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Elliott Wise

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AN “ODOR OF SANCTITY”: THE ICONOGRAPHY, MAGIC, AND RITUAL OF EGYPTIAN INCENSE

ELLIOTT WISE

Fragrance has permeated the land and culture of Egypt for millennia. Early graves dug into the hot sand still contain traces of resin, sweet-smelling lotus flowers blossom along the Nile, Coptic priests swing censers to purify their altars, and modern perfumeries export all over the world.¹ The numerous reliefs and papyri depicting fumigation ceremonies attest to the central role incense played in ancient Egypt. Art and ceremonies reverenced it as the embodiment of life and an aromatic manifestation of the gods. The pharaohs cultivated incense trees and imported expensive resins from the land of Punt to satisfy the needs of Egypt’s prolific temples and tombs. The rise of Christianity in the first century CE temporarily censored incense, but before long Orthodox clerics began celebrating the liturgy in clouds of fragrant smoke. Some of incense’s ancient properties of life and fertility were even persevered under the new theology. By examining the iconography and magic of incense, this paper will trace the themes of intercession, rejuvenation, and deification from their cultic and funerary origins to their reverberations in the monasteries and churches of Coptic Orthodoxy.

The “Fragrance of the Gods”

The most common depictions of incense in ancient Egypt come from tombs and temples where standard scenes present a pharaoh or priest fumigating a mummy or the statue of a god. The smoking censer often takes the shape of a human arm ending in a hand holding a charcoal-filled bowl. The officiator would select precious pellets of resin from a small compartment located halfway along the arm and throw them into the bowl. These censers proliferated during the middle and later dynasties of Egypt, and they imitate the derep

¹ A. Lucas writes that traces of incense have been discovered in graves from the earliest to the latest eras of Egyptian history. A. Lucas, Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1962), 96.
hieroglyph for “offering.” In addition to pictorially recalling the gift-giving nature of fumigation, the long, arm-shaped censer prevented burns from the hot charcoal and also protected the incense from being polluted by human hands. Although temple and tomb censing rites accomplished similar purposes, cultic and funeral incense should be considered separately in order to categorize the nuances of Egyptian religious symbolism.

A 19th Dynasty relief from the temple of Seti I at Abydos provides a classic example of cultic fumigation (fig. 1). Seti leans forward towards a statue of Amun-Re, his right hand pouring water over a bouquet of lotus flowers while his left hand wafts smoke from an arm-shaped censer towards the god.

Fig. 1: Relief from temple of Seti I (Abydos, 19th Dynasty)

The incense signifies reverence and prayer, but on a deeper level it also evokes the actual presence of the deity by creating the “fragrance of the gods.” The temple text from the *Ritual of Amon* describes incense coming from the pores of Amun:

> The god comes with body adorned which he has fumigated with the eye of his body, the incense of the god which has issued from his flesh, the sweat of the god which has fallen to the ground, which he has given to all the gods . . . . It is the Horus eye. If it lives, the people live, thy flesh lives, they members are vigorous.

Some texts identify deities with specific scents or types of incense. Secret recipes for incense carved onto the walls of the temple of Horus at Edfu explain that the finest myrrh “springs from the eye of Re,” while other grades of myrrh come from the eyes of Thoth and Osiris, the back of Horus, “the divine limbs,” “the spittle,” and the bone of the gods. The Egyptians worshipped several patrons of fragrance, including Merehet, goddess of unguents; Chesmou, deity of perfume production; and Nefertum, the lion-headed god of incense described as “the lotus in the nostril of Re.”

The Egyptians carefully bought, transported, and stored their frankincense and myrrh, treating the pieces of resin like emblems of their gods’ bodies. Hatshepsut immortalized her expensive expeditions to Punt on the walls of her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri. Rows of men carry incense trees back to Egypt so that the sacred precinct could have the “odor of the divine land.” A New Kingdom priest named Hepusonb considered his temple duties of storing and offering incense so important that he included images of the resin trade in his tomb along with inscriptions detailing the amount of incense required by Amun each day. The monetary worth of incense doubtlessly signified the depth of Egypt’s devotion, and fittingly, the priests burned these expensive gifts before equally expensive cult statues made of gold and precious stones. Religious secrecy veiled the process for making incense and unguents, which required

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a set number of days, symbolic ingredients, and magical spells. Perhaps the priests believed that as they compounded fragrant resins with honey, wine, and raisins, they were mysteriously creating the body of the gods.

