

'INCENSUM IN MONASTERIUM' IN PREANDALUSIAN HISPANIA (CENTURIES 5th-8th)

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Frankincense in late antique monastic contexts is analysed in Hispania. It is possible to see the few archaeological testimonies and the low attention given to the matter by archaeologists. However, we notice that the liturgical use of frankincense in the Iberian Peninsula appears always related to oriental clerics and monks, and we also identify a place of production (a monastery) of this substance.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, Archaeology, Frankincense, incensum, Hispania, Els Altimiris, El Bovalar

INTRODUCTION

Frankincense is a luxury item that has long been in use in the context of many different liturgies in all the Eastern Mediterranean civilizations: Syria, Palestine, Arabia, etc. It is obtained from the dried resin of a range of species within the genus *Boswellia*, indigenous to the Horn of Africa and the Western Arabian Peninsula, and it is compacted with granules which may be scented with vegetable essential oils or other resins. The granules and powders obtained from frankincense, when adequately burnt on ember, release a characteristically fragrant smoke.

It is well known that in the pre-Christian East one "called the gods" through the use of frankincense, because they liked to inhale it and it caught their rapt attention¹. It has secular uses as well, because of the aseptic properties conferred by frankincense to environments in which it is burnt. Even today, in areas where the plant is native –like Somalia or Eastern Ethiopia–, its unprocessed resin is used for hygienic purposes in disinfection and domestic disinfestation (fig. 1).

Therefore, due to its Eastern origins, the presence of frankincense right from the very beginnings of Christianity is hardly surprising, as is its being mentioned in the New Testament, first in the Gospel of Luke and then in the Book of Revelation: [...] According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense (Luke, 1: 9-11); And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him **much incense**, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints [...]. And the angel took the censer,



*Fig. 1: Incense or unpolished resin, obtained from *Boswellia sacra*, and subjected with bark from the same tree. Commercialised in an Ethiopian market to be burnt in domestic censers. (Photography by Laura de Castellet).*

and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth (Revelation 8, 3-6).

Christianity accepted the use of frankincense from the start, to later on adapt it and adopt it in the liturgy, but this happened temporarily only in the East. One must wait until the Middle Ages to be able to establish its approximate generalisation in the West, even though historians seem to

¹ K. NIELSEN, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, Leiden, 1986 (Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, XXXVIII), p. 30.

have taken it for granted that, at least in *Hispania*, its use was also common in the West throughout Antiquity. And nothing could be further from the truth, since the sources that account for this are very scarce, and they always do so in connection with personalities from the East or under a significant Eastern influence.

Constantine, who set the Imperial capital to the East, offered frankincense and censers to the basilicas of Rome². Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Teodosian Code contained the prohibition, among legislation against expressions of pagan cult, of burning frankincense³. Outside the strictly Eastern area, the burning of frankincense was deemed an eminently pagan custom.

In the 6th century, under the pontificate of bishop Fidel of Mérida, a man of Greek origin, we find the first documentation of frankincense being used within an ecclesiastic context in Hispania: *Then he arose and, the deacons according to custom carrying censors and preceding him, went with all who were present to the church to celebrate Mass with the help of God*⁴.

In the specific case of the Iberian Peninsula, the (relative) residual presence of censers or incense burners previous to Christianity can be traced back to Eastern traders (mainly Greek and Phoenician) who established their colonies in ancient Iberia. Symptomatically, the first appearance of a censer in a Christian context, such as that of Fidel of Mérida, again come up in relation with Eastern traders⁵.

So it was that the ubiquitous frankincense had been rapidly adopted in the East by the new Christian liturgy, in an almost spontaneous way; unlike in the West, and even less so within its boundaries, where the lack of such a background initially involved a relative ignorance of the item in general terms (4th & 5th centuries), seeing as only an emperor like Constantine offered it to the Roman basilicas, despite the prohibition. In a second phase (6th & 7th centuries), the migrations of Eastern clergymen toward the West triggered the beginning of its 'popularization' and adoption (fig. 2). This will now be examined in Visigothic Hispania, where it seems that local churches offered a certain amount of resistance and rejection to the use of frankincense in the



Fig 2: The earliest (and not too profuse) preserved depictions of censers in Hispania are from the 10th century. (a): miniature of the *Beatus of Girona* (f. 89v). Depictions from Late Antiquity are found in other very sparse parts of the West, like the censer in the mosaic from *Palace of Justinian in Ravenna* (b).

liturgy, feeling harassed by the arrival of the Eastern clergy and their "strange" liturgical customs.

