

“MYRRHA ET AROMATIBUS PRETIOSISSIMIS”.
THE USE OF AROMATICS IN ROMAN DOBRUDJA
(2ND - 6TH CENTURIES AD)

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In the Near East and the Mediterranean world, frankincense and myrrh – along with other aromatics – occupied an important place in religious practices². When discussing resins and spices, it is impossible to make a clear distinction between them, because in the final outlets, they were sold together. Aromatics generated a vast commercial network – terrestrial and maritime – where we find a “Frankincense road”, as well as markets with special spots for their sale.

As in the Orient, in the Roman Empire, frankincense was used in both the funerary and the temple-specific cult³. The smell of frankincense in the religious ritual was produced by burning it in specially designed containers called *thymiateria*, or in the flames burning on the altars dedicated to various deities⁴.

The study hereof comprises a set of direct and indirect evidence regarding the use of these aromatics in the urban or rural centres, from the period of the Dominate and of the Principate, by analysing various written sources (literary texts and epigraphs) and archaeological artefacts (amphorae, incense burners and censers).

In Scythia Minor, aromatic substances were always included in the religious act of the traditional Roman gods. This tradition is also featured in Ovid’s *Sorrow*

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² G. K. Young, *Rome’s Eastern Trade: International commerce and imperial policy, 31 BC – AD 305*, Routledge, New York, 2001, p. 81.

³ Fr. Cumont, *Lux perpetua*, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1949, p. 46.

⁴ L. A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology*, Brill, Leiden, 1968, p. 205.

of an Exile: "Nor is it a pleasure to offer incense that wins nothing from gods" ("Nec dare tura libet nihil exorantia Divos")⁵.

Frankincense – associated with royal power and divinity⁶ – is one of the fundamental aromatic substances within Christian tradition, being present throughout the entire mass⁷. Whereas at the beginning, the members of the new religion born on the banks of Jordan manifested a form of repulsion on for the frankincense, over time, however, it acquired an important role of mediation between the individual and the divinity⁸, according to the words of one of David's Psalms: "*Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense...*" (Psalm 141.2). Furthermore, frankincense and myrrh are among the only gifts accepted as an offering at the altar.

Originating from the south of Arabia and the north of Somalia, frankincense – especially the one with high commercial value – was produced by two species of the genus *Boswellia*, *B. Carterii* and *B. Frereana*, to which one may add a third, *Bhua Dajiana*⁹.

The Arabic and the Egyptian traders obtained significant profits due to great demand of resins for the religious practices in the Mediterranean and the Near East, a trade that was never perturbed, mostly when the new direct commercial routes to India were discovered¹⁰.

1. The altar dedicated to Mithras at Troesmis (Fig. 1/a, b)

In order to understand how the use of this resin perpetuated in the primary Christian Church, a brief overview is necessary regarding its use in the ceremonies dedicated to other divinities, either from the Roman traditional pantheon, or from the Oriental one.

The burning of aromatic resins was always present within the religious processions specific to eastern religions, of salvation, such as Mithraism. Numerous

⁵ Ovidius, *Tristia*, III, 13, 23.

⁶ G. K. Young, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁷ H. Leclercq, *Encens (sub voce)*, in *DACL*, V/1, *Encaustique-Feux*, 1922, col. 11-21.

⁸ I. Elies, "*Un odor tan saboroso*". *For an Olfactive Interpretation of the Catigas de Santa María*, in C. M. Alsina et alii (eds.), *Sensual and Sensory Experiences in the Middle Ages. On Pleasure, Fear, Desire and Pain*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, p. 49.

⁹ G. W. Van Beek, *Frankincense and Myrrh in Ancient South Arabia*, in *JAOS*, 78, 1958, 3, p. 141-142; Idem, *Frankincense and Myrrh*, in *BA*, 23, 1960, 3, p. 71.

¹⁰ G. K. Young, *op. cit.*, p. 15, 17, 31.

shrines identified in Dobrudja feature places for burning resins. In this respect, the best example is the shrine discovered at Troesmis (county of Tulcea), dated to the 2nd century AD (until the year AD 167). It may be highlighted that – on the upper side of the limestone block – a small circular basin is carved for the ritual burning of aromatic substances. The inscription reads as follows: “*To Mithras the undefeated, worship. Lucius Valerius Fuscus, centurion of the 5th Macedonica Legion, fulfilled the vow with a full heart*”¹¹.

A set of inscriptions and votive reliefs discovered at Troesmis attest the existence of the cult of the god Mithras, largely disseminated among the Roman troops. Fifteen kilometres away from the fortress, within a Roman settlement, they also discovered the ruins of a *mithraeum*¹².

Within the processions of this religion of Mysteries they also burnt frankincense, as suggested by the lines painted on the rendering of the *mithraeum* underneath the basilica of Santa Prisca in Rome: “*Accipe thuricremos, Pater, accipe, sancte, Leones/ per quos thura damus per quos consumimur ipsi*” = “*Accept the burning incense, Pater, accept, Holy One, the lions/ Through whom we give incense, through whom we ourselves are consumed*”¹³.

