Yingxue Wang  
Department of History of Art and Architecture  
Harvard University

Smell in Histories of Art, Religion, and Medicine:  
The Case of Symeon the Stylite the Younger

The emerging interdisciplinary field of sensory studies treats the various human senses as shapers and bearers of culture fundamental to the distinctive infrastructure of cosmology, epistemology, and lived experience in a given society. Drawing on this theoretical development, this paper conducts a case study on Symeon the Stylite the Younger (ca. 521–592 AD) (“Symeon” hereafter), whose sanctuary was located near the ancient metropolitan city of Antioch and enjoyed far-reaching popularity during the sixth and seventh centuries within and beyond the region of Syria. The wealth of textual and material evidence of Symeon’s veneration reveals the centrality of smell in structuring the representation of the saint’s being and the mechanism through which his sanctifying presence effectuates healing from illness and endows protection from wandering demons.

Given Symeon’s tremendous popularity in the early medieval period and the abundance of extant textual and material records, the saint has sustained scholarly interest for well over half a century. However, literature on Symeon is dwarfed by the copious publications on his predecessor,

---
Symeon the Stylite the Elder (ca. 389–459 AD). Moreover, scholarly labor has been split between historians who analyze the saint’s hagiographies and archaeologists and art historians who focus on small finds related to the saint’s sanctuary, such as ceramic, glass, and pilgrimage artefacts. As Emma Loosley Leeming has recently pointed out in her work on the historiography of the Elder Symeon, existing publications have delved deep into individual aspects of the saint’s life without making an attempt to conduct an overarching synthesis that places it in a larger context. This paper aims to combine analysis of textual, visual, and material sources related to the understudied Younger Symeon through the unique entry point provided by the olfactory modality.

By conducting a close study on the olfactorily charged materials from the case of Symeon’s life and veneration, this paper also aims to enrich the ongoing methodological framing of the non-visual senses. As previous scholars have frequently pointed out, much theoretical adjustment is needed to overcome the hegemony of vision in the western episteme in attempts to study other

---


4 The prominence of scent as a motif in the saint’s hagiography and in the iconography of Symeon tokens has been noticed by some previous scholars, but has yet to be systematically investigated and contextualized. The most constructive discussion of scents in the cult of Symeon, albeit brief, comes from Susan Ashbrook Harvey’s book on scent in late antique Christianity. See Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 194–96. In the two-volume publication of the *Life of Symeon the Younger*, edited and translated by Paul van den Ven, the commentary provides several scattered but helpful notes on the mentions of incense, perfume, and censers throughout the text. See Paul van den Ven, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (521-592), Subsidia hagiographica, no. 32 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1962), vol. 2, p. 7, Chapter 2 notes 2–3; p. 23, Chapter 19, note 1; p. 41, Chapter 35, note 1; p. 44, Chapter 37, note 10; p.58, Chapter 53, note 1; p. 218, Chapter 222, note 2. For a brief discussion of incense and lamps in relation to the worship of Symeon, see Gary Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2010), 50–52.
Smell constitutes a crucial modality that structures human experiences, emotions, and memory, and yet its theoretical and analytical potential has been poorly explored in modern scholarship. As the anthropologist Alfred Gell has observed: “the olfactory domain is one of the least explored aspects of human symbolic experience.” This paper presents an attempt to formulate an analytical language of smell, and a mode of olfactory thinking that weaves together textual, visual, and material analysis.

The *Early Life of Saint Symeon the Stylite the Younger* (*Life* hereafter), composed shortly after Symeon’s death, is loaded with references to smells and aromatic substances throughout the saint’s career. In the narrative of the *Life*, fragrance is evoked as an efficacious medium that bridges the human and divine realm, providing the very substance of exchange between humans and divine agents. Symeon’s mother, Martha, receives a vision from St. John the Baptist when she visits the saint’s sanctuary in Antioch to pray for the conception of a holy child. In Martha’s vision, St. John gifts her a good smell (εὐωδίαν) in the form of a ball of incense (storax, στύραχος) as the proof (σημεῖον) of divine favor. When passing on the gift of fragrance, St. John says to Martha:

---

7 There is some disagreement about the authorship of the text. See van den Ven, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (521-592), 1:101f.
“Have confidence, woman, and pray, for your request has been granted, and here is the proof: take this perfume, arise immediately, and cense the temple; this perfume will suffice for a while.”

