

Frankincense and the Nabataeans: Historical and Archaeological Evidence⁽¹⁾

Zeyad Al-Salameen

Assistant Professor, Al-Hussein Bin Talal University

(Received 6/9/2007; accepted for publication 5/12/2007)

Keywords: Frankincense, Nabataean trade, Southern Arabia.

Abstract. This paper sheds light on the frankincense trade which prospered during the classical period. It discusses the Nabataean involvement in this trade and reviews historical, archaeological and epigraphic evidence in this regard. It includes the publication of the first discovery of a Nabataean inscribed frankincense burner.

Introduction

Both history and archaeology provide ample evidence that the Nabataean Arabs actively participated in the prosperous trade of frankincense which reached its apogee during the classical periods. Active Nabataean involvement in this lucrative trade provided an economic incentive for social change. This highly esteemed commodity was mainly used as incense, i.e. to produce a fragrance when burned in the religious rituals of most ancient peoples (van Beek, 1960: p. 82). It was obtained from trees growing in Southern Arabia, mainly in Dhofar, and East Africa, including Somalia and Ethiopia, and it was brought to the Roman world and other markets by means of camel caravans along the Incense Road which began in Southern Arabia and passed via Nabataea (van Beek, 1960: p. 72). This merchandise was obliged to pass through Shabwa where the king, according to Pliny, "has made it a capital offence for camels so laden to return aside from the high road" (*Natural History* XII. 63ff). Then, the caravans loaded with those aromatics travelled to Timna' and then proceeded via the well-known Incense Road via Oboda to Gaza, which was receiving, during the Nabataean period, Arabian and Nabataean merchants carrying Southern Arabian products (Negev, 1966: pp. 89-98).

Nabataean involvement in the frankincense trade could be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, the

high demand for Eastern and Arabian commodities which is clear in the account of Pliny, who refers to quantities and prices of frankincense imported by the Romans (XII.XLI.82, XIII.20). He hinted at the immense quantities of frankincense used by the Roman emperor Nero in the funeral of his wife Poppea (XII.XLI.83). In addition, he said that aromatic and perfume products were highly prized and were very expensive, costing 400 denarii per pound (XIII.20).

Secondly, the geographical and strategic location of Nabataea which encouraged the Nabataeans to control this trade and to impose taxes such as the 25% tax which was levied in Leuke Kome and was imposed on the commodities that were transported via the Red Sea. Additionally, the Nabataeans appointed a customs-collector in this harbor to regulate and organize tax payments in addition to a centurion to protect the affairs of the city (*The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 62).

Historical Evidence

Nabataean participation in this trade is referred to in various classical historical sources. Most of these sources are unanimous regarding the vital mercantile role played by the Nabataean Arabs, mostly as middlemen between the Southern Arabian producers and consumers.

Diodorus Siculus is considered as one of the foremost authorities to shed light on the Nabataeans

⁽¹⁾ I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. John F. Healey for reading this article and for his valuable comments and suggestions.

during their early period (around the fourth century BC). According to Hieronymus of Cardia, who is cited by Diodorus Siculus, a number of Nabataeans were "accustomed to bring down to the sea frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kind of spices which they produce from those who convey from what is called Arabia Eudaemon" (Diodorus of Sicily: *The Library of History* XIX.94.5). Additionally, Diodorus refers to the military campaign waged against the Nabataeans by Antigonos in 312 BC. Antigonos' official, Athenaeus, disrupted the Nabataean panêgyris, descended upon them and took frankincense, myrrh and about 500 talents of silver (XIX.95.3). This hint in Diodorus' account is the earliest evidence which proves the availability of this precious commodity in Nabataea.

The Ptolemies had commercial interests in Arabia as they used to import commodities from Southern Arabia, Africa and India through the Nabataeans who controlled the overland trade routes. It also seems that the Nabataeans controlled some of the sea trade, which encouraged the Ptolemies to send expeditions to reduce the effect of the Nabataean pirates in the Gulf of Aqaba and Suez in order to control the frankincense trade and to divert their own trade directly from Southern Arabia to their newly established ports on the Red Sea without passing via Nabataea (Fraser, 1986: p. 177; Rostovtzeff, 1932: p. 741).

