

**MA in Greek and Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology**

**The Archaeology of Mycenaean Greece**



*Potnian Elements*  
**in the Scented Oils of Pylos**

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## Introduction

*Wine that cheers the hearts of men,  
oil that makes the face shine,  
and bread that sustains man's life.*

Psalm 104:15

Scented oils in the Late Bronze Age play an essential role in the beauty care regimen of the aristocracy, as well as in the foundation of the statal religion.

The Mycenaean world is no exception to this, as the decipherment of Linear B in 1952 has revealed. Fragmentary, accidentally baked tablets rescued from the ruins of the main unearthed palaces report lists of ingredients, apt for the manufacture of perfumes based on olive oil, along with names of perfume-boilers and their destination.

In the course of this essay, I will proceed to examine the case of the Palace of Nestor in Pylos through the Linear B tablets of the series Fr, first published by Bennett in 1958<sup>1</sup>. The first chapter is devoted to the identification of the raw materials and the preparation of the unguents. In the second chapter I will attempt to describe the setting and the palatial administration behind the industry, and its shortcomings. The motives for the aristocratic interests in perfumes will emerge in the third and last section of the paper.

It is generally believed that scented oils, alongside elaborate textiles, constituted the main source of wealth for the Aegean kings, granting them access to the royal gift exchange routes initiated amongst the elites of the Near East<sup>2</sup>. The Mycenaean stirrup jars brimming with fragrant oils, found all along the coasts of the Mediterranean, and in the shipwrecks of Uluburun and Cape Gelidonya, were exported in order to receive metals, ivory, exotic plants and other luxury items in return.

However, the palatial industry of Pylos seems to nurture different concerns, at least in the years that preceded the 'collapse of the kingdom', when the Palace of Nestor was set on fire for the last time, around 1080 BC. Emphasis in this essay is not on trade, but on the inner mechanics of

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1 Bennett, E. L. 1958: *The Olive Oil Tablets of Pylos*. In this paper, the transliterations of the Fr series will be based on the last version by Melena, Firth, 2021: *The Pylos Tablets*. For an introduction on the decipherment of Linear B by the architect M. Ventris, see Chadwick 2014. Goes without saying that the main source for this study has been the brilliant work by C. Shelmerdine, *The Perfume Industry of Mycenaean Pylos*, 1985.

2 Stella 1965, Shelmerdine 1985, Voutsaki 2001, Jasink 2006, *et alia*.

state formation. In this process the oils infused with aromatics set up a code that is both aesthetical and spiritual: a vehicle to reach the divine and to create it.

Echoes of Mycenaean customs vividly reverberate in the epic of Homer<sup>3</sup>. Gods rejoice in perfumes, and in the Iliad<sup>4</sup> Hera seduces Zeus with an ambrosial oil that she herself perfumed.

This is one of the first moments technology meets religion.

## 1. The art of perfumery in Pylos

*Ambrosial, her lovely skin she cleaned from all defilment,  
Ointed with oil ambrosial, which for herself was mingled.*

*Iliad XIV, 171.*

According to Pliny<sup>5</sup>, perfumes did not exist at the time of the Trojan war, with the exception of fragrant wood and rose-enriched olive oil<sup>6</sup>. This statement is usually intended as the confirmation that the process of distillation was not employed in the Bronze Age industries<sup>7</sup>. The Mycenaean manufacture of scented oils is thought to be aligned with the tradition of Minoan Crete<sup>8</sup>. The

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3 The figure of Homer dates to around three centuries after the collapse of the Mycenaean kingdoms. In my opinion, myths and literature can reveal much more on the thoughts and therefore lives of the people of a given historical time, even when the events are declaredly fictitious, than any historical documents. In either cases the veracity has not to be taken for granted, but in the myth the contact with the people's constitutive beliefs is more direct. History is not the succession of storage room inventories, but the interaction of ideas that transform nature's will and human imagination.

4 *Iliad*, XIV, 171.

5 *Naturalis Historia* XIII.

