Hot on the Incense Trail

SALALAH, OMAN—A cool mist hangs over the Dhofar Mountains close to the Yemen border, turning bare hillsides an English-meadow green as the rest of Arabia swelters in the summer heat. It is this moisture, the only finger of the Asian monsoon to touch the peninsula, that makes these mountains the perfect habitat for the scraggly frankincense tree, which oozes a gooey and aromatic resin when cut. The tree grows only in this Dhofar region of Oman, its likely ancestral home, and parts of Yemen and Somalia.

Frankincense was the ancient world’s most lucrative product, essential in temple rituals throughout the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia, prescribed by doctors for digestive problems, and turned to ash for eyeliner among Egyptian gentry. Yet the origin of its trade remains only dimly understood, in part because the mostly nomadic inhabitants here closely guarded their secret and left few artifacts and no texts behind. Researchers long assumed that the frankincense trade did not flourish until 1000 B.C.E. or later. But a country now welcoming archaeologists is providing an unusual combination of textual evidence, remote-sensing data, and careful excavations (see main text, p. 1098). The data suggest that the trade sprang up far earlier, says archaeologist Juris Zarins, who lives in Dhofar’s sleepy provincial capital, Salalah.

According to Zarins, long-distance trade itself—in seashells—began here as early as the 5th or 6th millennium B.C.E. Then, far to the northeast at R’as al Jinz, Italian excavators found what appears to be a frankincense burner dating to about 2200 B.C.E. Resins from Egyptian tombs date to about this time and may signal maritime connections across the Red Sea. For overland travel, donkeys, which by this period were in use, may have made the journey north. And Mesopotamian texts from this same era mention a trade in “aromatics,” likely frankincense.

By the height of the Umm an-Nar period at the end of the 3rd millennium B.C.E., when Indus goods were arriving in Arabia and Omani copper was being shipped to Mesopotamia, distant Dhofar and its frankincense seem to have been part of the first international trade system (see p. 1092). “There’s abundant evidence of goods exchange,” says Joy McCorriston of Ohio State University in Columbus. She and her colleagues are mapping thousands of uncataloged tombs in the region to gather data on population and trade routes. Both teams are finding evidence that Dhofar’s frankincense made it a player in the early economic network. But even as that origin comes to light, the 4-millennia-old tradition is nearing its end. The stalls of Salalah today are still filled with bags of frankincense. But buyer beware. “Now it all comes from Somalia,” says Zarins.

–A.L.