Thus in burning resins before the temple statues, the pharaoh and his priests sacramentally offer the god to the god, a concept which surfaces again in Christianity. Incense becomes the sensory equivalent of the cult statue—a manifestation in scent that complements the visual manifestation in gold or wood. Incense embodies Amun, the “Hidden One,” particularly well since both smoke and god can permeate the sanctuary invisibly. Myth and legends recount how other gods reveal their divinity through scent. In Plutarch’s Isis and Osiris, the queen of Byblos sees through Isis’s disguise only when she smells the “ambrosia”-like fragrance of the goddess, and the Coffin Texts mention the “fumes” and “scent” of the god Shu, described as the “storm of half-light,” or “byproduct of incense.”

Osiris has a particularly ancient connection to incense. Scholars believe his name used to mean “place of the eye” in reference to the legend of Horus offering his “sweet smelling” Eye to his father as a token of victory over Seth. Egyptians equated the Eye of Horus with incense, and they sometimes linked it specifically to the sticky juices of labdanum incense, which fell as tears from the god’s Eye onto gum-cistus bushes. Osiris became equated with these bushes—the literal “place of the [labdanum] eye”—and the Egyptians revered the goats wandering through the gum-cistus patches as manifestations of the Osirian ram of Mendes. As they ate the bushes, the goats’ beards became caked with hardened labdanum, and the incense could be harvested by cutting off their beards. Alternatively, ribbons of goatskin attached to flails were pulled over the gum-cistus plants to catch drops of labdanum. Osiris’s attributes of a goat beard and a flail connect him to the incense harvest and underscore the ancient centrality of scent in Egyptian religion. Pharaoh’s ceremonial beard and flail may have also carried incense connotations. Scholars hypothesize that the king’s crook represented his role as shepherd over his people while the flail

11. Fletcher, Oils and Perfumes of Ancient Egypt, 52.
reminded him of his duty to the gods. As tools for collecting labdanum, the flail and beard may have likened the king’s intercession for his people to gathering incense for the temple altars and then using the clouds of smoke to mediate between heaven and earth.

The decoration of many arm-shaped censers again references pharaoh’s role as chief intercessor with the gods. A miniature image of the king sometimes crouches behind the container for resin, located halfway along the length of the censer. Since the priest-king could not officiate at all of Egypt’s temples, these small sculptures may have endowed the priests with authority to fumigate the gods in place of pharaoh. In this way, the king’s presence could be magically invoked, regardless of who actually burned the resin.

The Egyptians depended on myrrh and frankincense trees for much of their incense, gathering the resinous “tears” and “sweat” of the gods as they exuded from the bark. These fruitful trees were venerated as mother goddesses, their resin described as divine menstrual blood. Other gods also offered life-sustaining fluids through tree bark. Illustrations from the Book of the Dead frequently show goddesses like Hathor encased in trees, refreshing the dead with a stream of water. In addition to appearing as a gum-cistus bush, Osiris’s djed sign implies that he evolved from a tree god, and spell 15 from the Book of the Dead calls him “lord of the naret-tree.” Plutarch adds that a bush of heather enclosed the god’s coffin until the king of Byblos cut the wood down to use as a column in his palace. Isis retrieved her husband’s corpse from inside the trunk and wrapped the remaining heather in scented linen for the people to worship. Osiris’s coffin parallels the sacred trees that secrete aromatic resins. Fragrance wafts from his corpse, from the heather blossoms surrounding it, and finally from the layers of perfumed linen. The Egyptians associated all the life-giving fluids that seeped out from Osiris’s decaying body with the resinous tears and sweat of the other gods.

