

The Frankincense Route: A proposed cultural itinerary for the Middle East*

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*Frankincense is a resin produced by pine-like trees of the genus *Boswellia*, which grow only in arid areas of southern Oman, Yemen, and in parts of Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia. It was one of the most valuable commodities traded in the ancient world. Today, around 500 tonnes/year of frankincense are exported from south Arabia for use in the manufacture of perfumes, aromatic oils and liturgical incense, but this is less than a tenth of the amount used in the ancient world where the wealth generated by its production and trade supported entire civilisations. At present several countries in the Middle East (especially Oman and Yemen) market discrete cultural tourism attractions and short tours around a frankincense theme, taking visitors to sites and along routes associated with the ancient trade. This paper suggests the advantages and disadvantages of linking these diverse single-country frankincense-based tours into a major international 'Frankincense Route'.*

It is often easier to design cultural routes on paper than to implement such plans in practice, especially in regions where cross-border cultural tourism is subject to political constraints. This paper examines the feasibility of constructing an international 'Frankincense Route' in the Middle East, where there is a well-developed market for such a product but many sensitive issues including religious, environmental and operational difficulties. At present several countries within the region (especially Oman and Yemen) market discrete attractions and short tours around a frankincense theme, taking visitors to sites and along routes associated with the ancient trade in frankincense resin, which was the most valuable traded commodity in the ancient world. Cultural tourism in the Middle East is becoming increasingly popular, assisted by tourism infrastructure development and better marketing. However, all countries in the region have suffered severe reductions in tourist arrivals in the wake of 'September 11'. The 'Frankincense Route' discussed in this paper presents a potential new cultural tourism product necessitating joint product and marketing initiatives like those developed for the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) 'Silk Road' programme. It would require an unprecedented level of intra-regional tourism co-operation but would present a positive and historically accurate image for a region whose current political profile is so contentious.

Ancient Frankincense Trade Routes

Frankincense is a resin produced by small pine-like trees of the genus *Boswellia*, which grows only in arid areas of southern Arabia and in parts of Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia. The best quality comes from the Dhofar area of Oman and Wadi Hadramaut of Yemen. Frankincense was one of the most valuable commodities traded in the ancient world, as witnessed by its status as one of the gifts brought by the Three Wise Men (probably Zoroastrian astrologer-priests from Babylon) to the infant Jesus. In ancient times most frankincense was burnt as incense in religious ceremonies, or in rituals connected with purification or prayer.¹ Today, frankincense is still harvested from wild trees, by a process not dissimilar to tapping rubber, and exported from

south Arabia for use in the manufacture of perfumes and aromatic oils and as a constituent in Chinese and other medicines, as well as for ecclesiastical use. Today's trade in frankincense resin probably amounts to no more than 500 tonnes per year; less than a tenth of the amount used in the ancient world where the wealth generated by its production and trade supported entire civilisations.

The best-documented records of very early frankincense trade routes come from Egypt. The female pharaoh Hatshepsut sent an expedition to 'Punt' (either Somalia or south Arabia) in 1500 BC, which returned with 31 frankincense trees, depicted on the walls of her mortuary temple at Deir el Bahri near Thebes (present day Luxor), currently a major tourist attraction. It seems likely that this was an unsuccessful attempt to try growing the trees in Egypt and to eliminate the long trade routes, but frankincense trees are notoriously reluctant to be cultivated. There is archaeological evidence for the use of incense in Palestine and Syria in the second millennium BC, and the Old Testament is rich in descriptions of incense use. When Moses returned from captivity in Egypt around 776 BC frankincense was included in Jewish religious observance, as laid down in Exodus 30:34, and it has continued to be a significant element in Judaeo-Christian worship ever since. Classical writings include eyewitness accounts of the growing of incense trees in Arabia, and in the fifth century BC Herodotus, the Greek historian and traveller, describes the yearly tribute of 1000 talents weight (around 500 tonnes) of frankincense paid to Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar for burning on the altar of the god Baal. Alexander the Great is reported to have captured around 500 talents of frankincense when he captured Gaza, a major port in the incense trade.²