But before we continue it is convenient to point out the meaning of the word *incensum*, in order to contextualise frankincense in the *Hispania* of Late Antiquity. The word refers in principle to the product one obtains from the resinous substance extracted from the trees *Boswellia sacra* (in Arabia) and *Boswellia papyrifera* (in India), known as frankincense in English, but in the sources it may also be referring -as is the case most of the times- to a broad range of aromatic substances of vegetable origin, which are manufactured in order to be burnt. Mostly these would be made out of locally sourced resins for the elaboration of other types of incense, for example with cypress or cedar⁶, but the range is truly vast. Still in 1779 the botanist Ignacio de Asso observed in Aragon how resins from junipers were used as a substitute for ecclesiastic frankincense for the base resin, using local aromatic plants⁷. The elaboration of resins by desiccation and their use in powder does not require complex infrastructure and can be easily performed in domestic environments. Desiccation can be minimally controlled in the oven, its manual pulverisation can be

² *Liber Pontificalis Romanae Ecclesiae*, 34, Silvester (324-335), ed. L. Duchesne, *Le Liber Pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire*, I, Paris, 1981, p. 172-176.

³ *Codex Theodosianus*, a. 392, ed. Th. Mommsen - P. M. Meyer, *Theodosiani libri XVI cum constitutionibus Sirmondianis et Leges Nouellae ad Theodosianum pertinentes*, I, 2: *Codex Theodosianus*, Berlin 1904; see J.A. JIMÉNEZ, *Teodosio I, Libanio y la prohibición de los sacrificios*, in *Latomus*, 69, 4, 2010, p. 1103, note 5.

⁴ *Vitas sanctorum Patrum Emeretensium*, ed. A. Maya Sánchez, Turnhout, 1992 (Corpus christianorum. Series latina, 116), IV, 6, 3.

⁵ Fidel, bishop of Mérida, had arrived to the City together with some Greek traders, and he succeeded his uncle Paulo, who was in his turn of Greek origin as well.

⁶ K. NIELSEN, *Incense in Ancient Israel*, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 62 y ss.

⁷ P. FONT I QUER, *El Dioscórides renovado*, Barcelona, 1961, p. 84.

done with stone mortars and granules can be elaborated in small workshops in parallel with pharmacopoeic products. The Eastern Christian Church, to this date, still trusts the elaboration of frankincense to specialised monasteries, where aromatic plants are grown for its customisation, whereas the Roman Church tends to use unprocessed frankincense of Arabian origin.

This ought to be taken into account for two main reasons:

1) Because texts very usually use the specific term *incensum* generically for the whole range of precious and aromatic substances that constitute all different types of incense, including substitutes of frankincense.

2) Because this will precisely allow us to speak not only of 'the use of incense', but of the 'production of incense' on Hispanic ground in monastic contexts during Late Antiquity. This is a relatively new matter in our field of investigation concerning antique monasticism.

The exotic trees from which the resin for frankincense is obtained of course do not grow, and never did, on Hispanic soil, but other trees did and do, such as the aforementioned Cupressaceae and other vegetable species that would also allow for the local manufacture of this precious product⁸.

CENSERS AND EASTERN CLERGY IN HISPANIA

Having clarified the Eastern origins -both geographic and liturgical- of frankincense, we now ought to consider how and when it was first used by Hispanic Christianity, and who introduced it. The clearest indicator of the use of frankincense is the presence of censers⁹, even though modern analysis methods also allow for the location and identification of subtle micro-debris that organic matter such as frankincense may leave. That is why we proceed to systematise and analyse all known literary and archaeological references, both direct and indirect, which lead to the presence of censers, frankincense and other aromatic resins in the Christian *Hispania* of late Antiquity, and being in a relatively advanced stage of this process, we will now show some of the most revealing results.



