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Oman
Frankincense

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In Salalah, in the south of Oman, not far from the ruins of Sumhuram, ancient port of the incense trade, anyone these days can buy the gift once thought fit for only a king: frankincense.

Though frankincense is mentioned in the Christmas story as one of the gifts brought by the Magi to Bethlehem (See *Aramco World*, November-December 1980), few people realize that the reason the Magi brought frankincense was that it was then a substance as valued as gold or jewels. As the Arab historian al-Tabari said, in describing the Magi's explanation of their gifts "... the smoke of incense reaches heaven as does no other smoke..."

The resin of the frankincense tree, *Boswellia sacra*, like myrrh and aloes wood, is one of a number of aromatic substances that, when burned, give off a pungent, pleasurable smell. This seemingly minor characteristic, however, was esteemed so highly in ancient cultures that almost all the peoples of the Mediterranean and the Middle East thought it vital to their religious rituals. They believed the fragrant white smoke from smoldering incense soothed angry gods.

The Temple of Baal, in Babylon, for example, burned two and a half tons of frankincense a year, according to ancient records, and in Rome, Pliny says, the emperor Nero burned an entire year's production of incense from Arabia at the funeral of his wife Poppaea.

Frankincense was also used for embalming corpses - pellets of frankincense, for example, were found in King Tutankhamen's tomb - and Celsus, the first century Roman medical writer, says the ancient Greeks used frankincense to treat hemorrhoids.

Exported by sea from Dhofar, or overland by camel through Medina to Petra, Damascus, Aleppo, Palmyra and other distribution points, frankincense brought prosperity to southern Arabia. Frankincense, in fact, was the basis of the economy of Oman's Dhofar province for over 2,000 years, peaking in the first and second century when King Il'ad Yalut of the Hadhramaut took over the incense-producing areas, built the port of Sumhuram, and so secured a monopoly of the frankincense trade.

With the decline of the Roman Empire, the demand for incense slackened somewhat; though Christians also used incense at high mass and other ceremonies, the quantities were comparatively small. Another reason was the problem of finding enough people willing to tackle the difficult work involved in collecting the frankincense resin.

Frankincense collection - which begins in winter, peaks in spring and ends with the summer monsoons - starts with shaving strips of bark from the *Boswellia sacra* trunk. The collectors use an instrument like a putty knife called a *mingaf*. From these wounds the frankincense resin, or *luban*, oozes out and hardens into crystals, which are scraped off the tree and collected in two-handled baskets of woven palm leaves. Even better frankincense - light and clean in color - can be obtained by simply waiting and collecting it from the ground after it has fallen from the tree and dried naturally.

As recently as 1946, some 2,800 tons of various kinds of aromatic gums and resins - including frankincense - were being handled by the merchants of Aden. But in that year an artificial substitute was developed in Rome - delivering the coup de grâce for Oman's frankincense trade. The substitute involved cheap chemicals, which were melded into a shiny, rock-like conglomerate and distributed in brown chunks that had to be broken apart by a hammer. It was unappealing. It lacked the mystic feel of the east. And its smoke was by no means as white. But it smelled exactly like frankincense - and cost much less. "Since then," laments a Salalah merchant, "trade in incense has become only a fraction of what it used to be."

What little is left of the frankincense trade today is mainly in the hands of the Bait Kathir and, to a lesser degree, al-Mahra tribes, in whose territories - the desert plateau above Salalah - the best frankincense trees grow. But even they no longer work at it with any diligence. Recently, for example, during what should have been the height of the season, I drove to the plateau and found no one at all collecting frankincense. So I took a penknife, scored the bark of a gnarled old frankincense tree, rested in the shade of its

low twisted branches while its resin oozed out and hardened, and walked off with a pocketful of crystals. Once worth their weight in gold, they didn't cost me a penny.

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