



Worth its weight in gold

Myrrh isn't only an expensive motif of mortality, a potent analgesic and an Ancient Egyptian mouthwash, it's also associated with untamed lust and sensuality, discovers Deborah Nicholls-Lee





Preceding pages: The gift of myrrh is held aloft by a young Balthazar in Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi*, 1423. Above: Andrea Mantegna's depiction of Balthazar as a Moor in his *Adoration of the Magi*, about 1495–1505, reflects myrrh's African/Arabian origins

IMAGINE if, of the three gifts bestowed on baby Jesus, Mary had to choose only one. Should she pick a precious metal, some incense or a resin used to embalm the dead? I'd like to make the case for myrrh, arguably the most versatile and practical of the three and, in Biblical times, outpricing gold.

The myrrh referenced in the Nativity story is an aromatic sap tapped from small trees found in north-east Africa and the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Its name is derived from the Arabic word for 'bitter', a reference to its pungent flavour. By association with these regions, Balthazar, the magus bearing myrrh, is depicted by painters such as Rubens and Bosch as dark-skinned and wearing a bejewelled turban or feathered Fez.

Inside Balthazar's ornate container was a substance that had already been used for more than 4,000 years. Its earthy, liquorice-like smell would also have been familiar to the Ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, who burned myrrh as incense for ceremonies. As Martin Watt and Wanda Sellar note in *Frankincense & Myrrh* (1996): 'It was thought that the smoke rising heavenwards

from the sweet burning incense forged a symbolic link between the people and their gods.' Traces of myrrh have been found in mummified corpses, where a myrrh-based embalming fluid served as a preservative and fumigator.

Myrrh was also valued for its medicinal properties. 'If you're a person in the ancient world, in Greece or Egypt or Rome, and you're thinking about how to treat pain or a wound, then one of the first medications you would think about would be myrrh,' observes Candida Moss, a professor in the department of Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham and an expert in ancient medicine. 'It's one of their only barriers against infection,' she adds. 'We have Hippocrates, the father of medicine, prescribing it for wound treatment and Dioscorides, one of history's first great pharmacologists, talking about myrrh being useful for ulcers... It's also used as a digestive aid and the Ancient Egyptian Ebers Papyrus talks about using myrrh in a mouthwash.'

Thought to expel intestinal worms, myrrh was also used as an insect repellent, an antidote to snake bites and even an aphrodisiac.

The Ancient Greek philosopher Plutarch went further, claiming that *kyphi*, a liquid incense that counted myrrh among its key ingredients, 'allayed anxieties and brightened dreams and was made of those things which delight most in the night'. Simply put: the extolling of myrrh knew no bounds. It's no wonder that everyone wanted to get their hands on it.

Demand for myrrh peaked about the time of Jesus's birth, when caravans of camels would take this precious cargo on a journey of more than 2,000 miles from Yemen and Oman to the coral-coloured city of Petra in Jordan, then a redistribution centre and onwards to Egypt, Israel and Syria. Fast forward to the 18th century and doctors were encouraged to chew myrrh to protect them from contagious patients, whereas mariners suffering the effects of scurvy rubbed it into their bleeding gums. Today, myrrh is harvested primarily for perfume, but it is still used in salves and toothpaste and has been mooted by scientists as a potential treatment for everything from covid to cancer.

This wonderful cure-all was even an early painkiller. 'You can see that in the Bible in



A long road to Bethlehem: myrrh is sap from the East African tree of the same name

the Gospel of Mark,' Prof Moss explains. 'Jesus is offered myrrh mixed with wine when he's on the cross.' The gift of myrrh at the start of Jesus's life foreshadows his suffering and death, she adds. 'They brought him a very powerful analgesic associated with kings, but they also brought him an ingredient that would be used in his burial, prophesying the future for him.'

‘According to legend, the treasured gum that oozes from myrrh’s grey bark is said to be Myrrha weeping’

There's a duality to myrrh in the Bible, she continues. 'It has this medical use, preserving life and it's also used in ointments that are used in early life or transitional moments in anointing. Yet then, very potently, it's associated with funeral rituals, in embalming and mummification in Egypt and the Gospel of John has it as an ingredient being used to prepare the body of Jesus for burial—so it's also associated with death.'