The connection between incense and divine trees gains additional support from scholarship hypothesizing that the incense lamps used for offering light and aroma to the dead intentionally took a cone shape to imitate sycamores, incense trees sacred to Osiris. Their light-producing function imitates the sun,

20. Plutarch, Isis and Osiris, 41–43.
and their triangular form recalls the symbolic sunrays streaming down the sides of pyramids and obelisks. In the *Pyramid Texts*, the “scent of Horus’s eye” clearly symbolizes the sun since the falcon god uses the sun and moon as his eyes. Significantly, Re first appeared in a lotus blossom, the symbol for the incense god Nefertum, and the fragrance of that flower rises each morning like a fumigation to the sun god.

These solar associations endowed the censing rites with the magic to vivify the statues of the gods. The Egyptian priests symbolically offered animating sunlight to their gods in the form of the fragrant Eye of Horus. Like the aromatic sweat of Amum that wafts life into all the deities of the cosmos, the censer could breathe vitality into lifeless statues. The incense transferred the warmth and “odor of the living body” to inanimate objects, infusing wood or metal with the moisture of sweat. Libations of water assisted the incense in creating bodily fluids for the statues, and the Egyptians sometimes interpreted pellets of resin as the tears of Isis that resurrected Osiris and commanded the life-giving Nile to rise each year. As a result, incense resins became emblematic for the power that breathed life back into the mummified god of the underworld.

In a sense, Egyptian priests regarded their gods as corpses constantly needing to be resurrected. In an image of Seti I fumigating statues of Horus and Osiris, the angled direction of the flames rising from the censer indicates that the pharaoh directs the incense towards the gods by blowing through the censer (Fig. 2). In this way, he bestows life on the images through his own breath. Besides animating the cult statues, incense had other important functions in the cult. Fumigation cleansed the temple and bestowed life and divinity on offerings, making them fit for the consumption of the living gods. The concentrated scent

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26. Smith, *The Evolution of the Dragon*, 55. Smith mentions that the Arabic term for a type of Egyptian incense—*a-a-nete*—may preserve the tear symbolism because it translates to “tree-eyes.”
27. Smith, *The Evolution of the Dragon*, 38. Some Egyptian legends claim that Isis conducted a memorial service for each piece of Osiris’ mutilated body and buried them in separate locations all along the Nile. As a result, many temples claimed to have a relic of the god and a tomb dedicated to him.
of incense can create a hypnotic stupor, a property which may have aided priests as they mediated with the gods. Plutarch writes that “the odor of resin contains something forceful and stimulating” that “gently relax[es] the brain, which is by nature cold and frigid.” Plutarch expounds on this numbing, relaxing power when he writes that kyphi causes “a beneficent exhalation, by which the air is changed, and the body, being moved gently and softly by the current acquires a temperament conducive to sleep.” He associates this druglike sensation with wine and drunkenness. It may be that Egyptians fumigated their gods in thick clouds of pungent smoke in order to lull them into a druglike trance. This would make it easier to manipulate the deities into assisting questionable or undeserving causes. Pharonic religion certainly has precedents for this type of “divine deception.” Spell 30b in the Book of the Dead prevents the heart of the deceased from confessing its evil deeds to the gods, and Spell 14 dissipates the anger of a deity with magic and offerings.

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“If It Lives, the People Live”

The life-giving properties of incense take on new implications in the cult of the dead and especially in the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony, illustrated by papyri like Hunefer’s nineteenth-dynasty Book of the Dead (fig. 3). In this image, the jackal-headed god Anubis presents a mummy to a group of mourners while a priest offers incense and libations from behind a pile of gifts. The “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony functioned similarly to the rites that animated statues of the gods, with the smoke infusing the corpse with the “odour of the living.” It may at first seem eccentric for the Egyptians to single out scent as the most potent tool for restoring life. Scholar G. Elliot Smith writes that Egyptians naturally would have considered odor as a fundamental characteristic of living, breathing, heavily perfumed men and women as they sweated in the sweltering sun along the Nile. The absence of scent would have automatically indicated death. Dating back to primitive burials in the desert sand pits, incense accompanied the corpse as the vehicle for restoring fragrance, warmth, and moisture to the scentless, desiccated, and cold bodies of the dead.

