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Scents of Place

Frankincense in Oman

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What a difference six and a half centuries can make! Writing in 1355, the great Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta reported that the *suq*, or market, of the southern Arabian city of Zafar smelled so vile, "because of the quantity of fruit and fish sold in it."

Today, Zafar has become Salalah, capital of the Sultanate of Oman's Dhofar Governorate. The suburb of al-Harja', where the market was located, has been supplanted by al-Haffah. And the smells of the *suq* would please Ibn Battuta, just as they please modern-day visitors: The occasional ghostly whiffs of drying sardines are overwhelmed by a voluptuous aura of aromatics. As one Omani said to me, splashing *eau de toilette* on the tassel of his *dishdashah*, and on me, "Scent? We can't live without it!"

Arabia has been famously fragrant since the earliest times. *Kitab al-Tijan*, probably the oldest Arab history book, has Ya'rub, the first speaker of Arabic, following the scent of musk southward from Babel. Greek and Latin authors wrote of an Arabia redolent with spices and aromatics. In Shakespeare's 17th-century view of 11th-century Scotland, Lady Macbeth wailed that all the perfumes of Arabia would not sweeten her blood-stained hand.

A look around the *suq* at al-Haffah proves that all this is no mere literary cliche: There are bottles and flasks of scent by the thousand, ranks of pottery incense burners in primary colors, and jar upon jar of obscure ingredients, waiting to be pounded, compounded and combusted by the ladies of Salalah. Few of the raw materials are local; most come from around—and in—the Indian Ocean, still as generous a sea as it was for the Arab navigators of the Middle Ages.

One product, though, is entirely indigenous to the southern Arabian Peninsula, and among all the sweet and heavy odors it provides an unmistakably clear note: frankincense. The scent of its smoke is everywhere, rich but not cloying, honeyed yet slightly astringent, with hints of lime, vetiver and verbena—the olfactory equivalent of a good sorbet. For thousands of years, this inimitable odor has carried the fame of Arabia across three continents.

Even today, Oman is permeated with frankincense. Government buildings are censed daily, even the elevators. At home, Omanis perform their courtly ceremonies of hospitality—the graceful pouring of coffee, the dates and sweets delicately proffered—in an atmosphere perfumed by frankincense. Outsized incense burners smolder in significant public places: Brazier-sized ones flank the entrance to the sultan's palace outside Muscat. And truly gigantic sculptures of incense burners can be found in urban traffic circles, where, as often as not, they function as fountains.

Entering Salalah, I noticed that the gigantic incense burners—this time disguised as planters—had escaped the traffic circles and run riot along the highway. Their square, crenelated form descends from types used more than two millennia ago, when Dhofar, together with the coastal areas across the modern border with Yemen, was known as the Frankincense Land. Later on, Arab writers referred to the area as al-Shihr and eulogized its principal product, in Arabic called *luban*. One poet said,

> Go to al-Shihr and leave Oman;
> You'll not find dates but you'll find *luban*.

The implication, perhaps, is that if dates are the staff of life, frankincense is the equivalent for the soul. Following the poet's advice, I had traveled the nearly 1000 kilometers (600 mi) from Muscat to see, and smell, where the human love-affair with frankincense began.

The tree *Boswellia*, which produces the gum, is found not only in southern Arabia, but also in Somalia and India. But of the 25 or so species of *Boswellia*, the one generally agreed to produce the finest frankincense is *Boswellia sacra*, which grows exclusively in Dhofar and, to a lesser extent, in the al-Mahrah and Hadhramaut regions of Yemen. The earliest reference to a frankincense trade comes in pharaonic records of around 1500 BC, which state that the gum came to Egypt from "the Land of Punt," which was probably located in the Horn of Africa. But by the Graaco-Roman period *Boswellia sacra* had

captured the markets, and exports from Arabia, mainly destined for the Mediterranean, reached an annual 3000 tons.

