

18 THE INCENSE ROAD – FRANKINCENSE

The best frankincense comes from trees that grow in southern Arabia and Oman. In the past medicines were made from it and as its fragrant smoke drifted upwards it was thought to give protection from 'the evil eye'. Collecting the resin that comes from frankincense trees is difficult work and in ancient times it was shrouded in mystery. Herodotus, a Greek writer, told of winged serpents that guarded the trees. What is certain is that there were many dangers and perils on the 2,735 kilometre journey as it was carried across the Arabian peninsula. Hundreds of camels laden with goods travelled the route with their masters. City states along the incense road grew rich supplying the needs of the camel caravans and charging them taxes as they went through. There were severe punishments if they departed from the road; so taxes could not be avoided. Frankincense was a very expensive necessity at that time and brought great wealth to everyone dealing in it.



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In March, April and May the bark of the tree is cut, and tiny droplets of frankincense ooze out and solidify. The tree must be at least three to four years old, and it is important to cut the bark to exactly the right depth.



The freshly harvested gum resin is sorted into different varieties of frankincense, according to its shade. The light pastel shades are the best, while the darker shades are not worth so much. It is packed into 40 kg. sacks to be sold in the souqs. The resin is not usually burnt on its own. It is ground into a fine powder and mixed with other fragrant ingredients to make a product called *bokhur*, which is burnt along with chips of oud wood to perfume a house.

A great port, Khor Ruri, was built in southern Oman to export the frankincense. It was guarded by the city of Samharam.

Globules of frankincense ooze from skilfully made incisions.

