in which there was musk."

According to another report, she said, "With these two hands, I perfumed the Messenger of God [eulogy] with *dharīra* powder.[5] [This was] during the [Prophet's] Farewell Pilgrimage, when quitting and entering *iḥrām*."

According to another report, she said, "I used to perfume the Prophet [eulogy] when he entered *iḥrām*, with the best perfume I could find."

5 King, 281: "The classical *dharīra* was made with palmarosa [...] but the formulas are invariably for complex mixtures of dried powdered aromatics. One formula [...] purports to date to Sasanian times and includes aloeswood, musk, and ambergris. Other formulas include many different ingredients and are sometimes based on floral and botanical scents."

According to another report, [ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr] said, "I asked ʿĀ'isha, 'With what did you perfume the Messenger of God [eulogy] during *iḥrām*?' She answered, 'With the best perfume.'"

According to another report, [she said,] "Before he entered *iḥrām*, I used to perfume the Messenger of God [eulogy] with the best [perfume] I could get my hands on. Then he would enter *iḥrām*."

According to another report, [she said,] "[I perfumed him] with the best [perfume] I could find, so that I saw the perfume glisten in his hair and beard."

[p. 33] According to another report, she said, "[It was] as if I was looking at the glistening of the perfume in the parting of hair of the Messenger of God [eulogy], while he was in a state of *iḥrām*."

[§ 1.2]

According to another report, [Saʿīd b. Jubayr, d. 95/714] said, "Ibn ʿUmar used to oil himself lavishly. I mentioned this to Ibrāhīm [al-Nakhaʿī, d. ca. 96/715],[6] and he said: 'How do you reconcile this with what he [Ibn ʿUmar] said [against wearing perfume in *iḥrām*]? [Remember that] al-Aswad related from ʿĀ'isha [that she said] she had seen perfume glistening in the parting of hair of the Messenger of God [eulogy], while he was in a state of *iḥrām*.'" In another report, he added: "This is how he [the Prophet] used perfume during his *iḥrām*."

[§ 1.3]

According to another report, Muḥammad b. al-Muntashir [d. 101/719–20] said, "I asked ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar [what he thought] about men who put on perfume and then enter the next day in a state of *iḥrām*. He said, 'I do not like to wake up in the state of *iḥrām* exuding perfume. In fact, I would rather be daubed in tar!' Then I visited ʿĀ'isha and told her that Ibn ʿUmar had said that he did not like to wake up in the state of *iḥrām* exuding perfume, and that he would rather be daubed in tar. ʿĀ'isha said, 'I perfumed the Messenger of God [eulogy] on the occasion of entering *iḥrām*. Then he circumambulated [the Kaʿba] among his wives. Then he woke up in the state of *iḥrām*.'" In another report, he added: "exuding perfume". […]

[§ 1.4]

[p. 36] ʿĀ'isha said, "When we traveled with the Messenger of God [eulogy] toward Mecca, we applied sweet-smelling *sukk*[7] to our foreheads when we

6 A Kufan jurist with a positive view of perfume, al-Nakhaʿī also reportedly condoned the scenting of mosques with incense (*bakhūr*). See Bursi, 205–6.

7 *Sukk* is a compound musk perfume, mentioned in pre-Islamic poetry and said to have been used by the Prophet as well. See King, 152–3, 156.

entered *iḥrām*. We started to sweat, and it flowed over our faces. The Messenger of God [eulogy] saw this and did not object." Abū Dāwūd included it.

[§ 1.5]

[p. 37] Al-Ṣalt b. Zubayd[8]—may God be pleased with him—related from several members of his family that ʿUmar [b. al-Khaṭṭāb], [having arrived] at al-Shajara,[9] smelled perfume. He asked, "Whose perfume is this?"—to which [Abū] Kathīr b. al-Ṣalt replied, "It is mine. I put it on my head, with the intention of shaving [my head]." ʿUmar said: "Go to the water-hole and rub your head until you rid yourself of it." [Abū] Kathīr b. al-Ṣalt did [as he had been told]. [Mālik b. Anas] included it in his *Muwaṭṭaʾ*.

[§ 1.6]

Aslama, the *mawlā* of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, related that [p. 38] ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, [having arrived] at al-Shajara, smelled perfume. He asked, "Whose perfume is this?"—to which Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān[10] [d. 60/680] replied, "It is mine, O Commander of the Faithful." ʿUmar exclaimed, "Yours! By the life of God!" Muʿāwiya ventured, "Umm Ḥabība put this perfume on me, O Commander of the Faithful." ʿUmar said, "I adjure you to go back and wash it off!" [Mālik b. Anas] included it in his *Muwaṭṭaʾ*.

