

# **Scent in Medieval Hospitality Spaces**

*The Four Functions of Fragrance in the Medieval Experience of Welcome*

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Immersive Hospitality Research Series

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## **I. Introduction: The Forgotten Sense**

When we recreate medieval hospitality, we think about what people saw: the dressed table, the draped pavilion, the heraldic display. We think about what they tasted: the food, the wine, the spiced drinks. We think, sometimes, about what they heard: music, conversation, the sounds of a tournament field. We rarely think about what they smelled.

This is a significant omission. For medieval people, scent was not incidental to an experience; it was central to it. Smell carried meaning. A pleasant fragrance was understood as a sign of moral goodness, even of holiness. A foul odor signaled corruption, sin, or disease. The connection was not metaphorical; it was, in the medieval understanding, literal. The air one breathed shaped the health of the body and the state of the soul.

This meant that anyone responsible for creating a hospitable space, whether a great hall, a church, a pilgrim hospice, or a tournament pavilion, was expected to attend to scent as deliberately as they attended to food or decoration. Fragrance was a tool, and medieval hosts used it with intention and skill.

What follows is an attempt to understand that tool by examining not what medieval people used to scent their spaces (though those methods are discussed), but why they did it. Scent in the medieval hospitality context served four distinct functions, sometimes simultaneously: it welcomed guests, it protected health, it signaled the sacred, and it displayed status. Each function had its own logic, its own materials, and its own implications for how a space felt to the people inside it.

## **II. Scent as Welcome: The Hospitality of Clean Air**

The most fundamental function of scent in medieval hospitality was the simplest: making a space pleasant to enter. When a guest crossed the threshold of a great hall, a pavilion, or a hospice, the quality of the air was one of the first things they registered. A host who had strewn fresh herbs on the floor, warmed scented water for hand washing, or burned aromatic resins in the hearth was communicating something immediate: I expected you. I prepared for you. You are welcome here.

### **The Strewn Floor**

The most widespread practice was the strewing of fragrant herbs among the rushes that covered domestic floors. In medieval dwellings across Europe, floors were typically carpeted with rushes, reeds, or straw, which served as insulation and cushioning over stone or packed earth. These coverings absorbed spills, dropped food, and the general odors of daily life. Even in wealthy households, the rushes were fully replaced only once or twice a year, with fresh layers added for special occasions.

Fragrant herbs scattered among the rushes released their scent when walked upon, transforming the floor itself into a slow-release fragrance system. The Dutch traveler Levinus Lemnius, visiting England in 1560, recorded in his diary that the chambers and parlors he encountered were strewn with sweet herbs that refreshed him, and that nosegays of fragrant flowers in bedchambers cheered him and delighted all his senses.

Thomas Tusser, in his 1573 work *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, catalogs the recommended strewing herbs: basil, lemon balm, chamomile, pennyroyal, costmary, cowslips, daisies, fennel, germander, hyssop, lavender, lavender cotton, marjoram, mints, roses, rosemary, rue, sage, tansy, violets, and winter savory. Among these, meadowsweet held a special status. John Gerard noted that it was used to deck up houses and praised its ability to make the heart merry and joyful. Its particular virtue was that its scent grew stronger as it dried and was crushed underfoot, making it ideal for floor strewing.

The lady of the household was typically responsible for managing the strewing and the herb garden that supplied it. This was not a minor domestic task; it was one of the ways a noblewoman demonstrated her competence as a hostess and her care for the comfort of her guests.

### **Scented Handwashing Waters**

If the strewn floor was the background scent of welcome, the scented handwashing water was its most intimate gesture. Meals in the medieval period began and ended with handwashing, a practical necessity when food was eaten with the hands and dishes were shared. But the washing was far more than practical; it was a ritual of welcome and a sensory experience designed to signal that the guest had entered a space of care.

The water was almost always scented. *Le Menagier de Paris*, the 1393 French household management guide, provides a recipe: boil sage, then strain the water and cool it until it is a little more than lukewarm. Or, instead, use chamomile and marjoram, or rosemary, and cook with the peel of an orange. Bay leaves, the author adds, are also good.