“Θάρσει, γυναι, καὶ εὔχου, καὶ γὰρ προσεδέχθη ἡ δέησις, καὶ τῷ τοι τὸ σημεῖον λαβοῦσα τῇν εὐωδίαν εὐθέως ἀναστάσαθα θυμίασον τὸν οἶχον, καὶ αὐτή σοι διαρχέσει ἕως καιροῦ.”

Martha, after awakening from her vision, takes a censer and fills the entire building with fragrance. In this episode, *euodia* conditions the communication between Martha and the saint: the gifting of incense from St. John to Martha acts as a tangible, material evidence of God’s response to Martha’s prayers, and Martha’s burning the incense in the church constitutes her response to the manifestation of divine will. As such, fragrance serves as an efficacious medium of human-divine communication. Carrying both symbolic and sensory information, *euodia* conveys the transcendent, other-worldly reality of the divine without leaving the sensory realm. It serves as a double sign that represents the divine as a metaphysical, cosmic reality as well as a this-worldly entity possessing corporeal substance.

As indication of divine presence, fragrance plays a central role in the representation of Symeon’s identity. *Euodia* constitutes a key element in one of Symeon’s earliest visions that marks the beginning of his career as an ascetic. After Symeon turns seven in 528 AD and ascends a pillar to begin life as a stylite, he sees a vision in which a patriarch sent from the temple of God annoints him with a perfume (μῦρον) that emits sweet smells (εὐωδίας), officially initiating his life as an ascetic. Key to this transformative moment of Symeon’s life is the aforementioned perfume

---

(muron, μῦρον). According to extant textual sources related to muron, the term refers to a liquid or semi-liquid aromatic product that results from a long chain of labor: smells from scented elements (petals, leaves, roots, resins) are affixed to vegetable oil with the help of an astringent; to this mixture coloring agents are then added, as well as base ingredients such as salt, honey, and wine for improving conservation.10 The perfume mentioned in Symeon’s Life appears to refer specifically to the kind based on olive oil (ἐλαίου μῦρου).11 As a product long established in the Greco-Roman world and certainly well-known in the Syrian region, the perfume would have been readily relatable to the author and readers of Symeon’s hagiography.

As a consistent motif in transitional moments of Symeon’s career in the narrative of the Life, fragrance serves as the material agent that transforms Symeon from a mortal to an ascetic and agent of God. In the aforementioned episode, Symeon’s anointment by perfume transforms his body into a fragrant entity carrying the sweet smell from heaven. This episode of Symeon’s bodily transformation also echoes the earlier episode of Martha’s transformation at the church of St. John the Baptist. Before marrying Symeon’s father, Martha is determined to pursue a life of chastity and remain a virgin with a pure body in accordance with the Holy Scripture—it is for this reason that when the marriage proposal was first brought up by her parents, Martha adamantly refused until a visit to St. John’s sanctuary changed her mind.12 After her marriage with John, Martha visits the church of St. John the Baptist again in order to pray for a child who would be a faithful servant

11 Life, 60.25; ed. Ven, I:54.
12 Life, 1; ed. Ven, I:2–3.
of God. During her stay at the church, Martha cleanses her body by keeping a fast and eating nothing but bread, water, and salt. Later in the story, when she burns the incense acquired from St. John, her body, purified through fasting, further takes in the divine fragrance as she accepts the prophecy of her imminent conception of Symeon. Similar to the case of Symeon’s anointment, Martha’s body is transformed, by means of euodia, from a mortal woman to the sanctified mother of a future saint. The divine fragrance inhaled by Martha purifies her body, which has lost virginity through the union with her husband, in anticipation of Symeon’s birth. Symeon’s hagiography notes that Martha preserves part of the incense she has acquired from St. John, and thus, like Symeon, she retains the fragrance from her encounter with the divine. The smell that clings to their bodies serves as tangible trace of God’s presence and intervention in their lives.