Within the Mithraic rituals, there were seven degrees of initiation: *Corax*, *Nymphus*, *Miles*, *Leo*, *Perses*, *Heliodromos* and *Pater*. The head of the community was *Pater*, and those within the fourth level, namely the Lion (*Leo*) – the first initiation degree per se – were associated with fire; consequently, they were in charge with the burning of frankincense¹⁴. On a container discovered in the *mithraeum* of Richmond from Cologne, Sol-Mithras is featured offering frankincense for sacrifices¹⁵ (Fig. 3). The burning of frankincense in a burner situate near an altar, as it is presented in the fresco within the pronaos of Bel’s temple in Dura-Europos, was associated with the ritual of purification¹⁶. The same

¹¹ *ISM*, V, nr. 221.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ L. A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

¹⁴ J. Bird, *Incense in Mithraic Ritual: The Evidence of the Finds*, in D. Peacock, D. Williams (eds.), *Food for the Gods: New Light on the Ancient Incense Trade*, Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2007, p. 122-134; A. Chalupa, *Seven Mithraic Grades: An Initiator of Priestly Hierarchy?*, in *Religio*, XVI, 2008, 2, p. 186.

¹⁵ J. Bird, *op. cit.*, fig. 6/2.

¹⁶ E. M. Moormann, *Divine Interiors. Mural Paintings in Greek and Roman Sanctuaries*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2011, p. 191, fig. 107.

centre comprises the Mithraic relief of Zenobius, where the dedicator is featured burning frankincense within a *thymiaterion*¹⁷, as well as a small stone altar dedicated to the Sun God, comprising a “*small round depression*”¹⁸.

Numerous discoveries coming from the sanctuaries dedicated to Mithras have highlighted the existence of items pertaining to liturgical inventories, which were related to resin burnings. For instance, at Carrawburgh (Britannia), they discovered a spatula for eliminating the burnt remains, while at Tienen (Belgium) they took to the surface 103 fragmentary censers, made of ceramic¹⁹. The archaeological observations, correlated with the paleobotanical researches, concluded that in the temples dedicated to Mithras, such as those of Londinum (London) or at Carrawburgh (in the proximity of Hadrian’s Wall), pinecones were also regularly burnt²⁰. Furthermore, the Mithraic sanctuary of Gura Dobrogei features a *Cautes* holding a pinecone²¹ (Fig. 3).

The burning of vegetal elements (stalks, fruits, leaves, resins), – which emanated strong smells and created chromatic effects – contributed to an intensification of sensory experiences and they facilitated the mnemonic effect of the religious rituals²².

The iconographic information constitutes a grounded support in the confirmation of the existence of similar habits within other cults, too. A first example is the one of Trajan’s Column, scenes 99 and 103²³, where the emperor is featured involved in a religious procession, consisting in rituals of purification and

¹⁷ L. A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

¹⁸ C. Hopkins, *Report of finds*, in P. V. C. Baur, M. I. Rostovtzeff (eds.), *The Excavations of Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of Second Season of Work, October 1928-April 1929*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1931, p. 60, Pl. XXXVI/3.

¹⁹ D. Walsh, *The Cult of Mithras in Late Antiquity. Development, Decline and Demise ca. AD 270-430*, Brill, Leiden, 2019, p. 119.

²⁰ L. Lodwick, *Identifying Ritual Deposition of Plant Remains: A Case study of Stone Pine Cones in Roman Britain*, in T. Brindle, M. Allen, E. Durham, A. Smith (eds.), *TRAC 2014: Proceedings of the Twenty-Fourth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Reading 2014*, Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2015, p. 60-61.

²¹ Z. Covacef, *Arta sculpturală în Dobrogea Romană, secolele I-III*, Editura Nereamia Napocae, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, pl. XXVI/3.

²² L. Lodwick, *op. cit.*, p. 56; Y. Hamilakis, *Archaeologies of the Senses*, in T. Insohl (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 212.

²³ http://www.trajans-column.org/?page_id=578#PhotoSwipe1568124452229, accessed on September 9th, 2019.

sacrifice of animals (*souvetaurilia*). On the altar, one may see a set of vegetal elements for burning, among which the pinecone. In the close vicinity, there is usually a child with the role of assistant (*camillus*), holding the box of frankincense (*acerra*) and looking up to the emperor, which means that the offering in question was especially important in the economy of the ritual act, being thrown into the flames by the one performing the sacrifice²⁴ (Fig. 4).

The ample composition of the mosaic dedicated to hunting – visible in Villa Romana del Casale (Piazza Armerina, Sicily) – dated to early 4th century AD depicts the episode of a sacrifice with frankincense brought to Goddess Diana by a Roman nobleman²⁵. The small sanctuary – comprising a statue and an altar with a circular tank – was called *sacellum*. A servant – represented to the right of the composition – taking care of a horse takes his hand to his nose, as if inhaling a nice smell (Fig. 5).

2. The martyr act of Saints Epictetus and Astion of Halmyris

One of the most important patristic sources regarding Christianity at the Lower Danube, “*Viața și suferințele Sfinților martiri Epictet și Astion*” – a martyrdom that occurred in the city of Halmyris (Murighiol, county of Tulcea), in the year AD 290 (Fig. 6) –, mentions the use of aromatics within funerary ceremonies: “*Vigilantius came with his entire house and with other Christians and took the bodies of the saint martyrs secretly; he sprinkled them with highly expensive aromatics and with myrrh (et perfundes ea myrrha et aromatibus pretiosissimis), he buried them in a special and honourable place, with Psalm songs and great piety*”²⁶.

This passage shows that myrrh (*μύρρα*) was an aromatic resin used mainly for funerary purposes. One of the most relevant moments – occurred right after Christ’s body was taken down the cross – is the embrocation and embalming. At that point Nicodemus – a member of the Sanhedrin – brings “a mixture of *myrrh and aloes*”, weighing 100 Roman pounds, the equivalent of 33 kilograms: “*The two of them wrapped it, with the aromatics, in strips of linen*” (John 19:40; Matthew

²⁴ I. C. Mantle, *The Roles of Children in Roman Religion*, in *Greece & Rome*, 49, 2002, 1, p. 85 et sqq.