The Greek and Latin words for frankincense, *libanos* and *libanus*, come from Arabic *luban*, which, like the South Arabian *libnay*, derives from a root that refers to "milky whiteness." The Arabic scientific name for the gum, *kundur*, seems to derive, possibly via Persian, from a Greek pharmaceutical term, *khondros libanou* —"grain frankincense." On the Greek island of Delos, pre-Islamic Yemeni frankincense traders set up an altar with a South Arabian inscription at about the same time that architecture in the Arabian Peninsula began to sprout Hellenistic acanthus leaves and cornucopiae. Commercial and cultural links suffered a blow when the trade crashed with the rise of Christianity, whose early leaders wrinkled their noses at the vast and conspicuous consumption of Rome. Not until this century did Arabia and the West resume a comparably fruitful commercial intercourse—only, this time, the commodity was oil. Today, little frankincense leaves its homeland.

Even if the fishy smells described by Ibn Battutah have now been relocated, one feature in his account of the Salalah *suq* is still the same, 670 years on: The trade, at least in the perfume department, is run by women. Their stock spills out of their shops and on to the pavement, where they sit among piles of frankincense and other aromatics.

"Why don't you sit inside?" I asked one. Her name was Radiyyah bint al-Da'n 'Ashur, according to the signboard on her shop.

"Oh, I'm too old to be getting in and out of chairs," she said, but with a twinkle of self-parody in her eyes. The twinkle suited her well: Swathed in jazzy prints, she sported a gold rosette in one nostril and a magnificent coral-encrusted gold ring through the other.

"We're all getting older," I replied, looking at the extraordinary array of stock in the shop behind her. "Don't you have anything to restore youth?"

Radiyyah looked me in the eye: "Scents can't make you young. They can only bring back memories of youth."

After discourses on civet and musk, ambergris and aloeswood, I steered her onto the subject of frankincense. She explained how houses are censed daily, in the early morning and at sunset, to make them fragrant and to keep away pests. Water, too, is purified by the addition of a few grains of frankincense. Following a birth, mother and baby are censed. At weddings, ululating women hold smoldering burners high in the air, while the male guests dance around burners at their separate celebration. "And then there are all the other kinds of incense and perfume. At some weddings they spend 600 riyals [about $1600], just on scents!" she said. This time, the twinkle in her eye was a twinkle of business acumen.

Frankincense, then, is used in both celebration and purification, and this latter use is well-founded, for it is known to contain disinfectant phenols. But, I discovered, a savor of yet more ancient beliefs hangs about it. Late one afternoon, under the coconut palms of Salalah, I was enjoying a mug of milk fresh from the udder of a Dhofari cow. Sunset was near, and as the light faded, a herdsman began to cense the byre. "Omani sensitivity to smells," I thought, but my host explained that it was "to keep away germs." As a gum, frankincense has several more mundane uses: Heated with sesame oil and sand, it forms a sealant called *lukk* that is used for gluing Yemeni dagger blades into their hilts, and in the recent past it has served as a general-purpose crack-filler, a tooth-filling, and as the main ingredient in a depilatory wax.

Radiyyah mentioned too that frankincense was "good for stomach disorders." I remembered seeing references to it in medieval medical texts and, curious to learn more, consulted the 13th-century pharmacopeia of al-Malik al-Muzaffar. The author's academic credentials were sound: "I know more of medicine," he said, "than anyone." He writes that *kundur*, in humoral terms, heats and dries. It thus heals deep wounds and stanches fresh ones. Taken internally, it clears "darkness of vision," burns blood and phlegm, dries moisture in the head and chest, strengthens a weak stomach, stops diarrhea and vomiting, digests food and expels wind. It is good for febrile conditions and eases palpitations of the heart. Its smoke is efficacious against plague. (In the West, the makers of up-market cosmetics are beginning to use the gum in their products; perhaps, I thought, pharmacologists should take another look at it, too.) There was more: Chewing frankincense strengthens the teeth and gums. It eases speech impediments. And it even strengthens the "spirit" in the heart and brain, thus combating laziness and stimulating the memory. Overdosing, al-Muzaffar warns, can cause headaches, melancholy, scabies and, in extreme cases, leprosy. Wider reading revealed that the Yemeni polymath al-Haymi recommended a mixture of frankincense, olive oil and honey be taken in the bath as a remedy for rheumatism. He added that the gum is "an excellent stimulant of appetite in the 100-and-over age group."