While Symeon’s sanctified being is conceived in terms of fragrance in the Life, stench connotes the presence of demons (δαίμονας). In one episode, Symeon performs exorcism on a prominent citizen from the city of Epiphaneia of Syria. The citizen presents pieces of aloe incense (ξύλον ἀλοα) to Symeon as an offering, and insists that the saint burn it. Detecting that the man will not yield until he sees the power (δύναμιν) of God, Symeon decides to burn the aloe in a censer as requested. Immediately a foul scent spreads (διεδόθη ὀσμὴ δυσωδίας ὑπερβαλλούσης), and all those present in the monastery are endangered (κινδυνεῦσαι). The pervasive dusodia spreads for two miles from each side of the monastery, and people who are travelling to the monastery report that they perceive a great stench (ἀντελάβοντο δυσωδίας πολλῆς), which they are barely able to endure. Symeon then commands the citizen from Epiphany: “Confess your deeds to God, and repent your vices, so that the demons may not take hold of you immediately, and may not make an example [out of you] for the entire land.” The text thus associates dusodia emitted from the

---

burning of aloe with the presence of demons, which can take hold of humans as they absorb the smell. Demons are also shown to be capable of invading the space of the monastery with their demonic bodies in the form of pervasive *dusodia*. The narrative thus makes clear that demons, conceived in terms of *dusodia*, move freely across physical boundaries, permeating the surrounding space and penetrating into human bodies. Because of this effusive, roaming quality of demons, the *Life* characterizes their activity as “demonic wandering” (διαβόλου πλάνης).\(^{14}\)

In the narrative of the *Life*, Symeon’s *euodia* and the demon’s *dusodia* form two antithetical, competing cosmic forces operating invisibly yet tangibly on the beings of humans. Similar to the demon’s bodily constitution, Symeon’s sanctified being, conceived in terms of fragrance, consists of light, airy substance different from mortal flesh, which effuses from his physical body into the surrounding space. Just as the demon’s pneumatic body gives it power over human victims, the fragrant composition of the saint allows him to intervene in illness and misfortune. The sway of divine and demonic agents over human welfare in the *Life* reflects the belief in the pneumatic constitution of all living beings in Syrian theology. According to Tatian the Syrian, there are two kinds of *pneuma* in the world: the higher kind constitutes the being of God, while the lower kind constitutes the souls of humans and demons. In this framework, an overload of the lower *pneuma* in the human soul produces a downward tendency, leading to the ruin of health and spiritual wellbeing; restoration requires the injection of divine *pneuma*, which, when combined with the human soul, counters the lowly *pneuma* and leads to an ascent to the divine and immortality.\(^{15}\) In this light, the olfactory field where *euodia* and *dusodia* operate constitutes an arena for the cosmic battle between Symeon and the demon that shapes human fortune.

---

\(^{14}\) *Life*, 222.28; ed. Ven, I:193.

\(^{15}\) Tatian, *Oratio Ad Graecos*, 13.1–2, 16.1–2. Edited by Miroslav Marcovich, 43:30, 34.
The *Life* also employs olfactory language and imagery to communicate Symeon’s victory over demonic influences with his health- and protection-granting power (*dunamis*, δύναμις). The hagiography identifies the saint as a potent source of healing superior to any other type of medicine. The Prologue of the *Life* celebrates Symeon as “the best healer of the sufferings of the soul and the body” (*ιατρόν άριστον ψυχικῶν τε καὶ σωματικῶν παθῶν*). In one of his invocations of God leading up to a vision, Symeon dismisses worldly physicians and medicines, and instead beseeches the help of God, the “heavenly healer.”

I bemoan and I cry for the fault I have committed; a mortal doctor will not be able to treat this evil, nor will an astringent medicine be able to cleanse the decay of sin, and heal the wounds that come [from it]. But with tears from my soul, I lower my head, shouting, I come to you, the celestial healer, because you have pity for all, because you can do all things.

Στένων δακρύω ἐφ᾽ ὧ ἔμελλον ὑποπίπτειν πράγματι. οὐ δυνήσεται δὲ βροτὸς ιατρὸς τοῦτο θεραπεύσαι, οὔτε φάρμακον στυπτικὸν τὴν τῆς ἁμαρτίας ἀνακαθᾶραι σηπεδόνα ἢ τὸ εξ αὐτῆς τραῦμα συνουλώσαι δυνήσεται. Ἀλλὰ τοῖς τοῖς ψυχῆς μου δάκρυσι δάκρυσι κάτω νεών τὸ πρόσωπον προσέρχομαι σοι βοῶν τῷ ἐπουρανίῳ ιατρῷ. Εἴλεεις γὰρ τοὺς πάντας, ὅτι πάντα δύνασαι.