²⁵ G. V. Gentili, *La villa imperiale de Piazza Armerina*, Istituto Poligrafico della Stato, Roma, 1966, p. 30, fig. 14.

²⁶ N. Vornicescu, *Primele scrieri patristice în literatura română (sec. IV-XVI)*, Editura Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 1992, p. 69.

27:63; Mark 15:43). Maybe the two Marys – depicted in the fresco of the Dura-Europos chapel – actually hold big bowls, not *alabastra* with myrrh, probably filled with a mixture of myrrh and aloes²⁷ (Fig. 7).

A resin material – resulted from drying out the bark of the bush *Commiphora myrrha* –, myrrh was indigenous to the south and west of the Arabian Peninsula, corresponding to the coastal plain area from the side of the Red Sea. At the same time, myrrh was cultivated in Gedrosia, the west of India, and mostly in Somalia; the one from the last area was considered the best²⁸.

The two aromatics – myrrh and frankincense – were considered goods with a religious purpose, not “luxury goods”, because they were usually burnt in temples – to honour the gods – or they were used in burial rituals. Nonetheless, myrrh can also be associated with *luxuria* because in Alexandria – a city featuring one of the most important markets for *aromata* – there was a list of prices for certain merchandises arrived in the Egyptian harbour. Hence, the rescript of emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus finds a set of aromatic substances, such as: cardamom (*cardamomum*), long pepper (*piper longum*), white pepper (*piper album*), betel pepper (*folium pentasphaerum*), spikenard (*folium barbaricum*), kostos (*costum*), canella cinnamon (*cassia Tyriana*), wood cinnamon (*xylocassia*), myrrh (*smyrna*), ginger (*zingiberi*), the leaf of the cinnamon tree (*malabathrum*), Indian bay leaf (*aroma Indicum*), galbanum – flowers of brass (*chalbae*) and others. It is worth noting that many of these products were destined mainly to pharmaceutical concoctions²⁹.

Myrrh was an expensive resin, a fact also confirmed by the text of a graffiti discovered in the house of the merchant Nebouchelos, dating to the 2nd century AD, situated at Dura-Europos. This shows that a merchant called Agripa – most probably a middleman involved in caravan trade – was paid the record amount of 300 denarii for the delivery of three containers of myrrh³⁰. Another graffiti

²⁷ P. V. C. Baur, *The Paintings in the Christian Chapel*, in M. Rostovtzeff (ed.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of Fifth Season of Work, October 1931-March 1932*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1934, p. 270, pl. XLVIII.

²⁸ B. Michael, *The Coastal Arabia and the adjacent Sea-Basins in the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea (Trade, Geography and Navigation)*, in *Topoi*, 2012, 11, p. 182.

²⁹ *Corp. Iur. Civil.*, XXXVIII, 4, 16 (p. 606).

³⁰ S. Gould, *Inscriptions*, in P. V. C. Baur, M. I. Rostovtzeff, A. R. Bellinger (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of Four Season of Work, October 1930-March 1931*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1933, p. 128, nr. 256; M. Rostovtzeff, *La «Maison des archives» à*

confirms the presence of other aromatics, too, imported from the east, such as cardamom and kostos, while the fruits of myrobalan (*μυροβαλανον*) seem to have been brought from Egypt³¹.

As the early Christian sources mention, myrrh was brought from the area corresponding to the Saba Kingdom³². According to the exegesis of the gifts offered to baby Jesus by the Magi – reflected in the universe of patristic literature – gold reflected the royalty of Christ, frankincense symbolises His divinity, while myrrh his other nature, the human one, announcing his death at the same time³³.

For the 4th century AD, the poet Prudentius confirms the Christians’ tradition of using myrrh, especially from Saba, in the process of treating linen, for a better conservation of the bodies of the deceased: “*Candore nitentia claro/ Praetendere lintea mos est/ Adpersaque myrrha Sabaeo/ Corpus medicamine servat*”³⁴.

This practice was still being used in AD 652-653, as depicted by Teophanes Confessor: “*In this year Herakleios’ nephew Gregory died at Heliopolis. His body was embalmed in myrrh and brought to Constantinople*”³⁵.

Doura Europos, in *CRAI*, 75, 1931, 2, p. 162-188; J.-B. Yon, *Commerçants et petits commerçants sur les bords de l’Euphrate*, in *Topoi*, 8, 2007, p. 422.

³¹ S. Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 129, nr. 257.

³² Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, XLII, 4, 7 (*The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, 10, *Tertullian, Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix, Octavius*, translated by R. Arbesmann, E. J. Daly, E. A. Quain, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D. C., 2008, p. 107): “*Of course we do not buy incense; it the Arabians complain, let the people of Saba know that more of their wares and dearer ones are spent on burying Christians than on fumigating the gods*”.

³³ Irineu, *Contr. Her.*, III, 9 (Sfântul Sfințit Mucenic Irineu al Lyonului, *Aflarea și respingerea falsei cunoașteri sau Contra ereziilor*, 2, translation from English, introduction and notes by D. O. Picioruș, Editura Teologie pentru azi, București, 2007, p. 34): “*myrrh, because it was He who should die and be buried for the mortal human race; gold, because He was a King, of whose kingdom is no end; and frankincense, because He was God, who also was made known in Judea, (Mc. 3, 7) and was declared to those who sought Him not (In. 1, 10)*”.

³⁴ Prudentius, *Cath.*, hymn. X (*Prudentius*, with an English translation by H. J. Thomson, I, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1949, p. 88-89); H. Leclercq, *Myrrhe (sub voce)*, in *DACL*, XX/1, *Mara Vocis-Noé*, 1935, col. 572.