The simplicity is deceptive. The choice of herbs communicated something. Sage was practical, with believed antibacterial properties. Rosemary signaled greater care and was associated with memory and fidelity. Orange peel, which required imported citrus, was a gesture of luxury. Rosewater, which became fashionable among the nobility after Crusaders brought the practice back from the Levant, was the most prestigious option. Bowls of rosewater stood on the dining tables of the wealthy, available for guests throughout the meal.

In the grandest households, the handwashing was elaborately staged. Servants poured scented water from ornate aquamaniles (pitchers, often shaped like animals or mounted knights) and lavabos (hanging bowls with spouts) over the hands of seated guests. The quality of the vessel, the warmth and scent of the water, and the whiteness of the towel all reflected on the host. The scented handwashing was, in essence, a threshold ritual: the first sensory signal that the guest had crossed from the outside world into a space of hospitality.

### **III. Scent as Protection: Fragrance Against Disease and Corruption**

The medieval understanding of disease was built on the miasma theory: the belief that illness was transmitted through bad air, specifically through foul odors. This was not superstition in the way we sometimes characterize it; it was the dominant medical framework of the period, rooted in Galenic humoral theory and supported by centuries of scholarly tradition. If disease traveled through bad smells, then good smells were genuinely protective. Fragrance was medicine.

This belief had profound consequences for how spaces were managed. Every practice of scenting a space carried a dual purpose: what was hospitable was also hygienic, and what was hygienic was also hospitable. The line between the two was not drawn.

#### **Fumigation and Aromatic Burning**

The burning of aromatic substances to purify the air was practiced across every level of medieval society. Rosemary, lavender, and other astringent herbs were burned as fumitories, specifically intended to drive out the noxious humors of plague and other illnesses and to clear rooms where illness had been present. Juniper berries were burned for the same purpose. During the Black Death of 1347 and its recurrences, the therapeutic function of fragrance intensified dramatically. Doctors and apothecaries prepared various anti-plague preparations, and fumigation with aromatic herbs became a standard public health measure.

The practice was not limited to crisis. Churches routinely burned incense in part because large gatherings of people in poorly ventilated stone buildings generated exactly the kind of concentrated foul air that the miasma theory warned against. One surviving church blessing explicitly praises incense for its air-purifying quality: May the Lord bless this incense to remove every harmful stench, and to kindle it for His sweet fragrance. The burning of incense during services was simultaneously worship and sanitation.

#### **Pest-Repelling Herbs**

Many strewing herbs served a protective function beyond their fragrance. The connection between pleasant scent and practical pest control was well established. Tansy discouraged flies. Pennyroyal and other mints repelled fleas and ticks. Rue and wormwood were believed to ward off plague-bearing vermin. Cedar shavings repelled moths. Sage,

rosemary, basil, and bay leaves were understood to have insecticidal as well as aromatic properties.

In a world without chemical pest control, these were not folk remedies; they were the available technology. A floor strewn with pennyroyal and tansy was a deliberate intervention against the fleas that infested rush-covered floors, and a host who maintained this practice was protecting the health of everyone in the space.

### **The Pomander: Portable Protection**

The pomander, from the French *pomme d'ambre* (amber apple), was the miasma theory made personal and portable. A ball of aromatic resins, including benzoin, labdanum, and storax balsam, ground together and coated with cinnamon, cloves, and sometimes ambergris, the pomander was carried in the hand, tucked into clothing, or worn in a pierced metal case on a chain. Held to the nose, it created a bubble of clean, fragrant air around the wearer.

The pomander descended conceptually from the church censer. The same practice of warming aromatic resins to release protective fragrance, miniaturized for individual use. Nobility carried pomanders through city streets, into crowded gatherings, and to events where the air quality might be uncertain. The practice reveals a medieval assumption worth noting: scent was understood as a personal responsibility as well as a communal one. A guest arriving at a feast might carry their own pomander, layering personal fragrance onto whatever scent environment the host had created.

## **IV. Scent as Sacred: Fragrance and the Divine**

The most intensely scented spaces in the medieval world were churches, cathedrals, and pilgrimage shrines. Here, scent operated on an entirely different register than it did in the domestic household. In the sacred context, fragrance was theology made material.