Export of frankincense and trade between the incense-producing areas of southern Arabia and the incense-consuming civilisations of Europe and the Near East was facilitated by the domestication of the camel in the second millennium BC, although a certain amount of resin was exported from Arabia by sea, even to India and China. It would appear that the trade in frankincense reached its peak around the second century AD when at least 3000 tonnes per year were exported to Greece and Rome. Frankincense was harvested in South Arabia in the form of sticky tear-like fragments scraped from trees, and packed into bags for its long journey into Europe and beyond. Each tree produces only a small amount and the growing area is restricted. The immense length of the export route and the high cost of transport and protection for caravans contributed to its rarity and high price. By 2000 BC caravans were utilizing the main south-north route following the coast of the Red Sea, a journey of as much as 2400 miles long, linking production areas with markets. The value of the trade accounted for the prosperity of kingdoms in what is now south Yemen and for the growth of cities such as Marib in the Sabatean kingdom, which flourished between 1500-542 BC. Around 950 BC Marib totally controlled the incense trade and was thought to be home of Queen of Sheba (Saba) whose wealth was founded on the trade. It is possible that only one major land route was in use at any time because of the difficulties of keeping control. The northern end of the land route was controlled by Assyria until the seventh century BC and afterwards by the Nabateans, whose magnificent cities of Petra (Jordan) and Medain Salah (Saudi Arabia) were trading and distribution centres for frankincense and other luxury goods. In Roman times Gaza was the main Mediterranean terminal for the frankincense trade, with the resin transferred to Alexandria for sorting before export. By around AD 23 a minimum of 1300-1700 tons of frankincense were being carried to Rome in some 7-10,000 camel-

loads. The overland routes were still in use in the fourth century AD, but decline in demand and rise in popularity of sea trade led to their eventual abandonment.

Tracing the ancient frankincense routes requires the utilisation of both historical and archaeological sources. Different variations of the routes were used at different period. Figure 1 shows the major route following the east coast of the Red Sea, through what is now Yemen and Saudi Arabia, travelling in Nabatean times through Medain Salah and on to Petra. Other routes skirted the Rub El Khali desert (Empty Quarter) and crossed the center of Arabia to link with the Gulf ports. The resin was also exported by sea, mainly through the ports of Salalah in Oman and Bir Ali in Yemen, both eastwards to India and northwards up the Red Sea. In Egyptian times resin was also imported from Somalia (and probably Ethiopia/Eritrea/Sudan) and travelled north before being offloaded at Red Sea ports such as Qeseir and Berenice and transported a relatively short distance overland, joining the Nile Valley just north of Luxor, from where it was transported northwards to Alexandria and Cairo by river. A variation involved sailing still further north and offloading in Gaza. From Alexandria ships sailed across the Mediterranean to supply the markets of Greece and Rome, with overland caravans also crossing the north of Sinai to Petra, Jerusalem and north through modern Syria and Turkey into Europe via an overland route. Archaeological evidence for the ancient routes includes concentration points such as the fortified city of Khor Rori (Dhofar, Oman), whose wealth was founded on the frankincense trade, and remains of Sabeen civilisations including Marib and other Yemeni cities which marked staging points along the route.

Frankincense trade as cultural route

In 1994 the World Heritage Committee made a major step forward into refining the concept of a cultural route, which may either combine exchanges and journeys, or be a physical way used for travelling.³ Clearly, the ancient frankincense route belongs to the former category and conforms to World Heritage criteria as a result of its length and diversity (reflecting the complexity of the links that it maintained), its temporal characteristics (the route was utilised for over 2000 years), its cultural characteristics (linking remote ethnic and cultural groups) and its unified purpose as a major trade route specializing in one commodity. A first attempt to get recognition for frankincense sites from the World Heritage Committee took place in 1987,⁴ but Oman's attempt to get the port of Khor Rori and the associated incense route listed failed to meet the criteria. However, in October 2000 the World Heritage committee listed the 'Frankincense Trail' in Oman as a Category iii World Heritage site, noting that:

the frankincense trees of Wadi Dawkah and the remains of the caravan oasis of Shisr and the ports of Khor Rori and al-Bahid vividly illustrate the trade in frankincense that flourished in this region for many centuries and was one of the most important trading activities of the ancient and medieval world.