6 Knowledge in Pliny can be immense but has to be taken *addito salis grano*. In the same mentioned passage he claims that 'no incense was burned for the gods', and even though the time of the diffusion of frankincense in the Aegean is still under debate, we find other resins that could have been exhaling through the incense burners from at least as early as the Early Minoan IIA (2700-2600 BC). See the incense burner from the EM cemetery of Hagia Photia, in the Hagios Nikolaos Archaeological Museum of Sitia. These resins could be laudanum, abundant in the Aegean (see Warren 2002), pine resins, moss and other local plants. In the Late Bronze age, we also find terebinth (*Pistacia terebinthus*, incontrovertible evidence from the Uluburun shipwreck, and possibly ki-ta-no in the tablets of Knossos) and myrrh (proposed by Sacconi on the reading of the Linear B ideogram MU in Knossos).

7 In Greece, the practice of distillation only bloomed in Hellenistic times. Although Democritus is often thought of having conducted experiments, and the natural cycle of water had been observed before him, the first textual reference of the process, as Shelmerdine also notes, dates back to Aristotle, *meteorologica* I.9, II.3. It is believed distillation might have been already practiced at the end of the second millennium BC in the perfumery of Mesopotamia. See Levey 1955.

8 This statement is based on the continuity of Minoan arts into the Mycenaean world: from the iconographic motives to the supposed small industries. On the Minoan scented oil workshops, see MMIA Khamalevri (Vlazaki-Andreadaki 1997), MMIII Knossos (Panagiotaki 1999), LM I Mochlos (Koh 2006), LM XLVII Room of the Palace

methods of preparation mainly consisted in *enfleurage* and maceration. In the first case the herbs were steeped in cold oil, in the latter the oil is heated, conceivably up to around sixty five degrees<sup>9</sup>.

The Linear B tablets never provide a recipe, but merely lists of ingredients, often incomplete, and the approximate aim of the production. The base is always an oil, the ideogram OLE \*130<sup>10</sup> in Linear B, sometimes expressed as *e-ra<sub>3</sub>-wo* (ἐλαιον), olive oil. In the Pylian series Fr, this ideogram is often overlapped by a syllable. For example, the oil destined ‘to the house of Zeus’ (*di-wi-jo-de*) on the tablet Fr 1230, is conjunct to the syllable A. These syllables are called ligaments<sup>11</sup>, and have often been interpreted as a different variety of carrier oil, such as almond, safflower, sesame oils or even animal fats<sup>12</sup>. This remains a good interpretation, as some of these plants have been identified amongst the spices on other series of tablets<sup>13</sup>, and their role in the perfume industry is known in Egypt<sup>14</sup> and in classical times, yet their meaning is still disputed. What is unanimously accepted is the qualification of the given oil by an adjective. In the Pylian tablets, three ingredients mainly stand out. The oil *wo-do-we*<sup>15</sup> (ῥοδόεν), infused with roses, is a heart-warming example reechoing the oil by which Aphrodite anoints the corpse of Hektor to protect it from the injuries of time<sup>16</sup>. Rose-scented oil is still praised in classical times, for the fragrance and medicinal properties<sup>17</sup>.

Theophrastus (IV century BC) narrates that perfume sellers often add rose petals to other unguents, when clients do not seem inclined to buy them, as rose scent imposes itself on the final concoction, even though for a short period of time. For this reason, and for the reason olive oil is not the most receptive carrier oil to the fragrances, classical authors<sup>18</sup> mention the process of *stypsis*, to pre-treat the oil and thicken it for it to retain the final scent. One of the plants used for this purpose is the cyperus (*Cyperus Rotundus*, κυπαρόεν in Greek), which is interpreted in the tablets as *ku-pa-ro-we*. In fact, it only figures in the Fr texts as combined with rose-scented oil<sup>19</sup>. The third essence is

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of Zakros (Platon 1974).

9 Wylock 1970. Shelmerdine 1985. Warren 2014.

10 Another ideogram used in the tablets is *AREPA*, translated as unguent.

11 The possible ligaments on the Fr tablets are: OLE+A, OLE+PA, OLE+WE in one case, OLE juxtaposed with po, OLE+SI ‘not impossible’ in Fr 1198 (Melena 2021).

12 See Shelmerdine 1985.

13 For example, in the tablets Ge of Mycenae: sesame (sa-sa-ma), safflower (ka-na-ko), cumin (ku-mi-no), and others (see Jasink 2006). The tablets concerning perfumes in Knossos are grouped in the series Fh, Fp, Fs, F, Ga, Gg. One ingredient that present in Knossos yet missing from the tablets of Pylos at our disposal is the po-ni-ki-jo. This has been translated by Foster (see Shelmerdine 1985, 23) as alkanet, the colouring agent used in classical perfumery, and that could explain OLE po. Another ingredient is MU (intended as myrrh by Sacconi 1969).

