

FRANKINCENSE, INCENSE and ROSICRUCIAN UNDERSTANDING

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In the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament of The Holy Bible, frankincense was an ingredient for incense (Ex 30:34) and in Matthew 2:11 gold, frankincense, and myrrh were among the gifts to Jesus by the Magi. Egyptians ground the charred resin into a powder called kohl (which was also the substance used by them as a black eyeliner).

Like most people, I had a vague overall impression of what frankincense is; but I believe the following overview (reprinted with permission*) gives the most complete and succinct description of the historical origin and purposes of frankincense, along with a thorough description of its peculiar (and even fragile) harvesting:

Frankincense or Olibanum provides one of the most evocativescents in the long history of aromatics. Its fresh, fruity, pine-lemon bouquet with delicately sweet, resinous and woody undertones, slows and deepens breathing and has been used since ancient times to awaken higher consciousness, and enhance spirituality, meditation, and prayer.

Frankincense has been one of the worlds most treasured commodities since the beginning of written history. At its peak, its value rivalled that of gold, the rarest silks, and the most precious gems. Ironically, it is a milky-white resin produced by a scrubby, unlikely looking tree, genus Boswellia. There are twenty-five known species of Boswellia, each creating a water-soluble gum resin with its own distinctive fragrance and medicinal properties.

Frankincense trees require an arid climate where moisture is provided by morning mist. The few ideal environments in the world for this small prized tree are found in Southern Arabia (Oman and Yemen), India and Northern Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Kenya). Further, frankincense trees require a limestone-rich soil and are necessarily found growing on rocky hillsides and cliffs, or in the dried riverbeds below. Harvesting can be a very dangerous task.

Frankincense trees grow to about 20 feet in height (8 metres) with branches often beginning near its base. The common Oman, Aden (Yemen), and Somalia Species, B. Sacra / B. Carter, produce small yellow-white colored flowers with five petals, while the African B. Papyrifera a B. Thurifera produce small pale-red flowers. Each are a favorite among bees and produce small fruits which are fed to livestock. But, it is the tree's resin that has been treasured for thousands of years for its aromatic and medicinal uses.

Frankincense resin begins as a milky-white sticky liquid that flows from the trunk of the tree when it is injured, healing the wound. The Arabic name is luban, which means white or cream. It is also known as Olibanum and its essential oil is often called "Oil of Lebanon". Its currently recognized western name Frankincense, is said to have originated from the Frankish (French) Knights of the Crusades who treasured it in large quantities.

Frankincense resin flows when a tool called a mengaff is used to scrape a five-inch section down the trunk of the tree. The tree is marked and the harvester returns in two weeks to scrape what has become hardened frankincense resin from the tree. Resins which fall to the ground are collected on large palm leaves placed (there) when first tapping the tree. The process repeats itself for about 3 months during harvesting.



Frankincense trees are ideally harvested twice per year, from January to March and then again from August to October. The trees benefit from rest periods and produce finer quality resin when taken care of properly. Collected resins are aged for about twelve weeks and are then brought to the world's markets. Finer resins are opaque-white, semi-translucent white with shades of lemon or light amber. The exceptions are B. Frereana which is used as chewing gum and is best soft and translucent lemon colored with golden hues, and B. Serrata of India which is best golden to golden-brown. India's B. Serrata is highly prized and extensively used in Ayurvedic medicine.

Frankincense resin is distilled by steam or CO2 to extract its precious essential oil, which is used extensively in aromatherapy. This oil is rejuvenating to the skin, treating acne, bacteria and fungal infections, and to treat wounds and scars. Thus, it is used in cosmetics, soaps, and perfumes. The University of Munich found the anti-inflammatory properties of frankincense very effective as a treatment for joint pain and arthritis. The famous eleventh-century Arabian physician, Avicenna, recommended its cooling effects as a remedy for infections and illnesses that increase the body's temperature. Greek and Roman physicians used frankincense in the treatment of a great variety of diseases. Frankincense remedies appear in the Syriac Book of Medicine, ancient Muslim texts, and in Ayurvedic and Chinese medical writings.

Frankincense is also a natural insecticide and was used in ancient Egypt to fumigate wheat silos and repel wheat moths. In Arabia, the smoke of burning incense resin is used to repel mosquitoes and sand flies. Researchers have found that burning incense indoors improves the acoustic properties of a room. Dioscorides described how the bark of the tree was put into water to attract fish into nets and traps. In ancient Egypt the resin was a key ingredient for embalming their dead.

The symbolic and reverent uses of frankincense and incense is what I was most familiar with. When I was growing-up, I would see incense used on religious occasions. It was readily apparent that it was used to sanctify or bless. I remember that I slightly smiled when I first heard a member of the clergy allude to its more practical applications of deodorizing. Recently, I wrote to Godfried Cardinal Danneels, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, Belgium. In his reply, the Cardinal said:

"In general, the incense is a sign of adoration and it is used to honour God. Think of the psalm that sings: 'May my prayer go up to you like incense' and of one of the precious gifts of the wise men to the Child Jesus. They brought royal gifts and incense was one of them. Incense was and still is expensive. It is cut out of a special tree and is rather hard to find."