Incense was the primary vehicle. Frankincense, myrrh, sandalwood, benzoin, and various blends of resins were burned in thuribles (censers) swung on chains during the liturgy. The practice had roots in the Old Testament, where Moses receives a specific recipe for incense exclusive to the Temple, and in early Christian worship, where it served as a gesture of reverence, a symbol of prayers ascending to heaven, and a means of setting sacred space apart from ordinary space.

The theological dimension cannot be overstated. In the medieval understanding, scent and holiness were directly connected. The concept of the odor of sanctity held that saints, during their lives and especially after death, emitted a supernaturally pleasant fragrance. This was understood not as a metaphor but as a physical manifestation of divine grace. When the second-century Bishop Polycarp was martyred by burning, his hagiographers reported that his body smelled not of charred flesh but of frankincense and myrrh, connecting his death to both the incense of the Temple and the gifts of the Magi. Pleasant fragrance was evidence of holiness; foul odor was a sign of corruption and sin.

### **The Sensory Design of Shrines**

Medieval shrine spaces were deliberately designed as multi-sensory experiences. Artists and architects, working with their patrons, used visual spectacle, sound (chanting, music, the designed acoustics of stone), and scent to shape the pilgrim's experience and impress it on memory. In the small, enclosed spaces typical of shrines, pilgrims did not merely smell incense; they were enveloped in it. Scholars of medieval sensory experience have observed that visitors would quite literally taste the air of the saint's locale, an experience intensified by the incense burning at the site.

The scent of a shrine was layered. Incense provided the dominant note, but beeswax candles contributed their own distinctive honey-sweet fragrance, quite different from the animal-fat smell of the tallow candles used in most domestic settings. The presence of beeswax (expensive; tallow was cheap) was itself a marker of sanctity and investment. Aromatic oils might anoint the reliquary. Flowers or fragrant herbs might be strewn. The

combined effect was a scent profile unique to ecclesiastical spaces, one that medieval people would have recognized immediately upon entering.

### **Frankincense and the Language of Worship**

Frankincense occupied a privileged position among aromatic resins. It was the incense of the Temple, one of the gifts of the Magi, and the substance most associated with divine worship across the Christian tradition. Its smoke was understood to symbolize prayer ascending to God. The burning of frankincense in a space did not merely make it smell pleasant; it made it sacred. The scent itself was a boundary marker, separating the holy from the profane, the inside from the outside, the space of worship from the space of daily life.

This matters for understanding hospitality because many medieval hospitality spaces had sacred or semi-sacred dimensions. A hospice run by a religious order was not merely a guesthouse; it was an expression of Christian charity, and the scenting of its spaces with incense or aromatic herbs participated in that spiritual identity. Even a noble household, where hospitality was understood as a moral obligation rooted in Christian teaching, might use the language of sacred scent to elevate the act of welcoming guests.

## **V. Scent as Status: Fragrance and Social Display**

The fourth function of scent in medieval hospitality was social communication. The quality, rarity, and sophistication of the fragrances a host employed were legible markers of wealth, taste, and cultural knowledge, just as the quality of the food, the fineness of the textiles, and the elaborateness of the table setting were.

### **The Economics of Fragrance**

Not all scents were equal, and medieval people knew it. Strewing common herbs like mint or tansy from the kitchen garden was within the reach of any household. Strewing lavender or rosemary required a better-tended garden. Rosewater for handwashing was a luxury that signaled access to either a still or a merchant who traded in distilled waters. Imported frankincense, ambergris, or exotic spices placed a host at the top of the fragrance hierarchy.

Rosewater is a particularly revealing case. Its popularity among European nobility was directly linked to the Crusades, which brought sustained contact with the perfumery traditions of the Islamic world, where scented preparations had been highly developed for centuries. Arab and Persian physicians had refined distillation techniques that European practitioners adopted, and the trade in aromatic materials connected Mediterranean commerce, the Silk Road, and the spice ports of the Middle East. A host who served rosewater at table was participating, however indirectly, in a global trade network, and the sophistication of the gesture would have been recognized.