I listened as Radiyyah went through the different grades of frankincense in her stock. "Those big yellow lumps aren't so good," she said. "These are better. Look, they're like pearls. But," she opened a small box, "these are the real *fusus"* Her word "gems" was

well chosen: Teardrops the size of fat ring-stones, some were silvery, others had opalescent hints of rose, green or topaz. "This is *najdi,"* she explained, "from the *najd* [plateau], the high land behind Jabal Qara." She pointed to the range of mountains across the plain from Salalah.

I had already made inquiries about where the best frankincense comes from. My informants, however, could not agree. In Jabal Qara, one had said that the best came from Mughsayl, west of Salalah. A farmer near Mughsayl said that the best came from 'Aydam, nearer the border with Yemen. The literary sources were similarly in disagreement. "The finest *luban* of all you won't find in the *suq,"* added Radiyyah, confusing the matter further. "It's called *hawjari* and it comes from around Hasik." I knew of the place, a small town on the coast 130 kilometers (80 mi) east of Salalah that Ibn Battuta, too, had mentioned as an important source of the best *luban.* On the formidable, twin authority of Radiyyah and Ibn Battuta, I felt I might really be on the track of the aristocrat of aromatics.

That evening, I lit some charcoal and placed a "gemstone" of *najdi* on it. It seemed not to burn, but to sublimate. The fumes spooled upward like a thick skein of cobwebs. The scent was heavenly. And this was only the second-best sort! A look at the map, however, went some way to explaining the rarity of Hasik's *luban:* Surrounded on all sides by the Samhan range, the town was entirely cut off from the road network. The only approach was by sea.

Not long after, I found myself walking down to the harbor at Sad'h, 100 kilometers (62 mi) nearer Hasik. "Sad'h," explained Salim al-'Adli, a native of the town, "was built on the *luban* trade." He pointed out a fine old merchant's house, its lime-plaster facade decorated with two sailing ships in low relief. Down in the cove, small fish skittered across the surface of the water, glinting in the morning sun. I was surprised to see another sailing vessel, not a representation but a real, full-sized *sambuq,* beached on the shore. Her stern was covered by a finely carved inscription: "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful: O Protector of souls in hulls, O Savior of hulls in the fathomless sea, protect this sambuq whose name is *al-Dhib [The Wolf]."* The prayer continued, giving the date AH 1371 (AD 1951) and asking the Almighty "to bring us bounty whence we know not." *Al-Dhib* was not yet 50 years old, but that final phrase, "whence we know not," took my imagination momentarily across an ocean of time to lands where camphor and aloeswood grew, to islands where the roc was said to have dwelt.

The diesel-engined *Asad al-Bahr (Lion of the Sea),* bound for Hasik with a cargo of rice, sugar, cooking oil and hay, did not inspire such daydreams. But the monsters of old were still at large: A few meters to starboard, an enormous tail appeared and began slowly thrashing the waves. Both whale and *Lion of the Sea,* though, were dwarfed by the cliffs of Jabal Samhan, beneath which we were passing. Forming a sheer wall, they trailed clouds like the scarves of an exotic dancer. I recalled a Greek description of the Frankincense Land, "mountainous and forbidding, wrapped in thick clouds," and I remembered those other monsters of old, first reported by Herodotus in the fifth century bc: vicious flying snakes that guarded the frankincense groves. Herodotus is often criticized for an over-fertile imagination, but the Dhofari scholar Sa'id al-Ma'shani has noted the existence of a rock drawing from the region which shows a man's leg and a snake. Possibly, he suggests, this is an ancient "No Trespassing" sign.

Five hours out of Sad'h, we arrived at Hasik. Here, where the cliffs retreat a little from the sea, a line of cuboid houses overlooked a placid bay that shimmered with dolphins' backs. As the deputy governor, 'Ali al-Shikayli, turned out to be from an old Sad'h family, I asked him about *al-Dhib.* "She was my grandfather's ship," he said, "and it was my father who did the calligraphy of the inscription you took down!" The unexpected connection set off a flow of reminiscences in which 'Ali explained how *al-Dhib* took frankincense to Aden, Basrah and Bombay. We were joined by some old Hasik frankincense hands, and the conversation began swerving between Arabic and Mahri. The Mahri tribesmen, traditional guardians and harvesters of the crop here, speak a derivative of the ancient South Arabian languages. Some of their current terminology can be found in inscriptions going back to the heyday of the trade with Rome.