Papyri in the archive of Zenon⁽²⁾ provide us with a wide range of information about different commercial relations in his time. These papyri record the purchasing of Gerrhaean and Minaean frankincense from the Malichus of Moab and document activities of Dionysius and Drimylus who sold slave girls in Syria and Palestine (Graf, 1990: p. 54). A memorandum from 259 BC records Zenon's agents who encountered the Nabataeans on their return to Egypt (Graf, 1990: p. 55). The significance of this memorandum is that it reflects the intense and competitive situation between the Nabataeans and the Ptolemies and refers to the involvement of the Nabataeans and Ptolemies in the frankincense trade.

Agatharchides of Cnidos (ca. 130-110 BC) refers to the Nabataeans and his notes appear in the work of Diodorus. He refers to Aqaba as one of their ports and continues "the promontory, which is situated in front of the islands, lies below the area called the Rock and Palestine. It is to this region that the Gerrhaeans and Minaeans bring, as is the report, frankincense and other aromatic products from what is called upper Arabia" (Burstein, 1989: pp. 148-151).

Photius also quoted the following account from

Agatharchides of Cnidos which might refer to Petra and the Nabataeans. He said "to this land, Petra, the Gerrhaei and Minaei and all those Arabs with dwellings nearby convey, so it is reported, from the upper country frankincense and cargoes connected with spices" (Groom, 1981: p. 68).

Strabo from the late first century BC gives a detailed account about the Nabataeans. He said that frankincense is a product of Cattabania (Qataban) in Arabia (*The Geography of Strabo*, XVI.IV.4). According to his writings, frankincense and other products were sold to merchants who took 70 days to get from Southern Arabia to Ayla, Aqaba (XVI.IV.4) which was one of the main Nabataean harbors according to Agatharchides of Cnidos (Burstein, 1989: pp. 150-1) and Strabo (XVI.IV.18).

Strabo mentions in his *Geography* that goods were conveyed from Leuke Kome to Petra, and then to Rhinocolura to be distributed to other nations (XVI.IV.24). This inland route leading from Leuke Kome to Petra is also mentioned by the writer of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (*The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, 6).

Concerning the size, Strabo says: "yet camel-traders travel back and forth from Petra and to this place (Leuke Kome) in safety and ease, and in such numbers of men and camels that they differ in no respect from an army" (XVI.IV.23). The size of the caravan trade has been estimated by scholars such as Groom who suggested that it was about 7000-10000 camel-loads per year (Groom, 1981: p. 160).

Pliny does not refer directly to the involvement of the Nabataeans in the frankincense trade, but provides some details about the tree, its harvest and prices and its role in the formation of the ancient Arabian economy. He informs us that a whole year's production of Arabian frankincense was consumed at the funeral of Poppaea, the Wife of Nero (XII.XLI.83). He also said that a frankincense-loaded camel from South Arabia to the Mediterranean cost 688 denarii (XII.XXX.54). It is not clear whether this figure includes the original purchase price of the gum-resin in the production centers in Southern Arabia (van Beek, 1960: p. 86). Elsewhere, Pliny estimated that of the 100 million sesterces which were expended by the Roman Empire for goods from the East, approximately half of this sum was spent on Arabian commodities (XLL.XLI.84; VI.XXVI.101).

Historical evidence confirms that frankincense was used in the manufacture of cosmetics and perfumes to stop bleeding, to heal wounds, to promote suppurations and for cleansing. It was also used as an antidote of hemlock and in prescriptions for pains in the sides and chest, hemorrhoids, paralyzed limbs, bruises,

⁽²⁾ Zenon, the Finance Minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 BC).

ulcerations and abscesses (van Beek, 1960: pp. 70-95).

Archaeological Evidence

Various Nabataean archaeological remains have been uncovered outside Nabataea. These elucidate Nabataean commercial interactions as well as their activities outside their kingdom. These remains include inscriptions, pottery and coins that have been uncovered in Qaryat Al-Faw, Marib, Tenos, Rhodes, Delos, Cos, Miletus, Rome, Puteoli, Antioch, Palmyra, Tyre and Demir (for more details, see Schmid, 2004: pp. 415-426).

