

Boswellia sacra

[Synonyms : *Boswellia carterii*]

FRANKINCENSE is a deciduous or evergreen shrub or tree. Native to southern Arabia and north-eastern Africa, it has small, scented white flowers.

It is also known as Bible frankincense, *Encens* (French), *Encienso* (Spanish), Gum olibanum, Incense, *Incenso* (Italian), *Incienso* (Spanish), *Kundar* (Urdu), Mastic tree, *Oliban* (French), *Olibano* (Italian, Spanish), Olibanum, *Perfygydarth* (Welsh), Salai tree, *Saorthùis* (Scottish Gaelic), *Túis* (Irish Gaelic), and *Weihrauch* (German).

The resin (particularly from young trees) is harvested. (It emits a strong perfume when burnt.) Other than in the rainy season, small incisions are made in the bark to extract the resin which collects in small hollows in the tree trunk. The tears that ooze out along the trunk and round the base are scraped off. This yields three basic grades of resin. The ‘white’ tears are top quality, tears containing pieces of bark are dried and ground into a powder, and a balsamic oil is distilled from waste matter.

Sacra is Latin (sacred, holy, consecrated) with reference to the plant’s use in religious rituals. The resin (possibly combined with resin from other species) provided incense, perfumes, medicines, and cosmetics for the ancient Egyptians, the ancient Greeks, and the Romans. It was blended with other aromatic ingredients and both burnt as incense and a fumigator, as well as being included as an ingredient in the mummification process used for the bodies of the dead. It was also one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

In the mid-1490s BC Queen Hatshepsut (c.1540-c.1481 BC) who ruled Egypt for part of her life, is said to have raised a fragrant garden at the temple of Deir-el-Bahri. (For this 32 frankincense trees had to be transported all the way from Somalia to Egypt. Descriptions indicate that they were dug up with large root balls and placed in wicker baskets – and all but one lasted the journey.) From that time the maintenance of a scented garden is said to have become a tradition with Egyptian Pharaohs who succeeded her and, by the time of the last centuries BC, may well have been a far more widespread practice throughout the Middle East.

Frankincense was one of the four ‘sweet scents’ used by the Jews in ceremonial incense, and it also played a ritual role on their Sabbath day. The Greek historian, Herodotus (c.485-425 BC) tells how at the annual feast of Bel 1,000 talents’ weight of frankincense was offered at the temple of Bel in Babylon, and that the Arabs provided a similar annual tribute to the King of Persia. The Romans did not limit the use of frankincense to religious ritual but also employed it during state ceremonials and domestic celebrations. It is hardly surprising in view of its status that it was one of the gifts described in the Christian *Bible* as having been brought to the Christ child by the Wise Men from the East. This brings to mind an English tradition that takes place annually in the Chapel Royal in St. James’s Palace, a ritual that dates back to the 1400s. In its original form the Monarch participated personally but from the early 19th Century, the end of George III’s reign when he was

succumbing to mental illness, two Gentleman Ushers have performed the function on the Sovereign's behalf. Briefly, during the Epiphany Service (the Feast of the Epiphany takes place on 6th January) they carry two silver-gilt salvers to the sanctuary step. One contains twenty-five golden sovereigns and the other frankincense and myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*). The Dean of the Chapels Royal (the Bishop of London) receives them and presents them at the altar. After the Service the sovereigns are exchanged for £25 in modern coinage which is donated to a charity fund administered by the Chapel Royal. The frankincense is passed to another church that will use it and the myrrh is sent to an Anglican Benedictine community at Elmore Abbey in Berkshire where it becomes an ingredient in one of their prepared incense mixtures. From at least the last decades of the 20th Century tickets have been required for admission to this Epiphany Service and these are said to be in great demand.

For the Romans of course it was an even greater luxury than recognized in the Middle East – not least because of the distance it had to be transported. Since at least 1500 BC the resin had to be carried over land on Arab camel trains (or on the backs of donkeys) from Arabia to Egypt (usually through the port of Alexandria). This was known as the Incense Road and was extremely dangerous – and extortionate, as every kingdom it passed through levied taxes on the caravan's progress. If the frankincense had not been stolen before reaching Alexandria it was then sorted and processed in a kind of 'clearing house'. As in say the diamond mines of today those working in that 'clearing house' were subject to stringent discipline and had to strip before leaving the area to check that no resin had been stolen. Then this precious cargo was shipped to the other side of the Mediterranean. It should also be mentioned perhaps, that like other commodities such as mandrake (*Mandragora officinarum*), the traders protected their sources by spreading rumours of the most frightening harvesting procedures they could dream up. Apparently for frankincense some claimed that the tree was angered if it was cut to release the resin and would often give out a vapour that could kill anyone within range. All of this only contributed further to maintaining an exorbitant price. Its continued widespread esteem is illustrated however in the lavish funeral given to Nero's (37-68) second wife, Poppaea. He was Roman Emperor for the last 14 years of his life and in 65, during a fit of rage, murdered her when he kicked her during pregnancy. At the funeral her cremation was masked by the smell of incense – it was said that a year's harvest of frankincense was burnt.

Charred frankincense, alone or with other aromatic ingredients, has been used by Egyptian women particularly since ancient times to paint their eyelids, the powder being referred to as *kohl*. The resin has also been made into a paste for perfuming the hands. This last practice has a particularly long pedigree as the Greek historian, Herodotus (c.485-425 BC) recorded that Scythian women also scented their hands in this way.

Authorities suggest that the rarity aura that surrounded frankincense could only have arisen because in its native habitat local people were primarily interested in plants that provided food. This relegated frankincense to secondary importance and meant that the gum was harvested haphazardly and the tree was not actively husbanded or cultivated in its natural surroundings. (One does ponder the hardships of living in that habitat however and wonder how they were kept unaware of the value of their commodity.)

Today frankincense is in demand commercially. The top quality (often combined with resin from other species) is used for religious rituals in many parts of the world. In the Christian churches it continues to play its part, especially during Roman Catholic services and the incense is often combined with myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*) from Arabia. This latter is excluded from frankincense exported for use in Japanese temples as a similar resin is obtained from the bark of a different tree). The waste matter is also of value as it

is used by the perfumery industry, the cosmetics industry and the toiletry industry (the latter in scented soaps).

Medicinally, the Romans are said to have viewed frankincense as an antidote for hemlock poisoning (*Conium maculatum*), and Avicenna (980-1037) the noted Persian philosopher and physician, recommended the resin for treating fevers, dysentery, tumours, ulcers and vomiting. In more recent times herbalists have used frankincense in a steam inhalation as a remedy for bronchitis and laryngitis and early 21st Century Western medicine has been trialing its use in treatments for osteoarthritis. Its modern use in Chinese and Indian medicines has a history centuries old.