The *luban* trees, I learned, grow in and above the three main wadis, or valleys, around Hasik. The *hawjari* type favored by Radiyyah comes from beyond the watershed, but the present panel of experts was unanimous that *luban* from the seaward side of the mountains, called simply *hasiki,* was even better. "Its scent is the strongest. And it is the only sort that improves with keeping."

Harvesting is carried out mainly between spring and early autumn. First, the outer layer of bark is removed, in half a dozen places on a medium-sized tree. The operation, known as *tawqi',* needs a careful hand: If cut to the "quick," a tree will become barren. This first *tawqi'* does not produce marketable frankincense, but it opens the "pores" of the tree. Subsequent *tawqi's,* made in the same spots at intervals of 10 days or more, allow the gum to exude. The third *tawqi'* produces the most, "like a cow milking better the more calves she has," they said. When the gum has hardened, it is scraped off and stored in the shade, preferably in a cave, until the end of the season. Then it is taken down-wadi to the sea.

This, at least, was what happened from well before the time of Herodotus until a scant half-generation ago. Now, Hasik has entered the Ice Age: An ice-making plant in town means that frozen fish can be exported to distant—and lucrative—markets. These commercial links have fueled demand for another product of the sea: abalone. With the shellfish selling to Far Eastern buyers for $200 a kilo ($90/lb), frankincense cannot compete. Although the women of Hasik collect a little for use at home, commercial frankincense harvesting has ceased. I now knew why the finest *luban* was also the rarest.

Next morning, Shaykh Musallam bin Sa'id al-Naqsh Thaw'ar al-Mahri, though he had long since retired from frankincense harvesting, agreed to give me a demonstration. Crossing the narrow plain behind Hasik, we entered Wadi Hadbaram. Cave-riddled cliffs, again topped with cloud, rose above a stream that meandered fitfully through reedbeds. The place was full of birdsong, and crumbling rock galleries above echoed with the beat of pigeons' wings. Not far into the wadi, Shaykh Musallam headed for the steep side of the gorge and started climbing. He was not a young man, and I hoped he would not regret this adventure. Yet in less than a minute, he was far above me. By the time I caught up with him, panting, he was looking at me pityingly through kohl-rimmed eyes.

We traversed a scree slope to a small outcrop, and found our goal—a group of three *luban* trees. Each about three meters (10') tall, or a bit less, they had several main trunks and a confusion of thin branches that had lately put out small, crinkly leaves. The trunks were silvery white and scarred, like the shins of an old warrior. With both hands, Musallam gripped his *manqaf*, a sort of chisel with a handle of *luban* wood, and with a few practiced downward strokes sliced off a patch of papery bark to reveal a pistachio-green layer beneath. More strokes removed the green layer, leaving a wound the color of raw steak. Slowly, beads of white liquid began to appear on the wound, like pus. (The word *tawqi'* is appropriate, for among its meanings in classical Arabic is "to gall a camel's back.")

As we slipped and stumbled down the cliffside in the hot sun, I reflected that a professional harvester would have to make this trip four times or more. Multiply that by the hundreds of trees scattered around the gorge and on the high tops, and the result was a lot of hard work for comparatively little gain: Frankincense sells for around $2.50 a kilo ($1.15/lb) wholesale, and most trees produce only a few kilos. I could understand the attraction of abalone, which can net a top diver $50,000 dollars in a two-month season.

Musallam was ready to go back to Hasik. I said that I would explore further.

"Watch out for snakes," he warned.

I remembered Herodotus. "Not flying ones...?"

"Yes. They jump out of the *samur* trees."

Herodotus, I thought, I shall always give you the benefit of the doubt.

For good measure, there were supposed to be leopards too. In the event, I saw nothing more alarming than the back end of a small rodent, disappearing into its hole. But I admit I gave every *samur* tree I saw the widest possible berth.

Back home, I lit some Hasiki frankincense, a going-away present from Shaykh Musallam. Whatever the substance of their other claims, the old pharmacists were right on one point: Frankincense stimulates the memory. For, as the smoke is released, so too is a stream of recollections: early-morning frankincense meeting the iodine tang of low tide, rustlings in the reedbeds of Wadi Hadbaram, a cow-byre at twilight; and older recollections, of censers in childhood churches and, finally of course, the Salalah *suq*, where Radiyyah sits among her stock, a benign commingler of smells.

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