This is the only fragment of the route to achieve World Heritage status *per se*, although many sites and towns associated with the ancient trade have separate listings. An interesting difference is now arising between the criteria that defined the ancient route, and the criteria that may be considered to define a modern tourist itinerary which visits many of the sites associated with the frankincense trade. This

modern route may more properly be defined as a 'tour route to a cultural destination', whose development is controlled by destination managers such as ground operators, accommodation providers, and local communities. The development of such a route is also related to levels of public sector support and interest from government departments, national tourism organizations as well as to international interest from information media and bodies such as the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) and UNESCO. It can be debated whether a modern tour route qualifies as a cultural route,⁵ and the term seems to be used to designate an artificially-constructed itinerary which happens to include major cultural sites. Tour routes are developed between cultural resource managers and planners using a different mix of attractions varied to suit length, cost and objective of both tour and target market. They can also vary in scale from a small city walking trail to the entire length of the Silk Road but could be considered merely as heritage trails, aimed at attracting visitor to a series of historical and cultural attractions by devising an attractively-linked themed package. Just as original routes linked countries by trade or shared interests, these new tourist routes can do the same. But an essential difference lies in the fact that profits from original frankincense routes spun off at all stages to local communities whereas the relatively small percentage of profits from frankincense cultural tourism is not returned to host communities, most going to European-based tour operators.

A cultural route represents a spatial link between societies, which co-influenced their mutual development. It can be evidenced archaeologically or from historical sources or (more recently) from oral tradition. Examples of commercial cultural routes include the salt route in West Africa, the routes followed by the rum trade and slave trade and, especially significantly, the Silk Road that provides a model for route development. The Silk Road project derived from a UNESCO research project, later adopted by the WTO who packaged and supported it as an international tourism marketing strategy. Much the same sequence has been followed, though less successfully, with the Slave Route project devised by UNESCO in 1996, to 'link participating countries and international institutions which express willingness to transform a historical slave route into an itinerary for heritage tourism that will enrich the lives of the inhabitants of Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean'.⁶ This cultural tourism programme was based on the UNESCO Slave Route scientific project and its cultural and historical interactions. Part of the rationale for the development of the Silk Road was to promote tourism development in the five central Asian Republics after their separation from the USSR. They formed a vital element in the cultural route, dominated by Uzbekistan whose entire tourism industry was developed on this basis.⁷ The Silk Road WTO project was initiated in 1994 'to promote a special Silk Road tourism concept' which was initiated in 1994 with nineteen participating countries. It featured a logo and a comprehensive and cohesive marketing strategy that converted a potential resource into an integrated tourism product. A brochure was produced and a WTO Silk Road stand appeared at all major travel fairs. More countries joined the project (including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Mongolia and Syria) and subsequent initiatives have pressured governments to implement joint tourism strategies and to develop measures to reduce travel barriers and expand products which benefit local people. Could the sites which marked the ancient frankincense trade routes be packaged and developed in the same way?

Contemporary frankincense tourism

Several Middle Eastern countries, notably Oman, Egypt and Yemen, actively promote tourism to sites associated with their ancient frankincense trade. Others, including some of the Gulf States such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, include visits to the *suq* (market) where frankincense is still sold, as major attractions. Jordan and Saudi Arabia both include major cultural heritage sites (Petra and Medain Salah) associated with the frankincense trade, although the former is not usually marketed on that basis and the latter is seldom visited by international tourists because of visa restrictions. Although Somalia (plus Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan and part of North Kenya) were also significant in the ancient trade and still produce substantial amounts of resin today, no archaeological sites associated with the trade are promoted for visitors and tourism access to the country is extremely limited. Both the ancient and modern trade in frankincense involved major European cities including Rome and Athens, as well as trading ports such as Alexandria, Gaza and Istanbul. All these cities include major cultural heritage attractions but none are specific to the frankincense trade. Frankincense tourism, therefore, is really a Middle Eastern phenomenon.