14 Lucas, Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries.

15 Occurrences in the Fr series: 1203, 1204, 1207, 1208, 1223, 1226, 1238.

16 *Iliad*, XXIII, 186.

17 Theophrastus, in *de odoribus*, IV BC. Dioscorides and Hippocrates use it for gynecological conditions (Wylock 1971).

18 Again Theophrastus, *de odoribus*, 17.

19 Tablet Fr 1203. See Shelmerdine 1985 for the idea of cyperus as στῦμμα and not ἄρωμα.

*pa-ko-we*, the one which recurs in more instances<sup>20</sup>. The majority of scholars tends to translate it as ‘sage’<sup>21</sup>; others as ‘lichen’, for the Greek word *σφάκος* allows for both translations.<sup>22</sup>. The latter is a tempting hypothesis, and both are used in perfumery and wield remarkable medicinal properties. However, sage has also been identified on the LM Minoan Blue Bird Fresco at Knossos, and its oil is still today part of apotropaic rites of passage in Northern Israel<sup>23</sup>, residue of old Mediterranean traditions.

Plant identification in ancient sources is a roller coaster, and many passages remain obscure. Another adjective in the Fr tablets, *e-ti-we*<sup>24</sup>, left untranslated by Bennett in 1958 (‘e-ti-scented’), was reconstructed as henna by Shelmerdine<sup>25</sup>, and this practice seems coherent with the predilection of the ancients for colourful textiles and dyes<sup>26</sup>.

In the tablet Fr 1224, we would then read:

*pa-ko-we , e-ti-we*  
*pa-ki-ja-ni-jo-jo , me-no , po-se-da-o-ne OLE+PA z 2;*

‘in the month of *pakijana*, sage-scented henna-dyed *oil* to Poseidon’.

The meaning emerging from these words is astonishing. All the elements composing our picture of the Mycenaean world reverberate in one sole lump of clay: the respect for the cyclical time, expressed in months, the passion for vibrant colours and redolent plants, oils to anoint princesses’ waves of hair and offered to the god of the sea and earthquakes. Moreover, henna is likely imported from the east, which is aligned with the picture of interconnectedness of the Late Bronze Age, where raw materials circulated widely and new meanings were carved out of them.

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20 In the Fr series: 1200, 1202, 1216?, 1217, 1220, 1223, 1224, 1226, 1232, 1235, 1240.

21 Shelmerdine 1985. As *Salvia Pomifera* (Bennett-Chadwick) or *Salvia Fruticosa* (Tucker 2004). Wylock (1971) also proposes *Salvia Sclarea*.

22 Stella 1959 on the *Usnea Barbata*, *φάσκον*. Another possible lichen is *Evernia furfuracea*, found on the bark on pines and firs, and completely disappeared today because of air pollution. It was found in the cavities of the mummies in Egypt (Lucas 1948), though not being an Egyptian product, which gave me to believe this could be one of the unique aromatics Aegean reigns were exporting to Egypt.

23 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1584233/>

24 In the Fr series: 343, 1211, 1224.

25 Shelmerdine 1985, 28: *ἔρις* as another name for *κρημνός* (Lejeune 1958), whose properties described in the Papyrus *Holmiensis* and in Pseudo-Democritus corresponds to the henna, sought after plant and pigment in the Bronze Age.

26 Classical sources abound in the description of dyed perfumes. Before this, there existed entire dye workshops on Minoan Crete, mostly meant for textiles. See the MM workshop of Alatzomouri Pefka. However, residue analysis has not yet to this day showed traces of henna (*Lawsonia inermis*) not native in the Aegean.

At the same time it should not surprise us how limited the knowledge impressed on the tablets turns out to be. It is believed administrative records on clay were never baked in the Aegean, but air-dried to re-utilise later on. It is only possible to unearth the tablets immortalised by the destruction of the palace by fire, yet not crumbled by the crushing walls. Hence, the lack of proper documentation on certain plants and perfumed oils that we can imagine they were producing. One of these is the ‘superior iris oil’ extolled by Theophrastus. Iris (*Iris unguicularis*) is one of the recurrent motifs of Aegean art, and residue analysis has shown traces of its oil in the MM scented oil workshop of Bolanis at Khamalevri<sup>27</sup>. Scholars tried to see references to it in the word *wi-ri-za* conjunct to the ideogram \*145 LANA in the series Un of Pylos. I believe the most convincing hypothesis in regard to *wi-ri-za* \*145 is to intend it as part of the perfumer’s equipment<sup>28</sup>.