Fig. 3: Opening the Mouth Scene, Hunefer Funerary Papyrus (19th Dynasty)

As with temple fumigation that assured “living” offerings for the “living” gods, the vivifying qualities of funeral incense could also be used to animate non-humanoid objects. Priests performed the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony on heart scarabs to make them give a positive testimony when the deceased appeared before the underworld tribunal of Osiris.  

Even cartouches could have their “mouths opened,” as in a relief inscribed in the temple of Seti I where Seti and his son offer incense to long columns of pharaohs’ names. For the Egyptians, who believed that every object possessed a spirit, incense could restore warmth and moisture to anything.

Although resin burned in the temples could represent the bodies of multiple different gods, the incense and libations used to “open the mouths” of mummies primarily referenced Osiris. The funeral rites dramatically reenacted the myth of his resurrection. The son of the deceased usually officiated before the mummy in imitation of Horus and his legendary visit to Osiris’s corpse. The falcon god vivified his dead father by offering him his Eye, the sign of his victory over Seth. In the same way, the dutiful son would burn “the scent of Horus’s eye” before the mummy to ensure his parent’s triumph over death. Appropriately, a falcon head often appears on censer handles, like a tangible corollary for the abstract “version of Horus” rising as incense from the other end of the censer.

With cultic incense, priests offered the resinous body of the god to the god himself or to other gods. The funeral fumigation resurrected the dead by administering Osiris’s resinous flesh, bones, and sweat to the mummy, transforming the corpse into Osiris. An incense text from the Middle Kingdom describes this process of receiving the various parts of Osiris’s body: “The incense comes (twice). The grains [of incense] come (twice). The toe comes. The back-bone of Osiris comes forth. The natron goes (twice). The members which issued from Osiris.” As the dead “absorb” the god’s flesh, they not only receive life but also the god’s divinity. During fumigation, the mummy appears to “inhale” the gods’ breath in the form of incense. Sharing the divine breath bestows godhood on the dead, a concept described in the Book of the Dead during the nocturnal voyage of the sun god’s barque through the watery underworld: “I breathe the air which comes out of your nose, the north wind which


39. Ions, Egyptian Mythology, 32. Sometimes the son performing the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony used a rod with a ram’s head carved on it. This identified him ritually with Horus. There may be a connection between this animal-headed instrument and the arm-shaped censers with their hawk-headed handles.

40. Blackman, “The Significance of Incense,” 74.

41. Middle Kingdom incense formula, quoted in Blackman, “The Significance of Incense,” 74. Most depictions of the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony also include a priest offering a calf’s leg to the mummy. This motif may be connected to the arm-shaped censer used to fumigate the corpse. Since the incense can also be interpreted as parts of Osiris’s body, the ceremony offers arms and legs on several literal and symbolic levels.

comes forth from your mother. You glorify my spirit, you make the Osiris my soul divine.”

Even Egyptian lexicon reflects this symbolism with the word senetcher, meaning “incense,” deriving from the word, senetcheri, meaning “to make divine.”

Although the Middle Kingdom democratization of the funeral rites extended aspects of godhood to ordinary people, the deifying quality of incense applied most readily to pharaoh. In the spells from the west-south walls of the antechamber of Unis’s pyramid, the king becomes a god as he exchanges his “scent” with the heavenly scent of the deities: “Your scent has come to Unis, incense: Unis’s scent has come to you, incense. Your scent has come to Unis, gods; Unis’s scent has come to you, gods, Unis shall be with you, gods; you shall be with Unis, gods.”

Incense could also be used to acknowledge the living king’s divinity. In the texts for the fumigation rites of pharaoh’s coronation the distinction between king and deity blurs as the officiator asks pharaoh, to “take . . . the fragrance of the gods (censing) . . . which has come out of thyself.”

Wearing the royal crown that signified the Eye of Horus, the king shared the life-giving fragrance emanating from the Egyptian pantheon.

Birth symbolism in censers and incense intensifies the power of fertility and renewed life. According to the Coffin Texts, the first deity created gods and humans from the same fluids that mystically produce precious incense resin: “I made the gods evolve from my sweat, while people are from the tears of my Eye.”