Today, the Middle East receives around 16 million tourists a year,⁸ only 2.4% of the world's international arrivals. Moreover, the region is highly vulnerable to the effects of political tensions and notorious for the inability of its constituent countries to form working partnerships. Oman, Lebanon and Jordan are currently showing strong growth in arrivals, but overall tourism to the region is growing quite slowly. Tourism development in the region has been helped by the fact that many Middle Eastern countries are going through a period of economic slowdown due to falling oil prices, with consequent economic diversification in order to reduce their reliance on the oil industry for economic growth. Tourism features strongly in these plans.⁹ However, there is a very low degree of international co-operation. Very few of Saudi Arabia's 3.7 m visitors/year are western tourists because of visa difficulties, although some educationally-based special interest tour operators (such as British Museum Tours in the UK), have begun to take small parties into the country under carefully-controlled conditions. Oman and Yemen are the main frankincense tour destinations but have no open land border crossings, meaning that a visitor desirous of following the length of the ancient route could only do so by flying between the respective capitals of Muscat and Sana'a and taking separate tours from those centres. And if that visitor did not conform to Saudi Arabia's qualifications for a tourist visa they would be unable to continue their journey along the northern end of the route, and would in any case have to enter Saudi Arabia from Oman, rather than Yemen. Oman is easily the most westernised of the Middle East frankincense tourism countries, having encouraged private sector investment in tourism and created a reputation as an up-market, luxurious destination with relatively relaxed visa requirements and cultural restrictions. Before 1998, Egypt was the best-developed tourism destination in the region, but is only now shrugging off problems resulting from a major terrorist attack in Luxor.¹⁰ Yemen is still a minor player despite attempts to claim that conditions there are stable, with recent kidnappings and concerns over tourists' safety keeping arrivals at a low level. The Yemeni government has made some attempt to stimulate foreign investment and solve border issues with Saudi Arabia, but progress is slow.

Religious, as well as political, difficulties would need to be solved if a modern frankincense tourism route were ever to be constructed. Islam, the dominant religion of the Middle East, is adhered to with differing degrees of fundamentalism by the component countries. Oman is perceived as relaxed in its religious observance, but

even there alcohol is available only in hotels (and not in all hotels), there are dress restrictions and the country is virtually closed during Ramadan. In Saudi Arabia Islamic restrictions are observed very strictly, making it impossible for an independent non-Muslim (or female) traveler to visit the country except under very unusual circumstances. There are also climatic considerations. The Gulf gets extremely hot in summer, making a land route feasible only during the winter. Even today, many inhabitants of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf vacation in the Salalah area of Oman during the heat of summer, since it is green and beautiful in August as a result of the monsoon rains between June and September.¹¹ Others go northwards to Jordan and Syria for the same reason. Despite these drawbacks, the countries that comprise southern Arabia have many shared cultural features and are often amalgamated together in visitors' minds as regional variations of the Arab world. From a tourism point of view although religious and environmental factors may be restrictive the region has many positive elements for tourism development. Western food is easily available and there are few insect pests (except in Yemen). Southern Arabia is served by good modern airports; car hire is readily available; there is a diverse accommodation base rapidly developing in relation to the oil boom. On the debit side, there are no shared land borders so that companies which currently offer frankincense tours must run two separate itineraries for Yemen and Oman. Nor is Saudi Arabia a player in the international tourism marketing scene.