Fig. 3: Censers of Hispania in Late Antiquity (They are not at the same scale): a) Censer of Lledó (Monastery of Saint Feliu de Guixols, Girona). Museu Episcopal de Vic; b) Censer of El Bovalar (Serós, Lleida). Museu Diocesà de Lleida; c) Censer of Aubenya (Mallorca). Museo del Seminario de Palma; d) Censer of Almería. Museo Arqueológico Nacional (from VIZCAÍNO SÁNCHEZ, 2014. 25); e) Censer in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, perhaps from Córdoba (image edited by Natalia Salazar).

In relation to archaeology, and more specifically to censers found on the Iberian Peninsula, we owe the works of Professor Palol, and more recently, Jaime Vizcaíno. Very concisely, only a few censers have been preserved, all of them from the 6th or 7th centuries (fig. 3), and have been attributed to Eastern workshops. One perhaps to a Sicilian workshop operating during the Byzantine reconquest, presenting a Greek inscription related to the passage in the New Testament concerning Zachary and frankincense (Luke, 1: 5-25). These censers are, north to south:

- The censer of Lledó found in the Monastery of Saint Feliu de Guixols (Girona), in Visigothic territory¹⁰.
- The spectacular censer of El Bovalar, which we will refer to later on. It was found in Visigothic territory.
- The hemispheric censer of Aubenya (Mallorca)¹¹, perhaps originally from the aforementioned Sicilian workshop, which was found in Byzantine territory.
- The censer in Almería, which was found in Byzantine territory¹².
- The gadrooned censer in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional¹³, perhaps from Córdoba, and therefore in Visigothic territory if its origin were to be confirmed.

Archaeological data is therefore certainly scarce and, on the other hand, the reading of the also scarce specific written

⁸ About the origin and uses of the incense, see: B. LARIOUX, *Parfums d'Orient. La Science des épices au Moyen Âge*, in A. Paravicini (ed.), *Parfums et odeurs au Moyen Âge. Science, usage symboles*, Firenze, 2015 p.61-88; R. CORBINEU, P. GEORGES-ZIMMERMANN, *Le parfum de la mort. Plantes et aromates pour la préparation des corps (Moyen Âge et période moderne, Ibidem, p. 161-180; M. MONTESANO, The Smell of Magic, Ibidem, p. 205- 220; M. ROCH, L'odeur de la sainteté dans le traité "Flores Epytaphii Sanctorum" (V. 110) de Thiofrid d'Echternach, Ibidem, p. 221-240; I. VENTURA, "Sume tibi aromata prima" profumi ed aromi nell'esegesi ad Ex. 30, Ibidem, p. 349-428.*

⁹ Censers appear in Ancient and Mediaeval sources under three main denominations: *thymiateria*, *incensarium* and *turibulum*. However, censers are not very commonly found in ecclesiastical inventories: B. CASEAU, *Objects in Churches: the Testimony on Inventories*, in L. Lavan, E. Swift, T. Putzeys (eds.), *Objects in context. Objects in Use. Material Spatiality in Late Antiquity*, Leiden - Boston, 2007, p. 551-579.

¹⁰ P. PALOL SALELLAS, *Los incensarios de Aubenya (Mallorca) y Lladó (Gerona)*, in *Ampurias*, XII, 1950, p. 1-19.

¹¹ M. A. ELVIRA BARBA, *Incensario hemisférico*, in *Bizancio en Hispania. De la Antigüedad Tardía a El Greco*, Madrid, 2003, p. 238.

¹² J. VIZCAÍNO SÁNCHEZ, *El incensario bizantino de Almería. Consideraciones acerca de la importación de bronce 'coptos' en la Hispania meridional durante la Antigüedad Tardía*, in *Estudios bizantinos*, 2, 2014, p. 1-32.

sources available in *Hispania* once again clearly confirms the Eastern origin – both geographically and “ideologically” – of frankincense and its liturgical use. Therefore, when it appears in ancient Christian sources, it accompanies Eastern church members, as seen already in the example of Fidel of Mérida while heading toward the celebration of a mass in a procession where the deacons bore censers.

These are the testimonies in Hispanic literature and archaeology featuring Eastern characters¹⁴, but it can be established that on the Hispanic side the use of frankincense in the Christian liturgy was received with outright rejection – this can be seen mainly in the attitude of Isidore of Seville. The framework of this rejection is one of strong opposition to this Eastern liturgy which was ‘permeating’ *Hispania* because of the intense immigration of Eastern clergy that happened throughout the 6th and 7th centuries, for reasons that escape the aim of this study and in which we will not delve. It will suffice to mention two of the main historical landmarks: the conquest of the peninsular South by Justinian between the mid-6th century and the mid-7th century¹⁵, and the exodus of Eastern monk communities¹⁶ facing the first stages of Islamic expansion after the first half of the 7th century.

