

Sharjah Archaeology Museum, UAE, The Incense Burner

By Izabella Kosla-Sluzek

Not a day has passed since I moved to Abu Dhabi without my detecting a pleasant smell wafting into my apartment from the common corridor through the gaps in the front door. The resin-like aroma is almost always accompanied by the somewhat acrid smoke of burning charcoal. I soon identified its source as none other than fabled frankincense – one of the gifts taken to the baby Jesus by the Three Magi. Myrrh, and especially frankincense, were the most prized export items from the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, traded along the 5,000-year old Incense Road linking southern Arabia to the outside world. Today the highest quality frankincense, secreted from the trees growing in Oman's Dhofar Mountains, is sent directly to the Vatican.

To extract the famous fragrance, frankincense clumps have traditionally been placed over hot coals in an incense burner proudly residing in every Arabian household and regularly used during various social, ritual and hygienic occasions, for example to fumigate a room, welcome a guest or pacify a crying baby.

Frankincense is resinous sap obtained from the bark of a tree of the genus *Boswellia*, particularly *Boswellia sacra*. The best frankincense is harvested from the trees that grow in southern Oman and Yemen. To tap a tree, a cut is made in its inner bark through which milky sap bleeds into a small container where it soon hardens.

The ceramic incense burner pictured on the left is on display at the Archaeology Museum in Sharjah, one of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates. It was excavated from the ruins of a house at Mleiha, a large settlement which flourished between ca 300 BCE and 150 CE, contemporary to the estimated age of the burner (150 BCE – 0 BCE). It is round, two-tiered and has a moulded decoration of



Ceramic incense burner, height: 23.8 cm, width: 15 cm, Sharjah Archaeology Museum, photo by Izabella Kosla-Sluzek



Dome-like ceramic cover for burning incense, with a bull figurine on top, unearthed at Muweilah, UAE, ca 900-600 BCE, photo by Izabella Kosla-Sluzek

female figures (lower tier) and female heads (upper tier). Originally painted purple, it was probably imported from modern-day Pakistan.

Mleiha exemplified the southern Arabian success story: it was a prosperous inland oasis town that became rich owing to its strategic location on the busy camel caravan route. At the centre of Mleiha towered an imposing fort, erected mainly for defensive purposes in an era when neighbours would frequently wage war against each other over access to this lucrative trade.

The settlement existed for at least 700 years after the Iron Age, during which period it actively participated in the thriving incense trade between Arabia, the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and South Asia. The Incense Road naturally merged with the western Silk Road. When

the aromatics trade intensified in the last centuries BCE, the major players along this international commercial route would not hesitate to pay the weight of the frankincense in gold. Apart from incense, pearls were also exported from Arabia, whilst its imports included ceramic, metal, glass and luxury objects from Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean.

While the Sharjah incense burner looks rather unlike its traditional Arabic counterparts still in use today, the British Museum's limestone example from Yemen of approximately the same age looks almost modern by comparison. It has a carved inscription in a pre-Islamic language of southern Arabia.



Limestone incense burner, Yemen, height: 23 cm, width: 13.6 cm, British Museum, photo courtesy of the British Museum

Izabella Kosla-Sluzek lived in Singapore for almost 20 years before moving to Abu Dhabi, UAE, in 2011. She was a long-time FOM member who enthusiastically participated in study groups, study tours, gave several Monday morning lectures and guided at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Peranakan Museum and the former History Museum.