Theophrastus reports that the iris oil is not pleasant nor safe on skin when freshly concocted. Seasoning improves its odour and this can be preserved for around three years, twenty years if the collector is experienced. The reason by which iris oil, or any other fragrance, is missing from the Pylian records could be that the year of disbursement did not coincide with the year of the destruction of the Palace, the tablets were simply lost, or that the Palace was not interested in that production.

In this frame it is impossible to avoid the stringent control exerted by the Palace.

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27 Vlazaki-Andreadaki 1997.

28 *Wi-ri-za* (root) + LANA on Un 249 and Un 267 (tablets examined below for a different scope): iris root (Palmer), lanolin, oil extracted from the sheep’s fleece and used in classical perfumery (Killen), a strainer (Beck and Beck).

## 2. Palatial directives

*The world cannot exist without a perfumer or a tanner.*

Talmud, Kiddushin 82.

Surrounding the Palace of Nestor on the hill of Epano Englianos, there lay vast fields of olive trees<sup>29</sup>. No administrative text is known about olive mills, or the measures adopted in the manufacture of the scented oil. However, there are elements to reconstruct this industry as ‘*a palace business of some importance*’<sup>30</sup>. In two tablets of the series Un in Pylos, a perfumer (*a-re-pa-zo-o*, in classical Greek: ὀλιφαζόος) receives a list of ingredients as the necessary equipment to treat the oils. On Un 267, the perfumer Thyestes<sup>31</sup> is given aromatics destined to be boiled (*tu-we-a*, *ze-some-no*) and other items such as coriander (*ko-ri-a<sub>2</sub>-da-na*), cyperus (*ku-pa-ro<sub>2</sub>*), both substances likely to be employed not as fragrances but as *stymmata* (astringents to thicken the oil), wool (ideogram \*145 aforementioned, possibly to be used a strainer), wine, honey (both used in classical perfumery in the extraction of plant compounds) and an obscure item written as KAPO, generally interpreted as ‘fruit’ or cinnamon<sup>32</sup>. The man allocating these materials is a ‘high palace official’, by the name of Alxoitias (*a-ko-so-ta*), known from other tablets in a different context of the palatial administration<sup>33</sup>. The function of another perfumer, Philaios of the tablet Un 249, is characterised as *potnian*.

Potnia (as the ‘*πότνια θηρῶν*’, mistress of the animals of classical memories, the epithet of Artemis) is the most observed theonym in the Mycenaean world, to the point its connotations seem to have turned into the qualifiers of the royal organisation, the original name of what we translate today as ‘palatial’. Potnia is thought to be the goddess immersed in flowers on the seals, the goddess of nature who turns to assist in the creation of the Mycenaean state. This is another, yet striking indicator of the indissoluble bond between aristocratic power and religion in the cultures of the Bronze Age.

On the tablet Un 249:

*po-ti-ni-ja-we-jo*

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29 Pollen analysis reported by Davis J. in Cline.

30 Shelmerdine 1985.

31 I will adopt the rendition of the names given by Shelmerdine 1985, 41. Four names of perfume-boilers in Pylos: Kokalos, Eumedes, Philaios,, Thyestes.