Papyrus plant motifs often complement the decoration on arm-shaped censers, doubtlessly a reference to the primeval swamp of creation. Perhaps Egyptians even interpreted the bowl resting on the hand of the arm-shaped censer as a womb, which “conceives” new life as it burns frankincense and myrrh—the menstrual blood of the tree goddesses. “Giving birth,” to the smoky, evanescent bodies of the deities, the censer bowl could also symbolize Nut, the primeval mother of the gods. Interestingly, the hieroglyph for her name suggests both a womb and a vessel for carrying water. In the Book of the Dead the goddess bears a divine child who rises from her womb like an aroma—“the flower which came out of the Abyss, [whose] mother is Nut.”

Nut gives birth to the sun each morning, and in a similar way, the censer “gives birth” to the rejuvenating, solar Eye of Horus.

43. Spell 15 in “Book of the Dead.”
44. Wilkinson, Symbols and Magic, 93.
45. Pyramid text 176 from the antechamber, west-south walls of the Pyramid of Unis, in Allen, The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts, 49.
47. Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods, 131.
48. Spell 1130 in Hallo, The Context of Scripture, 1.27.
49. Interestingly, the wooden coffin holding a mummy until it resurrects also was thought to represent the womb of the tree mother. See M. L. Buhl, “The Goddesses of the Egyptian Tree Cult,” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 6 (1947): 80–97.
50. Spell 42 in “Book of the Dead.”
The “Sweet Savour” of Coptic Incense

Although the use of incense in Coptic Christian art and liturgy most likely derives from ancient Egypt, the Church at first felt reluctant to embrace fumigation because of its pagan associations.51 Long before its appearance at services, however, some Christians used incense in their funeral rites.52 Paganism survived well into the Christian era, and even funerary incense probably continued to conjure up idolatrous mystery rites. For this reason, indications of incense in the official liturgy float unreliably in and out of historical documents for several centuries.53

The mystical writings of the Coptic Gnostics parallel the symbolism of pharonic incense. The concept of the “fragrance of the gods” and the sensory presence of deity finds a corollary in the Christian God who reveals himself through the “odor of sanctity.”54 Censing in the Coptic liturgy reflects the themes of resurrection and fertility associated with ancient fumigations. In the services of evening and morning incense as well as in the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil, priests burn frankincense while petitioning the Lord to accept deceased Church members into the “waters of restfulness,” and the “Paradise of Delight,” to “raise . . . their bodies” and “grant them the incorruptible in place of the corruptible.”55 Incense and water libations also accompany prayers for the fertility of the land. The swinging censer animates the local crops as the priest prays for “the vegetation and the herbs of the field,” “the face of the earth . . . for sowing and harvesting,” and for the “rising of the waters” of the Nile.56


52. Early believers envisioned incense as a symbol for prayer rising to heaven. Gero, “The So-Called Ointment Prayer in the Coptic Version of the Didache: A Re-evaluation,” 75. Gero gives an interesting example of burning incense used as a literary device to indicate prayer. He cites a group of sailors who sought the attention of the Virgin Mary as they were about to sink. The text says they “placed incense on the fire,” which is completely illogical on a wet, sinking ship. Rather, the phrase must mean that they prayed to her. Ernest Alfred Wallis Thompson Budge, ed. The History of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the History of the Likeness of Christ (London: Luzac, 1899), 138, n. 1.


The ancient Egyptians use of incense to “open the mouths” of the statues of their gods has some resonance in the Orthodox rite of censing icons—painted images of Christ and the saints. An icon becomes a mystical “window” of communication with the divine only after being blessed, incensed, and anointed with holy water or oil. Incense ritually helps restore life to the dead Christ on Easter morning after the clergy “inters” an icon of the Lord beneath the church altar. The priest incenses the altar and then “resurrects” the icon from its liturgical tomb to the sound of a triumphant anthem.  

Just as the pellets of resin embodied the actual blood, sweat, and tears of the pagan deities, Coptic incense symbolizes Christ, particularly as he hung bleeding from the cross. In a poignant text from the Raising of Incense rite, the priest censes towards the east and north and announces, “This is He Who offered Himself an acceptable sacrifice on the cross . . . and His good Father smelt It in the evening on Golgotha.” In another section of the liturgy, the celebrant compares the incense offering to the sacrifice that Abraham burned on the altar in place of Isaac, the Old Testament shadow for the paschal Lamb of God. Incense so strongly evoked the presence of Christ that 12th century Copts developed a custom of confessing their sins into a censer. The faithful probably imagined that the smoke would carry their confession up to God, but they may have also viewed the ceremony as an opportunity to whisper their faults directly into the ear of Christ, mystically present in the white smoke billowing from the golden censer.

