



SNOW LOTUS

Aromatherapy, Education, Inspiration

Frankincense

The Rainbow Bridge

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The Scent of Civilizations

The slow-moving, ceremonial procession is headed by two-hundred girls in white gowns bearing golden pitchers of aromatic waters, followed by two-hundred youths in purple tunics bearing bowls of incense. The girls manually sprinkle the fragrant waters over the crowd; the young men in turn smudge the crowd with billows of fragrant precious resins. The youths are followed by two huge smoldering braziers of incense carried by litter-bearers, and finally a golden altar supporting a large statue of a serene god, around whose feet burn frankincense, myrrh and saffron.

This is not an opening scene from a Cecil B. de Mille movie. This is just the typical start of a holy day from any one of the ancient Western cultures - Sumeria, Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, Greece and Rome. Frankincense, the precious resin from Saudi Arabia and East Africa, is the ubiquitous fragrance in these cultures. Like a Rainbow Bridge, it is the olfactory link that binds the long history of the West into a single tapestry. Frankincense is an important archetypal soul scent of almost all Western cultures and religions, right up to modern Judaic and Christian societies.

More specifically, frankincense is the timeless incense of the Western sun-gods of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Hebrews and Greeks. It is the most consistently used scent in Western religious practices, both ceremonial and

meditational, and is virtually synonymous with incense. The resin was censed on one hand to create an aromatic human connection to these divines in an desire for transcendental union. Frankincense operates by inducing the state of focused contemplation necessary for aspiration to the divine, to the spirit. On the other hand, the resin was burnt to bless and inspire humans with the very fragrance of divinity. Its divine power would effectively disperse the forces of evil or negative energy that were responsible for disease and bad karma among humans. It was the scent of purification.

Moreover, at different times and places, the resin was also an important product in perfumery, skin care and medicine. It's important to recognize that most of the natural fragrance materials commonly used in perfumery and aromatherapy today were also used in a similar way then: for personal perfuming and hygienic aromatherapy practices. Then as now, many ancient Western cultures in one way or another exhibited the division between the sacred and the secular. Resins like frankincense, myrrh and galbanum therefore also saw extensive secular applications in addition to sacred applications. The main difference between then and now is that ancient peoples made more extensive use of fragrance for individual perfumery than we do today. Likewise, because their daily hygienic practices were often intimately connected with the employment of fragrances, their day-to-day aromatherapy applications went far beyond today's aromatherapy in terms of quantity, diversity and ingenuity.

The ancient concept of hygiene was different from modern hygiene as a specific concept of bacterio-logical asepsis or aseptic sanitation. Hygiene involved the promotion of good, pleasing smells on the body and in the daily environment, as disease and negative energy was thought to spread on the back of nasty odors: bad smells were synonymous with disease itself (this barring diseases arising from spiritual causes). Despite nineteenth-century germ theory, today this makes complete sense, as pleasing scents exert a positive neuroendocrine-immunologic effect on individual health and well-being (psychoneuroimmunology). Traditional hygiene therefore simply meant keeping the house, the streets and, most importantly, the body, always fragrant. Natural resins like frankincense and other plant extracts thus played a crucial twofold role. First, in hygienic topical and environmental aromatherapy for keeping illness and negative energy at bay. Second, in personal perfumery for the enjoyment of the fragrance itself. Some

cultures, such as the Egyptian and Roman, emphasized the perfumery aspect of natural aromas, whereas Jewish and Arab cultures, for instance, laid much importance on their hygienic aspect. Clearly, the notion that the ancients used fragrance merely as an aesthetic blanket for bad smells is an impoverished one.

Somalis, Arabs and Bedouins have collected frankincense resin from the small desert trees of Saudi Arabia and Somalia for many a millennia. They traded the various grades of resin with a relay of Arab traders who ferried them along the overland spice road. Frankincense thereby eventually reached the major cultural centers of Mesopotamia to the northeast and Egypt to the northwest, where it was an extremely precious commodity, sometimes worth more than silver or gold. The Sumerians, for instance, incorporated Frankincense in their extensive use of botanical aromatics, most of which were cultivated in what is thought to be the original biblical Garden of Eden. Skincare and perfumery uses for the resin, which survive to this day, date back to the third or fourth millennium B.C. in the highly-developed Sumerian civilization. According to Greek historian Herodotus, the Babylonians used to burn vast amounts of resins in their sacred rites to their vast pantheon of gods, for example to the sun god Bael. They also developed the science of aromatic astrology to unprecedented heights, as interpretive astronomy was a core science of their civilization. We may assume that frankincense was also an important aromatic in ceremonies in which the king consummated his sacred marriage with the Goddess at the summit of the ziggurat, the pyramidal temple palace that represented the sacred point of contact between heaven and earth (more on this below).