This situation led to the presence of monastic communities in the Iberian Peninsula, with a more intense presence in the South for obvious geopolitical reasons, but nevertheless showing signs of a clear expansion throughout the Iberian territory¹⁷.

In relation to this presence, for example, we know of the foundation of the *Agaliense* Monastery near Toledo around the year 600, very probably by exiled monks of Egyptian and Syrian origin¹⁸. Also, in the remote Gallaecia, a clergyman of Pannonian origins, Martin, founded the monastery of Dumio in the mid-6th century. This was famously one of the main centres for the diffusion of Christianity in the North of the Peninsula, where many Eastern Christian texts were translated¹⁹.

But this Eastern presence, it seems, often disturbed the local Hispanic ecclesiastic elites, who reacted at least preventively against certain expressions and customs that

they deemed excessive or strange. That was perhaps just the superficial reflection of a deeper theological and political struggle, sharply noted in his time by professor Fontaine²⁰, who pointed at the manner in which Isidore of Seville reacted critically against the Eastern liturgy that was “invading” *Hispania* by means of these exotic clergymen from the East. His complaint had to do with the presence of an eccentric Eastern bishop from the sect of the acephali in the council of Seville in the year 619. It was precisely within this framework that it is made manifest how the burning of incense is a practice for Jews and pagans, which provides a clear picture of the disparagement and despise toward frankincense among the local Christian clergy in Visigothic times. Isidore himself does not refer to it as an element of liturgy in his *Etymologiae*, but simply describes it as an aromatic substance in the chapter *De odoribus et unguentis*, within his fourth book concerning medicine²¹.

However, the situation of Christianity changed substantially after the Muslim invasion. Sources from the Hispanic Early Middle Ages begin to mention a general usage of censers, without any differentiation between the Eastern and the Western liturgy, which can be found during the Visigothic centuries.

THE CASE OF ELS ALTIMIRIS AND ITS RELATION WITH EL BOVALAR

The archaeological works we are currently conducting in the site of Els Altimiris (in the Catalan pre-Pyrenees), show an economy based on forest-rural activities among which the exploitation of forest resources plays a prominent role. We believe that the archaeological evidence we have identified allows us to talk for the first time about the manufacture of aromatic resins in the Early Middle Ages in *Hispania*.

This site near the episcopal see of *Ilerda* has been identified as a monastic community in the mountains in a chronology placed between the late 5th century and the early 9th centuries, having a peak of importance in the 6th and 7th centuries²². Its position in a barren and isolated location, sur-

¹³ J. L. BALMASEDA MUNCHARAZ; C. PAPÍ RODES, *Cruces, incensarios y otros objetos litúrgicos de épocas paleocristiana y visigoda en el Museo Arqueológico Nacional*, in *Boletín del Museo Arqueológico Nacional*, XVI, p. 128.

¹⁴ Another Premediaeval Hispanic text featuring a testimony of the use of frankincense is the *Peregrinatio* of Egeria (*pars* II), but in this case the censers are referenced in the description of the liturgy of Jerusalem, so this source does not quite fit our purpose of documenting the use of frankincense in the Iberian Peninsula. All other brief testimonies concerning frankincense in the Western liturgy in late Antiquity are compiled and commented in F. CABREROL; H. LECLERCQ, s.v., *Encense*, in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, V, I partie, Paris, 1922, p. 11-20.

¹⁵ J. VIZCAÍNO SÁNCHEZ, *La presencia bizantina en Hispania (siglos VI-VII). La documentación arqueológica*, Murcia, 2010 (*Antigüedad y Cristianismo*, XXIV).

¹⁶ It was mainly the influential and dynamic Syrian monasticism described by Theodoret of Cyrus: P. CANIVET, *Le monachisme syrien selon Théodoret de Cyr*, Paris, 1977 (*Théologie historique*, 42), pero también del egipcio: S. FERNÁNDEZ ARDANAZ, *Monaquismo oriental en la Hispania de los siglos VI-X*, in *Antigüedad y cristianismo*, XVI, 1999, p. 203-214.