Symeon contrasts the mortal physician (βροτὸς ιατρὸς) with the heavenly healer (ἐπουρανίῳ ιατρῷ) in terms of efficacy. The repetition of the verb “to be able” (δύναμι) emphasizes that the former

---

17 *Life*, 35.4–11; ed. Ven, I:34. English translation by author.
possesses no power to bring about true healing, while the latter is capable of all things. The noun of the same root δύναμις (“power, might”) is used in the same chapter to describe Symeon’s triumph over Satan, in which he overcomes alluring dreams by divine power (τοῦ Θεοῦ δύναμις). Symeon’s speech also employs a bodily and sensory language to describe the effects of sin, referring to them as decay or putrefaction (σηπεδόνα) and a wound (τραῦμα). The effective remedy, presented in a medical language, needs to cleanse (ἀνακαθᾶραι) the putrefaction and cause the wound to cicatrize (συνουλώσαι). According to this account, the all powerful God is the only effective source of healing for treating such detrimental forces on the human constitution.

Symeon’s hagiography presents the saint, “the best healer,” as the vessel of God’s health-restoring divine dunamis in the form of fragrance. In the above-mentioned episode, after Symeon completes his invocation of God the celestial doctor, he receives a vision in which a priest from heaven descends with a chalice containing the health-bringing body and blood of Christ, while the surroundings are filled with a fragrant smoke (καπνοῦ εὐωδίας). In this vivid imagery, the fragrance brought by the body and blood of Christ constitutes the very substance or material medium of their health-bringing power. Olfactory language is employed throughout the Life in episodes about the saint’s battle with demons. At the onset of Symeon’s career as an ascetic, he sees a vision in which a patriarch from heaven anoints him with a fragrant perfume, while giving the following command:

“Chase devils by this perfume and, girdled with the strength from above, put thousands that there are in pieces, destroy their myriads, and if they try to mistreat you, take courage, for there is no one that exists that can do you harm.”

---

18 Life, 35.3; ed. Ven, I:34.
19 Life, 35.11–14; ed. Ven, I:34.
“Εν τούτῳ τῷ μύρῳ δύσχε τούς δαίμονας καὶ ἐπ’όσφυος σοθ δύναμιν εξ ὑψοῦς
περιζώσαμενος σύγκοψον αὐτῶν τὰς χιλιάδας καὶ ἀφάνισον αὐτῶν τὰς μυριάδας, καὶ ἐάν
ἐγχειρήσωσι λυμήνασθαί σοι, θάρσει, ὅτι οὐχ ἔστιν ὁ κακώσων σε.”

This passage equates perfume (μύρῳ) with the power from above (δύναμιν εξ ὑψοῦς). With this
divine perfume rubbed onto his body, Symeon acquires the healing *dunamis* from God, the
celestial physician, and becomes his delegate on earth. Empowered by God at the very beginning
of his ascetic career, Symeon would go on to perform many miracles of healing and draw large
crowds of the sick from near and far. During the outbreak of bubonic plague in Antioch on 542
AD, when the inhabitants of the city died en masse, Symeon wielded his power to preserve the
ones who solicited his help. The health-granting *dunamis* from God thus dwells in Symeon’s
body like fragrance in an open jar, available for those who seek it for bodily restoration.

As the preceding analysis has shown, the centrality of scent in Symeon’s *Life* reveals the
underlying olfactory framing of the saint’s *dunamis* and his cosmic battle with demons. Besides,
it points to the *contagious* mechanism through which Symeon and demons alike affect human
wellbeing. Both divine fragrance and demonic stench constitute effusive supernatural entities that
effectuate transformative influences on human individuals they encounter by permeating their
bodies and souls. The olfactorily charged account of the *Life* projects a radically intersubjective

---

20 Paul ven den Ven, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (521-592) (Bruxelles: Société des
21 For the mention of large crowds flooding to Symeon’s sanctuary on the Miraculous Mountain, see *Life*,
universe in which individual illnesses and misfortunes are organically and viscerally fused with collective suffering and struggles between invisible forces on a cosmic level.