³⁵ Theophanes, *Chron.* (*The Chronicle of Theophanes. An English translation of anni mundi 6095-6035 (A.D. 602-613)*, with introduction and notes, by H. Turtledove, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1982, p. 44).

3. The dedication to the Sun God of Salsovia

Following the Edict of Mediolanum, Dobrudja remains loyal to Licinius; it continues to preserve old practices and superstitions. An inscription discovered in the wall of the Salsovia city – a settlement situated on the Danube bank, at Mahmudia (county of Tulcea) – confirms the continuity of aromatics use within religious services dedicated to traditional deities from the first half of the 4th century AD. The inscription, dated to AD 322, had been placed at the feet of a monument dedicated to the Sun God. The text shows that Licinius ordered his soldiers to worship – every year on November 18th – the Sun God using frankincense, torches and libations: “*ture, cereis et profu(sionibus)*”³⁶.

The inscription suggests the existence within the Roman auxiliary troops of the function of *thurarius*, a servant fulfilling a key-role in sacrifices involving frankincense³⁷. During fumigations, he was the person in “direct contact” with this substance, which played a primordial role in the religious ritual³⁸. The profession had an Oriental origin, a fact confirmed for the 1st century BC by the existence of a frankincense merchant or a person in charge with sacrifices including the resin in question: Lucius Lutatius Paccius. As indicated by the inscription discovered in Rome (between Via Appia and Via Latina), he fulfilled the position of *thurarius* for the family of Mithridates VI Eupator, the king of Pontus (“*thurarius de familia rege Mitredatis*”)³⁹. In the same respect, I mention the fresco within the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods at Dura-Europos, depicting a Roman officer while offering sacrifice, using a portable *thymiaterion*⁴⁰.

Often, within the professional structures (*collegia*), the *thurarii* were associated to the *unguentarii*⁴¹. Based on the inscriptions, in the Roman Empire there were eight professions associated to perfumery and to the olfactive universe,

³⁶ V. Pârvan, *Salsovia*, Inst. Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, București, 1906, p. 27; D. M. Pippidi, *Studii de istorie a religiilor antice*, Editura Universitatis, București, 1998, p. 291.

³⁷ V. Pârvan, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁸ F. Allé, *Travail et identité professionnelle. Analyse lexicographique des métiers du parfum dans l'Occident romain*, in *L'Ant. Class.*, 2010, 79, p. 209.

³⁹ *CIL*, VI, 5639; J. P. González, *Aurífice en la Roma Julio Claudia. La fiebre del oror romana*, in *SAA*, 23, 2017, 1, p. 49.

⁴⁰ M. Crosby, *House in Block E4*, in M. I. Rostovtzeff, A. R. Bellinger, C. Hopkins, C. B. Weller (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of Sixth Season of Work, October 1932-March 1933*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1936, p. 21, pl. XL/2.

⁴¹ *CIL*, VI, 36819.

implicitly: *herbarius* (collector of plants and herbs), *aromatarius* (seller of herbal medicines), *pharmacopola* (seller of remedies), *pigmentarius* (merchants or colours and colourings), *seplasiarius* (probably merchant of aromatic substances), *negociator seplasiarius* (perfume trader), *thurarius* (seller of frankincense for religious rituals) and *unguentarius* (manufacturer and seller of fragrances, ointments and pharmaceutical products)⁴².

Concerning the cult of the Sun, in the *pars orientalis* of the Empire, the counterpart of Sol Invictus was Iarhibol. Among the cult items included in the frescos and the various graphic representations at Dura-Europos – such as the sacrifice of Tribune Lucius Terentius, in relation to the worship of this divinity – it is worth highlighting the presence of the *thymiaterion*. The item is featured as a container with a long base, where sacrificants burned frankincense, with ritualic and purifying purposes.⁴³ Archaeological researches have underlined a variety of *thymiateria*, made of ceramic or faïence shaped as an altar⁴⁴ or as a camel⁴⁵), or made of bronze (shaped like a small shovel or like a trapezoidal vessel)⁴⁶.

4. The deposit of resin amphorae in Tomis (Fig. 8/a, b)

In the 5th-6th centuries AD, for the liturgical needs, the metropolis of Tomis had to import vegetal resins and aromatics from various Oriental centres of the Empire. A significant part of the load identified in the chambers of the commercial complex in Tomis – known as the “Roman Building with Mosaic” – may have had religious purposes⁴⁷.

⁴² D. Delvigne, *Les délices de la liberté: la vie professionnelle des affranchis de la cité de Capoue à travers les sources épigraphiques*, Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres, Université catholique de Louvain, 2017, p. 27.

⁴³ C. Hopkins, *The Temple of Azzanathkona*, in M. Rostovtzeff (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 153, pl. XXXVI/3.

⁴⁴ J. A. Baird, *The Inner Lives of Ancient Houses. An Archaeology of Dura-Europos*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 175, fig. 4.4, especially the small altar within the inner yard of the G1-B house, with a dimple for burning incense.

⁴⁵ C. Hopkins, *Private Houses*, in M. Rostovtzeff (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 37, pl. XX/4; C. E. Snow, *Preservation of Art and Artifacts from Dura-Europos: A Conservator's perspective*, in L. Brody, G. L. Hoffman (eds.) *Dura-Europos. Crossroads of Antiquity*, McMullen Museum of Art, Boston, 2011, p. 35, pl. 39.

⁴⁶ C. Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 49, pl. XXIII/3; F. E. Brown, *Block F3*, in M. I. Rostovtzeff, A. R. Bellinger, C. Hopkins, C. B. Weller (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 81-82, pl. XXVI/1.