¹⁷ P. C. DÍAZ MARTÍNEZ, *La recepción del monacato en Hispania*, in *Codex Aquilarensis*, 5, 1991, p. 131-140.

¹⁸ A. BRAEGELMANN, *The life and writings of Sto Ildephonse of Toledo*, Washington, 1942, p. 10. The very likely Eastern origin of this monastery has been inferred through the context and the names of the titular saints (Cosmas and Damian). However, Ildephonse of Toledo, the main source concerning this monastery, omits its origins, which is at least strange (Were the origins of the foundation omitted on purpose in order to elude its Eastern nature within the context of a struggle between the local and the foreign?).

¹⁹ L.A. GARCÍA MORENO, *La Iglesia y el cristianismo en la Gallaecia de época sueva*, in *Antigüedad y cristianismo*, 23, 2006, p. 39-56.

²⁰ J. FONTAINE, *Poésie et liturgie. Sur la symbolique christique des luminaires, de Prudence à Isidore de Séville*, in R. Cantalamessa e L.F. Pizzolato (eds.), *Paradoxos politeia. Studi patristici in onore di Giuseppe Lazzati*, Milano, 1979, p. 318-346.

²¹ ISIDORVS, *Etymologiae*, VI, 12, 4-6, ed. W.M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum siue Originum*, I-II, Oxford, 1911 (no page).

²² See: W. ALEGRIA TEJEDOR, M. SANCHO i PLANAS, *Els Altimiris, enllaços i confluències entre la Tardoantiguitat i l'Alta Edat Mitjana*, in *Tribuna d'Arqueologia 2008-2009*, Lleida, 2010, p. 221-236; W. ALEGRÍA, M. SANCHO i PLANAS, *Comunitat de muntanya - comunitat monàstica: Els Altimiris, un enclavament cristià a la serra del Montsec*, in *Primeres jornades d'arqueologia i paleontologia del Pirineu i Aran*, Lleida, 2015, p. 214-221.



Fig. 4: Iron structure from a scale found in the site of Els Altimiris in levels corresponding to the late 6th century and the early 7th. The starting point of a hanging hook is partially preserved at the top end of the shaft. This would secure its correct position in order to proceed to weighing. The swing arm ends in an L-shape in one end, and it is broken on the other. The lower end of the shaft would facilitate the exact monitoring of weight. (Image from the archive of Els Altimiris. Photography by Marta Sancho. Editing by Marta Valls).

rounded by a forest and protected by spectacular cliffs, makes it a unique site bearing great relevance within the archaeology of the Hispanic Early Middle Ages. Among the elements that characterise this settlement we must highlight the presence of a superb church surrounded by an external estate which conforms the ecclesiastic complex. The site is completed by the floors of some huts, semi-excavated in rock, three big cisterns and a closing wall delimiting the whole complex²³.

The careful examination of archaeological evidence, the analysis of existing sources on the territory and the knowledge of historical dynamics concerning this chronology have led us to this monastic identification²⁴. In this context, the presence of objects like the ones used in the handling of



Fig. 5: Bronze plate matching the scale, found in the site of Els Altimiris within the same levels corresponding to the 6th-7th century. We are currently performing new analyses, which is why we were unable to proceed to the drawing and measuring of the piece, in order to avoid polluting the samples. Let us simply indicate that the best preserved side shows a fitting mark around the whole plate, which corresponds to the fitting system (Image from the archive of Els Altimiris. Photography and editing by Júlia Coso).

pharmacological substances like oils, resins and aromatic plants is fully justified and we understand it as a common practice among those who were capable of preserving the knowledge they inherited from the Ancient world²⁵.

Concerning the topic in discussion, it is most interesting to note the link –through cattle drive²⁶– of this mountain monastery and another very likely monastery – El Bovalar, which was already excavated years ago by professor Palol²⁷. This one is located in the plains, and a beautiful censer of Eastern origin was found within a superb church the architecture of which contains references to that of its Syrian counterparts. This, together with other arguments, led us at the time to the reasonable conclusion that the place must have been a monastic foundation very probably established by Eastern monks²⁸.