**Eulogia:**

**Multisensory Dissemination of Symeon’s Power**

Symeon’s sanctuary, situated atop the Miraculous Mountain 18 kilometers southwest of Antioch, was a major pilgrimage destination from the sixth to the seven centuries (Fig. 1). Bordered on the east by the Great Melas River (Büyük Kara Çay) and on the south by the Orontes River, the site is adjacent to the Roman road connecting Antioch with Seleucia Pieria (Fig. 2). Tokens, in the form of small round image-bearing disks, constitute the major material evidence of the site’s activity as a pilgrimage destination. Around twenty tokens have been identified as originating from the shrine of Symeon (“Symeon tokens” hereafter), all of which share a consistent iconographical design. The imagery is made up of three key components: Symeon occupies the center of the composition atop his column; angels on the upper part crown the saint from both sides; and supplicants on the lower part approach the saint with incense burners (Fig. 3). Some

---

23 For the most comprehensive listing and description of the tokens of Symeon the Stylite the Younger, see Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Itinéraires archéologiques dans la région d’Antioche: Recherches sur le monastère et sur l’iconographie de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (Bruxelles: Éditions de Byzantion, 1967), 140–58. As is evident from previous scholarship, there exists a complex relationship between tokens from the shrine of Symeon the Stylite the Younger and those from the shrine of Symeon the Stylite the Elder. In terms of quantity, many more tokens have been excavated from the site of the Elder and identified as tokens depicting the Elder. According to Gary Vikan, more than 250 tokens of the Elder have been found, whereas only a handful of tokens of the Younger survived. Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 31–33. However, there is much overlap in terms of the design of the two groups, and identification of a particular token encounters difficulties. Moreover, given that the shrine of Symeon the Stylite the Elder achieved its height after his death in the sixth and seventh centuries, contemporaneous to the flourishing of the shrine of the Younger Stylite, it is reasonable to conjecture that the two sites shared a kindred relationship and found no issue in—and perhaps even intentionally engaged in—making and disseminating similarly designed tokens. Scholars like Vikan uses the term “Symeon tokens” to refer collectively to the tokens of the Elder and the Younger. In any case, the issue of iconography of the two groups of tokens is beyond the scope of this project, and I will use “Symeon tokens” in this paper to refer primarily to tokens that have been associated with the Younger in previous literature.
tokens also include inscriptions on the perimeter that identify Symeon’s locus sanctus: “Blessing of Saint Symeon [in the Miraculous Mountain]” (Figs. 4–5). The central element of the imagery depicts Symeon’s pillar with a staircase rising to a height that has been estimated as 18 meters above the ground (Fig. 6). Reproducing the iconic monument associated with Symeon’s monastery in pictorial form, the tokens turn the sacred locale of the saint on the Miraculous Mountain into portable and distributable images acquired and carried by pilgrims within and beyond the local area around the saint’s shrine.

Symeon tokens serve as a potent means of expanding the reach of the saint’s dunamis and allowing his worship to acquire a trans-regional scope. Symeon’s hagiography relates an episode in which the saint, after blessing a priest’s son who has travelled to his shrine for healing, sends the boy home to await the deliverance of the cure. When the priest expresses reluctance to leave, the saint responds: “The power of God… is efficacious everywhere. Therefore, take this eulogia made of my dust, depart, and when you look at the imprint of our image, it is us that you will see.” Symeon’s response to the priest makes clear that through the eulogia, God’s dunamis remains readily accessible regardless of one’s location. The user of the eulogia can acquire the desired healing and protection even when physically distant from the saint and his locus sanctus. The saint also highlights two key aspects of his eulogia that account for their efficacy, namely their materiality (“made of dust”) and iconography (“the imprint of our image”). In the following

---

24 The exact height of Symeon’s pillar is debated. See Djobadze, Archeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-the-Orontes, 23.
sections, I will dissect the various sensory dimensions of the Symeon tokens to further investigate the mechanism through which they represent, embody, and enact the saint’s *dunamis*.