⁴⁷ Al. Barnea, *La Dobroudja aux IV^e-VII^e siècles n. è.*, in Al. Suceveanu, Al. Barnea, *La Dobroudja*

An important number of full amphorae – some of them fragmentary or cracked – around 120, most of them LR 2 and LR 4 types, initially used for shipping wine and oil, contained diverse types of vegetal resins, such as: frankincense (*gummi-resina olibanum*), myrrh (*gummi-resina Mirrha*), colophony (*colophonium*), turpentine (*balsamum terebenthinae*), Chios resin or mastic (*mastyx*), styrax (*balsamum styracis*), pine resin (*resina pini*) and resin mixtures (*balsamum*)⁴⁸. To them, it is worth adding a set of amphorae containing bitumen and pigments.

Some of these organic substances were used in perfumery and cosmetics, in the manufacture of pharmaceutical products, in the fabrication of torches, in the impermeabilization of various vessel elements (gaskets, ropes), in the inner treatment of amphorae used for shipping wine⁴⁹, as well as in funerary practices (embalming, fumigation).

These were goods shipped on long distances, given that Tomis was situated at the end of a great trade line extending on significant distances. Hence, frankincense, as well as myrrh, were used in cult edifices for the pleasant smells emanated while burning. Most probably, the precious resins were traded by the Patriarchate of Alexandria, which usually held the monopole over these products, or by another important religious centre within the Eastern-Mediterranean area. Of course, we can also take into account the role of the imperial administration in Constantinople, which was able to ship such merchandises stored in its warehouses.

Following the Church Peace, Emperor Constantin the Great and Empress Elena – to support religious services in churches – offered substantial donations from the Oriental provinces of the Empire.

Towards Basilica Constantiniana of Rome, left great amounts of myrrh (*stacten*) and pure nard oil (*oleus nardinus pisticus*), to be burned in front of the

romaine, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1991, p. 245.

⁴⁸ Em. Popescu, *Inscripțiile grecești și latine din secolele IV-VIII descoperite în România*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 1976, p. 99; 101-118, nr. 66a-66m.5; L. Buzoianu, *Tomis-Ville commerciale au Pont Euxin (Documents épigraphiques et archéologiques)*, in F. Karagianni (ed.), *Medieval Ports in North Aegean and the Black Sea. Links to the Maritime Routes of the East, International Symposium, Thessalonike, 4-6 December 2013, Proceedings*, Thessaloniki, 2013, p. 118-119; O. Karagiorgou, *Mapping trade by the amphora*, in M. M. Mango (ed.), *Byzantine Trade, 4th-12th Centuries. The Archaeology of Local, Regional and International Exchange, Papers of the Thirty-eight Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies. St. John's College, University of Oxford, March 2004*, Society for Promotion of Byzantine Studies Publication 14, Ashgate, 2009, p. 46.

⁴⁹ A. Rădulescu, *Amfore cu inscripții de la Edificiul Roman cu Mozaic din Tomis*, in *Pontica*, 6, 1973, p. 197-198.

altar, in golden and silver containers (*vasa sacra aurea et argentea*)⁵⁰. They were used along with aromatics (*donum aromaticum*) and balsam (*balsamum*) because – during the Easter holidays (*in diebus Paschae*) – they used to burn in a golden container around 200 pounds of *balsamum*⁵¹, namely 65.4 kg (taking into account that one *libra* accounted for 327.168 g)⁵².

The donations made for St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome comprised aromatics (*aromata*), nard oil (*oleum nardinum*) and balsam (*balsamum*), which had been brought from the Sybilles estate (*possessio*), in the territory of the Antioch city (*sub civitatem Antiocham*)⁵³. The estate of Timialica, situated in the territory of Alexandria city (*sub civitatem Alexandriam*), exported – besides pepper – nard oil, balsam, aromatics and Isaurian storax (*storace Isaurica*)⁵⁴. Another estate called Passinopolimse, located in the territory of the Armenia city (Egypt), sent pepper (*piper*), saffron (*crocum*), storax, cinnamon oil (*aromata cassia*), nard oil, balsam, clove essence (*cariophylu*) and *oleum Cypriu*⁵⁵. From the same province, the estate which Hybromius gave to the emperor Constantine exported *aromata*, *cassia*, nard oil and *balsamum*⁵⁶.

The products donated to the St. Paul’s Basilica in Rome were similar to those given to St. Peter’s Basilica. From the territory of the city of Tyr (*sub civitate Tyria*), the estate of Fronimusa sent nard oil, *aromata* and *cassia*⁵⁷. The same goods were sent from *possessio* Cyrios – in the territory of the city of Egypt (*sub civitate Aegyptia*) – to which one may add *balsamum*, storax (*storace*) and *stacten*⁵⁸. From the same territory, the estate of Basileia sent aromatics (*aromata*), nard oil, balsam and saffron⁵⁹.

⁵⁰ LP, XXXIV, 10, 10-13 (*Le Liber Pontificalis*, I, text, introduction and commentary by L. Duchesne, Paris, 1886, p. 173); E. H. Seland, *The Liber Pontificalis and Red Sea Trade of the Early to Mid 4th Century AD*, in Dionisius Agius et al. (eds.), *Navigated Spaces, Connected Places: Proceedings of the Red Sea Project*, V, Archaeopress, Oxford, 2013, tab. 13:1.

⁵¹ LP, XXXIV, 13, 11-12 (p. 174).

⁵² E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁵³ LP, XXXIV, 18, 16-18 (p. 177); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:2.

⁵⁴ LP, XXXIV, 18, 19-21 (p. 177); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:2.

⁵⁵ LP, XXXIV, 20, 2-4 (p. 178); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:2.