### **Vessels and Ceremony**

The handwashing ritual illustrates how scent and material display intertwined. The water itself was scented, but it was served in vessels that were themselves objects of art and wealth. Aquamaniles, the pitchers used to pour water over guests' hands, were made of bronze, silver, or gold, often elaborately cast in the shapes of animals, mounted knights, or fantastic creatures. Lavabos, the hanging bowls with spouts, could be equally ornate. Queen Jeanne d'Evreux of France included several aquamaniles among the precious table decorations listed in her will.

The ceremony surrounding the handwashing amplified the display. Those who dined with a medieval king were greeted by musicians and ushered into a lavatory with luxurious basins, fresh white towels, and scented perfumed water. The experience engaged every

sense: the music, the warmth and fragrance of the water, the visual beauty of the vessels, the softness of the towels. Each element reflected on the host's generosity and refinement, and the scent of the water was inseparable from the rest.

### **Pomanders as Personal Display**

The pomander, discussed earlier as a health measure, was equally a status object. The materials were expensive: ambergris was rare and costly, musk was an imported luxury, and the metal cases that held pomanders were crafted by skilled goldsmiths and silversmiths. Wearing a fine pomander communicated wealth as clearly as wearing fine jewelry. The scent a person chose to carry was, like their clothing, a statement about who they were and where they stood in the social order.

A host's choice of fragrance for their space, and a guest's choice of fragrance for their person, were parallel acts of social communication. The scent environment of a medieval hospitality space was a collaboration, however unspoken, between host and guest, each contributing to the olfactory character of the gathering.

## **VI. The Four Functions Together: Scent as the Architecture of Atmosphere**

In practice, these four functions rarely operated in isolation. A floor strewn with lavender was simultaneously welcoming (pleasant), protective (antibacterial, flea-repelling), and a marker of status (lavender was more expensive than common rushes alone). Incense in a church was simultaneously sacred (symbolizing prayer), protective (purifying the air of a crowded space), and a display of institutional wealth (frankincense was not cheap). Rosewater at the table was welcoming, luxurious, and, by the logic of the miasma theory, hygienic.

This layering is the key insight. Medieval people did not think of scent as belonging to one category. They did not distinguish between a fragrance that was hospitable and one that was healthy and one that was holy. The best scents did all three things at once, and the best hosts understood this. A well-scented space was a well-managed space, and a well-managed space was a sign of a competent, generous, and morally serious host.

The implications for recreating medieval hospitality are significant. Scent is the only sensory dimension that operates entirely below the threshold of conscious analysis for most people. Guests in a space will notice, immediately and viscerally, whether it smells like a parking lot or a medieval pavilion, but most will not be able to articulate why the space feels different. This makes scent uniquely powerful as a tool of immersion. It does not require the guest to know anything about medieval history; it works on the body directly, creating mood, triggering memory, and communicating care before the conscious mind has time to process what is happening.

The medieval host understood this. The question is whether we are willing to learn from them.

## **VII. A Note on Practical Application**

The methods described in this paper are, for the most part, accessible and inexpensive. Strewing herbs on the floor of a pavilion requires nothing more than a trip to a grocery store or a garden; lavender, rosemary, mint, and sage are widely available. A bowl of warm, herb-infused water offered for handwashing before eating requires a kettle, some sage or rosemary, and a clean towel. A small dish of frankincense resin on a charcoal disc creates the scent profile of a medieval sacred or semi-sacred space. Even dried herbs in small bowls placed around a tent will gently perfume the air.

The harder task is not sourcing materials but shifting the mindset. Adding scent to a hospitality space requires thinking of the space as a complete sensory environment rather than a visual display with food. It means arriving early enough to strew herbs before guests arrive. It means heating water. It means choosing a scent profile that fits the theme and mood of the event, just as you would choose a color palette or a food menu.

The evidence presented here suggests that medieval hosts would have considered this obvious. For them, the scent of a space was as fundamental as its furnishings. For those of us who seek to recreate that experience, attending to scent may be the simplest and most powerful tool we have not yet fully used.

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