

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Frankincense & Myrrh

Wanda Sellar & Martin Watt

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About the Book

The story of frankincense and myrrh runs in tandem with man's evolution. Their use in so many varied ways has accompanied man and woman through the uncertain and often stormy path of life.

Once prized as highly as gold, frankincense and myrrh's use in perfumery suggested an exclusivity as do the celebrated perfumes of today. But they offered much more than mere aesthetic delight. At times they were a life-line to spiritual and physical health and well-being.

Over many centuries the use of frankincense and myrrh pervaded a wide range of societies and religions. The caravan trails for this valuable cargo have disappeared but these aromatics continue to be valuable commodities both in the East as well as in the West.

Frankincense and Myrrh continue to excite the imagination and are probably the most famous aromatics of all time. Their appeal and magic will never die and this book explains why.

Also by Wanda Sellar

THE DIRECTORY OF ESSENTIAL OILS

Frankincense & Myrrh

Through the Ages
and a complete guide to their
use in herbalism and aromatherapy today

Wanda Sellar & Martin Watt

Indexes Compiled
by Lyn Greenwood



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DEDICATED TO
Bernie and Sue

THE INCENSE TRAIL



Foreword

The idea for this book was conceived soon after a trip to Tunisia. Our goal was to visit essential oil production areas, but we also had time to wander amongst the ruins of Carthage - once the centre of the Phoenician Empire. Amongst the fallen rock and ballista balls, we saw the crimson vetch growing amongst the cypress and eucalyptus. Here and there were yellow-green umbels of caraway or fennel and fig trees growing out of stone walls. Yet the most arresting sight amongst the ruins was the startling yellow of the mimosa trees, the tiny yellow pompons arranged in elongated clusters spreading like sunshine through the pinnate leaves.

Here was splendid evidence of an ancient herb garden. Over the centuries, these herbs and plants of various shapes and colours seeded themselves amongst the ruins and had brought a spark of the past into the present. It was a whimsical notion of course, but as we surveyed the colourful profusion of plants, we imagined them standing as silent witnesses to the events of history.

It would be interesting, we thought, to chronicle the history of some celebrated plant and see how it had influenced civilisation throughout the ages. Somehow the name of frankincense suggested itself, and who can refer to this well-known aromatic without also referring to myrrh? These plants have many associations. The ancient pyramid vaults, the great religions and the three gifts bestowed on Jesus, conjure up so many fascinating images. Of course, frankincense and myrrh were also used extensively in healing.



A Hieroglyph for Incense

We were amazed how much information there was on these plants – but you had to know where to look for it. First-class botanical and historical information was to hand, though much of it was quite technical. We have tried to draw together the strands of information, to provide a comprehensive picture of how these resins have been utilised by mankind over thousands of years. This process has been tremendously enhanced by recent scientific research, which is indicating that aromatic plants do indeed have potent effects on our emotional and physical health. Of course our predecessors knew that thousands of years ago.

However, since the book may be of general interest to the public as well as practitioners of the healing arts, a glossary of terms is given at the back. We have also tried to reference our material in as much detail as possible.

To commemorate our journey through the clouds of incense, we have also made our own ‘Meditation Blend’ and named it ‘Lebonah’.

History

'Until the day break, and the shadows flee away
I will get me to the mountain of myrrh,
And to the hill of frankincense.'
Song of Solomon 4:6

WHICH OTHER AROMATICS fire the imagination more than the legendary frankincense and myrrh? They were the most prized aromatic gums of the ancient world and a significant source of wealth in southern Arabia. Their universal appeal has remained constant throughout the ages; surely a testimony to their intrinsic worth.

Was it ancient man who, back in the distant past, first discovered the haunting fragrance of frankincense and the smoky notes of myrrh? When he threw the twigs on the camp fires, did their aromas lull him to sleep? It is possible too that their preservative properties may first have been observed when insects were found in the resin masses, perfectly preserved. Perhaps when hands were grazed and cut gathering wood, their wound-healing properties were first noticed.



Aromatic gums, like frankincense and myrrh, developed into a precious commodity in the ancient world and their use, particularly in the form of incense, goes back to a period of extreme antiquity. 'Incense' referred to the

aromatic smoke rising from any odiferous material burned over hot coals, but throughout the centuries the word became synonymous with frankincense - meaning 'true incense'.¹ It was prized above all other resins except myrrh - which was three times as valuable - but frankincense generated five times the demand of myrrh.

Why were frankincense and myrrh so popular? Was it due to their superior aroma or perhaps because of their fixative value - giving a lasting quality to a perfume blend? Or could it be that the pervading strong smells of those times needed fragrant herbs and spices to mask unpleasant odours and keep vermin and insects at bay? Both resin gums had many uses: in perfumery, as varnishes and in medicine.

The magical frankincense was actually derived from the resin of a rather unspectacular scrubby tree found growing in the arid regions of Arabia and East Africa. Despite its lowly origins the world clamoured for its share of this beautiful resin which was used in perfumery, healing and worship. The name frankincense is derived from the Old French: *franc* meaning free, pure or abundant, and the Latin *incensum*, to kindle. It is also known as *olibanum* from the Arabic *luban* (referring to the milky juice exuding from the tree) although both frankincense and myrrh, as well as other balsam trees, were often referred to as luban. The Hebrews called it *lebonah*.



