

The Ancient Trade in Incense, Perfumes and Spices

Zohar Amar, Bar Ilan University

There are few written accounts of the Nabateans; one of the major sources is a description provided by Diodorus of Sicily, which was based on earlier sources. From his writings it appears that the Nabateans were nomadic Arabian tribes who were active in the central Negev and the Dead Sea Basin. They controlled the trade routes and exploited the land's natural resources as well as the valuable perfume-producing plants endemic to the region, reaping an enormous profit from their trade (Diodorus II 48, 6–9). When their kingdom was annexed to the Roman Empire in 106 CE and they abandoned their nomadic lifestyle to become sedentary inhabitants of the region (a process that began in the 1st century BCE), the Nabateans continued to control the spice and incense trade routes.

The scarcity of historical accounts of the Nabateans may be explained by the fact that the classical sources included them among the many "Arabian" tribes engaged in the spice trade. In Jewish sources also, from the Bible through the rabbinical literature, there are many accounts of Arabian involvement in the spice and incense trade. These references also included the nomadic merchant middlemen who were not involved in the actual cultivation of the spices, and thus left behind few traces of their activity. The Nabatean Arabs were in fact the connecting link in the perfume, incense and spice trade which was conducted between "Arabia Felix" (Yemen) and the Mediterranean coast. Some of these products originated in southeast Asia and were brought over the Indian Ocean, while others, such as frankincense and myrrh, came from southern Arabia. The demand for these ingredients in the ancient world brought about the development of a well-organized and highly-developed commercial system. The system of distribution and marketing was comprised of many routes, both overland and maritime, which underwent periodic fluctuations in their relative importance. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods several routes passed through the Land of Israel, the most prominent being the route running from Dhofar (Oman) to Sheva (Yemen), northward to Petra, Oboda and finally to Gaza – an important port from which spices were shipped to the countries of the Mediterranean Basin and the Roman Empire. Other overland routes reached Rhinocolura (el-Arish) and way stations in Egypt.

It is evident from both historical and archeological research that the spice trade was of great economic value and that the Nabateans, and later the Roman Empire, invested vast resources in establishing and maintaining the roads and providing the necessary travel accommodations: food, water and protection. This is demonstrated by the setting up of milestone markers and the construction of way stations, fortresses, towers and observation posts along the roads. These services not only aided the spice trade itself, but also provided substantial revenue to the rulers and employment opportunities for the Nabateans and local ethnic groups.

The Nabateans produced and traded products for use in medicines and perfumes that were much in demand for export, such as bitumen from the Dead Sea and perfume from the balsam trees (*Commiphora gileadensis*) which grew in the Jericho region. However, the bulk of the Arabian trade was based on products that grew primarily in southern coastal Arabia, Habash and Somalia, such as frankincense (*Boswellia*), myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) and ladanum (*Cistus ladanifer*). These plants produced the resins used in the perfumes and incenses that were most in demand throughout the ancient world, for both sacred and secular purposes. Other perfumes and spices originated in southeast Asia, or were ascribed to regions where Arabian tribes ruled, such as cardamon (*Elettaria cardamomum*), varieties of cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*; *Cinnamomum cassia*) and varieties of costus (*Costus speciosus* or *Saussurea lappa*).

A large share of the incense was used in the Temple in Jerusalem (in the qetoret), as well as in pagan rituals. Incense was also used by individuals and in burial rites. Many scholars believe that the decline in the Arabian spice trade began with the spread of Christianity, which did not perform burial rites involving cremation or embalming techniques (Figs. 93-102).