Highlights of a modern tour following the ancient itinerary could include the Deir el Bahri temple near Luxor (Egypt), and the Sinai desert, including the spectacular sixth-century fortified monastery of St. Katherine at the foot of Mount Sinai which is the region's major cultural attraction.¹² Sinai was crossed by ancient frankincense caravan routes from Gaza to Petra, and possibly by a coastal Ras Mohammed-Aqaba route heading towards Petra. In Oman visitors could see the contemporary frankincense harvest in Dhofar, the site of Shisr, claimed as the lost frankincense-trading city of Ubud, and the impressive ruins of the third-millennium frankincense port of Khor Rori (now a World Heritage Site) and Marbat castle. The restored castle of Nizwa is the centre of the cultural tourism trade, as nearby Bahla Fort with its 15 gates and 132 watchtowers is now closed for restoration. Dhows, similar to those used in the ancient trade, are still being built at Sur harbour. Saudi Arabia has many attractions relevant to frankincense, including the Asir region in the south west, target of a campaign in 25 BC by the Roman General Aelius Gallus who was sent to conquer the incense-producing regions. Najran is close to the current Yemeni border and has a 4000-year history as a trading centre; it was the last important stop on the frankincense route before the caravans branched east or west. The most spectacular archaeological site in Saudi Arabia, Medain Salah, was the model for Petra and is just beginning to appear on tourist itineraries. Yemen is currently receiving European Community assistance with the development of its cultural tourism, with particular effort being targeted at combating a negative media image, improving staff training and tour guiding. The World Heritage cities of Shibam, Sana'a and Zabid were all associated with the frankincense trade and the country is marketed as a 'cross-roads of the spice, incense, myrrh and gold routes and the meeting point of the Far East and Mediterranean'. Highlights include Marib, the capital of the kingdom of Saba, which controlled Yemen for 800 years, where visitors can see the remains of the oldest dam in the world. The prosperity of Saba derived from the incense trade, and visitors can still trace the ancient route through Wadi Hadramaut and the desert cities of Shibam and Shabwa, the latter being an important centre for caravans of incense which had to

pay one-tenth of its loads as gifts for priests of temples. Bir Ali, now a coastal village, was once the major port through which frankincense was exported, with roads leading from there to all the northern and eastern routes.

Key destinations for both ancient and modern routes include Dubai, whose current tourism product promotes a mixture of its ancient culture, modern shopping, beaches and world-class hotels.¹³ Today, most of the tourism routes in the Middle East pass through Dubai, which has become a major player in business and leisure tourism as well as the regional hub of airline, cargo and passenger transport industries.¹⁴ It now boasts one of the fastest rates of hotel growth in the world, and has aimed its product at the rapidly-growing western European winter-stay market by offering a combination of modern, safe hotels excellent shopping and reliable weather combined with a tradition of tolerance to visitors.

In summary, therefore, it is undeniable that southern Arabia already has many destinations and tourism products associated with the ancient frankincense trade, but there is almost no intra-regional co-operation and a surprisingly low growth rate for international tourism, partly because of political instability. Although frankincense tourism does exist, the routes which it follows are fragmented by political borders and at present no initiatives exist to overcome these restrictions and emulate the precedents set by the Silk Road.

Is There a Future for Tourism along the ‘Frankincense Route’?

Cultural routes are not a new idea in the Middle East. Indeed, one of Egypt’s early cultural tourism development strategies envisaged the construction of an ‘Exodus Route’ following Moses and Israelites across Sinai, together with other historical routes taken by armies from Alexander the Great to Napoleon.¹⁵ But the most recent cultural tourism development plans concentrate either on encouraging visitors to specific sites, or on limited local itineraries associated with them.

The Third International Meeting on the Silk Road project held in Tbilisi, Georgia, during 1998 concluded that visa restrictions were the most serious impediment to the healthy growth of tourism along this Central Asian route. Silk Road tourists constantly encountered problems obtaining visas and there was a general lack of clear and accurate information about visa requirements and costs. Exactly the same is true for the countries involved in frankincense tourism. However, visa-related issues cannot be resolved as part of a joint marketing strategy, but need to be addressed by national tourism administrators at the highest governmental level. There are precedents for solving the problem, such as the combined multi-entry visa in use by the Baltic States, and it is hoped that one goal of the Silk Road project will be to duplicate this multiple-entry multi-country visa for *bona fide* tourists. Implementing a similar idea in the Middle East would greatly facilitate international co-operation, but it is difficult to see how all countries could be persuaded to join since some (particularly Saudi Arabia) have very restrictive entry requirements. A further problem identified in the Silk Road was a lack of appropriate accommodation, but in the Middle East hotel occupancy is relatively low and there are major new hotel development programmes. However, accommodation tends to be expensive in major urban areas and simpler guest-house style facilities are uncommon (except in