The tokens channel Symeon’s efficacious power through appeal to the olfactory modality central to Symeon’s veneration. As Susan Harvey has remarked, the Symeon tokens are notable for the incorporation of censers into their imagery.27 Some depict supplicant figures with hand-held censers used for burning aromatic substances (Fig. 7), and some show a type of regional amphorae produced in the Levantine provinces often used for the transportation of perfumed oil (Figs. 8).28 Inscriptions found on multiple tokens also highlight the offering of incense: for instance, one terracotta token includes the following inscription: ΠΡΟCΔ[ε]Ξ[α]Ι ΑΓΙΕ ΤΟ ΘΥΜΙΑΜΑ Κ[α]Ι ΠΑΝΤΑΣ Ι[α]CΑΙ (“Receive the incense, o saint, and heal all [the supplicants]”) (Fig. 4).29 Considering the limited space offered by the surface of the disk, the incorporation of such lengthy inscriptions and the choice of their content must have been the result of careful consideration on the part of the designer.

The iconographic and inscriptional prominence of scent in the Symeon tokens can be accounted for by the centrality of the offering of incense as the means of acquiring a miraculous cure from the saint, a recurring theme in the narrative of his hagiography.30 Foregrounding the burning of incense and the presence of effusive perfume, the imagery and inscriptions of the Symeon tokens present an ongoing supplication to the saint for his intervention. Together they encapsulate a communication process taking place within and beyond the pictorial sphere, firstly

---

30 For instance, see *Life*, 70; ed. Ven, I:60.
between the monk figures and the saint represented in the image, and secondly between the user of the tokens and the saint residing physically on the Miraculous Mountain. In other words, visual and inscriptive representation of the offering of incense turns the tokens into a spatial mechanism that shrinks the distance between Symeon and his worshipper. The emphasis on scent as the medium of communication between the two enhances its tangibility and effectiveness, opening up a channel for the users of the tokens who might be physically separated from Symeon’s sanctuary to access his *dunamis* in the local and the perceptible.

Beyond evoking the process of incense offering in the iconography and inscriptions, Symeon tokens are also embodiments of the saint’s *dunamis* through its olfactorily charged materiality. According to Lafontaine-Dosogne, the majority of surviving Symeon tokens were made of pressed earth.\(^{31}\) Symeon’s hagiography informs us that his *eulogia* was made from the dust blessed by him.\(^{32}\) Elemental analysis carried out on the Symeon tokens identifies the soil that makes up the tokens as that which comes from around Symeon’s sanctuary on the Miraculous Mountain.\(^{33}\) Since Symeon’s *dunamis* and ascetic body are constructed and conceived in terms of fragrance, as discussed in the previous sections of this paper, it is reasonable to infer that the dust touched by the saint carries the saint’s fragrance. This conjecture finds support from an episode from Symeon’s *Life* that tells of the saint’s *eulogia* releasing fragrance and protecting a travelling monk, Dorotheos, from a storm at sea:

\(^{31}\) Other materials include lead and glass. Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Itinéraires archéologiques dans la région d’Antioche. Recherches sur le monastère et sur l'iconographie de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (Bruxelles: Éditions de Byzantion, 1967), 140. Although the study of the lead and glass tokens promises important insights for the Symeon tokens as a group, detailed information concerning these in current scholarship is limited and a detailed examination is beyond the scope of the current paper.

\(^{32}\) *Life*, 163; ed. Ven, I:145.

The monk took the dust of the saintly servant of God that he carried with him as a *eulogia*, and after having put it into water, he threw it on the sea and sprinkled the whole boat, saying: “Holy servant of God, Symeon, direct us and save us.” With these words, all those on board were impregnated with perfume, the water of the sea surrounded the boat like a wall, and the waves were powerless against it.34

Symeon tokens are thus fragrance-filled objects made of the dust blessed by Symeon, embodying the saint’s *dunamis* in their material composition. Whenever and wherever they are activated, the tokens are believed to perform the saint’s miraculous protecting power as if he were bodily present.

Seen from their manufacture process, Symeon tokens also constitute a kind of virtual or quasi-perfume. The Syriac hagiography of the Elder Symeon offers insights into the technical process through which tokens of dust were made: earth from around the saint’s pillar was mixed with oil and turned into a paste, which was then impressed with an intaglio stamp—like a surviving stamp used for producing pilgrim tokens of St. Isidore (Fig. 9).35 In this light, the making of Symeon tokens is akin to the making of perfume, in which a fleeting scent is captured through the addition of a fixant such as olive oil. Symeon’s efficacious *dunamis* is thus captured in a rather literal sense by the tokens and thereby made portable, distributable, and accessible for temporally and spatially distant worshippers. The olfactory serves as the key modality through which the token’s efficacy is constructed, conceived, and actualized.