32 Whenever needed, see Diccionario Micénico, edited by Jorro, 1999.

33 Shelmerdine 1985, 42.



*pi-ra-jo , a-re-pa-zo[-o] ku-pa-ro2 AROM 2 T 5*

*wi-ri-za LANA 2 []\*157 10*

*vacat [ ] KAPO T 6*

In fact, even from these scattered few texts at our disposal, the Mycenaean administration behind the royal workshops seem to conform to the ‘Asiatic scheme’, well documented in Ugarit and the Near East<sup>34</sup>. Kokalos, another Pylian perfumer, receives figs and wheat for his work<sup>35</sup>, the perfumer Eumedes is mentioned in ‘three land tenure texts’. The names on the tablets are not of independent craftsmen. The Palace figures as a *redistributive centre*, which definition leads to several implications. Alongside the power of rewarding the workers, the palatial administration must have had the power to punish. On this very aspect, the Mycenaean tablets fall silent. However, even in the frame of an ideal agreement between the royal servicemen and the Palace, devoid of any human conflict, the illusion of symmetry in this contract easily breaks down once the former party is generally replaceable for the latter, while the collapse of the latter has unprecedented effects on the former. A system of centralised production is the consequence of the request for specialised activities. At the same time, specialised craftsmen are liable to lose touch with the primary necessities, ‘*might no longer produce their own food, thus becoming increasingly vulnerable to disruption*’<sup>36</sup>. Royal workshops of prestige goods, such as scented oils, wares, metalworking and luxurious textiles, might have excelled in times of splendor, aiming at efficient rhythms of production and exportation<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, they could have easily aggravated the process of disintegration affecting all the Mediterranean empires in the eleventh century BC, as larger groups of people were involved.

The causes for the state of generalised devastation which led to the end of the Bronze Age are still daily debated, the most plausible interpretation being the compounded effects of a ‘system collapse’. Any system dysfunction is exacerbated by the discontent of new classes of people. Signs of these progressive changes leading to the final dissolution could be observed in the architectural traces, in how these reflect a sense of instability dictated by novel demands. In the case of the Palace

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34 Shelmerdine 1987.

35 Tablet Fg 374.

36 Shelmerdine 1987.

37 Shelmerdine defines the pottery of Pylos as ‘anomalous’, that is undecorated and hard to destine for exportation. At the same time the Palace of Nestor is ‘a kingdom on the sea’, strategic position for international contacts, as it is also proven by the textual reference to different ethnic groups and foreigners on the land (Stella 1963). The most convincing hypothesis is an indirect involvement of Pylos in the trades towards the East, and a more direct presence in the routes towards the West.

of Nestor in Pylos, the latest additions to the building reveal the need for compartmentalisation, more restricted areas which are in turn easier to patrol and control. Above all, the space destined to workshop activities also underwent a noticeable extension, as the consequence of an increased demand for luxury item production<sup>38</sup>. There are reasons to believe<sup>39</sup> its function was not economic – no more meant to accumulate wealth –, but mainly diplomatic: to insure peace in a climate of instability by exchanging precious exotic gifts with the elites of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Nonetheless, scented oils go beyond the definition of prestige and their role in the international relations. Their manufacture primarily served the sensibility of the Mycenaean aristocracy. In a world of no soap, the antibacterial and moisturising properties of the oils must have not passed unnoticed and must have easily imposed a new standard of skincare and hygiene. Ideals of beauty, and the desperate attempts to achieve them, are one of the most powerful forces of cohesion in a community. The other one is religion.

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38 Shelmerdine on the observations around the 'Architectural changes in Pylos', 1987. Scented oil workshops are notoriously hard to identify, especially without residue analysis in the vessels found *in situ*. Room 47 is the most probable candidate for the workshop area in the Pylian Palace.

39 See Voutsaki 2001.

### 3. Mind engineering or instrument of the divine?

The second half of the Fr tablets of Pylos informs us on the destination of the oils.

With the exception of one tablet, recording ‘*the transfer of oil within the perfume industry, from one perfumer to another*’, and the type of vase apt to contain it<sup>40</sup>, the recipients of the disbursement belong to the royal family or to divine beings.

In the tablet Fr 1215, we read:

*wa-na-ke-te , wa-na-se-wi-jo , we-a-re-pe*  
*sa-pe-ra RA*

A jar (sa-pe-ra)<sup>41</sup> of oil is given to the king, *wanax*, meant for anointment (*we-ja-re-pe*). In the private correspondence of the kings in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>42</sup>, the desire for scented oils is never concealed, always present in the lists of precious gifts to send and to receive: ‘*I herewith send a hahannatu-jar full of sweet oil to be poured on your head, seeing that you have sat down on your royal throne*’<sup>43</sup>, the king of Alashiya writes to the pharaoh of Egypt.

In the Near East, the ceremony of anointment was performed to crown the new king, and as part of any *rite of passage*: to celebrate birth, to honour death<sup>44</sup>, and prepare the bride. Pouring oil on a woman’s head was a formulaic expression for her marriage. This code was shared all over the Mediterranean, across empires with different languages and different gods.

Aegean kings do not figure in the league of brothers animating the international correspondence discovered in Tell el-Amarna, perhaps by chance<sup>45</sup>. The administrative tablets in Linear B are not much eloquent on the beliefs and on the degree to which they correspond to what it is written in the East. At the same time, it is possible to trace similarities.