Although censers appear regularly in Coptic images dealing with the priestly duties of Aaron or the funeral of the Mother of God, a recently discovered Annunciation scene from the Monastery of the Virgin (al-‘Adra) in Dayr al-Suryan deepens the iconographical complexity of Coptic incense. The encaustic mural dates to the 12th century and had been obscured for hundreds of years by a painting on top of it. The Virgin sits on a throne surrounded by Old Testament prophets, while the Archangel Gabriel approaches to announce the message of the Incarnation. In analyzing the painting, scholar Lucy-Anne Hunt highlights the prominently placed censer balanced on a column. The smoke symbolizes the virginity of Mary, cited poetically in a Coptic hymn: “The fine incense of your virginity, Virgin Mary, rose more still than that of the Cherubim and Seraphim

59. See the “Inaudible Prayer Accompanying the Censing During the Catholic Epistles in the Liturgy of St. Basil,” in *The Coptic Liturgy*, 70.  
up to the throne of the Father.”

The lush plants and trees surrounding Mary symbolizes her virgin fertility, which will culminate in the birth of Christ. The censer makes an apt allegory for the new life springing from the Incarnation as the incense creates vegetation and life wherever its scent reaches. The Syrian Jacobite Mass of the Catechumens also describes the Mother of God and her divine Child in terms of scent: “The blessed root that budded forth and sprang up out of a dry ground, even of Mary, and all the earth was filled with the savour of its glorious sweetness.” The Coptic doxologies reinforce this theme, beseeching the Virgin to “come out of thy garden, thou choice aroma.” Hunt notes that the direction of the rising incense lines up with a cross surmounting one of the buildings framing the Virgin’s throne. This foreshadows Christ as the crowning blossom on the root of Jesse, growing up from his mother just as the vinelike coil of incense smoke “grows” up from the censer. The Liturgy of St. Basil even refers to Mary’s womb as “the censer of gold,” and “her sweet aroma” as Christ.

The burning bush next to mural’s depiction of the prophet Moses, combined with the inscription on his scroll alludes to the Orthodox tradition of comparing the flaming bush of Sinai to the virgin-fertility of the Mother of God. In icons of the burning bush, the Virgin frequently bears the Christ Child at her bosom surrounded by the bush and a circle of fire. The smoke produced by the flaming leaves and branches relates to the tree resin burning inside a golden, spherical censer. Icons from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai sometimes depict Mary standing in front of a blossoming shrub as a substitute for the burning bush. This deepens the fertility symbolism of fire and smoke and again anticipates Christ as a “budding rod,” the blossoming fruit of Mary’s spherical womb. The fire within the Coptic censer conceives Christ and allows him to rise aromatically through the air. This womblike censer may be a final development in the ancient associations linking Nut and the maternal tree goddesses to the harvesting and burning of pharaonic incense.

Religion along the Nile has relied heavily on incense to convey an “odor of sanctity” to ritual and art. Pharonic reliefs abound with depictions of arm-shaped censers perfuming the offering tables of gods, kings, and mummies. In
the lonely monasteries of the desert and the great churches of Alexandria Coptic priests intone the liturgy behind a white mist of pungent smoke. For ancient Egypt, the burning frankincense and myrrh distilled through the air, recalling the womb of creation, the fluids of deity, and the life that depends on the rising sun. Although the early Coptic bishops strove to eliminate the superstitious idolatry of new converts to Christianity, some pagan ideas survived, notably in the theology and iconography of incense. The sweet smoke began to connote the hope for life after death, the fertility of the land, and especially the fruit of the Blessed Virgin’s womb—God himself, who like a fragrance, “fill[s] all places, and [e]xist[s] with all beings.”

70. “Pauline Prayer of Incense,” in The Coptic Liturgy, 68.