There are three objects we associate to the handling of resins. Firstly, a very simple scale, formed by a central axis with a hook in its upper end for hanging (fig. 4, 8). The other end is pointed and about 5 centimetres from it there is a swing arm ending in an L-shaped hook. Its discovery in the year 2013 suggested from the very beginning a more than likely handling of valuable goods and the mixing of special quantities. We can say that at the time it was a precision device. In the following campaign, in 2014, we found a bronze plate (fig. 5) very near the location of the structure

²³ See: M. SANCHO i PLANAS, *Els Altimiris*, in Ph. Senac (ed.), *Histoire et Archéologie des Sociétés de la Vallée de l'Èbre (VII^e - XI^e siècles)*, Toulouse, 2010, p. 67-90.

²⁴ M. SANCHO i PLANAS, *Quins cristians per a els Altimiris. Propostes de contextualització d'un jaciment tardoantic i altmedieval del prepirineu lleidetà*, in *Urgellia*, 17, 2011, p. 801-816.

²⁵ Isidore of Seville, in his *Regula monachorum*, dedicates a part of his work to pointing out the importance of the existence of infirmaries in monasteries, and de availability of monks versed in the subject. See: I. GARCÍA, M. C. RAMOS, E. GONZALBEZ, *Enfermedad y cuidados en la obra de Isidoro de Sevilla. Siglo VII*, in *Index de Infermeria*, 14, núm. 51, 2005, p. 71.

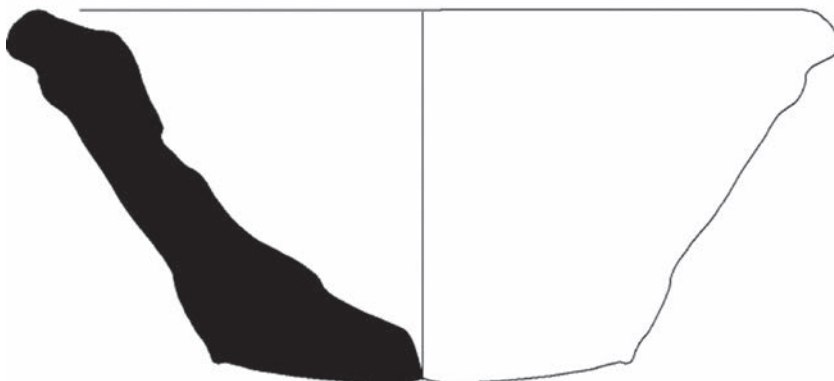
²⁶ See: J. SALES CARBONELL, N. SALAZAR ORTIZ, *The pre-Pyrenees of Lleida in Late Antiquity: Christianisation processes of a landscape in the Tarraconensis*, in *Revista d'arqueologia de Ponent*, 23, 2013, p. 27-44; J. SALES-CARBONELL, M. SANCHO PLANAS, *Monastic networks and livestock activity: relationships and contacts at regional level in the southern slopes of the Pyrenees (VI-IX centuries)*, in *Les moines autour de la Méditerranée. Contacts, échanges, influences entre Orient et Occident, de l'Antiquité tardive au Moyen Âge: Mobilités et contacts à l'échelle local et régionale*, École Française de Rome, 17-19 septembre 2014, Rome, in press.

²⁷ P. PALOL SALELLAS, *El Bovalar (Seròs, Segrià). Conjunt d'època paleocristiana i visigòtica*, Barcelona, 1989.

²⁸ J. SALES CARBONELL, *Fabricando pergamino durante la Antigüedad Tardía: unas notas arqueológicas para los monasterios de Hispania*, in *Augustinianum*, 53, 2, 2013, p. 469-499; ID., *El Bovalar (Seròs, Segrià): ¿Un monasterio productor de pergamino en la Hispania visigoda?*, in *Rivista di archeologia cristiana*, 90, 2014, p. 423-464. In these articles one can find all the bibliography concerning the excavations and study of the site.



ALT'13-401-37 Morter lític



Figs. 6 and Fig. 7 Stone mortar (photograph and drawing) found in abandonment levels in the site of Els Altimiris. The analyses performed on it have not yielded any positive results, since a reliable sample of the remains containing the pores on the piece could not be recovered. Despite this, it is interesting to note the inner abrasion, which was produced by a circular friction movement. In the fragment of the pestle, made of a harder material, we can observe the wear from use fully coinciding with the curve of the mortar (Image from the archive of Els Altimiris. Photography and editing by Júlia Coso).

of the scale, doubtlessly being one of the two plates commonly found in this type of scale. Both pieces were located in stratigraphic levels corresponding to the 6th and 7th centuries.