The Egyptians continued the time-worn tradition of bringing down the divine favors of the sun-gods with the use of frankincense. Specific incense blends were burnt at dawn, midday and dusk throughout the kingdom. Frankincense was a component of *kyphi*, the temple incense burnt in Heliopolis every sunset to honor the setting of the sun-god Rê. Queen Hatshepsut was a big-scale importer of resins from the land of Punt, Somaliland, such as myrrh, frankincense and opopanax, and began her own cultivation of boswellia plants in the Nile river delta, where they still grow today. Her tomb of 1480 B.C. contains large murals of frankincense plants. Although for most of Egyptian civilisation the sacred resins and plant oils were in the domain of the priests, in the reign of Ramses III the

latter started making them available to the upper classes. Eventually, like the Sumerians before them, the Egyptians incorporated most aromatics into everyday life. Late-dynasty queen Cleopatra's extravagant use of fragrance is well-documented - her encounter, for example, with Mark Anthony - from the aromatic billows of the reception boat to the seductive scents of her bed-chamber.

Cosmetic applications of frankincense dating to ancient times include the use of kohl, which consisted of several resins ground and charred, for a black eyeliner that originally served to ward off the evil eye; the use of a multi-ingredient paste to perfume the hands; the use of molten frankincense for a depilatory paste (Herodotus). Just as in Arabic society to the present day, frankincense in Jewish culture was originally considered the most effective scent for attracting divine blessings and dispersing evil spirits. It was (and sometimes still is) used to purify living and work quarters as well as synagogues and mosques, with the optional addition of some benzoin and aloeswood. Ever since the edict of the prophet Moses to the Hebrews around 1500 B.C. to make sacred aromatic offerings, *levonah*, frankincense, was burnt in braziers on the incense altar morning and evening - eventually in the main Temple sanctuary in Jerusalem, and in outlying synagogues. The precious resin was kept in a great chamber within the Temple, together with other spices. Its use according to the prescribed proportions, together with other ingredients composing the sacred incense, was forbidden for secular purposes. Later sacred incense recipes from the Talmud also include frankincense, along with about sixteen other ingredients. However, note that frankincense was not used in any anointing oil recipes, such as the one found in the Book of Wisdom: anointing oils have associations with the sensuous biblical Song of Songs and the visit to Solomon of the beguiling queen of Sheeba. Frankincense was also traditionally offered on its own as a supplement to sacrifice for firstfruits, for the meal offering and the Shabbat showbread.

The oldest Temple incense recipe, according to the Book of Exodus, was *stacte* (possibly myrrh), *onycha* (musk), galbanum and frankincense. Christian church incense has always used frankincense as the predominant component, with

optional secondary amounts of benzoin and/or myrrh. The Russian orthodox church, in contrast, utilizes mainly benzoin with optional myrrh, frankincense and others.

Frankincense saw restrained use in Greece, being offered mainly to the sun-god Apollo in his various temples. The same was true in early Rome, when the physicians Celsus and Galenus discussed the resin Olibanum or Mascula thura (as it was known) in their many textbooks on remedies and aromatics. In imperial Rome, however, this was no longer true. Benefitting from both the silk road from Central Asia and the spice road from Saudi Arabia, Rome imported ever-increasing amounts of aromatics from all corners of the globe, spending them on endless prodigal social banquets and ceremonies, both secular and sacred. To the emperor Nero belongs the dubious distinction of once spending four million sestertii (about \$115,000 or £70,000 in today's currency) to fragrance a single party. Rome's lavish expenditure on frankincense alone rivaled that of any previous culture: during the first century A.D., Rome managed to burn up almost 3,000 tons of the costly resin. And surpassing even himself, on the death of his wife Poppaea, the emperor Nero decided to burn at her funeral more than the entire annual output of Arabian frankincense. We can understand why, in return, the Romans privileged Saudi Arabia with the name Arabia felix, Arabia the Blessed.