Mary Magdalene was among the myrrh bearers who anointed the dead body of Christ, wrapping him in linen fragranced with myrrh, according to Jewish custom. St Mary and her myrrh was a popular subject in Renaissance art, the container of myrrh-infused embalming fluid recalling her role in Christ's burial and as the first person to see him after the resurrection.

More recently, literature has capitalised on myrrh's rich symbolism. In Tennyson's *Hero to Leander*, based on two lovers from

Greek mythology, myrrh is again a motif of mortality. When Hero says: 'I've bathed thee with the pleasant myrrh; Thy locks are dripping balm,' she foretells the couple's tragic end. Nowadays, we are less attuned to this symbolism, but, at Christmas time, as choristers sing *We Three Kings* by John H. Hopkins Jnr, myrrh's morbid verse stirs us still: 'Myrrh is mine;/its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom;/sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,/sealed in the stone-cold tomb.'

Yet, this mysterious sap has a sensuous side, as seen in the heavily scent-laden poetry of the French Romantic poet Charles Baudelaire. In his Gothic spectacular *The Dance of Death*, Death perfumes herself with myrrh; whereas in the sonnet *Correspondences*, myrrh's incense is a marker of otherworldliness, 'hymning the ecstasies of the soul and senses'. Even the Old Testament evokes myrrh's hedonic allure. In the *Bride and Her Beloved* from the *Song of Solomon*, for example, the groom's lips are 'like lilies, dripping with flowing myrrh', whereas *The Book of Proverbs* warns against 'the wayward woman with her seductive words' who has perfumed her bed 'with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon' and invites men to 'drink deeply of love till morning'.

In a tale from Greek mythology, retold by Ovid, myrrh is again associated with untamed lust when the gods transform the incestuous Myrrha, daughter of the king and queen of Cyprus, into a myrrh tree. The legend that her son Adonis was born from the trunk of this tree has fascinated Italian artists for centuries, inspiring numerous surreal depictions of this tree-woman hybrid. According to the legend, the treasured gum that oozes from myrrh's grey bark is said to be Myrrha weeping. Even now, the hardened drops of sap are known to specialists as 'tears'.

But wait, there's myrrh

- The genus *Commiphora myrrha* takes its name from the Greek *kommis*, meaning gum, and *phora*, meaning bearer and is a member of the *Burseraceae* family. This diminutive, deciduous tree reaches maturity at about 25 years of age and grows to about 16ft

- **Requiring full sun and temperatures in excess of 10°C, myrrh thrives in tropical climates and is happiest in stony desert scrubland at an elevation of between 330ft and 3,300ft**

- Myrrh produces long clusters of delicate white, bell-shaped flowers that yield red, almond-shaped berries, once thought to cure baldness if applied to the scalp

- **To harvest myrrh, incisions are made in the bark and the toffee-coloured resin (below), a protective response to the cuts, seeps out. It's a slow and delicate process: the sap must harden before it is collected, which can take several weeks, and cutting too far or too often risks killing the tree**

- Sadly, myrrh's protective thorny branches have not prevented its decline. In Oman, it's thought that fewer than 250 specimens remain, with fire, insects and the overgrazing of livestock cited as key issues. The clearing of land for gold mining in Somaliland also endangers this ancient tree—the result of mistakenly valuing gold over magnificent, multi-purpose myrrh



Today, a voyage across the Arabian Sea is not necessary to experience myrrh. Although it varies in price and quality, for about £100, a kilogram of myrrh resin can be dispatched to the British countryside. Once obtained, the anointing, embalming, chewing or burning needn't begin immediately. According to *Frankincense & Myrrh*, myrrh is one of the few essential oils that improves with time. Myrrh, it says, mellows with age and develops a "warmer" character. If only humans could harness that quality, it would still be worth its weight in gold.