⁵⁶ LP, XXXIV, 20, 5-6 (p. 178); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:2.

⁵⁷ LP, XXXIV, 21, 3-4 (p. 179); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:3.

⁵⁸ LP, XXXIV, 18, 5-8 (p. 179); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:3.

⁵⁹ LP, XXXIV, 21, 7-8 (p. 179); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:3.

The Basilica of the Saint Martyrs Mercellinus and Peter received every year nard oil, balsam and aromatics for burning (*aromata in incensum*)⁶⁰.

Maybe in this key – created based on the information within *Liber Pontificalis* – we should also consider certain commercial realities within the province of Scythia.

In order to highlight the relations between the Egyptian patriarchal see and the metropolis of Tomis, it is worth mentioning as a comparison that – in late 6th century AD, in a letter addressed to Patriarch Eulogius of Alexandria – Pope Gregory thanked the Alexandrine patriarch for the Arabian aromatic wood and the resin-scented wine (*cognidium*) sent as gifts. At the same time, certain gifts comprising resins could also come from high dignitaries, as shown by a letter addressed by the same Pope to Leontius, ex-consul of Sicily, from whom he had received oil from the Holy Cross and aloe wood (“*oleum sanctae Crucis et aloe lignum*”); one to be used by touching, the other for providing a nice scent when burned (“*Unum quod tactum benedicat, aliud quod per incensum bene redolet*”)⁶¹.

In his turn, Gregory used to offer to various ecclesiastical personalities of the time – as gifts – a wide array of aromatics. Hence, in AD 599, he sent to the anchorite monk Secundinus aloe, frankincense, storax and balsam, to be burned in order to honour the martyrs⁶².

The resins and aromatics brought from the Oriental regions also penetrated the Northern Black Sea territories⁶³ using the Black Sea or Lower Danube harbours. Throughout Late Antiquity, it may be concluded that spices were extremely important in the political relations between the Roman Empire and the various barbarian leaders. Some of them were sent as gifts or stipendia to the barbarian nations, who used to include resins within funerary ceremonies, and aromatic plants to prepare medicines or in gastronomy.

On the occasion of the first siege of Rome (AD 409), during the negotiations carried out with the representatives of the Senate, King Alaric of the

⁶⁰ *LP*, XXXIV, 26, 10 (p. 183); E. H. Seland, *op. cit.*, tab. 13:4.

⁶¹ *PL*, 77, col. 938.

⁶² *PL*, 77, col. 989: “*Aloa vero, thimiama, storacem, et balsamum, sanctorum martyrum corporibus offerenda*”; E. R. Barker, *Rome of the Pilgrims and Martyrs. A Study in the Martyrologies, Itineraries, Syllogae, and Other Contemporary Documents*, Methuen & co London, 1913, p. 88.

⁶³ The archaeological researches within the Prut-Dniester space have brought to light a diversity of burners for fumigations, which Sarmatians used in the 3rd century AD, during funerary ceremonies.

Visigoths requested in exchange for the peace – besides the 5,000 librae of gold, 30,000 librae of silver, 4,000 silk clothes, 3,000 tanned leathers – 3,000 librae of pepper⁶⁴. Converted into the modern system of weight measurement, the amount of pepper reached almost 1,000 kg.

Another source helps us get a better insight into the importance of this spice in the period: this time, the action takes place during the turmoil caused by the invasion of the Huns. In the year AD 448, in its way towards the court of Atilla, the Roman embassy led by Priscus Panites found shelter during a storm, in a Scythian village situated in the North-Danubian areas. The female owner of the village “*was one of Bleda’s wives*”, the brother of the Hun king killed in the fight for supremacy between the two leaders. Priscus mentions that, upon their departure, “*we went to say goodbye to the queen and to honour her with gifts: three silver cups, leathers dyed red, pepper from India, dates and various other exotic delicacies that barbarians appreciated very much*”⁶⁵.

Such merchandises were also included in the luggage of Emperor Mauricius, on the occasion of his campaign against the Parthians, in AD 599/600. The list of aromatics, which fulfilled a variety of religious, medicinal and even diplomatic functions, included ointments, diverse fragrances, frankincense, mastyx, *saccharum*, saffron, musk, amber, bitter of raw and dry aloe, first quality and second quality pure cinnamon powder, cinnamon wood and other fragrances⁶⁶.

Some of these aromatic substances were extremely rare. Upon conquering the palace of Chosroes at Dastager, in 625/626, the armies of Emperor Heraclius would find there a great amount of such exotic products: big chunks of aloe wood, weighing 70 or 80 *librae* each, pepper and ginger, along with silk clothes, silver and wool rugs⁶⁷.

During the reign of Mauricius – in the context of the fights between General Priscus, commander of the imperial troops of Thrace, and the khan of the Avari, Baian – there was an exchange of goods between the two camps. During the Easter holidays of AD 600, as a gesture of gratitude for the wagons of food provided by

⁶⁴ Zosimus, *Historia nova*, V, 41, 4 (Zosime, *Histoire nouvelle*, III/1, texte établi et traduit par F. Paschoud, Société d’édition «Les Belles Lettres», Paris, 1986, p. 61-62 and note 96).

⁶⁵ *FHDR*, II, p. 261.

⁶⁶ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Three treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, introduction, edition, translation J. H. Haldon, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae XXVIII*, Viena, 1990, p. 106-108; B. V. Pentcheva, *The Performative Icon*, in *The Art Bulletin*, 88, 2006, 4, p. 650-651.