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40 Fr 1184: <<ko-ko-ka-ro , a-pe-do-ke , e-ra<sub>3</sub>-wo , to-so / e-u-me-de-i OLE+WE 18 / pa-ro , i-pe-se-wa , ka-ra-re-we 38>> (Kokalos delivered so much olive oil to Eumedes: 518.4L, from Ipsewas oil jars: 38). Both Kokalos and Eumedes are perfumers (defined as *a-re-pa-zo-o* in other instances). The content of the tablet is unique, and in fact the only tablet of the series unearthed in the Archive Complex. On this detail and the quantities of oil reconstructed from Linear B, see Shelmerdine 1985. The word *ka-ra-re-we*, also present on the Knossian tablets, is intended to be a specialised ware for oil, probably the known stirrup jar.

41 Stella 1959.

42 Fappas 2011.

43 EA 34: 50, from the *Amarna Letters*. Moran 1992.

44 There is a recipient recurring in the tablets, *di-pi-si-jo-i*, of obscure significance. The interpretation I would abide by is ‘the thirsty one’ (Palmer 1981, on ‘Diccionario Micénico’) from the Greek δῖπτοι, which is an expression for the dead in Orphic texts. I will not discuss their instances in this paper. Occurrences: Fr 1218, 1220, 1231, 1232, 1240, 1338. For example, I would translate Fr 1220 as: to the Lousian field, sage-scented oil, oil for the dead king (*ro-u-si-jo , a-ko-ro , pa-ko-we OLE+PA v 4 / di-pi-si-jo-i , wa-na-ka-te OLE+PA s 1*).

45 Some of the tablets transported by camels after their discovery were broken and lost.

In a text from Asshur, contemporary to the activities of Pylos, perfumes are linked to the festivals:  
*'Preparation of perfumed oils... for the festival when perfumed oil will be poured on the head of the king according to the instructions of Belatekalle, the perfume maker.'*<sup>46</sup>

At least two Mycenaean festival names have been reconstructed from the series Fr.

On tablet 1222: <<OLE+ PA v I / wa-na-so-i , to-no-e-ke-te-ri-jo>>, oil is destined to the *wanasoi* (same root as *wanax*) for the festival thornohelkterion<sup>47</sup>.

The other festival is the lekhe-estroterioi (*re-ke-e-to-ro-te-ri-jo*). This is celebrated on Fr 1217 with sage-scented olive oil (*e-ra<sub>3</sub>-wo , pa-ko-we*) for a ceremony of anointment (*we-ja-re-pe*) at *pakijana*<sup>48</sup>. I am willing to intend *pakijana* as a town of an important shrine, where the festival lekhe-estroterioi took place. The month of *pakijana* could then be another way to refer to the festival, when a Greek deity surfaces from the sea. This is the festival of Poseidon<sup>49</sup>:

*pa-ko-we , e-ti-we*  
*pa-ki-ja-ni-jo-jo , me-no , po-se-da-o-ne OLE+PA z 2*

(Fr 1224: In the month of *pakijana*, sage-scented henna-dyed oil to Poseidon)<sup>50</sup>.

And on the fragments of another tablet:

*e-ti-we , pa-ki-ja[ po-]se-da-o-ne re-ke-to-ro-te-ri-jo OLE[ qs*

(Fr 343: henna-dyed oil for the festival lekhe-estroterioi at *pakijana* to Poseidon)<sup>51</sup>.

Scented oils are destined to the house of Zeus: <<*di-wi-jo-de OLE+A v I*>><sup>52</sup>, are offered to the gods on various occasions:

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46 VAT 10165 in Fappas 2011: king of Asshur Tukulti-Ninurta I, 1244-1208 BC.

47 Translation in Shelmerdine 1985.

48 Halo of mystery around the name of *pakijana*, on this tablet in the form of a toponym (*pa-ki-ja-na-de*). On Fr 1216, sage-scented oil is disbursed to the *pakijan-ians* (name in dative). It is absent in the tablets of Knossos.

49 Probably not enough evidence for the assertiveness of this tone. However, without risks and statements around uncertainties, no narrative in Aegean pre-history and in life could be advanced.