[§ 1.7]

ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar clothed his feverish son in shrouds and then he [the son] died at al-Juḥfa in the state of *iḥrām*. He put a veil on his head and face, saying, "If we were not in the state of *iḥrām*, we would have put perfume on him." [Mālik b. Anas] included it in his *Muwaṭṭaʾ*. [...]

[§ 1.8]

Nāfiʿ, the *mawlā* of Ibn ʿUmar [d. between 117/735 and 120/738], said, "When setting out to travel to Mecca [to perform the Ḥajj], Ibn ʿUmar put on a scentless unguent. Then he went to the mosque of Dhū l-Ḥulayfa, prayed, and sat in the saddle. Then, when his riding-camel stood up with him straight upon its legs, he entered *iḥrām*. He used to say, 'This is what I saw the Messenger of God [eulogy] do.'" [p. 39] Al-Bukhārī included it.

8 Death date unknown. He was the son of Zubayd b. al-Ṣalt, a Medinan Companion whose nickname was Abū Kathīr ("Father of Plenty") and who related *ḥadīth*s from ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

9 A place name and a mosque close to the Mecca sanctuary, well beyond the traditional *mawāqīt*.

10 The later caliph, r. 41–60/661–80.

[§ 1.9]

ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar said that the Messenger of God [eulogy] used to put on an unguent that was not *muqattat*: that is, an unguent that was not scented, for *qatt* is [the technique of] making unguents smell good by [boiling them with] herbs. According to another report, included by al-Tirmidhī, he used to put on oil that was not *muqattat*, while he was in a state of *iḥrām*. The first [report] is related by Razīn [d. 524/1130],[11] but I have not found it in the basic texts (*al-uṣūl*). […]

[§ 1.10]

ʿAbdallāh b. al-ʿAbbās [d. ca. 68/687] said, "Pilgrims smell [p. 40] of fragrant herbs, they look in the mirror, and they treat themselves [in case of illness] with what they eat, namely, oil and clarified butter." Al-Bukhārī included it.

[*§ 2. On Perfume and Ointment = Vol. 4, pp. 766–73*]

[§ 2.1]

[p. 766] Anas b. Mālik [d. between 91/709 and 93/711] said, "The Messenger of God [eulogy] said, 'Perfume and women are made dear to me, but my solace lies in prayer.'" Al-Nasāʾī included it.

[§ 2.2]

Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab [d. 94/715] was heard saying, "God is good and He loves perfume; clean and He loves cleanliness; noble and He loves noble-mindedness; generous and He loves generosity. So keep clean"—and I saw [written somewhere] that he said, "[keep] your courtyards [clean]"—"and do not assimilate yourselves to the Jews!" He [the person who heard this] said, "I related this [p. 767] to Muhājir b. Mismār, and he said, "Āmir b. Saʿd related this to me, too, on the authority of his father, from the Prophet, in a similar version, except that he said, "keep your courtyards clean."" Al-Tirmidhī included it.

[§ 2.3]

Anas b. Mālik related that when the Messenger of God [eulogy] was offered perfume, he did not reject it. Al-Nasāʾī included it. In the version transmitted by al-Bukhārī and al-Tirmidhī, it is stated that Anas [b. Mālik] did not reject

11 Razīn b. Muʿāwiya al-Saraqusṭī is the author of a work entitled *Tajrīd al-ṣiḥāḥ al-sitta*, a compilation of *ḥadīth*s culled from the Six Books of Sunni Islam. Razīn omits the long chains of transmitters, a feature of his work that inspired Ibn al-Athīr to do the same in his *Jāmiʿ al-uṣūl*. See Ahmad, 34–5.

perfume [when being offered it], and that Anas claimed that the Messenger of God [eulogy] did not reject perfume, either.

[§ 2.4]

Abū Hurayra [d. ca. 59/681] said, "I heard the Messenger of God [eulogy] say, 'When presented with perfume, do not reject it. For it smells nice and is easy to bear.'" Abū Dāwūd included it. Al-Nasāʾī added: "It [perfume] derives from Paradise." Muslim also included it, replacing "perfume" with "sweet-smelling plants" (*rayḥān*).

[§ 2.5]

[p. 768] ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar related that the Messenger of God [eulogy] said, "Three things must not be rejected: cushions, unguents, and perfume." Al-Tirmidhī included it.

[§ 2.6]

Abū ʿUthmān al-Nahdī [d. ca. 95/713] related that the Messenger of God [eulogy] said, "If one of you is offered sweet-smelling plants, let him not reject it, for they derive from Paradise." Al-Tirmidhī included it.

[§ 2.7]

Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib [d. 81/700] related: "I asked ʿĀʾisha whether the Messenger of God [eulogy] used to put on perfume? She answered 'Yes, [he used to put on] male perfumes, that is, musk and ambergris.'" Al-Nasāʾī included it.

