

The Frankincense trail

John Malathronas travels to Southern Oman's Dhofar region in search of the legendary Frankincense Trail and the lost city of Ubar

Of the gifts the Three Wise Men brought to Baby Jesus, no other puzzles a modern scripture reader more than frankincense. Gold, yes, that's fit for a King, and myrrh; indeed, we can all understand how good a present an expensive perfume makes, but frankincense? Isn't that the resin that smells funny when lit? What was the purpose of Caspar's offering – a mosquito-repellent for Joseph's family?

It's hard to convince someone today that two millennia ago burning frankincense was supposed to ward off evil and that Caspar might well boast that it was the power of his present that prevented Jesus being slain with all the first-born. Evil seems to have a nose for fine fragrances fit for a French sommelier: once the West was cut off from its source of frankincense around 300CE, garlic seems to have taken its place.

Whereas in the East, priests still shake their frankincense-burning thuribles, blessing their congregations during Orthodox worship.

Frankincense is a resin that has been tapped from *Boswellia sacra* trees in the lower Arabian Peninsula for at least 5,000 years and traded with the ancient Egyptians, Hindus, Chinese and Jews, all in thrall to its mystical virtues. The best quality comes from the Dhofar region of South Oman from where the caravans took it north for trade with the West and to the now-defunct port of Sumhuram for trade with the East.

Sumhuram in Dhofar is part of the Omani Frankincense Trail, a UNESCO site that extends up to the town of Shisr 170km inland. One of the most significant pre-Islamic ruins at the mouth of a river-water lagoon (Khor) is now marketed as the Palace of the Queen of Sheba. It does this important structure a disservice, because it does not allow us to view it as the defensive fort it was, as well as forgetting that Sumhuram was founded not in Solomon's time but in the first century BC. As befits a hub of frankincense trade, some magnificent limestone burners have been discovered, carved with lions, ibexes and eagles, and are now exhibited in the on-site museum.

An anonymous ancient Greek description of Dhofar as a 'mountainous, inhospitable country permanently encased in thick fog' comes as a surprise to those who view the Arabian peninsula as a 24/7 sun-parched wasteland. Yet not to the locals who are used to a summer monsoon season – the time when the ancient Greek boats passed by to trade. Amazingly, the region has two high seasons: winter, when wealthy Europeans descend to embrace the sun and escape the rain and cold of the north; and summer, when wealthy Arabs descend to embrace the rain and the cold – well, 25C; don't bring any pullovers – to escape the forbidding Gulf sun.

The frankincense tree does not like rain much, so it is native in three inner dry wadis, one of which, Wadi Dawkah, has been chosen as the site of a Frankincense Natural Park. Twenty kilometres inland from the Arabian Sea and beyond the moisture-catching al Qara mountain range, the park forms a living link with that legendary past of caravans and djinns. It is a strange tree when you encounter it, with almost no trunk and long, thick branches that spring out of the roots directly, like a bouquet out of a vase. It has been exploited to extinction elsewhere, since continuous tapping reduces its fertility, namely the germination rate of its seeds, by around 400 per cent.

Harvesting frankincense took place throughout the summer and the resin is left to dry on the branches for a week. It was then graded – first-tapped trees produce the best quality – and put in sacks to be sold to merchants in the town of Khisr 70km inland, the last outpost before the desert of Ar Rub al Khali (The Empty Quarter).



Shisr is reached today via a featureless orange and yellow Mars-scape, no stone larger than a fist. It has been excavated by none other than Sir Ranulph Fiennes and been widely conjectured to be the Lost City of Ubar (or Iram). It is best known from a passage of the Arabian Nights that asserts that 'one who tries to find Ubar will go mad', and another in the Qur'an that describes it 'as a city of lofty pillars whose citizens were punished by Allah because of their corruption'. It seems that desertification and the Roman-Parthian wars in the third century AD were the reason for its demise – and the end of the frankincense caravans.

Trade in the aromatic resin was only re-introduced with the Crusades (in case you were wondering where the 'Frank' bit comes from) but the only vestiges of its wide use remain in our language when we are 'incensed': a heraldic term denoting a beast with fiery eyes burning bright like, well, incense does.

Oh, and people in the southern Arabian Peninsula started marketing another plant introduced from Ethiopia on the African coast opposite.

It was called coffee.