

The Ancient Spice Trade, Part I: The Ancient Near East

by Chris Mundigler

Spices may have been what drove the Portuguese, Spanish, English and Dutch to discover the far reaches of planet Earth, but for the civilization around the Mediterranean the world was a much smaller place.

Colonization and conquest may have been the driving forces behind the expansion of the Greek and Roman worlds, but long before these civilizations, networks of trade routes had been established in the ancient world and one of the main commodities traded were spices.

We know from ancient records that Egypt and the Near East were major players on the international spice market. Most accounts agree that Arabia was the greatest, and by some stories, the only real source of spices in the ancient Near East. Some of these spices were grown in Arabia, some merely passed through the peninsula enroute to other markets, but either way this region grew incredibly wealthy as a result of its participation in the spice trade.

From 1200 BC to well into the 6th century AD, three main civilizations dominated the Arabian peninsula. The Mineans established themselves in Arabia around 1200 BC and soon came to depend on the spice trade for their economic well-being. They were followed by the Sabaeans around 950 BC – a civilization that lasted for almost 1500 years – and it was in this era that the famous Queen of Sheba (another name for the Sabaeans) came from southern Arabia to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem “with camels bearing spices, and very much gold and precious stones.” (I Kings 5:1) – wealth gleaned from the vast spice network set up in Arabia. Many sources, as we will see, indicate that the spice trade was already well-established by this time between Africa, southern Arabia, Syria and many of the lands around the Mediterranean. Finally, the Himyarites controlled Arabia, and the spice trade, between the 2nd and 6th centuries AD, again growing incredibly rich as the West’s hunger for spices continued to grow.

Solomon also used the spice trade to bring tremendous economic wealth to his kingdom (I Kings 10:10, 10:25) and even may have built a string of fortresses in southern Israel specifically to protect the spice caravans coming from southern Arabia into his lands, which were marked by the Euphrates River in the east, Syria in the north and the border of Egypt in the southwest (Figure 1).

We know from the Bible as well, that traders from Sheba exchanged “the best of all kinds of spices” (Ezekiel 27-22), but the actual source of those spices was jealously guarded by the Arabs. Some, like frankincense and myrrh, were produced directly in southern Arabia, in the lands of Yemen and Oman (Figure 1), while others were imported into Arabia from China and Java via India to the east. By the second millennium BC, hundreds, if not thousands, of camels at a time were making the 2400 mile journey from southern Arabia along the Red Sea coast on the north-south caravan route into Syria. Other routes cut east-west through Mesopotamia en route to Egypt and may have met the trade caravans moving north from Arabia. It may have been on one such trade encounter that the Three Wise Men, probably Zoroastrian priests from Babylon, acquired their frankincense and myrrh as they journeyed to visit Jesus in Bethlehem. This frankincense – a resin from a pine-like tree that grows in south Arabia (where the best quality comes from), Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia – was exported in vast quantities using camel

caravans to the Near East and Europe, as well as via ships east to India and China in exchange for other spices imported from those same regions.

As part of the mystique and in an attempt to keep the origins of some of these exotic spices a secret from the rest of the world, the Arabs told fantastic and fanciful tales of horror and danger about the acquisition of spices like cinnamon and cassia, which, most sources agree, did not grow in the ancient Near East, but were brought into Arabia from China, east and southwest India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The Arabs probably brought these two spices (both mentioned in the Bible) into the region from the Far East by ship via the Persian Gulf and then by camel to Assyria, Babylon and Egypt.

Along with these valuable spices imported from the east, the Arabs also began bringing in other spices which the west soon became dependent on: pepper, ginger, cardamom and cloves. And it was because of the potential wealth of this market that the fanciful Arab stories began.

Traveling and writing around the 5th century BC, Herodotus of Halicarnassus was told a wondrous story by the Arabs about how they had to fight off huge birds of prey who made their nests out of massive cinnamon sticks. The Arabs, Herodotus tells us, “cut all the oxen and asses and beasts of burden that die in their land into large pieces... and the old birds, swooping down, seize the pieces of meat and fly away with them up to their nests; which, not being able to support the weight, break off and fall to the ground. Hereupon the Arabians return and collect the cinnamon, which is afterwards carried from Arabia into other countries.” (*Histories*, Book III)

In the same Book, Herodotus notes that Arabia is “the only country which produces frankincense, myrrh, cassia, cinnamon and laudanum,” most of which are also gathered with great peril by the intrepid Arabs. “For the trees which bear the frankincense are guarded by winged serpents, small in size, and of varied colors, whereof vast numbers hang about every tree.”

To collect cassia (a variety of cinnamon known to the Chinese as early as 3000 BC), Herodotus writes that the Arabians have to “cover all their body and their face with hides of oxen and other skins” to protect them from vicious, screeching bat-like creatures that live around the shallow lake where the spice is found. Despite these dangers, Herodotus romanticized Arabia for its spices: “The whole country is scented with them, and exhales an odor marvelously sweet.”

Centuries later, the Roman historian Pliny tried to expose these stories as myths and fables, and helped break the Arab monopoly of the spice trade in the ancient Near East – that was in the 1st century AD, though, and a topic for a future issue of *Labyrinth*. Other historians were also amazed at the quantity and variety of spices that were traded out of Arabia. Diodorus of Sicily, in the 1st century BC, commented on the Nabataean traders and their procurement of “frankincense and myrrh and the most valuable kinds of spices... from what is called Arabia Eudaimôn [or Arabia Felix, Arabia the Fortunate].” (*Bibliotheca Historica*, Book XIX.94)

Writing towards the end of the 1st century BC, the Greek historian Strabo tells us about the country of Sabaei (in the area of modern Yemen; Figure 1) and how it is the most fertile of all Arabian nations, “producing myrrh, frankincense and cinnamon” in such quantities that the traders of these spices “become drowsy by the odor of the aromatics [and] the drowsiness [must be] removed by the fumes of asphalt and of oat’s

beard.” (*Geography*, XVI.iv.19). Strabo goes on to tell us that by trading spices up into Syria and Mesopotamia, the Sabaeans “have become the richest of all the tribes” to such an extent that their “doors, walls, and roofs are variegated with inlaid ivory, gold, silver, and precious stones....”

These riches were not without peril, though, as the spice trade in antiquity was often the victim of ambushes and robberies on the caravan routes, and piracy, storms and shipwrecks on the Mediterranean. Despite all this, the huge profits for the spice markets and economic centers of Babylon, Alexandria, Carthage and Rome far outweighed the risks involved. Next, we will move west into Egypt and north Africa to see how spices helped open up the Mediterranean world to some of the greatest civilizations the world has ever known.