Throughout the different excavation campaigns that were conducted, we have been able to recover many fragments of stone mortars (fig. 6-7), shallow and with a very wide

opening, together with worn away round stones that would have been used as pestles, through continuous circular movements and not by crushing in alternate strikes. This type of mortar allows for the grinding of resins for their later handling, which avoids losses throughout the process, while facilitating the obtaining of fine powder from aromatic plants. Let us remember that even genuine frankincense is usually used in the East with a cover of the finest powder from the same resin, mixed with other powdered aromatic substances.

The ongoing analyses on the mortars have not yet yielded any results, since no samples of the substances preserved in their vesicles have been successfully recovered. However, the scale plate has provided us with data of great interest²⁹. The palynological analyses show us densely wooded surroundings containing over a 60% of arboreal species, among which the family of *Quercus*-oaks and holm oaks- stands out, together with a wide range of trees and bushes like pines and heather, or others more typically found in damper environments, such as the ash, the poplar or boxwood.

Another result from the analyses gives us data about pharmacopoeic practices with three species – two of which are highly toxic – used in the elaboration of different medicines³⁰. Finally, a resin has been detected the origin of which has not been successfully established, but it is of vegetable origin. This resin could be related to the production of a broad range of substances, but no case would justify its being weighed with the precision of a luxury item, save it being aromatic resins in the style of frankincense.

Even though, unsurprisingly, no species of the frankincense tree can be found in the Pyrenees, the mountains of Montsec, the location of this site, are abundant in resin from Cupressaceae and pines, such as that of different kinds of juniper and black pines. Their oils and resins were thoroughly used in pharmacopoeia on humans, sheep and goats, but their resins also work as substitutes for frankincense.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we must insist that, given the presence of a small number of burners and the very likely production of aromatic resins in a specific site like that of Els Altimiris, we are now able to establish the presence of frankincense in Christian environments in Visigothic *Hispania*, while

²⁹ We are grateful to Santiago Riera Mora and Ana Ejarque for their dedication and hard work in analysing these objects and providing us with the results before their publication.

³⁰ Palynological analyses show the manipulation of different types of ferns together with *Primula Hirsuta* and *Solanum Dulcamara*. Even though these three species are not rare in the Montsec area, they do not grow spontaneously on the site, since they are grown in either damp environments or pastures. Both ferns and nightshade are potentially toxic, so their usage and weighing must be attributed to experts in their dosage. They are used in fitotherapy as expectorators in the case of the first two, and ferns are used to obstruct tapeworms, which were a common infection in cohabitation with cattle. In calcareous and dry areas, ferns of the genus *Dryopteris filix-mas*, of renowned curative powers, are hard to find, so they are searched in higher, more humid areas, or cliffs associated to presence of mountain monasteries and the curative powers that were attributed to their dedication, as in recent times with the therapeutic use of ferns (*Pteridium aquilinum*) that Mallorcan parishioners obtained at the monastery of Our Lady of Lluç (P. FONT I QUER, *El Dioscórides renovado*, Barcelona, 1961, p. 68). We are currently researching the possible application of these plants in Ancient and Mediaeval pharmacopoeia. It is worth noting that Isidore of Seville himself gathered over 500 terms about the botanical sciences and their possible medical uses. See: J. HERRERA, *De la Farmacia en las Etimologías de San Isidoro de Sevilla*, Fundación Farmacéutica Avenzoar, Sevilla, 2014.

literary sources branded the Eastern clergy that practised this liturgical custom pagans and Jews.

The matter to be elucidated here is then why censers can be found in Hispanic ecclesiastic contexts, if there was such a rejection of the use of frankincense in the Visigothic liturgy. It is true that during the Visigothic centuries there was an obvious background and influence of Eastern forms in the Hispanic liturgy, but to us the use of censers before the Muslim invasion of the Peninsula corresponds with the presence of churches and monastic communities of Eastern origin, which had arrived to Hispania with their own liturgical traditions. This hypothesis, as we have shown, was also backed by literary sources.