The Nabataeans constructed a chain of architectural installations to facilitate the transfer of frankincense and other South Arabian commodities to consumers. Watchtowers and caravanserais were built to protect the routes, to provide security for travelers, and to supply caravaners and travelers with their needs (Al-Salameen, 2004: pp. 52-53).

Archaeological discoveries in Nabataea have revealed that frankincense was used by the Nabataeans. A small altar was found in the 2003 season of excavation at Al-Khaznah Courtyard at Petra. It was full of burnt incense that would have been used as an offering during the religious ceremonies in the courtyard (Farajat and Nawafleh, 2005: p. 381). Additionally, a burnt layer in the courtyard and three hearths have been found and they contained quantities of frankincense (Sami Nawafleh personal communication).

Nabataean epigraphy does not provide us with information about frankincense at all. A word which occurs twice in Nabataean inscriptions and could be linked with offerings was read as *hmn'* (Littmann, 1914: pp. 24-27; Naveh, 1979: pp. 112-113). This word is found in a Palmyrene inscription and was translated as "sun-column" or "fire-altar" (for a discussion, see Littmann, 1914: pp. 26-27). Drijvers, on the other hand, suggests that "the Aramaic word *hamānā* as well as Hebrew *hammān* bear the notion of divine presence surrounded and protected by a stone wall. The most appropriate translation is consequently "chapel" or "sanctuary"" (Drijvers, 1988: pp. 165-180).

Incense burners are not common among Nabataean finds. In some cases, items are identified as incense burners/altars (Hammond, 1996: pp. 132-33). A group of incense burners/altars were uncovered in the Winged Lions Temple at Petra. They were rectangular blocks made mostly of limestone with cavities on the upper surface. Their sides were decorated with figures, geometric designs and bands. Their average measurements are 14 x 13 x 14 cm (Hammond, 1996: pp. 132-33).

A unique fragment of an inscribed Nabataean

incense burner (Plate 1) was found in Bayda by Mr. Hani Falahat of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities⁽³⁾. Interestingly, this is the only known inscribed Nabataean burner discovered so far. It was made of sandstone and measures 4 x 4 x 6 cm. It has a shallow recess at the top. The depth of the recess could not be established easily as its rim was broken.



Plate 1. Fragment of a small inscribed Nabataean incense burner from Bayda.

It seems that two lines of text were inscribed on the burner and only the last letters of each line remain (Fig. 1). The last word of the first line could be read as *'drmw* which is a personal name common in Nabataean inscriptions (Al-Khraysheh, 1986: p. 27). The last word of the second line is *hḫb* which means "in good, favorably, in welfare, good luck" (for a discussion, see Healey, 1996: pp. 177-86) and this word is preceded by the letter *ṣ*. The other sides of the burner are seemingly plain. There are no signs of burning in the recess at the top. Dating the burner paleographically is difficult due to the shortness of the text.

Nature of Frankincense Trade in Nabataea

Historical chronicles do not provide any information about frankincense use in Nabataea and they refer to its growing centers, transportation via Nabataea and to its use in the Hellenistic and Roman periods as we stated earlier. The question that arises: Was frankincense manufactured in Nabataea or used within its boundaries to produce aromatic products?

Hammond and Johnson argued that unguents and perfumes were produced in Nabataea and

⁽³⁾ This fragment has been handed over to the Petra Antiquities Office to be displayed in the Petra Museum.

frankincense formed that main ingredient (Hammond, 1972: p. 66; Johnson, 1987: pp. 36-49). This argument was based mainly on the discovery of Nabataean unguentaria which were identified as containers for unguents and perfumes. It is likely that such a production existed in Nabataea (Al-Salameen, 2004: pp. 226-28).



Fig. 1. Remains of Nabataean inscription on the incense burner.