⁶⁷ Theophanes, *Chron.* (p. 451).

the Avari, the Roman commander “sent as gifts to the barbarian merchandises from India, such as pepper, bay leaves, flavours, cinnamons and other exquisite products, while the khan was in Sirmium”⁶⁸. From another source – Theophylactus Simocata – we find out that, besides the aforementioned spices, there was kostos, which was included in the category of aromatics used in fumigations⁶⁹: “The commander fulfilled the barbarian’s request and sent him pepper, Indian leaves, cinnamon and the so-called kostos. Upon receiving the gifts and putting aromatics on, the barbarian was very pleased”⁷⁰.

Kostos was not an aromatic sent randomly to the Avari commander. It is worth noting that in the magical-religious rituals of Late Antiquity – reflected in the Greco-Egyptian papyri known as the Eighth Book of Moses (Leiden Papyrus J 395) – the seven types of related to the pantheon of traditional deities were as follows: the aromatic specific to Kronos was styrax (στύραξ), “for it is heavy and fragrant”; to Zeus, malabathron (μαλάβαθρον); to Ares, kostos (κόστος); to Helios, frankincense (λίβανον); to Aphrodite, Indian nard (νάρδος Ἰνδικός); to Hermes, cassia (κασία); to Selene, myrrh (ξύρνα)⁷¹.

5. A container for burning aromatics (*thymiateria*) discovered in Dobrudja

The archaeological researches conducted over time have highlighted the existence of containers dedicated to religious functions, known as *thymiateria* or *thuribula*, of either metal or ceramic⁷². At Dinogetia⁷³ (Fig. 9/a), on the Danube

⁶⁸ FHDR, II, p. 611.

⁶⁹ E. A. Pollard, *Indian spices and Roman “Magic” in Imperial and Late Antique Indomediteranea*, in *J. World. Hist.*, 24, 2013, 1, p. 17.

⁷⁰ FHDR, II, p. 545.

⁷¹ *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, XIII, 17-29 (H. D. Betz, *Greek Magical papyri in Translation*, Chicago University Press, 1986, XIII, 1-343, p. 172).

⁷² For the thuribles found on the Dobrudjan territory, see D. Paraschiv, G. Nuțu, *The Discovery of a Clay Thuribulum in the North of Dobrudja*, in V. Cojocaru (ed.), *Ethnic Contacts and Cultural Exchanges North and West of the Black Sea from the Greek Colonization to the Ottoman Conquest. Proceedings of the International Symposium Ethnic contacts and Cultural Exchanges North and West of the Black Sea, Iași, June 12-17*, Editura Trinitas, Iași, 2005, p. 339-349.

⁷³ Gh. Ștefan, *Anciens vestiges chrétiens à Dinogetia-Bisericuța*, in *Dacia*, XI-XII/1945-1947, 1948, p. 303, fig. 1-2; I. Barnea, *Christian art in Romania, 1, 3rd -6th Centuries*, Publishing House of the Bible and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, București, 1979, p. 232-233, pl. 98/1;

bank, and at Golech (Sanctus Cyrillus?) (Fig. 9/b)⁷⁴, a settlement situated in modern-day Bulgaria, two bronze incense burners were discovered – the first, polygonal, has a Syrian origin. Three other portable cylindrical *thuribula* made of ceramic were discovered at Tropaeum Traiani⁷⁵ (Fig. 10/a), Capidava⁷⁶ (Fig. 10/b) and Enisala⁷⁷ (Fig. 10/c). This set of containers, all featuring handles for hanging, may be completed by a smoker modelled from the same material, originating from Varna (Bulgaria)⁷⁸ (Fig. 10/d).

Some censers were used for other purposes besides the religious ones: to purify the rooms of houses, such as the items discovered at Dura-Europos⁷⁹. At Side, the identification of a bronze incense burner in a chamber pertaining to a colourings shop indicates their use for secular purposes, too, such as freshening the air in bad-smelling rooms⁸⁰.

Incense burners and resins were part of the same array of instruments used in the scenting process, being generalised mainly in cult spaces⁸¹. Through its use in the Christian religious edifices, frankincense becomes a “*vector of the prayers*” brought by the priests⁸², thus creating a visual bridge between man and the divinity.

L. Dumitriu, *Thuribulum*, in L. Stratulat, I. Iațcu (eds.), *Arta pelerinajului. Obiecte creștine în spațiul est și sud-est carpatic (secolele IV-XVI)*, *Catalog de expoziție*, Editura Palatul Culturii, Iași, 2011, p. 2, nr. 7.

⁷⁴ G. Atanasov, *Martyrium et Ἀγῶσιον dans le castel basbyzantin près du village de Golech, région de Silistra (communication préliminaire)*, in C. Choliolčev, R. Pillinger, R. Harreither (Hrsg), *Von der Scythia zur Dobrudža*, *Miscellanea Bulgarica* 11, Verein “Freunde des Hauses Wittgenstein”, Wien, 1997, p. 130, Abb. 5/9.

⁷⁵ I. Barnea, *op. cit.*, p. 232-233, pl. 98/2; I. C. Opriș, *Ceramiques a caractere liturgique et devotionnel provenant de la Scythie Mineure (IV^e-VI^e Ap. J.-C.)*, in *Eph. Dacoromana*, S. N., XII, 2004, 1, p. 265, fig. 8-10.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, fig. 11-12.

⁷⁷ D. Paraschiv, G. Nuțu, *op. cit.*, p. 340-341, fig. 3/1-4; A. Adina, *Thuribulum*, in L. Stratulat, I. Iațcu (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 2, nr. 6.

⁷⁸ R. Pillinger, *Monumenti paleocristiani in Bulgaria*, in *RAC*, LXI, 1985, 3-4, p. 305, fig. 26.