---

In its material composition, Symeon tokens also represent a kind of contact relic. Dust, the raw material of the tokens, is the form of the earliest Christian relics, and constitutes a major sacred material charged with theological import in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, featuring 102 occurrences in the Old Testament. Dust possesses strong corporeal associations as the material from which human bodies are made: “The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7); “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19). The transition from flesh to divisible objects such as dust signals a symbolic process shared by many traditions of relic worship. Through the making of relics, a holy figure transforms from a human individual into a divided or distributed person, whose constitutive parts, according to Alfred Gell, “are not physically attached, but are distributed around the ambience.” In the case of the Symeon tokens, the dust does not consist of the corporeal remains of the saint, but its materiality allows for the tokens to function as contact relics. Palm prints have been found on the back of multiple Symeon tokens made from earth (Fig. 10). While it is certainly impossible to determine whether the palm prints were supposed to have been left by Symeon’s blessing hand, it is nevertheless reasonable to assume that they serve as an indexical mark of a person present at the tokens’ production site, namely the Miraculous Mountain where Symeon resides. In other words, the traces of a hand combined with dust from the saint’s shrine reinforce the material proximity of the tokens to the very person of the saint, turning them into legitimate contact relics. Through the production and dissemination of small objects that bear his corporeal traces, Symeon’s person becomes pluralized.

and characterized by divisibility and distributivity. Embodied in portable tokens, Symeon turns into a transcendent agent capable of manifesting his *dunamis* beyond temporal and spatial confines.

Based on what we know about the use of Symeon’s *eulogia* from his hagiography, the fragrant dust was believed to be explicitly medicinal. According to the author of the *Life*, for many who seek the saint’s help, healing is accomplished by the application of his holy dust.\(^{39}\) In an episode about a boy suffering from severe constipation, restoration of health is achieved immediately when the boy’s parents invoke Symeon’s name and smear the boy with the saint’s holy dust.\(^{40}\) Another story tells of a cripple in Antioch who recovers after having been rubbed with the *eulogia* made from Symeon’s blessed dust.\(^{41}\) Symeon himself is said to have given the following prescription to a man who seeks treatment for the lack of body hair: “take my dust and rub it all over your body, and as soon as you do, the Lord, through my humble service, will make hair grow on you appropriate to the condition of someone your age.”\(^ {42}\) Throughout the hagiography, Symeon’s dust is used as a kind of cure-all remedy for all kinds of afflictions and misfortunes.\(^ {43}\) The medicinal value of the saint’s dust is further made explicit by the inscription of “health” (*hygieia*) spelled backward found on some of the Symeon tokens (Fig. 10a), the same word found frequently on surviving stamps used by physicians on their prescriptions.\(^ {44}\)

The close study of Symeon’s hagiography and the Symeon tokens demonstrates that smell constitutes a key modality through which experiences of illness, suffering, and violence are

---

\(^{39}\) *Life*, 255; ed. Ven, I:221.

\(^{40}\) *Life*, 115; ed. Ven, I:94.

\(^{41}\) *Life*, 163; ed. Ven, I:145.


\(^{43}\) For another example, the dust is used to revive a sick donkey (*Life*, 148; ed. Ven, I:135). For a discussion of the medicinal use of Symeon’s dust, see Vikan, “Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium.”

\(^{44}\) Vikan, *Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*, 52–53.
articulated and addressed in late antique Syria. The olfactory serves as the sense through which people conceive, perceive, and vocalize their experience of the invisible social and cosmic forces that lead to illnesses, environmental disasters, and social havoc. Equally important is the role of the olfactory domain in formulating responses to such crises and framing experiences of healing and protection. Symeon’s holy being and sacred power are conceived in terms of fragrance, an invisible yet viscerally perceptible entity. Working through a contagious mechanism, the saint’s fragrant, diffusive being spreads its sanctifying presence through space and air, acting as celestial medicine that restores health and an invisible armor against evil forces such as wandering demons and invading barbarians. Materialized in multisensory tokens, Symeon’s health- and protection-granting power becomes available for a trans-regional network of pilgrims as olfactory relic, medicine, and apotropaic device.