Conclusions

The prosperous trade in frankincense led to the flourishing of many ancient cities located along trade routes, especially those located in Nabataea. Those routes were furnished with a chain of architectural installations to serve the needs of the travelers and caravaners to facilitate and organize the transfer of commodities internally and externally. These arrangements resulted in flourishing trade and led consequently to a wide range of cultural influences and interactions.

It is clear that Nabataea was a bridge for the importation and exportation of frankincense and other highly esteemed South Arabian products. Nabataea benefited from this international trade and the huge demand and supply as traders were obliged to pay 25% tax of the value of the imported commodities upon entering Nabataea, as indicated by the writer of the *Periplus*. Some of these imports might have been consumed locally in the production of perfumes, or as an ingredient in medicine, in addition to other cultic

and ritual uses. The range of its use by the Nabataeans could not be established easily due to the lack of sufficient archaeological and historical evidence.

References

- Al-Khraysheh, F.** *Die Personennamen in den nabatäischen Inschriften des Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*. PhD Dissertation, Marburg University, (1986).
- Al-Salameen, Z.** *The Nabataean Economy in the Light of Archaeological Evidence*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, the University of Manchester, Manchester, UK, (2004).
- Burstein, S.** *Agatharchides of Cnidus: On the Erythraean Sea*. London: The Hakluyt Society, (1989).
- Casson, L. (Ed.)**. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1989).
- Diodorus of Sicily**. *The Library of History*. Translated by C. Oldfather, London: William Heinemann, 1933.
- Drijvers, H.** "Aramaic Ḥmn' and Hebrew Hmn: Their Meaning and Root." *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 2, (1988), 165-180.
- Farajat, S. and Nawafleh, S.** "Report on the Al-Khazna Courtyard Excavation at Petra (2003 Season)." *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*, Vol. 49, (2005), 373-393.
- Fraser, P.** *Ptolemaic Alexandria*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, (1986).
- Graf, D.** "The Origin of the Nabataeans." *Aram*, Vol. 2, (1990), 45-75.
- Groom, N.** *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade*. Harlow: Longman, (1981).
- Hammond, P.** *The Temple of the Winged Lions, Petra, Jordan: 1973-1990*. AZ: Fountain Hills, (1996).
- Healey, J.** "May He be Remembered for Good: An Aramaic Formula." In: K.J. Cathcart and M. Maher (Eds.), *Targumic and Cognate Studies: Essays in Honor of Martin McNamara*. (1996), pp. 177-186.
- Littmann, E.** *Semitic Inscriptions: Section A, Nabataean Inscriptions from Southern Hauran*. Leiden: Publication of Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria, (1914).
- Naveh, J.** "A Nabatean Incantation Text." *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 29, (1979), 111-19.
- Negev, A.** "The Date of the Petra Gaza Road." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, Vol. 98, (1966), 89-98.
- Pliny**. *Natural History*. Vol. 2, Translated by H. Rackam, London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1961.
- Rostovtzeff, M.** "Foreign Commerce of Ptolemaic Egypt." *Journal of Economic and Business History*, Vol. 4, (1932), 728-69.
- Schmid, S.** "The Distribution of Nabataean Pottery and the Organization of Nabataean Long Distance Trade." *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, (2004), 415-426.
- Strabo**. *The Geography of Strabo*. Translated by H. Jones, London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1917.
- van Beek, G.** "Frankincense and Myrrh." *Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 23, (1960), 70-95.

البخور والأنباط: الأدلة التاريخية والآثرية

زياد السلامين

أستاذ مساعد، جامعة الحسين بن طلال

(قُدِّم للنشر في ٢٠٠٧/٩/٦ م؛ وقُبِل للنشر في ٢٠٠٧/١٢/٥ م)

الكلمات المفتاحية: البخور، التجارة النبطية، جنوب الجزيرة العربية.

ملخص البحث. يلقي هذا البحث الضوء على تجارة البخور عند الأنباط حيث يناقش مشاركة الأنباط في هذه التجارة اعتماداً على المصادر التاريخية والآثرية والنقشية. يشتمل البحث على دراسة لكسرة من مبخرة نبطية تحتوي على بعض الأحرف حيث تنشر هنا لأول مرة.