[§ 2.8]

Al-Azharī [d. 370/980] explained: "It is related that they [the Arabs] used to detest female perfumes. However, they saw no harm in male perfumes." He further said: "'Female' means the perfume of women, such as *khalūq* and saffron. 'Male' perfumes are those that have no color, such as musk, [p. 769] aloeswood, camphor, and ambergris." […]

[§ 2.9]

Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī [d. ca. 65/684] related that the Messenger of God [eulogy] was asked [what he thought] about musk. He answered: "It is the best of all your perfumes." Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī included it, but according to the version transmitted by Abū Dāwūd [the Prophet answered]: "Musk is the best perfume." Al-Nasāʾī [included] the same version, but according to another version that he transmitted, he [the Prophet] answered: "Musk is one of the best among your perfumes."

[§ 2.10]
Nāfiʿ, the *mawlā* of Ibn ʿUmar, said, "Ibn ʿUmar used to fumigate with unscented aloeswood and with camphor that he mixed with aloeswood. He used to say, 'This is how the Messenger of God [eulogy] fumigated.'" Muslim and al-Nasāʾī included it. […]

[§ 2.11]
[p. 770] Anas b. Mālik said, "The Messenger of God [eulogy] had a perfume box (*sukka*) from which he used to perfume himself." Abū Dāwūd included it.

[§ 2.12]
Abū Hurayra related that the Messenger of God [eulogy] said, "Men's perfume: conspicuous scent, discreet color. Women's perfume: conspicuous color, discreet scent." Al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasāʾī included it.

[§ 2.13]
ʿImrān b. Ḥuṣayn [d. 53/673] related: "The Messenger of God [eulogy] said: 'The best perfume for men is that whose scent is conspicuous, while its color is discreet. The best perfume for women is that whose color is conspicuous, while its scent is discreet.' And he forbade saddlecloths dyed in red." Al-Tirmidhī included it.

[§ 2.14]
Abū Mūsā l-Ashʿarī [d. ca. 48/668] related that the Messenger of God [eulogy] said, "Every eye is a fornicator. Now, when a woman puts on perfume and passes [p. 771] by an assembly [of men], she is just like this"—meaning: she is a fornicator. Al-Tirmidhī included it, but according to Abū Dāwūd, he said: "When a woman puts on perfume and passes by people in order that they smell her scent, she is just like this." […]

[§ 2.15]
Abū Hurayra related that the Messenger of God [eulogy] said, "Let a woman who has been exposed to incense (*bakhūr*) stay away from praying the evening prayer together with us!" Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, and al-Nasāʾī included it.

[§ 2.16]
According to a report transmitted by Abū Dāwūd, he [Abū Hurayra] said: "I met a woman who smelled of perfume, trailing a pillar of dust [whipped up by her long garment]." He asked her, "O bondmaid of the Almighty! Are you coming from the mosque?" She said: "Yes." He asked, "Did you put on perfume

for it?" She said, "Yes." He said, "I heard my dear Abū l-Qāsim[12] say, 'No woman who perfumes herself for the mosque shall be admitted, unless she gets rid of her defilement (*janāba*) by means of a full-body lustration (*ghusl*).'" Al-Nasāʾī also relates that he [the Prophet] said, "If a woman goes to the mosque, let her wash off her perfume [p. 772] just like she performs a full-body lustration to get rid of her defilement." [...]

[§ 2.17]

[As regards the expression] "O bondmaid of the Almighty!": He [Abū Hurayra] linked the bondmaid to the Almighty here, to the exception of the other names of God Exalted, because the woman was full of pride and haughtiness, on account of the perfume she had put on, vainly dragging her garment over the ground. This compelled [Abū Hurayra] to link her name to that of the Almighty, in order to put her in her place and humble her—a very subtle allusion and rather good example of rhetoric.

[§ 2.18]

Zaynab, the wife of Ibn Masʿūd [d. ca. 32–3/652–4] related that the Messenger of God said, "If one of you is present in the mosque, let her not touch perfume!" According to another version [he said], "If one of you is present at the night prayer, let her not use perfume in the evening!" Muslim and al-Nasāʾī included it. [Mālik b. Anas in his] *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ* included [the report of] Busr b. Saʿīd, with a loosened (*mursal*) chain of transmission,[13] that the Messenger of God [p. 773] said, "If one of you is present at the night prayer, let her not touch perfume!" Al-Nasāʾī included this version, too, on the authority of Zaynab.

12 "Father of al-Qāsim" is the teknonymic, or *kunya*, of the Prophet.

13 An *isnād* is "loosened" (*mursal*) when a Successor cites the Prophet, omitting the intervening Companion. See Pavlovitch, § 7.1.2.