⁷⁹ J. A. Baird, *The Inner Lives of Ancient Houses: An Archaeology of Dura-Europos*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 196, note 186.

⁸⁰ J. S. Crawford, *The Byzantines Shops at Sardis*, *Archaeological Exploration of Sardis Monograph* 9, Cambridge-London, 1990, p. 15, fig. 303, 304, 339, 566, 570.

⁸¹ H. Leclercq, *Encensoir (sub voce)*, in *DACL*, V/1, *Encaustique-Feux*, 1922, col. 23.

⁸² E. Destefanis, *Accessibilità ed esclusione negli spazi culturali: il ruolo degli arredi liturgici fissi e mobili*, in A. Coscarella, P. De Santis (ed.), *Martiri, santi, patroni: per una archeologia della devozione. Atti X Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Cristiana, Università della Calabria, Aula Magna, 15-18 Settembre 2010*, Università della Calabria, 2012, p. 150; C. Gauthier, *L'odeur er la lumière des*

The sweet smells were part of the synesthetic image (*pikilia*) addressing the participants to ceremonies⁸³.

As it can be easily concluded by the aspects above, frankincense and myrrh, along with other aromatics, have played throughout the centuries an important role in the economy and religious practices within the Mediterranean and Pontic areas.

„MYRRHA ET AROMATIBUS PRETIOSISSIMIS”

UTILIZAREA AROMATICELOR ÎN DOBROGEA ROMANĂ

(SECOLELE II-VI P. CHR.)

(REZUMAT)

În spațiul cuprins între Dunăre și Marea Neagră, cunoscut în Antichitate ca Scythia Minor, substanțele aromate, cum erau tămâia și smirna, au fost nelipsite din sacrificiile religioase organizate în cinstea zeilor tradiționali romani. Arderea tămâii contribuia la intensificarea experiențelor senzoriale și ușura efectul mnemonic al ritualurilor religioase. În ceea ce privește smirna, aceasta era o rășină aromatică folosită cu predilecție în scopuri funerare, așa cum aflăm din „Viața și suferințele Sfinților martiri Epictet și Astion”, eveniment petrecut în jurul anului 290 p. Chr.

Originare din Arabia, Etiopia și Somalia, acestea erau bunuri ce străbăteau distanțe mari, iar orașul Tomis se situa la capătul unei mari linii de comerț. Astfel, în secolele V-VI p. Chr., pentru necesitățile liturgice mitropolia Tomisului era nevoită să importe rășini vegetale și aromatice din diverse centre orientale ale Imperiului. Nu este exclus ca prețioasele rășini să fi fost comercializate de către Patriarhia Alexandriei, care, de obicei, deținea monopolul unor asemenea produse. Rășinile și aromatele aduse din Orient pătrundeau și în teritoriile nord-pontice prin intermediul porturilor de la Marea Neagră ori Dunărea de Jos. Pe tot parcursul Antichității târzii constatăm că aromatischele erau extrem de importante în relațiile politice dintre Imperiul Roman și diversele căpetenii barbare. Asemenea produse erau trimise ca daruri ori ca stipendii neamurilor barbare, care obișnuiau să utilizeze rășinile în cadrul ceremoniilor religioase, iar plantele aromatice în prepararea medicamentelor sau în gastronomie.

dédicaces. L'encens et le lumineux dans le rituel de la dédicace d'église au haut Moyen Âge, in D. Méhu (ed.), Mises en scène et mémoires de la consécration de l'église dans l'Occident médiéval, Collection d'Études Médiévales de Nice 7, Brepols, Turnhout, 2008, p. 85.

⁸³ B. V. Pentcheva, *op. cit.*, p. 650.

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Figure 1. a. Altar dedicated to Mithras, Troesmis, Tulcea county (photo museum);
b. detail of the circular tank



Figure 2. Mithraic relief, Gura Dobrogei, Constanța county (*apud* <http://www.cjc.ro/>, accessed on September 9th, 2019)



Figure 3. Sol-Mithras offering frankincense; image from a container discovered in the Richmond mithraeum in Cologne (*apud* J. Bird, *Incense in Mithraic ritual*, fig. 6/2)



Figure 4. Sacrifice brought by Emperor Trajan, Trajan's Column, scene 99 (*apud* <http://www.trajans-column.org/>, accessed on September 9th, 2019)



Figure 5. Sacrifice brought to Goddess Diana, mosaic from the Villa Romana del Casale (*apud* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>, accessed on September 9th, 2019)



Figure 6. Crypt of Saints Epictetus and Astion within the basilica of Halmyris, Murighiol (photo by O. Bounegru)



Figure 7. Women carrying bowls with myrrh, Dura-Europos (*apud* <https://artgallery.yale.edu/>, accessed on September 9th, 2019)



a



b

Figure 8. a, b. Amphorae discovered in the “Edifice with mosaic” at Tomis, Constanța (author’s photo)



Figure 9. Bronze censers discovered in the Dobruđja area: a. Dinogeția (*apud* A. Ailincăi, in *Arta pelerinajului*, cat. 7); b. Golech (*apud* G. Atanasov, *Martyrium*, fig. 5/9) (different scales)



Figure 10. Ceramic censers discovered in the Dobruđja area:
 a. Tropaeum Traiani (*apud* I. C. Opreș, *Ceramiques a caractere liturgique*, fig. 8);
 b. Capidava (*apud* I. C. Opreș, *Ceramiques a caractere liturgique*, fig. 11);
 c. Enisala (*apud* L. Dumitriu, in *Arta pelerinajului*, cat. 6);
 d. Varna (*apud* R. Pillinger, *Monumenti paleocristiani*, fig. 26) (different scales)