Yemen). The development of a formal Frankincense Route would raise destination awareness and project a positive regional image, especially in those countries, such as Yemen, which are struggling to combat poor media coverage. It is easy to see how such a concept could generate consumer interest. The necessary levels of airline co-operation are already in place, with market leader airlines such as Emirates (based in Dubai) flying to all relevant national capitals, although generally requiring a transit through Dubai.

Figure 2 illustrates a theoretical 'Frankincense Route', with a visitor travelling to a major entry port such as Dubai or Muscat (Oman), and then either following the route either via side trips within specific countries, as at present, utilising air transfer, or (in the future) overland in the event that border crossings are facilitated. A further option would be to trace part of the route by sea, travelling from Aden or Salalah northwards up the Red Sea coast to Egyptian coastal resorts and thus to the Nile Valley. The route has considerable potential to expand existing cruise business in the Arabian Gulf and India Ocean. This is attracting steadily-growing numbers of visitors,¹⁶ and many cruise products are also linked to emerging golf tourism in the Gulf. The cruise industry will benefit from the opening of new ports in Dubai, complementing that country's two new international airports in same country that will be handling 40 million passengers a year by 2003. The benefits to consumers which would result from the development of a Frankincense Route are obvious, but there are also benefits to ground handlers in host countries in terms of access to information, better contacts, better mutual understanding, and new and innovative tour opportunities. It has often be said that, politics permitting, the Middle East has the potential to be a major player in the European short-haul winter sun market, an opportunity which Dubai and to a lesser extent Abu Dhabi are already exploiting. Short-haul cultural tourism involving routes capable of being travelled in segments of different length is currently very popular, both at a macroscopic scale (such as the Silk Road) and more country-specific such as the pilgrimage route to Compostela in Spain.

Arab States are becoming more significant players in culture resource management strategies and cultural tourism, facilitated by the formation of a regional grouping which presented a plan to the World Heritage Committee meeting in Beirut during 2000 and identified their particular needs in terms of assistance.¹⁷ 57 sites from Arab regions feature on the World Heritage list but two states (UAE and Kuwait) have still not ratified the Convention. The World Heritage list provides one forum for communication, as does increased co-operation with UNESCO's education sector and the submission of a more balanced representation of properties from the region. Hazbun has commented on some of the difficulties encountered by tourism development and the politics of post-national development in the Arab world.¹⁸ In his view, tourism planning in the Arab world has usually resulted in profits for a small capital-rich elite. It has also relied extensively on investment by European and American companies in flagship luxury hotels, rather than concentrating on smaller, more sustainable projects that would spread the benefits of tourism more widely. A Frankincense Route could redress this balance, by providing tourists with the opportunity, the means and the motive to explore the region in greater depth, rather than concentrating on beach tour hotels. Tourism development in the Arab world has also been viewed as not requiring integrated national markets but as an activity which is specific to each country.¹⁹ The stultifying bureaucracies in the public sector, and the lack of inter-departmental co-operation at ministerial level present further

difficulties. Moreover, there is a general lack both of trained personnel and relevant vertical and horizontal integration within the travel industry. Arab countries have often centralised their administrative control over the tourism sector while lacking the capacity to develop it. This has resulted in enclave economies developing in small highly-managed spaces, segmented from national economies, and usually highly reliant on global hotel and tourism corporations. Although it is not claimed that the development of a specific project such as the Frankincense Route could eliminate all these problems, it could result in better intra-regional co-operation and permit the development of joint marketing and product development strategies. The involvement of a major international agency such as the World Tourism Organisation or UNESCO would clearly be highly beneficial, and it is possible that the development of such a project could have as beneficial an effect for southern Arabia as the Silk Road has had in central Asia, from equally unpromising beginnings.

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