"Before incense was used also because of a more practical reason, since the smell of it is nice, it was often used to chase the bad smells from the sick and death (the dead). During funerals it was even more necessary. Think of the enormous incense in the cathedral of the sanctuary of Compostela in Spain. There the incense was needed to chase the bad smells of the many pilgrims who arrived after months (of travel) to pray and receive forgiveness for their sins."

Similarly, Most Reverend Ronald W. Gainer, Bishop of Lexington, Kentucky, gave me his views on the multitude of benefits of incense: *"Personally, I definitely favor the use of incense whenever appropriate. I believe it adds a definite majesty and solemnity to the liturgy. Incense is always a multi-sensory experience: we see the beautiful smoke, we hear the thurible clanging against the chain, and we smell the fragrance of the burning incense."*

In Masonic circles, incense is sometimes used in the higher degrees of the various Rites. Wichita Consistory, one of the Concordant Bodies within the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite in the Valley of Wichita, Kansas, uses incense in the Thirty-second (32°) Degree; and in a visit with Stage Manager, Illustrious Brother Chet Hockett, 33° , I was informed that a theatrical supply store furnishes the 'flash-powder' which is used for brief dramatic effect in the 21° of Noachite Mason. Within the Northern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite in the United States, I consulted Illustrious Brother Jeffrey K. Saunders, 33° , Secretary of the Scottish Rite Valley of Indianapolis, Indiana.



Brother Saunders felt that incense may have been used in years past by the Valley of Indianapolis--
- but it is no longer utilized.

Incense is used in the proper conferral of the grades of the Masonic Societas Rosicruciana in Civitatibus Foederatis. Recently, I spoke with Past Supreme Magus, Most Worthy Frater Thurman C. Pace, IX° , and he indicated that Incense adds both beauty and deeper understanding of the ritual in Masonic Rosicrucian Societies worldwide. Our symbolic use of incense in a fraternal setting always yields to the solemnity of incense used in a religious context. Our usage does not replace or supplant the religious use of incense. As Masons and Masonic Rosicrucians, we are ever mindful of the Biblical passages in Revelation 8:3-6 which state:

"And another angel came and stood before the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given to him much incense, that he should offer of the prayers of all saints, upon the golden altar which is before the throne of God. And the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel. And the angel took the censer and filled it with the fire of the altar and cast it on the earth; and there were thunders and voices and lightnings and a great earthquake. And the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound the trumpet."

The use of incense mentioned above depicts the use of incense by angels as a sign in a celestial context. As Masonic Rosicrucians, we are mindful that humans, (as mortals), only possess those qualities endowed by our Creator. As scholars, we are familiar with the four elements of Earth, Air, Water and Fire. Since each of us is a Christian Mason , we have the hope (just like all other Christians) that our prayers, symbolized by incense, will rise to heaven. When God created man, HE gave man dominion of the earth. As custodians of the Earth, we have the utmost duty to preserve nature's abundant resourceswith the realization that nature is precious and has living characteristics. Those unique frankincense trees need fertile soil of the earth; they need the moisture of morning mist (water); they need air from that arid climate. After the sap or resin hardens and dries, the transformation into the practical essence (and scent) of Incense occurs via fire. And, in every step of the process it is representative of the changes of Mother Nature or planet earth. Frankincense trees, like mortal man, can perish. It is my hope that scholarly research into frankincense and incense----combined with our own inner prayers--- will broaden our knowledge and understanding of its separate uses by mortals on earth and by the Angels in Heaven.

Sources / Recommended Readings:

- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, 33° and a K.T.
- Postal letter from Godfried Cardinal Danneels, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, B-2800 Mechelen, Nr Brussels, Belgium to Sir James A. Marples, KHS, of Longview, Texas, USA, dated 19 April 2007.
- Postal letter from Most Rev. Ronald W. Gainer, 1310 W. Main Street, Lexington, Kentucky 40508 to Sir James A. Marples, KHS, of Longview, Texas, USA, dated 31 January 2007.
- Scents of Earth, Frankincense supplier;
- *website: <http://www.scents-of-earth.com> Permission granted from original owner, Mark, to James A. Marples to cite history given on website; permission granted via telephone call 08 January 2008.
- Personal telephone conversation between James A. Marples and Chester R. Hockett of Wichita, Kansas on 11 January 2008. Illustrious Brother Hockett kindly gave permission to have his name cited as a reference in this presentation.
- Personal telephone conversation between James A. Marples and Thurman C. Pace of Westfield, New Jersey on 21 January 2008.
- Personal telephone conversation between James A. Marples and Jeffrey K. Saunders of Indianapolis, Indiana at his office at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in Indianapolis, Indiana on 23 January 2008.



About the Author:

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