50 Tablet also cited in the first chapter.

51 A third mention to Poseidon in the Fr tablets is on Fr 1219. I will omit the offering to Tinode on tablet Fr 1223.

52 Fr 1230.

*ro-u-si-jo , a-ko-ro , te-o-i , pa-ko-we OLE+PA*  
(to the Lousian fields for the gods sage-scented oil)<sup>53</sup>.

In the ancient world, the offering of oil is essential in the act of purification. The anointment washes away the dirt accumulated in the previous months and impels a deity to bless the incoming season.

This brings to mind an Akkadian incantation, dedicated to the God of Water and Wisdom:

‘Incantation. Pure oil, clear oil, bright oil, oil that purifies the body of the gods, oil that soothes the sinews of mankind, oil of the incantation of Ea, oil of the incantation of Asalluhi. I have coated you with soothing oil that Ea has granted for soothing, I have anointed you with the oil of healing,’<sup>54</sup>

Ointments and incantations in the Near East constitute the first necessary component of the medical practice, and medical practice always begins with the perception of *miasma*, pollution. In the ancient world, healing and religion are seen as one, converging in the ritual of purification. Under this light, religion is not merely needed by the single individual, but also for the stability of the entire congregation of individuals.

It is evident how civilisation arises in response to the fear of death; the taste for the exotic as a diversion, as if by defeating space one could interfere with time: as if the alliance with the distant enemy could spare the blow inflicted by the insider (diplomacy); work tools serve as a reminder to maintain a state of orderliness; luxury items become a meter of distinction between classes of people first, and then between individuals. The scoriae of these human dynamics is the perception of *miasma*, pollution, sense of evil, the notion of deadly sins, disease. This is what the kingdom has to be on guard for in order to thrive.

Divine entities are thus evoked and preside over the rites which will purify men from their evils and discontent for them to return to the tasks assigned. Religious ceremonies are not necessarily contrived by the elites, but their need imposes itself as the the community grows, when the organisation ceases to be organic to become dictated by a series of manmade laws, and the rhythms dictated by production. The elites need only to sustain this mechanism and to have faith in it. This faith converges in the anointment of *u-po-jo , po-ti-ni-ja*<sup>55</sup> – the hupojo potnia – in the

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53 Fr 1226. Transliteration from Melena 2021, translation from Shelmerdine 1985. Another offering of unguents to generic gods is in Fr 1355: **te-o-i , a-ro-pa**.

54 Maqlû VII 31-49 in Fappas 2011.

55 References to it in Fr 1225, 1236. Fr 1236: <<*pa-ki-ja-ni-jo , a-ko-ro , u-po-jo , po-ti-ni-ja , OLE+PA s 1 v 1*>>.

natural order that turns into palatial chaos: and the human attempt to create order afresh in the complexity of the Palace by the means of technology.

The scented oils constitute this first form of technology by the means of religion.

## Conclusions

*ti-ri-se-ro-e , wo-do-we*

Fr 1204

In the course of this essay, the Linear B tablets of the series Fr have been revised to shed light on the Mycenaean state formation and taste for aromatics: a form of aristocratic code that is not dissimilar from the one shared by the elites of the Eastern Mediterranean. Scented oils should not be intended as the perfumes described by Pliny<sup>56</sup>, pursued out of vanity, but as an instrument of devotion: the first form of physical and mental hygiene. Homeric heroes anoint themselves with fat oil after having plunged into the sea<sup>57</sup>: a new ideal of cleanliness arises to unite men and celebrate the cycles of nature and *her* transformations. The industry of aromatics becomes thus a self-perpetuating system: product of the kingdom, and vehicle by which the kingdom is kept together: by the sense of beauty and smell. However, purification rites can only act as a bonding agent, they clearly could not reverse the corruption of a whole system: if it becomes too extended, it is impossible to maintain the same faith. Once the number of heterogeneous human figures reaches a given threshold, it is impossible to make them depend on one sole centre.

Scholars tend to say the Mycenaean kingdom collapsed, yet its gods and rites have survived.

In order to further explore the themes of my essay, more research is needed on 1) the plant identification on the tablets: to reconstruct the nature of the rites, the possible 'altered states of consciousness' involved, the uniqueness of the Mycenaean flora; 2) the oil production of private farmsteads, independent from the palatial control, and their cults; 3) whether it is possible to understand our civilisation through the potnian more than how we understand potnian civilisation through our own.

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56 NH XIII.

57 *Iliad*, X.

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