Indeed, clergymen of Eastern origin, mainly monks who settled in the Iberian Peninsula throughout the 6th and 7th century, were the heirs of a millenary liturgical tradition and kept on using frankincense in Hispanic lands despite the risk of being labelled pagans and Jews by Hispanic ecclesiastic authorities. This is why we find it obvious that there was a relationship between these censers – perhaps not all of them, but most- and the settlements of clergy of Eastern origin which were mostly rural communities of monks.

The rarity of genuine frankincense and the difficulty of obtaining it fostered the production of substitutive resins that would be carried out in wooded areas where the raw materials needed were abundant. It seems only logical that these were made by monasteries in mountainous areas, in order to exchange them for other products which could not be found in their surroundings. This would be the case of Els Altimiris, where the latest excavation campaigns have recovered a fair amount of oyster shells, which is incontestable proof of an exchange flow ranging from the coast to the mountains, through the plains, where we can find the more than likely monastery of El Bovalar.

From this stems another issue which must be addressed on another occasion: the concept of ‘Eastern trade’ has been traditionally appealed to in order to contextualise the presence of censers in *Hispania*³¹. We believe it ought to be taken into account that it is very likely that a relatively high percentage of these censers simply came with the emigrant clergy as a part of their liturgical equipment.

To summarise, the use of frankincense and generic incense and the activity generated around it can be constructive to the debate on the problematic archaeological identification of Ancient and Pre-Mediaeval monastic communities in Hispania – particularly for those of Eastern origin or influence-. This is a controverted topic, which is on the

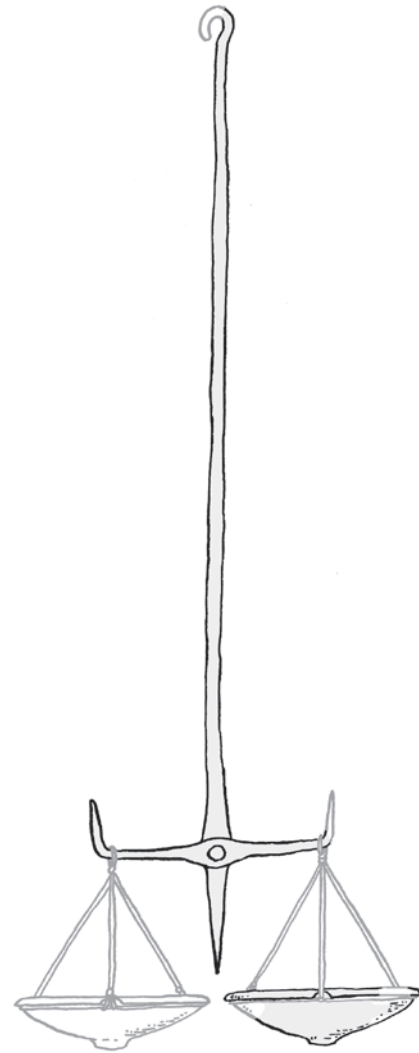


Fig 8: Ideal reconstruction of the scale of Els Altimiris. The hook from the original piece has been completed to hang from the top end of the shaft, and an L-shaped ending has been added to the right-hand shaft to match the one of the preserved left-hand side. The fitting system for the plate has been interpreted with vegetable fibre or leather strips. (Interpretation by the authors of this article. Drawing by Laura de Castellet).

table and has often generated a certain justified despondency in a number of scholars³². Because of the aforementioned reasons we believe that frankincense and its substitutes, not having been very appreciated by historians of Late Antiquity, constitute an indicator of high archaeological value which we ought to keep on delving in, in order to achieve a more thorough understanding of our earlier monasticism.

³¹ E. GARCÍA VARGAS, *Oriental Trade in the Iberian Peninsula during Late Antiquity (4th-7th Centuries AD): An Archaeological Perspective*, in D. Hernández de la Fuente (ed.), *New Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 76-117.

³² “Si es aceptable el grado de subjetividad de mi posible hipercrítica, se puede afirmar que o es imposible o parece imposible encontrar restos de las formas más antiguas de monasterios hispanos”, L. CABALLERO ZOREDA, *El conjunto monástico de Santa María de Melque (Toledo). Siglos VII-IX (criterios seguidos para identificar monasterios hispánicos tardoantiguos)*, in *Monjes y monasterios hispanos en la Alta Edad Media*, Aguilar de Campo, 2006, p. 121.

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