Myrrh

The myrrh tree has the same unprepossessing appearance as frankincense, nevertheless, it seems to

appeal to goats who feast in the prickly shrublands, and carry off myrrh globules on their beards. These are combed off, as we are led to believe, and sent to the market. (Apparently both myrrh and frankincense are said to make excellent fodder for both goats and camels.) Myrrh tends to grow all over southern Arabia but the principle growing areas appear to have been between modern Bayhan and Shabway. The true myrrh was often sold in markets under the name of *karam* to distinguish it from the opaque bdellium known as *meena harma*. Bdellium, probably *Commiphora africana*, was an inferior myrrh and often mixed with the true myrrh or sometimes substituted for it. Dioscorides opined the variety called *Troglodytica* to be the best. Myrrh is first mentioned in Exodus 30:23, and often referred to as *mor* or *myr*, a derivative from the Arabic *murr* meaning bitter.

It is supposed that frankincense and myrrh were used for the first time in ancient south Arabia. Archaeological evidence shows scripts on sherds found in Eilath dated to the fifth or sixth centuries BC. This is the earliest archaeological evidence of the incense trade.² A relief from the collection of South Arabian antiquities gathered by C. Rathjens Sabaeica, II, (Hamburg 1955, p.109 and 247, phot. 399) represents an offering-scene in front of an incense altar. Also, an hellenistic bronze statuette of a woman offering incense has been found in the Wadi Shalala and is now preserved in the National Museum in Sana under the signature YM 289. There is archaeological evidence for the use of incense in Palestine and Syria in the second millennium BC. At Megiddo elaborate pottery incense bowls on tall stands were found in a stratum dated to the 11th century BC, while a horned limestone incense altar is attributed to a stratum of 1050-1000 BC.³ It is not entirely clear however, whether the incense used was frankincense or myrrh or whether it came from south Arabia.

Indeed, excavations have unearthed incense burners in great numbers in southern Arabia.⁴ The south Arabian texts frequently mention incense offerings in domestic sanctuaries, though many incense burners have been found at the excavations of burial-places. The incense offerings were presented on small cube-shaped altars which have a cavity on top and four short legs or a quadrilateral base.



Theophrastus was probably the first to provide an eyewitness account of incense trees growing in south Arabia. This was by using the reports of reconnaissance vessels sent out by Alexander the Great. In *Enquiry into Plants* Theophrastus mentions that the harvested myrrh and frankincense, which was destined to be sold, was first brought to the temples of the gods. The resins, bundled and labelled, awaited the merchants who came to buy whichever bundle pleased them. A third - or according to Pliny (*Naturalis historia XII, 63*) a tenth part of the harvest was appropriated by the priests who seem to have exercised a monopoly in the trade. Indeed this is revealed in an epigraphic text, CIH 400, which is engraved on the pillar of a temple in Marib, clearly expressing the prohibition of taking away from the sanctuary or intercepting any incense of the sun-god.⁵ Obviously, frankincense was sacred to the gods and according to Theophrastus, particularly sacred to the sun-god.



BAAL

Chief importers of the resins were Egypt, Persia, Babylon, Assyria, Greece and Rome. Herodotus (c.300 BC), the Greek historian and traveller, describes the yearly tribute of a thousand talents (ancient unit of weight and money) of frankincense to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. This amounted to 98,422 lbs. The incense was burned at the altar in the great temple erected to the honour of Baal.

A similar amount was paid in tribute by the Arabs to the Persian king Darius (c.496 BC), no doubt in honour of his many conquests.⁶

Yet what was the significance of using resins like frankincense and myrrh in worship to god and king alike? Apparently it was thought that the smoke rising heavenwards from the sweet burning incense forged a symbolic link between the people and their gods. The burning of incense on more secular occasions is described by Herodotus. In the procession organised by Antiochus Epiphanes, king of Suria (Syria), at the Daphen sports, great golden dishes filled to the brim with myrrh and frankincense were carried by a cortege of young boys whilst the guests were sprinkled with scented water. Another procession followed with a golden altar, accompanied on either side by an incense burner made of ivy wood and gold.⁷

The use of frankincense and myrrh was, of course, not restricted to worship or aesthetic adornment. Since aromatics were derived from natural materials, their medicinal value was immense. Most of the ancient texts on medicines, perfumes and incense, from about 4000 BC onwards, included frankincense and myrrh. These can be found in the early Syriac Herbals, Egyptian Texts (both carved hieroglyphs and papyrus), Biblical books and in

Greek and Roman works. The Chinese, as far back as the 10th century, also imported frankincense from Arabia for medicinal use. The Chinese burned incense before they consulted their oracle book the *I Ching*. Though trading routes existed with the Arabian world, it is not known whether they used frankincense from India or from Arabia.

In fifth and sixth century the healers in India burnt incense sticks to subdue the demons that were causing problems for people suffering from arrow wounds. Once these evil spirits were driven away then the life of the patient was spared.

The Incense Route

Southern Arabia's wealth in ancient times rested very much on skilled irrigation schemes and agriculture. Yet it is also true to say that part of that country's wealth - and that of East Africa - was due to the valuable resins from the frankincense and myrrh trees. In 450 BC, Herodotus, Greek writer and historian, extolled their virtues in quite lyrical form. "The whole country is scented with them and exhales an odour marvellously sweet". The demand for frankincense and myrrh reached a peak about 2000 years ago when the caravans and their precious cargo, embarked on their journeys almost daily. Unfortunately, some of the myrrh was wasted during transport because the oil content easily escaped from the resin, unlike frankincense which was much more stable. Myrrh was pressed into goatskins to help retain the oil and frankincense was packed into basket-shaped containers to stop the 'tears' from sticking together. Although the resin trees grew plentifully in southern Arabia, the long arduous trek across the desert, packaging, labour and taxes meant that frankincense and myrrh became expensive commodities.

The route, it seems, began somewhere in the dry mountainous areas of the Yemen and Oman where the trees